

WOMEN COMEDIANS IN POSTWAR U.S. STAND-UP CIRCUITRY

A DISSERTATION

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

OF CORNELL UNIVERSITY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

KRISZTA POZSONYI

DECEMBER 2022

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KRISZTA POZSONYI, PH. D.

CORNELL UNIVERSITY 2022

## ABSTRACT:

This dissertation investigates how women performers participated in stand-up comedy in the postwar period and focuses on the role television played in both the emergence of stand-up and gender inequity therein. I use the concept of circuitry, decidedly rooted in its vaudevillian meaning, as the lens for my study, and I focus on “short-circuiting” as the systemic modes of shutting women out from the circuitries of live and televised stand-up, as well as from our historical accounts. Thus, the dissertation builds on feminist media historiography to make an intervention into our understanding of stand-up, its early history, and gender inequity.

Each of the three chapters focuses on a case study of a comedian in the era, who has mostly disappeared from our accounts of early stand-up. First, I discuss Jadin Wong, often referred to as the first Chinese American stand-up comedian, and I highlight how we can read her comic material as a continuation and adaptation of her work as a dancer in the Chop Suey Circuit. In the second chapter, I highlight how Sally Marr’s own comic career and contributions as a collaborator were sidelined due to her being the mother of comedian Lenny Bruce. In the third, I focus on Jean Carroll, who—unlike Wong or Marr—performed her own stand-up act on television as early

as the 1940s and remained one of the most televised women performers over the next two decades.

Through archival and digital research, I offer close readings of the comedians' television and film appearances and the print circulation of their written materials, and I trace their performance routes via newspaper sources. In doing so, I highlight the significance of the performers' gradual, trans-modal transition into stand-up comedy, and I demonstrate contemporary sources' consistent undermining of the comedy in women's performances. Thus, I argue that we need to use the definition of stand-up comedy with flexibility to better understand and account for women performers' contributions. Similarly, I show the significance of performers' connections, relations, networks, and the many (often gendered) forms of labor that together create and shape stand-up performance spaces.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Kriszta Pozsonyi earned her PhD in the Performing and Media Arts Department of Cornell University in 2022. She received an M.A. in Gender Studies from Central European University in 2013 in Budapest, Hungary, and received her B.A. and M.A. double majoring in American Studies and Hungarian Language and Literature at Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest, Hungary, in 2012.

Her research interests lie at the intersections of television studies, comedy studies, gender studies, and American studies. She has presented her work at conferences such as SCMS, Console-ing Passions, ATHE, and Screen. She has published an article on humor and pedagogy in the media classroom, co-authored with Seth Soulstein, in the *Journal for Cinema and Media Studies (JCMS)*, and has a chapter titled “Aging Camp/Camping Age: Mae West in *Myra Breckinridge* and *Sextette*,” forthcoming in an anthology on *Camp, Cameo, Comeback*. Her essay on “Aging Vocal Performance in Mae West’s *Sextette*” received the Marvin Carlson Award for Best Student Essay in Theatre or Performance in 2022.

At Cornell University, she has taught a range of first-year writing seminars, as well as serving as a teaching assistant and grader for a variety of courses on global and American cinema and television. Her work as a teacher has been recognized with several awards and prizes by the John S. Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines, as well as the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies First-Year Writing Seminar Award.

*DEDICATED TO MAGDI, BANDI, MAMI, AND TATI*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could not have written this dissertation without the help, support, and care of people at and beyond Cornell. I'm endlessly grateful for the patience and undying support of the members of my Special Committee: Nick Salvato, Sabine Haenni, and Samantha Sheppard. Nick's voice was the first voice I ever heard from Cornell (in a phone call informing me of my acceptance), and he gave me my first welcome hug at Cornell. Ever since then, he has remained a constant source of support and kindness, even at times when I wasn't sure I'd be able to finish this dissertation. Sabine made me feel I belonged here at Cornell and at PMA in my very first semester, and her dedication to and advocacy for graduate students over the years have made me feel proud and privileged to be at PMA. Samantha was the first professor for whom I worked as a teaching assistant and for whom I worked longest as a research assistant a few years later, and I only wish all professors had the depth of understanding, empathy, respect, and support for graduate workers that she has always afforded me. I'm infinitely grateful for all the ways the three of them have supported me and other graduate students throughout these years.

Beyond my Committee, I have received much technical and methodological help, as well as inspiration for this dissertation (and even more assistance as a teacher) from the brilliant and incredibly accommodating Fred Muratori, our subject specialist and liaison at Cornell Library. Similarly, my work has been made much easier by the wonderful staff of the Paley Center in New York City and the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. As well, I have gotten invaluable writing support from Tamar and the Graduate Writing Service of the Knight Institute, especially in the



last stretch of polishing this dissertation.

The network of support that has carried me to the finish line expands beyond the writing of this dissertation. There are people who believed in my ability to pursue a PhD earlier and more than I did, including Jen Sandler, Enikő Bollobás, and Erzsébet Barát, to whom I'll forever be grateful. My fellow grad students at PMA—especially Lexi, Rosalie, Victoria, Jon, Seth, Honey, Kelly, Caitlin, Nick, and J. Michael—have consistently inspired and taught me to become a better scholar, teacher, and colleague.

And without a doubt, I would not have made it this far without those who have supported me most in my private life. My friends Juli, Dzsudi, Viki, Ida, Leïla, Victoria, M.J., Tyler, Kelly, Seth, Sahar, and Krithika have all helped me feel connected, grounded, and at home, even from afar. My family has been nothing but unconditionally and relentlessly encouraging, and I could not be more thankful for them. Kriszta taught me how to believe in myself and helped me find my footing during the early years of my PhD. Luz and Lexi have been the absolute best partners and have helped me the most in actually getting to the end of the process. Finally, it wouldn't be me if I didn't end by crediting all the cats (especially Manó, Maci, Tess and Teola, Pitsie, and Béla) that have purred their way into my heart over the years.

## **INTRODUCTION: STAND-UP CIRCUITRY AND SHORT-CIRCUITING WOMEN PERFORMERS**

Gender inequity within American stand-up comedy is as old as the form itself, and it continues to be a reality in the present. One may assume that, because many women performers are famous today, the playing field has been leveled, and that no women performed stand-up comedy in the postwar period because very few—if any—names from that era are still remembered. However, women did indeed work in stand-up, both onstage and onscreen, from the 1940s through the 1960s, commonly considered the mode's earliest period. This dissertation will provide explanations for this collective amnesia surrounding women in early stand-up: what are the processes of erasure, obscuring, or mediated forgetting that have led to this effect? And, in return, how can we understand stand-up itself better through the study of performers such as Jadin Wong, Sally Marr, and Jean Carroll, the case studies of this dissertation? In the chapters that follow, I will investigate how and why women performers were locked out of circuitries of early stand-up comedy, as well as highlight the limitations on their contemporaneous work opportunities and the contained circulation of their written and audiovisual materials in press, public, and privately owned archives since then. However, while stand-up comedy's gender inequity is a historical problem, it's not (just) history. The problem of women's work and creative opportunities being short-circuited is a prevalent and urgent matter today as well.

To this day, women performers (and especially women of color) are given fewer opportunities, and this is true across all levels of fame or success, from high-profile, celebrity comedians' salaries to the stage time afforded to comedians

performing in clubs across the country. In 2019, veteran stand-up comedian and actor Mo’Nique filed a lawsuit against Netflix after the streaming service offered her \$500,000 for a comedy special, an egregiously low amount when compared to what Netflix had offered either to white women performers or to Black men performers at the time.<sup>1</sup> Amy Schumer had just been offered \$11 million for her Netflix special, and Dave Chappelle and Chris Rock had each signed 20-million-dollar deals. Furthermore, when Mo’Nique made this information public, Wanda Sykes revealed that Netflix had previously offered her “less than half of [that] \$500K.” Mo’Nique’s lawsuit against Netflix was settled out of court just earlier this year (2022), including a new agreement on a special, and Sykes managed to negotiate a significantly better deal with Netflix on her special, which came out in 2019 (*Not Normal*, directed by Linda Mendoza). However, Netflix has continued to take its time on making equal, let alone equitable, decisions in women performers’ cases.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on Netflix’s production, and the company’s corresponding strategy has been especially informative with regards to gender inequities. When the rate of production slowed down, women performers’ opportunities immediately fell through at a much higher rate. In 2021, when Netflix released only ten one-hour-long specials by American comedians as opposed to twenty specials in 2020 and over thirty in 2022, only one out of the ten was by a woman performer (*Nicole Byer: BBW [Big Beautiful Weirdo]*, directed by Betsy Thomas). However, even in 2020 and 2022, when the production of specials was at a much

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<sup>1</sup> Samantha Cooney, “Mo’Nique and Wanda Sykes Are Taking a Stand Against Netflix Over Alleged Pay Disparity. - EBSCO,” *TIME*, accessed November 8, 2022, <http://time.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/5113192/monique-wanda-sykes-netflix/>.

higher rate, only about one-third of the specials by American comedians were by women performers, and even if these numbers showed some improvement in terms of gender equity, the same cannot be said in terms of racial equity. Out of 2022's nine women performers who had an hour-long special, six were white women, and only one Black woman, one Asian American woman, and one Latina. Furthermore, while more than a third of the specials of men were the first Netflix special by that comedian, less than a quarter (two out of nine) were a first-time Netflix special for the women performers. While a first-time Netflix contract does not at all mean the comedian is young or not well-established, this discrepancy in numbers, together with the other aspects of gendered disparities, demonstrates that Netflix is significantly less invested in adding new names to its comedy roster when it comes to women than they are when it comes to men.

As one of the largest producers of stand-up comedy specials over the last decade, Netflix is an important measure of industry practices, but it is not the only one. Stand-up researcher Stephanie Brown has highlighted that, for instance, throughout the first half of the 2010s, the *Forbes* list of the ten highest paid comedians included only one woman: Amy Poehler.<sup>2</sup> The name has since changed, but the statistics have not. In the second half of the 2010s, another white woman, Amy Schumer, shows up in most years, and in 2018, when she did not, not a single other woman did. All of this is to say, the pay gap between men and women in the highest

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<sup>2</sup> Stephanie Brown, "Open Mic? Gender and the Meritocratic Myth of Authenticity in the Cultural Production of Stand-Up Comedy" (Ph.D., United States -- Illinois, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2018), 4, <http://www.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/2635545030/3C30235859D342B9PQ/1>.

paid group of performers is still very much present.

Stand-up's gender and racial inequity is not only evident in the glass ceiling faced by the top earners of the entire industry; it is also, and often even more, apparent in the opportunities available to women performers in comedy clubs. The "Comedy Club Database" (CCDB) project surveyed more than fifty prominent comedy clubs across the United States, for a period of three months in 2019, and gathered data about all the performers these clubs booked during the period. Their report showed that out of all comedians booked in this period across these clubs, only about 15% were women, and only 6% were women of color, 1% were Latina performers, and even less than that, 0.5%, were Asian-American women performers.<sup>3</sup> In the years since the 2019 report, the CCDB website has shut down, yet the phenomenon of wildly inequitable line-ups in comedy clubs has remained urgent, if it has not become even worse. Indeed, akin to the trend highlighted above in Netflix's pandemic-related production changes, many were voicing disappointment about how clubs and comedy venues responded to the challenges posed by COVID-19. In the summer of 2021, comedian Valerie Tosi tweeted about one of the most popular venues of the Los Angeles scene, Hollywood Improv, not booking a single woman performer over a whole weekend. Tosi's tweet, in which she begged "male comics [to] say something,"<sup>4</sup> seemed to gain a lot of public traction at the time, but the numbers have been slow to change. Today, a club like the Comedy Cellar in New York City, which is back to running more than a

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<sup>3</sup> The website is no longer accessible, but some of its content can (at the time of this writing) still be accessed via *Wayback Machine*: [https://web.archive.org/web/2022000000000\\*/www.projectccdb.com](https://web.archive.org/web/2022000000000*/www.projectccdb.com).

<sup>4</sup> Gwynedd Stuart, "Women Are Still Mysteriously Missing from Lineups at Some L.A. Comedy Clubs," *Los Angeles Magazine* (blog), July 1, 2021, <https://www.lamag.com/culturefiles/women-stand-up/>.

dozen shows each night with six comedians per each of those shows, has only one woman per line-up-of-six, almost without exception. It seems that no matter how regular and reasonable outcries have been in recent years, from those of Tosi and Mo’Nique, the scandal over the 2018 *Forbes* comedian list, or CCDB’s infuriating findings, stand-up continues to (re)produce inequality.

The goal of this dissertation is to examine, in part, how these inequalities were established, produced, and reproduced, from the first period of stand-up comedy becoming a distinct mode of performance, and how women performers navigated the changing but continually challenging landscape of stand-up. As in my quick overview above, which considered alongside one another the digital streaming platform Netflix and comedy club line-ups, the chapters of this dissertation pay attention to the different but related industries of television and live entertainment. In my historical analysis, I highlight the role that television played and continues to play as an enabling or short-circuiting force for the performers, in tandem with the circuits of venues where stage performance took place. Each of the chapters focuses on a specific performer—Jadin Wong, Sally Marr, and Jean Carroll, respectively—whose case study, singular or unique as each one may be, reveals processes of gendered historical erasure.

### **Postwar Era: A Period of Definition**

Stand-up comedy gained definition, meaning it became a distinct mode and form, in the post-World War II period. Stand-up is rooted in vaudeville, and so its definition often serves to delineate it from vaudeville’s comedy forms, including an

emphasis on stand-up's lack of props, harsh make-up, exaggerated costumes, or elaborate sets. Importantly, however, the implications of this differentiation are inevitably gendered, because women performers' transition from vaudeville to stand-up typically followed a different route than that of men. I address this in more detail in my third chapter, in the context of how this distinction is represented in the Amazon series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. While the consensus among researchers of stand-up comedy (across disciplinary associations) pinpoints the form's beginnings to the postwar era,<sup>5</sup> the period is then often simplified to refer to the fifties, and women comedians most often discussed in scholarship—such as Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, Totie Fields—tend to be placed in the late fifties and the sixties. Consequently, a common narrative of stand-up's beginnings suggests that it was a field joined by women performers only after the form had already become established by men. The chapters that follow demonstrate that this narrative is patently false.

Through the case studies of this dissertation, I show that women transitioned into stand-up from other modes of performance, primarily from dancing. In some cases, the dancing act itself was already comic, at least to some degree. In some cases, the performer may have also worked as an emcee. Different traces of comic performance like these are suggested in many sources, but they still require patchwork on the researcher's part to see a career arc within which comedy is not simply an unexpected turn. Yet, for the performers of this dissertation, the later comedy career

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<sup>5</sup> David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, 2nd edition (Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 1997), 13; Rebecca Krefting, *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 18; Michelle Robinson, "Stand-Up Comedy, Social Critique and Rethinking the Origins of American Studies," *SOAR: Society of Americanists Review* 1 (2018), <https://journals-psu-edu.proxy.library.cornell.edu/soar/article/view/60442>.

was never an unexpected turn. Instead, as I show, their long-lasting and consistent (if varied) practice of comedy was often ignored, dismissed, or undermined by contemporaneous reviews. This also means that if these career transitions were temporally gradual and essentially trans-modal, then they pose challenges to historical studies that aim to focus on figures who represent a newly exclusive definition. Thus, studies that focus on stand-up as a discrete form in this period cannot properly account for women performers whose work did not fit neatly within a singular modality.

While the postwar period is generally accepted as the era when stand-up comedy emerged, that does not mean that the term “stand-up” itself was in common use at the time. John Limon, in his seminal *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, notes that the term came into use only in the mid-sixties, based on the fact that the *Oxford English Dictionary* (at the time of the publication) traced its first use back to that time.<sup>6</sup> British stand-up comedy scholar-practitioner Oliver Double has pushed back against Limon’s explanation in a short piece in *Comedy Studies* journal, where he demonstrates that American trade press in fact commonly used “stand-up” in one variation or other to refer to a specific style of comedy all throughout the fifties, with some examples going back as far as the late 1940s. The precise dating of the term’s use in public discourse may prove hard to reconstruct. For the purposes of this study, it is not necessary to determine exactly when this change in terms happened. However, it is important to establish that the practice of the form pre-dated the term, and that comedians in the period were instead most often referred to simply as

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<sup>6</sup> John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 7, 126.



“monologists.”

At the same time, Double’s piece—or rather, pieces—on the history of the term also illustrates some of this dissertation’s larger points about the uniquely gendered challenges within historical research on stand-up. Double notes at the end of his original piece that he “tantalisingly”<sup>7</sup> found the earliest use of the term “stand up” applied to a comic act of a woman performer, Miss Nellie Perrier, in 1911, who performed “‘stand up’ comic ditties.”<sup>8</sup> Of course, Double does not argue that this use of the term would or should be considered a signifier of what we now consider stand-up performance per se. However, in a later issue of the same journal, Double publishes an update on his original findings,<sup>9</sup> in which he reevaluates his “tantalising” discovery regarding Perrier. In the update, he reports that a friend of his has found another early instance of the term “stand-up,” this time in a review from a 1917 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, in reference to a male performer. According to the review, the performer, who in 1917 was in a piano-based musical-comedy act, had much earlier performed comedy without a piano, and calls that previous act a stand-up comic act. Double admits that despite having personally researched the performer’s history, it was absolutely “impossible to know” what that earlier, “stand-up” act might have actually entailed. And while it seems that the act did not include piano music, the review noted that the performer “must have been a useful deputy for the piano” even at that time.<sup>10</sup> In other

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<sup>7</sup> Oliver Double, “The Origin of the Term ‘Stand-up Comedy,’” *Comedy Studies* 8, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2017.1279912>.

<sup>8</sup> Double, 108.

<sup>9</sup> Oliver Double, “The Origin of the Term ‘Stand-up Comedy’: Update,” *Comedy Studies* 9, no. 2 (July 3, 2018): 235–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2018.1428427>.

<sup>10</sup> 235 Double.

words, it is not at all clear whether the stand-up act was musical or not, or to what degree. Yet, for Double, this newly found piece is more valuable and revelatory than the one about Perrier, simply because it seems to suggest a slightly clearer delineation of musical and non-musical comedy. He concludes, “[the newly found article’s] use of the term is much less ambiguous than the usage in the 1911 review of Nellie Perrier.”<sup>11</sup> Double’s reading of the male performer’s act is arguably more generous than his of Perrier, and this generosity is rooted in an insistence on stand-up being defined as non-musical performance.

One of the threads I highlight in this dissertation is that insisting on stand-up comedy only making sense as a genre when defined directly in opposition to musical performance—whether dancing or singing—consistently does disservice to women performers. Women who would perform in early stand-up circuitry in almost all cases were rooted in musical or semi-musical performance. More important, as I show, we must rely on historical sources, such as the reviews that Double cites, that consistently undermine women’s comic abilities and efforts, which necessitates a critical approach to these sources that does not readily dismiss mentions of comedic work when done by women. Instead, we must speculate a little more generously about women performers’ comedic prowess and labor, and this generosity means thinking about definition as such with more flexibility.

Scholarship specifically on women monologists in the postwar period has been limited in scope. By this point, a fair amount has been written on Jackie “Moms”

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<sup>11</sup> Double, 237.

Mabley, one of the most influential early comedians.<sup>12</sup> Besides this work on Mabley, a dissertation has recently been published on Jean Carroll’s work, focusing more specifically on how Carroll’s performance was coded as Jewish. These two performers are, indeed, crucial to the period. As Kessler Overbeke importantly highlights, “Jean Carroll did not simply arrive on the stand-up scene near its beginning; she *was* a part of its beginning.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Mabley was not simply an early comedian; she was a forerunner for the form. My case studies contribute to this limited but growing literature. However, my goal is not simply to add to the canon of early stand-up women performers, but rather to highlight the ways and methods in which these performers have and may continue to disappear from our scholarly focus and the general public’s interests. In doing so, I highlight the kinds of labor that complement or compete with stand-up—that of agents, managers, and bookers in terms of the former, or childcaring labor in terms of the latter—and that have contributed to how these specific performers worked on ever changing circuits, how their stories have circulated in public and private archives, and how their legacies are tended to in contemporaneous to current media and press.

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<sup>12</sup> Bambi Haggins, “Moms Mabley and Wanda Sykes: ‘I’m a Be Me,’” in *Hysterical!: Women in American Comedy*, ed. Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant (University of Texas Press, 2021), 207–32, <https://doi.org/10.7560/314517-011>; Elsie A Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition* (New York: Garland Pub., 1995); Robinson, “Stand-Up Comedy, Social Critique and Rethinking the Origins of American Studies”; Eleanor Russell, “Mom Voice/Moms’ Voice: Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley, the Comic Voice, and Refiguring Black Maternity,” *Comedy Studies* 13, no. 2 (July 3, 2022): 199–211, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2022.2091735>; Katelyn Hale Wood, “Laughter in the Archives: Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley and the Haunted Diva,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 3 (October 1, 2014): 85–108, <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.1.3.0085>.

<sup>13</sup> Grace Kessler Overbeke, “The Forgotten Pioneer: Jean Carroll and the Jewish Female Origins of Stand-up Comedy” (Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University, 2019), 30, <http://www.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/2273201771/27FD4E1435A04D7DPQ/1?accountid=10267>.

### **“Firsts,” “Only”-s, and “Pioneers”**

In focusing on processes of erasure, instead of simply adding to the canon of stand-up comedy, I move away from what could be called the paradigm of “firsts” and “only”-s. Contemporaneous reviews, advertisements, and articles often seem to suggest that every woman who performs stand-up comedy is unique in her position: the “first” or “only” performer of her kind. When building on these sources, it can be tempting to reproduce this paradigm within historical research and emphasize the exceptionality of our “rediscovered” objects. Both manifestations of this paradigm, well-known and addressed within performance studies and media studies, serve to position these performers as novelties. This celebratory gesture, however, comes at the direct cost of furthering the erasure of performance legacies, connections, and other performers, especially in the case of performers from underrepresented or marginalized populations. Thus, this paradigm is in fact a hindrance, if not directly antithetical, to historical research.

Performance historian Brian Herrera highlights the problems with the paradigm of “firsts” in his work on “Latin numbers.” He defines “Latin numbers” as moments of “excited discovery of Latinos... which both highlights and obscures the cultural presence, influence, and impact of actual Latinas/Latinos.”<sup>14</sup> Herrera looks at how these moments keep repeating, obscuring not only the consistent existence of Latinx cultural workers, but also the pattern itself of forgetting and rediscovering. He

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<sup>14</sup> Brian Eugenio Herrera, *Latin Numbers: Playing Latino in Twentieth-Century U.S. Popular Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 4–5.

writes,

In such historical moments, Latina/o cultural workers and expressive forms become *novelties* requiring both introduction and translation... while also eliding the diverse histories of political struggle for inclusion enacted by prior generations of Latina/o cultural activists ... In short, each ‘Latin number’ makes Latinos ‘new’ all over again, thereby making historical amnesia an entertaining diversion for Latino and non-Latino audiences alike.<sup>15</sup>

As Herrera highlights, the celebration and popular recognition defining these moments of “doing numbers” are not simply futile in fighting amnesia; on the contrary, they depend on and reproduce it.

In a similar vein, film scholars Racquel Gates and Michael Boyce Gillespie specifically warn against the use of the celebratory designation of “firsts” in their manifesto on “Reclaiming Black Film and Media Studies.” As did Herrera, Gates and Gillespie tie this gesture directly to the effect of erasure and declare:

**We must** stop referring to every significant black film or media text as ‘first,’ thus erasing the labor and intellectual contributions of all who came before... Critical discussion around the films [celebrated as firsts] tends to tacitly frame them in terms of a white film landscape, suggesting that their worth rests in their ability to look and sound like standard (i.e., white) films, severing their ties to black film history and distancing them from ‘unexceptional’ black films in the present.<sup>16</sup> (Emphasis in original.)

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<sup>15</sup> Herrera, 4–5.

<sup>16</sup> Racquel J. Gates and Michael Boyce Gillespie, “Reclaiming Black Film and Media Studies,” *Film Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (March 1, 2019): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2019.72.3.13>.

Thus, Gates and Gillespie not only underscore the amnesia and disconnection of critical legacies and lineages within Black film history that such a designation (re)produces—as did Herrera in the context of “Latin numbers”—but also that this reinforces as the most important point of reference the dominant or mainstream *white* film history, industry, and reception. This question of point of reference can serve as another way to think about stand-up’s definition.

Herrera, Gates, and Gillespie map out how this paradigm continues to this day, in popular as well as scholarly discourses, applied to performance and media texts. Kiki Loveday has recently reflected on the proliferation of a term that can be understood as attendant to this paradigm, “pioneer,” specifically within feminist media historiographies of the last couple of decades. Loveday notes that the use of the term is especially problematic because it reanimates the frontier metaphor as a politically progressive one in these contexts. Indeed, Jean Carroll is celebrated as *The Forgotten Pioneer* in the title of Kessler Overbeke’s dissertation, and Moms Mabley is, similarly, constantly referred to as a pioneer of stand-up comedy, in works that ultimately aim to give more (and proper) credit to these performers. Loveday recognizes that “much of the best, most accessible, and anti-racist work [including The Women Film Pioneers Project or Kino-Lorber’s *Pioneers* DVD series] produced in the field over the last thirty years mobilizes the figure of the pioneer.”<sup>17</sup> The problem, then, is that when we reach for the figure of the pioneer in an effort to make up for the lack of credit certain performers have historically received, we participate in settler-colonial logics and

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<sup>17</sup> Kiki Loveday, “The Pioneer Paradigm,” *Feminist Media Histories* 8, no. 1 (January 1, 2022): 166, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2022.8.1.165>.

reproduce a focus on individual accomplishments and exceptionalism. In so doing, we also obscure the role of collaboration and networks.

Consequently, in the chapters that follow, I pay attention to the networks, circuitries, and collaborations that surrounded the performers whose work I analyze. All three of these performers have been framed as exceptional, and their stories are admittedly unique: Jadin Wong was often celebrated as the first Chinese American stand-up comedian, Sally Marr was positioned as the “mother of the father of modern stand-up,” and Jean Carroll has been celebrated as both a pioneer of the form and an exceptionally “femme” comedian. As a strategy of advertising, branding, or creative work, this framing might be worth attention. However, my chapters primarily investigate what forces and processes made their work im/possible, in/accessible, or un/successful, via the concepts of circuitry and short-circuiting, which I explain in the next section.

In closely analyzing the materials that have remained accessible from these comedians’ work, I build on feminist comedy studies’ investment in paying attention to the performers’ comic personae, their onstage (and onscreen) embodiment, and the performed material together. Philosophical traditions of humor studies have focused on theories that aimed to account for jokes’ effects and role in society at large. These accounts address the question of why and how jokes, humor, and laughter work, and what kinds of relations, communities, and societies they create. Within this literature, the general critical frameworks primarily referenced are the three main philosophical theories. First, superiority theory, which considers jokes primarily as a negative social force, is typically associated with the genealogy of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, and

Descartes' works. The second oft-referenced theory is relief theory, rooted in Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), whereas the third theory, incongruity theory, can be traced in the works of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard, among others.<sup>18</sup>

Feminist comedy studies has importantly moved away from these theories and toward a focus on the lived experiences and conditions of women comedians to pose questions about how women comedians build on these aspects in their work. Kathleen Rows' *The Unruly Women: Gender and Genres of Laughter* (1995) and Linda Mizejewski's *Pretty/Funny* (2014) are both invested in theorizing the body politics of women comedians. An important branch of feminist studies of stand-up comedy has also built on the scholars' own backgrounds as comedy practitioners working in comedy clubs, such as Regina Barreca,<sup>19</sup> Joanne Gilbert,<sup>20</sup> Beck Krefting,<sup>21</sup> and Stephanie Brown.<sup>22</sup> These (auto)ethnographical accounts tend to pay closer attention to the physical and affective spaces of the club settings. Through these varied methods and foci, feminist comedy studies poses a range of questions, such as how women comedians negotiate their marginalized positionality and experiences through their work, how they navigate bias and stereotypes in crafting their acts, and how their labor

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<sup>18</sup> John Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2020 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/humor/>.

<sup>19</sup> Regina Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White-- but I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015062106037?urlappend=%3Bsignon=swle:https://shibidp.cit.cornell.edu/idp/shibboleth>.

<sup>21</sup> Krefting, *All Joking Aside*; Rebecca Krefting, "Hannah Gadsby Stands Down: Feminist Comedy Studies," *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 58, no. 3 (2019): 165–70, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2019.0032>.

<sup>22</sup> Brown, "Open Mic?"



conditions contribute to their performance. In my case studies, I address the humor of the comedians and the nuances of their embodied performance, but my primary interest is not to provide a reason or theory for why they represent special or unique comic appeals. Instead, I focus on tracing their paths through changes in their industrial and performance conditions.

### **Rewiring in the Archives: Early Stand-up Circuitry And Archival Research**

In this dissertation, I use the term *circuitry* to convey that my analytical lens focuses on the performers' embeddedness in networks and connections (of collaborators, agents, managers, bookers, venue owners, and audiences). All these relations, I argue, must be attended to in order to understand both the paths and the comedy of these performers. Just as important, I use this specific term rather than alternatives (like networks) because of circuitry's direct reference to the legacies of vaudeville circuits. Analysis of the circulation of performers along vaudeville circuits, such as the Orpheum/RKO Circuit, the Chop Suey Circuit, the Chitlin Circuit, or the Borscht Belt, can better account for not only the comedians' work but also the ways television created a new, electronic circuit for stand-up performers. The chapters explore television's role in these performers' professional and—always intertwined therein—personal histories. Individual and unique as their cases may be, through them we can see the ways in which television participated in stand-up comedy right from this earliest period. I highlight in each case study the performers' pre-television vaudeville careers in order to better account for the significance of their *transition*

from their previous career paths to stand-up comedy. Transition is a key word for my argument: taking into account women in this period requires considering non-verbal and non-comic performance backgrounds—and, as I show, especially that which is documented as *marginally* comic. Marginal, liminal, or quasi cases of women doing comedy are the heart of this project.

Circuitry can, then, highlight how postwar stand-up's newly wired circuitry reproduced or shifted the enabling and marginalizing logics of legacy vaudeville circuits along the axes of race, ethnicity, and gender. This reference to vaudeville culture is crucial to my larger arguments that these performers' contributions as comedians cannot be understood without the context of their own backgrounds in vaudeville entertainment on one hand, and on the other, that the circuits' legacies and performance cultures carried on in the newly reorganized circuit of venues in the postwar period, wherein television became an increasingly important site.

In discussing circuitry within the context of media studies, I have to include a brief qualification. Circuitry, especially as a mode or method, has, of course, been a significant concept for television studies. In her chapter on the intersections of cultural studies and television studies, Julie D'Acci helpfully maps out the genealogy and different iterations of circuit models within cultural studies, starting from Stuart Hall's formulation of encoding/decoding to Richard Johnson's model of the "circuit of production, circulation, and consumption of cultural products" and the Open University's "circuit of culture."<sup>23</sup> Building on these models and incorporating

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<sup>23</sup> Julie D'Acci, "Cultural Studies, Television Studies, and the Crisis in the Humanities," in *Television after TV*, ed. Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel (Duke University Press, 2004), 418–45, <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822386278-021>.

critiques thereof (primarily by Lawrence Grossberg), D'Acci finally proposes a model of her own (see Figure 1 below for the different models next to one another).

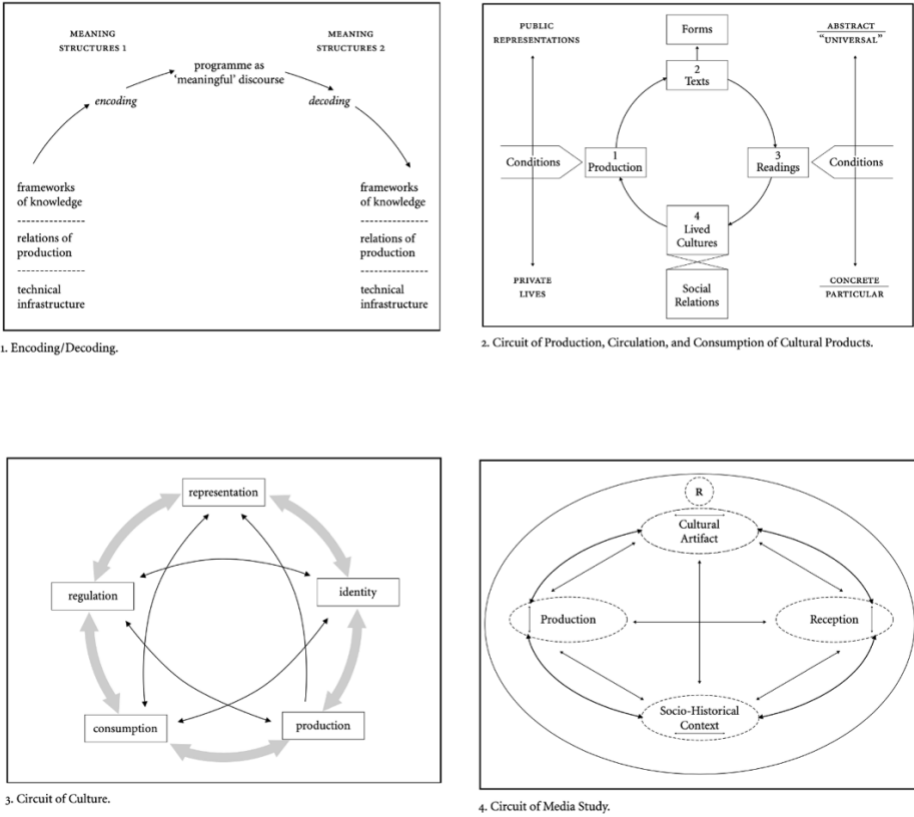


Figure 1: Different circuit models as summarized by Julie D'Acci<sup>24</sup>

The most important change in these circuit models is not only the specific sites of circulation (one could also call these “nodes”) but also the question of precisely what circulates among them. D'Acci astutely notes that while Hall’s model is a circuit (or circulation) of *meaning*, Johnson’s is one of cultural *products*, the Open University’s is one of not only culture but also cultural *analysis*, and, finally, her own, a circuit of

<sup>24</sup> D'Acci, 426–432.

*media study*. While my use of the term “circuitry” does not directly respond to any of these models, my means of conceptualizing short-circuiting and stand-up circuitry allows for considering all these categories: meaning, products, analysis, and media study.

My application of the term circuitry, however, is most strongly rooted in the vaudevillian referent of circuitry and focuses on the circulation of performers among nodes or sites made up both of performance venues and, just as important, of their collaborators. This, I believe is key to understanding performers’ disappearances and erasures from audio-visual archives (like the Paley Center), from what we understand as stand-up altogether (due to career changes or due to having to take over child rearing duties), or simply from scholarship (such as when the focus on Lenny Bruce obscures Sally Marr). In keeping with the vocabulary of circuitry, throughout the dissertation, I consider the forms of disappearance, erasure, marginalization, and amnesia the case studies highlight under the rubric of “short-circuiting.”

These chapters build on archival research to account for how women have been historically short-circuited within stand-up comedy. Mizejewski and Sturtevant acutely observe about women’s recurring disappearance from comedy, “it seems that every generation is surprised anew at the emergence of funny women, and then a kind of amnesia sets in about women’s long and unruly history of participation in comedy and comic performances.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, as I show in the chapters that follow, women *did* perform as stand-up comics in this period, and it is therefore worth interrogating how

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<sup>25</sup> Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant, eds., *Hysterical!: Women in American Comedy*, First edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 8.

they have disappeared and continue to disappear from our archives, records, canons, scholarship, or collective memory.

Archival research focusing on women comedians in the postwar period must contend with and therefore methodologically address the archival lacunae in terms of documentation and records. In this dissertation, I build on archival research, from holdings of publicly accessible libraries such as the New York Public Library or the Paley Center for Media, to archives in private corporations' hands (such as Jean Carroll's performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show*) and large digital databases, such as the Newspaper Archive ([newspaperarchive.com](http://newspaperarchive.com)). However, the narratives I construct out of this material require, as mentioned above, patchworking, and specifically feminist patchwork, in order to attend to gendered erasures and marginalization. In the recent two-part special issue of *Feminist Media Histories* on "Speculative Approaches to Media History," Allyson Nadia Field proposes that speculation is "a key method for thinking about questions of material loss and inaccessibility in new ways...[for] working with the paucity of evidence."<sup>26</sup> Material loss and inaccessibility appear all throughout the chapters of this dissertation, from missing audiovisual recordings of the stand-up act (Jadin Wong and Sally Marr), to material circulating in butchered forms (Jadin Wong's writing), to archives made practically inaccessible by private corporations (Jean Carroll), and so on. And every new archival record of a comedian working the stand-up circuits raises the question, how many other comedians simply do not show up in our records?

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<sup>26</sup> Allyson Nadia Field, "Editor's Introduction," *Feminist Media Histories* 8, no. 2 (April 1, 2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2022.8.2.1>.

In researching women comedians' work in the postwar era, speculation is both necessary and warranted. Beyond the question of *who* shows up in archival records, *what* needs to be interrogated just as much, and the answer will be just as gendered. The simple explanation is that because women have historically been considered less or not at all funny, reporters and recorders of comic performance were consistently biased against acknowledging, let alone appreciating, their comedic work. As Mizejewski and Sturtevant explain, "the idea that women aren't funny persists because it symptomizes a much larger gender problem," as they trace the long history of this "diagnosis" of "unfunny" from women declared hysterical to more recent instances of public figures, such as the late Christopher Hitchens (writing in *Vanity Fair*) or comedian Jerry Lewis, stating as much.<sup>27</sup> Working with archival sources, then, necessitates what I have previously referred to as a generous, or one could say speculative, approach. More attention is warranted when women's comedic performance is mentioned in brackets, footnotes, or demeaning throwaway lines of reviews. In other words, it is safe and fair to take (mentions of) women's comedy very seriously.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

In each of the following three chapters, I focus on a comedian originally rooted in vaudeville. These three performers toured different vaudeville circuits, but eventually they all worked as emcees and stand-up comedians in postwar nightclubs,

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<sup>27</sup> Mizejewski and Sturtevant, *Hysterical!: Women in American Comedy*, 1–5.

strip joints, or theaters. All three performers were locked out of the early stand-up circuit reshaped by television, albeit at different stages, ages, and ways. In other words, they were short-circuited in manners that are representative of larger processes of marginalization and gender inequity.

The first chapter focuses on Jadin Wong (1913–2010), a Chinese American performer, who started her career as a dancer on the Chop Suey Circuit in the 1930s before becoming a stand-up comedian in the fifties. Wong worked as a stand-up comedian for over a decade and a half before changing careers again and becoming a “Superagent,” heading the largest management company specialized in Asian American talent. Wong’s cultural memory and legacy, as preserved via documentaries (such as Arthur Dong’s *The Forbidden City USA* or Jodi Long’s *Long Story Short*), as well as plays like Joanna Chan’s *Forbidden City West* (2008) or David Henry Hwang’s adaptation of *Flower Drum Song*, (re)tell the story of Wong as a dancer-turned-agent, omitting her comedy career. While we do not have any extant audiovisual records of Wong’s comedy act, in my chapter, I build on archival materials, including the special collection of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and the digital *Newspaper Archive*, and I also consider the brief mentions and scholarly footnotes that hint at Wong’s longer investment in comedy beyond her stand-up years.

The second chapter attends to Sally Marr (1906–1997), a Jewish dancer-comedian who honed her act on the Borscht Belt circuit and was described as a comical satirist in a *Variety* review as early as 1951. Marr also happened to be the mother of the most commonly referenced comedian of the era, Lenny Bruce. Even

though Marr had worked as a comedian and as an emcee before Bruce did, her collaborative relationship with and creative influence on her son is consistently disregarded or downplayed in scholarship on Bruce. In the chapter, I analyze Marr's different forms of (stand-up) motherhood, as she enabled Bruce's career by taking over childcaring labor over his daughter, Kitty, tended to Bruce's legacy after his death for the rest of her life. At the same time, Marr continued her own career as a comedian and emcee, and she served as a mentor and quasi-agent to many in the stand-up scene. Despite her contributions to the development and culture of stand-up comedy, Marr's recognition has been short-circuited largely due to auteurist accounts of Bruce.

Finally, in the third chapter, I write about Jean Carroll, who did, in fact, fare better in television than the vast majority of her women contemporaries. Carroll, a comedian who only performed her Jewishness in subtly coded ways, appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* (then titled *Toast of the Town*) as early as the late 40s and returned to the series almost 30 times over the next two decades. Yet, her exclusive contract with Sullivan, signed by her manager husband, led not only to limited television appearances at the time, but also to the recordings of her performances being tucked away in the series' archive owned by a private company.

These case studies demonstrate the significance of circuits of mentorship and caretaking. It is, I think, no surprise that two of the three performers proceeded to become agents, managers, and mentors within the stand-up scene. Sally Marr stayed in stand-up comedy circles and became a quasi-manager to comedians like Cheech and Chong, Pat Morita, and Sam Kinison. She herself also inspired Joan Rivers to



research, write, and perform the titular role of her Tony nominated *Sally Marr...And Her Escorts*, a one-woman show that Rivers considered one of her most important achievements. Marr was also one of the real-life sources of inspiration, as a “godmother to all comics,”<sup>28</sup> for Amy Sherman-Palladino, creator of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. Wong, as mentioned, became the director of the largest agency specializing in Asian-American talent. In this capacity, her clients included David Henry Hwang, who then rewrote the character of Madame Liang for his production of *Flower Drum Song* to be based on Wong specifically. These circuits of collaborations, mentorships, and tending to legacies have resulted in some of the most important bits of the extant material—rare interviews, videos, photography—about these performers. Fellow performers, playwrights, and filmmakers, who decided to take care of the legacies of these performers, might serve as the most effective agents in fighting the systems of amnesia that would have us forget these women comedians.

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<sup>28</sup> Condé Nast, “Gilmore Girls Creator Amy Sherman-Palladino Explains Her Marvelous New TV Series,” *Vanity Fair*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/03/gilmore-girls-amy-sherman-palladino-amazon-pilot-marvelous-mrs-maisel>.

## CHAPTER 1: JADIN WONG AND EARLY TELEVISION'S ORIENTALIST SHORT-CIRCUITING

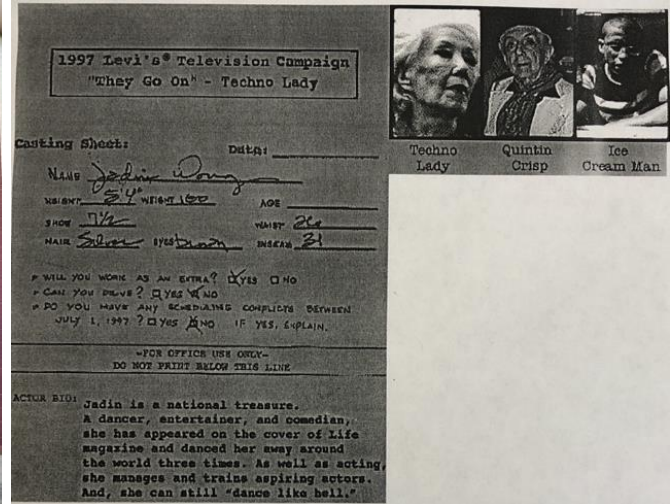
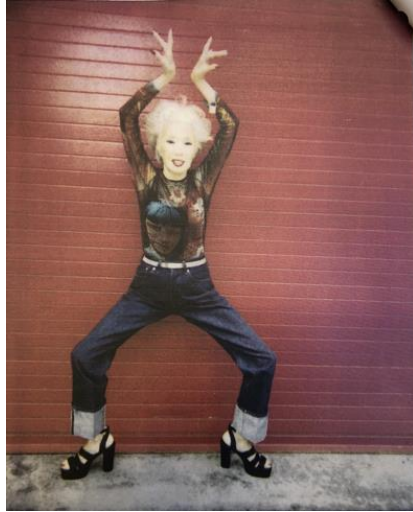


Figure 2: Wong's publicity photo Figure 3: Jadin Wong's Casting Sheet for "Techno Lady" for the "They Go On" ad campaign

“Jadin Wong is a national treasure.”<sup>29</sup> Thus opens Wong’s short biography on her casting sheet from 1997 when she was cast as “Techno Lady” (Figure 1) in the Levi’s ad campaign “They Go On,” alongside Quentin Crisp and Lenny Kravitz. At the time, the 83-year-old performer—whose age is the only data point decidedly left empty on the casting sheet (Figure 2)—still regularly practiced ballet and occasionally accepted acting or dancing role offers when her busy agent schedule allowed. By this point in her approximately seven-decade-long career, Wong had toured all over the United States and, as the casting sheet puts it, “danced her way around the world three times... and [could] still ‘dance like hell.’” By 1997, she was primarily known as a “Superagent,” head of Jadin Wong Management, the primary and largest (when not

<sup>29</sup> “1997 Levi’s Television Campaign ‘They Go On’ — Techno Lady: Casting Sheet,” n.d., New York Public Library.

the only) talent agency representing Asian American entertainers. However, between her years touring primarily as a dancer up until the early fifties and her move into talent management in the seventies, Wong worked as a stand-up comedian, a feat less well known and documented. While the same casting sheet identifies her as a “dancer, entertainer, and comedian,” this last listed profession does not get appropriate attention in how she is remembered, even when it comes to tributes to her work.

In the one-minute-long television ad for Levi’s, one of six loosely connected spots that make up the whole ad campaign, Wong walks down a street and enters an underground, guarded club, where we find fellow clubgoer (and fellow octogenarian) Quentin Crisp. From behind Crisp, a man stands up and approaches a condom vending machine, searching for coins in his jeans’ pocket. While the advertisement at this point cuts to children in the street buying ice cream from the titular “Ice Cream Man,” the first half conveys a vision of aging that defies normative expectations, as part of Levi’s’ turn toward an older (than their previous, 15-to-25-year-old) target audience.<sup>30</sup> Within this subversive vision of aging, Jadin Wong is our entry point into underground club life. “Techno Lady,” this gorgeous, edgy character, was unfortunately one of very few television appearances from Wong’s long career.

In this chapter, I argue that Wong’s years in stand-up comedy can best be understood as a continuation of the cultural work she established as a dancer. That Wong, unlike her white counterparts, never made it onto television as a comedian and faced difficulties and rejection within postwar stand-up circuitry, highlights how the

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas Riggs, ed., “Levi Strauss & Co.: They Go On Campaign,” in *Encyclopedia of Major Marketing Campaigns*, vol. 2 (Detroit: Gale Group, 2007), 889–90.

transition from vaudeville to stand-up comedy, a process that for women in general often meant a shift from dancing to performing as an emcee and monologist, was in fact short circuited by television's Cold War Orientalism. The first section of the chapter will provide an account of Wong's dancing background before and on the Chop Suey Circuit to show how she fashioned not only her signature dances but, as I will argue, the scaffolding for her comedy act. The second section will, then, analyze what (little) remains of her comedy act in archival sources and how her jokes circulated in the press. Finally, the third will argue that the short circuit in Wong's comedy can be best understood within the framework of how in the period of its massification, American television's Orientalism, shaped by Korean War politics and policies, curtailed Asian and Asian American artists' performance modalities. While *musical* acts by Asian American and Asian performers (including *Flower Drum Song*, which I will discuss at the end of the chapter) gained some heightened visibility in variety programming, *monologists* did not fit into the television landscape shaped by and in response to US military policy. As a result, while even Wong's fellow Asian American dancers from the Chop Suey Circuit could appear in programs like *The Ed Sullivan Show*; Wong, who was solely working as a *comic* by that point, did not. Wong eventually left comedy behind and found a more lucrative and rewarding career path in talent management.

Unlike in the case of Sally Marr or Jean Carroll, whose work I analyze in the other chapters of this dissertation, Jadin Wong's dancing background within the Chop Suey Circuit is fairly well documented in films, plays, publications, and scholarship. While some speculation is needed in approaching Wong's comedic material, archival

sources on her dancing can help us understand her later comedic work and the process of transitioning to stand-up comedy, including her short-circuiting in that field, in a more robust and revealing manner than in the other cases.

### **Wong as a Dancer of the Chop Suey Circuit**

Wong's roots as a dancer in the Chop Suey Circuit provides the context to better understand her later stand-up comedy. The almost two decades that she dedicated to stand-up from the late fifties to the seventies can be understood as a continuation of her work as a dancer in the thirties and forties. Thus, before I map out and analyze what remains of Wong's comedic material from the sixties, I first turn my attention to her work as a dancer. Wong crafted her signature dances building from her training and shaping them for the predominantly white audiences of the circuit, who came to the clubs of the Circuit for Orientalist entertainment. The club performers, at the same time, saw their work as both enabled by and pushing back against Orientalism. As I show below, this dynamic can be seen across multiple levels: how individual choreographies, the spaces of the clubs, and even the infrastructure of the whole Circuit were designed. Just as important, as I argue in the section after, the very building blocks of Wong's performance background in this context, and this intricate negotiation of Orientalism, can also be understood as the scaffolding for her stand-up material, demonstrating how legacies of the circuit continue, shift, and re-emerge, after the circuit itself is gone.

Born in 1913, Wong developed an interest in dancing as a small child. In an interview with the Museum of Chinese in America (MOCA) conducted in 2000, Wong

explains her family background and how her dancing career began: the child of a San Francisco-born mother from a musical family and a Chinese immigrant (from the Guangdong province) railroad worker father, Wong started studying ballet and tapdancing as a young child in her hometown of Marysville, California.<sup>31</sup> Marysville had not only been a strategically important location during the Gold Rush but also a refuge for Chinese and Chinese Americans from nearby areas in the second half of the nineteenth century when anti-Asian violence increased and forced people to flee.<sup>32</sup> The city had a flourishing Chinese American community and was the home of one of the first (and eventually one of the largest) Chinatowns established in the middle of the century.

Wong's passion for dancing eventually led her to leave the family. Still during Wong's youth, the family moved to Stockton, and at the age of fourteen, she ran away to Hollywood to pursue a career in entertainment. Soon after, she moved to San Francisco for a dance scholarship that afforded her extensive and rigorous training in a range of dancing styles. It was in San Francisco that Wong was "discovered" by Claudette Colbert and her husband, director-producer Norman Foster. Years later, Foster would cast her in her debut film appearance—as a dancer—in *Mr. Moto Takes a Holiday* (1939).

During her dance training in San Francisco, Wong developed her would-be signature dance: "Moon Goddess." Having encountered a variety of ethnic dance

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<sup>31</sup> Museum of Chinese in America, "Interview with Jadin Wong, June 9, 2000," accessed April 19, 2021, [http://ohms.mocanyc.org/viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=2015\\_008\\_006\\_1530025194.xml](http://ohms.mocanyc.org/viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=2015_008_006_1530025194.xml).

<sup>32</sup> For more on the significance of the Marysville Chinatown, see Tom, Brian, et al. *Marysville's Chinatown*. Illustrated edition, Arcadia Publishing, 2008.

techniques popular at the time and often mediated by white dancers, Wong created her “fabricated Oriental dances,” as described by SanSan Kwan.<sup>33</sup> In her interview with MOCA, Wong explains that in creating “Moon Goddess” specifically, she was inspired by Austrian ballet dancer Tilly Losch, famous for her hand-focused choreographies. Wong admired Losch as the character Lotus and German actress Luise Reiner in the leading role O-Lan, both performing in yellowface, in *The Good Earth* (Sidney Franklin, 1937). Wong also cites East Indian and Hawaiian influences in creating her dancing style, to which she was exposed not only during her own travels, but rather—and perhaps more so—via her extensive training in the US with the so-called “queen of ethnic dance,” La Meri (born Russell Meriwether Hughes, in Kentucky) and “father of jazz dance” Jack Cole. Thus, Wong fabricated her signature dance, at least in large part, based on white American and European dancers and performers who were defining ethnic dance and performance at the time. In this sense, “Moon Goddess” was built through a similar method, woven together from similar cultural fabrics, as Wong’s comic act would be decades later. Wong’s artistic approach in both modes of performance could be described as skillful fabrication that repurposed and twisted assumptions, (mis)understandings, and stereotypes circulating about Asianness.

With “Moon Goddess,” Wong secured an offer to perform at the newly-opened San Francisco nightclub Forbidden City, and thus entered the Chop Suey Circuit. The circuit, as Kwan illuminates, consisted of “Asian American cabaret acts that toured a

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<sup>33</sup> SanSan Kwan, “Performing a Geography of Asian America: The Chop Suey Circuit,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (March 2011): 126, [https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM\\_a\\_00052](https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00052).

string of nightclubs across the United States during the 1930s and 1940s, [headlining] at so-called ‘Oriental’ night clubs such as the Forbidden City in San Francisco (which remained open until 1962) and the China Doll in New York.”<sup>34</sup> The clubs were often located in Chinatowns, reflecting some of the more general changes that Chinatowns had gone through in the first part of the century. The circuit, in this sense, was a continuation—similar yet notably different—of the way Chinatown “*as a whole* [had become] a space of leisure for [white] native-born Americans”<sup>35</sup> in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In her chapter on early filmmaking and New York City’s Chinatown, Sabine Haenni demonstrates how Chinatown became *commercialized* and *spectacularized* (from sightseeing tours to cinematic representation) in that era and how, unlike European immigrant ethnic enclaves, it became *racialized* in the process. Commercialization, spectacularization, and racialization were thus intertwined at the core of Chop Suey Circuit performance culture.

The circuit built on the established dynamics of Chinatown tourism, but as its clubs gained popularity, it gradually shifted the landscapes of Chinatowns as well. While “[in the late 1930s,] by and large, Chinatown’s economy still depended on a specific kind of tourist trade, in which curios, restaurants, and the intensely sinocized streets, not its young musical performers and dancers, drew the interested,” as Anthony W. Lee shows, this soon changed with the circuit’s increasing fame.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kwan, 120.

<sup>35</sup> Sabine Haenni, “Filming Chinatown: Fake Visions, Bodily Transformations, Narrative Crises,” in *The Immigrant Scene: Ethnic Amusements in New York, 1880-1920* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 144.

<sup>36</sup> Anthony W. Lee, *Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 240.



Commercialization became even more evident and was put on display as well:

by 1947 a writer for *Newsweek* could claim with authority that “the sing-song girls, joss houses, and opium dens had given way to neon-lighted chop-suey restaurants.” No one actually believed that singsong girls or opium dens had existed in decades (other than as props for the tourist), but the gist of the comparison was clear. Chinatown had given up its old social and cultural life in favor of new trade practices, aimed at the tourist, which *staged* the old world as a commodity available to all.<sup>37</sup> (Highlight in original.)

At the same time, the circuit engendered new performing practices and thus changed—or participated in the changing—practices of racialization. One aspect of early racializing representation (in films like *Chinese Rubbernecks*, 1903), for instance, associated the Chinese body with supernatural fluidity and mobility, a corporealized representation of fears regarding Chinese immigrants’ mobility.<sup>38</sup> The image of Chinatowns offered an idea of spatial containment and immobility that allayed these fears. However, the Chop Suey Circuit’s performers, a few decades later, toured widely across the United States every few years (and were billed as such), from Washington state and Nevada to Iowa and Louisiana. In this sense, these tours provided a new geographic breadth of mobility, even if through a circuit that racially and ethnically framed the spaces of performance and reinstated logics of limitations and containment within. Put another way, the Orientalism whose logic aimed to contain and confine the performers inside Chinatowns, via this attendant

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<sup>37</sup> Lee, 251–52.

<sup>38</sup> Haenni, “Filming Chinatown: Fake Visions, Bodily Transformations, Narrative Crises.”

commercialization created the very infrastructure that enabled mobility for the performers.

This new mobility, however, also meant new negotiations within a hostile system, rather than a sense of easy freedom. The Chop Suey Circuit's performers, in Kwan's words,

...reinscribed America's racial cartography while also disrupting it. Their presence outside of the Chinatowns to which they were typically relegated as Asian Americans, their mobility beyond the barbed wire of the Japanese American internment camps, and their appearance in the rigidly black-white spaces of the Jim Crow South disturbed the embedded racial cartography of US cultural and legal practices.<sup>39</sup>

That is to say, while the Chop Suey Circuit continued previously established spectatorial and performance traditions, it also furnished performers with new means and forms of resistance.

Wong immediately became a staple at Forbidden City, arguably one of the most popular clubs of the circuit. Lee offers the following general description of the club:

Named after the fabled walled city in Beijing, the Forbidden City was an enormously popular nightclub in downtown San Francisco. Throughout its long life, beginning in the lean Depression year of 1938, the Forbidden City staged a remarkably wide variety of acts: song-and-dance routines, slapstick, musical duets and solo performances, tap dancing, magic acts, tumbling and

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<sup>39</sup> Kwan, "Performing a Geography of Asian America," 121–22.

sword routines, chorus line work, cancons, and even erotic “bubble” and “feather” dancing (so called because the female dancers played with bubbles and feathers around their otherwise unclothed bodies).<sup>40</sup>

The acts, varied as the list above reveals them to be, all participated in a specific ethnic performance strategy (typical of the circuit at large). As Lee highlights, “Low believed that the acts at the Forbidden City needed to stage everything for an audience in hyperethnic form, a mandate that applied not only to the interior decoration and wardrobe but also to the Forbidden City performers, whose identity had to be, compulsorily, Chinese. In fact, many of Low’s performers were of Japanese, Korean, [Inuit or Yupik] and Filipino descent.”<sup>41</sup> This compulsory Chineseness, as Lee points out, “produced a bizarre scenario: some Asian American players were performing ethnicity (Chinese) in order to perform race (white).”<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, Chop Suey Circuit performers, at Forbidden City and beyond, were billed as “the Chinese Frank Sinatra” or “the Chinese Sophie Tucker,” and the titles of their performances included, in the same vein, “Chinese Follies,” “Chinese Capers,” and “Celestial Scandals.” As these names suggest, the performances presumed a tension between white popular entertainment and Chinese performers. The artists were performing, in Kwan’s reading, “in whiteface [...] for the pleasure of white audiences... [with] many of the female dancers, promoted for their

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<sup>40</sup> Lee, *Picturing Chinatown*, 237.

<sup>41</sup> Lee, 275.

<sup>42</sup> Lee, 275–76.

‘exotic’ looks, [playing] on white American audience’s stereotypes of the seductive Oriental.”<sup>43</sup>

Forbidden City’s significance, specifically for Asian American performance before World War II, is also chronicled in Arthur Dong’s 1989 documentary *Forbidden City USA*. The film includes interviews with several of the club’s earliest performers, Wong among them, who all recall the cultural milieu of Chinatown nightlife in the 1930s and 1940s. The era closely followed the Immigration Act of 1924 and included the Second Sino-Japanese War and the conflict between the US and Japan. As Kwan explains, this era was dominated by a “new fascination for things Chinese [...] spurred on by the US involvement in the Pacific theatre during WWII. The Chinese were allies and Americans were interested in what these new and very foreign allies were like. Thus, Chinese Americans, previously the victims of exclusion acts and discrimination, were promoted to the level of curiosities.”<sup>44</sup> Postwar US military involvement, as I will argue in the final section of the chapter, similarly reshaped this Orientalism specifically on television, recharging some of these performance practices and reshaping them into what is commonly referred to as Cold War Orientalism.

Aligned with the shifting imaginary, Forbidden City had a unique geographical position as well: located just outside Chinatown proper, “Forbidden City’s in-between location reassured white audiences of their safety and comfort while still suggesting entry into the ‘forbidden.’”<sup>45</sup> Promotional materials and newspaper reviews at the time

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<sup>43</sup> Kwan, “Performing a Geography of Asian America,” 120.

<sup>44</sup> Kwan, 126.

<sup>45</sup> Kwan, 127.

marked the interior of Forbidden City for its “ornative [style] with silken hangings, Chinese urns, embroidered tapestries and ancient idols...[with a] main dining room [that] has an atmosphere of rich elegance.”<sup>46</sup> Thus, Wong’s familiarly unfamiliar “Moon Goddess” was introduced and shaped in order to fascinate, entertain, and reassure these audiences. As playwright Joanna Chan explains in the foreword to her play about Jadin Wong’s life, with her performance there, “Wong helped to create and popularize the ‘dragon lady’ image of the Chinese female in a long, tight gown, slits thigh high, and chopsticks in her hair—an image that became a fixation in the public imagination in the West.”<sup>47</sup>

While Charlie Low, the owner, manager, and emcee of the club, ensured that the club’s singers and dancers were all Asian-American, the orchestra was white; or, as reviews at the time would put it, *The Forbidden Knights* was “an American orchestra.” Inside the club, then, a similar dynamic of liminality, a tension between segregation and immersion, played out as it did in the location of the club. This dynamic can also be seen as a continuation of early cinematic representations reflecting that “in [...] American fantasies, Chinatown relentlessly produces boundaries; more accurately, it is relentlessly segregated from American public life.”<sup>48</sup>

Forbidden City was not the only Chop Suey Circuit venue with which Wong had a long-standing engagement. In 1947, she moved to New York City to work at the *China Doll* and remained there right until the nightclub had to close down suddenly in

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<sup>46</sup> Edward Murphy, “Forbidden City, San Francisco,” *The Billboard*, January 21, 1939.

<sup>47</sup> Joanna Chan, “Forbidden City West,” in 陳尹瑩戲劇集. *The collected works of Joanna Chan. Vol. 3 of 8. 之三 = 之三 =*, 2016, 346.

<sup>48</sup> Haenni, “Filming Chinatown: Fake Visions, Bodily Transformations, Narrative Crises,” 150.

1951. China Doll and Forbidden City, as primary venues of the Chop Suey Circuit, both catered to white audiences, but there were significant differences between them. While Forbidden City, like other west-coast clubs of the circuit, had an Asian-American owner, China Doll was owned by white stage producer Tom Ball. As Wong recalls in her interview, the audience was slightly different in the two clubs: Forbidden City often attracted Hollywood celebrities such as Orson Welles but had a wider audience in terms of socioeconomic class, whereas China Doll would advertise to and attract an upper-class New Yorker audience. Forbidden City had, in Wong's words, a "real Chinese" interior design with red and golden schemes; China Doll had a "more modern" look dominated by the color blue.<sup>49</sup> This more modern look accompanied a different engagement with stereotypes as well: "the China Doll played on Asian stereotypes in ways that Chinese-owned San Franciscan clubs did not. This difference led to shows with names such as 'Maid in China' and 'Slant Eyed Scandals.'"<sup>50</sup>

While Wong moved on from China Doll to tour internationally for a few years before returning to the States and launching her career in stand-up comedy, there are signs that she had, in fact, performed comedy even during her dancer years. Kwan's account of the Chop Suey Circuit includes a somewhat hidden gem in this regard: a footnote about Wong with a quick reference to a 1943 review of "Chinese Follies" mentioning Wong "[hitting the] microphone for some comedy chatter, announcing that 'dancing is strenuous but better than going back to the laundry,'" which Kwan reads as

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<sup>49</sup> Museum of Chinese in America, "Interview with Jadin Wong, June 9, 2000."

<sup>50</sup> Museum of Chinese in America, "Chop Suey Circuit & China Doll Nightclub," accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.mocanyc.org/collections/stories/chop-suey-circuit-china-doll-nightclub/>.

an example of “self-Orientalizing mockery” in service of the white audience.<sup>51</sup>

Somewhat oddly, Kwan’s footnote in the piece is supposed to expand on her point that within a regular revue program, “there might be a singer who would perform a few songs and crack some jokes; he might also serve as emcee.” The use of the male pronoun in this general statement in contrast to Wong serving as the primary example thereof either betrays Wong’s exceptionality at the time in stepping into these roles as a woman or might signal a shift in gendered roles within these nightclubs.

While it is hard to gauge exactly how often and how much Wong emceed, it seems clear that she was already performing (some) comedy during her early dancing years, decades before she officially transitioned to stand-up comedy. What I propose here, then, is to consider that Wong was not just “fabricating Oriental dances” but perhaps also molding a comic act and that the dances, such as “Moon Goddess,” can be understood as artistic scaffolding for her later comedic work.

### **“Lady Godiva was really the first...”: Wong’s Stand-up Material in Print Circulation**

A 1961 “New Acts” section of *Variety* introduces Wong as a “comedy, dancing” act, calling her a “cute Chinese doll[...] capable of clever repartee and [...] naturally strong in the hoofing dept.”<sup>52</sup> While the (racist and patronizing) review focuses on Wong’s looks and thoroughly details her changing from “a beautiful red gown for a demure Chinese fan dance” to “a slinky black gown which eventually

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<sup>51</sup> Kwan, “Performing a Geography of Asian America,” 123.

<sup>52</sup> Trump, “Reviews: New Acts - JADIN WONG,” *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000)* (Los Angeles, United States: Penske Business Corporation, March 22, 1961).

comes off to reveal her in a long slit skirt,” it says almost nothing about what her *comedic* material entailed. Only a brief comment on her “clever repartee” and a throwaway reference to “gags” appear in it. This short piece is one of several publications from 1960 and 1961 that signal that Wong was no longer billed *solely* as a dancer but rather as a comedian who also danced, and eventually, just as a comedian. Wong’s transition to comedy was thus gradual. Yet it is hard to gauge exactly how gradual it was, given that reviewers seemed to persistently focus on her looks rather than her words – a form of short-circuiting in itself. When Wong herself talks about this career shift in interviews, she places it as happening after she returned from Europe in the mid-fifties. From newspapers of the time, it only seems clear that, she fully transitioned into being a stand-up performer—or, rather, she was finally fully seen and understood as a stand-up performer—within the first couple of years of the sixties. Her years in stand-up were also substantial: she continued this career path until the middle to late 70s, when she went into talent management.

While audiovisual and photographic sources abound about Forbidden City and therefore Wong herself from that period, including Arthur Dong’s 1989 feature-length documentary<sup>53</sup> and its accompanying publications,<sup>54</sup> the same cannot be said about Wong’s years in stand-up. In a sense, Wong is confined to the Chop Suey Circuit, and her stand-up career is retroactively short-circuited even in sources that are meant to honor her artistry, memory, and legacy. With no extant audio or visual recording of

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<sup>53</sup> *Forbidden City U.S.A*, version Collector’s edition; Home Use Edition., DVD, Collector’s edition; Home Use Edition. (DeepFocus Productions, 2016).

<sup>54</sup> Arthur E. Dong et al., *Forbidden City, USA: Chinese American Nightclubs, 1936-1970* (Los Angeles, CA: DeepFocus Productions, 2014).



her comedy act, we are limited to print archival materials, the vast majority of which consists of advertising for her appearances—more telling of the locations and venues in which she would appear than of the performances themselves—and a handful of previews and reviews of her shows. Below, I will therefore share not only what we can learn from or speculate<sup>55</sup> based on these materials but also the challenges and violence the press circulation indicates (or, more precisely, in which it partakes).

A rare, albeit very late, exception to the dearth of archival traces comes in the shape of an article written by Wong herself, published in 1976, around the time she moved on from working as a comedian to becoming a talent agent. While this is one of the latest sources, I start here because it is the piece over which we can assume Wong had most authorial control and the one that—even in its relative shortness—provides the most extensive collection of comic material with which she wanted to be associated. In a February 15 Sunday *Parade* supplement (inserted into a wide range of newspapers at the same time), Wong’s writing fills up two full columns under the title “My Favorite Jokes by Jadin Wong.”<sup>56</sup> The piece consists of about a dozen jokes and a long “Editor’s Note” preceding them. At least some of the jokes are simply spins on widely circulating ones in the era, as was probably true of the live performance – of hers and most comedians, of course. However, the question of authorship is less important to settle here than the question of comic styling and persona that emerge from the curatorial decisions made in the piece. These decisions will also be important

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<sup>55</sup> I am using the term “speculate” in reference to speculative historiography, explained in the introduction.

<sup>56</sup> Jadin Wong, “My Favorite Jokes,” *Lincoln Sunday Journal And Star*, February 15, 1976, access-newspaperarchive-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu.

in seeing the *problems* with how the material circulates later, as I explore in later parts of this section.

Out of the twelve “favorite” jokes, exactly half could be categorized upon first look as engaging directly with Chinese stereotypes, Orientalism, or having the structure of a self-announcing Chinese proverb (“There’s an old Chinese proverb:…”). The other half address everyday themes, such as television as a medium (“Television will never replace a newspaper. You can’t hold a TV set over your head when it rains.”) or Las Vegas (“Las Vegas is the only place where you can get three lemons for a dime”). Some of the jokes poke fun at men, especially men in a position of power (e.g., “Diplomacy is telling your boss he has an open mind instead of saying he has a hole in the head”), while others make light of what it is like to work as a woman.

The “editor’s note” opens by explaining to the readers, “You don’t meet Chinese comediennes everyday; in fact, Jadin Wong might be the only one, and she brings a special tone to her comedy.” That Wong would be introduced as a novelty in comedy as a Chinese woman is not surprising; as I discuss in my introductory chapter, most women performers were discussed and introduced every time as at least a rarity, if not the only or first woman to perform comedy. Such discussion was, and to some degree remains to be, the case for many women of color performers. As Grace Jung notes, despite the late 70s club and television appearances of Korean American comedian Johnny Yune, including on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* (NBC), Margaret Cho decades later—and to this day—is commonly cited as the first Korean American stand-up comedian with mainstream exposure in the US. Thus, my point here is not that Wong *was* the first Asian American or Chinese American (woman)

comedian but rather that we do not know who was. More important, as I explain in the introduction, the claim to position these performers as “novelty” is more an act of erasure or ignorance of genealogies than it is of simple praise.

To explain the aforementioned “special tone” Wong brings to her comedy, the editor’s note then directly quotes her responding to her hecklers “with respect” by throwing a “Chinese saying” at them: “it’s better to keep one’s mouth shut and be thought a fool than to remove all doubt.” Repurposing this adage that has in fact most commonly been ascribed to Abraham Lincoln or Mark Twain—with no actual evidence of either having said it—reflects the way Wong’s humor works in the majority of the article: a spin on the notion of “Chinese proverbs” that both engages with racist expectations about the performance and subverts (some of) those expectations. Finally, the editor’s note explains that Wong had toured “all over the world” and would be appearing at the Town and Country Dinner Theater in Rochester (NY) and the Holiday House in Pittsburgh (PA), both of which were large supper clubs seating seven to nine hundred people at a time and which had headliners such as Phyllis Diller and Milton Berle.

Some of Wong’s “favorite jokes” play in a similar fashion with notions (erroneously) assigned a Chinese origin. For example, one goes, “The stock market is like ancient Chinese water torture. Lots of little drops will drive you crazy.” For the joke to work with a white audience—that is, Wong’s and the newspaper’s typical addressee—the incongruity of aligning “ancient” torture with the modern stock market might just be enough. At the same time, the joke can also be read as making fun of Western inventions that westerners claim have Chinese origins: what is currently

known as Chinese water torture was first described—as a technique by a different name still—by an Italian, and it was only named “Chinese” by Harry Houdini when he crafted his “Chinese Water Torture Cell” act.

The penultimate joke of the collection directly addresses the question of “firsts” that I mentioned earlier. For the sake of the joke’s integrity, I will start by relaying the full joke:

A woman was asked how she felt about being the first of her sex to receive a jockey’s license. She answered: “Lady Godiva was really the first, but she rode to show. I will ride to win.”

Of course, the first sentence—the set-up—of the joke echoes the experience of women in performing arts, especially in male-dominated genres and modes of performance, including stand-up comedy, continually asked this question. When Wong relays this joke, it comes from a comedian who, without fail and including in the very article in which the joke is embedded, is introduced as “the first” or “only” of her gender and ethnicity in her trade. The response of the jockey, on the one hand, combines the mythical or legendary, said to have happened many centuries ago—i.e., Lady Godiva’s horseride in the nude—with the mundane of today. In this sense, this combination or contrast between “ancient” and “modern” is similar to Wong’s other “proverb” jokes mentioned above. On the other hand, the jockey’s response citing Lady Godiva as the “real” first, the one who deserves credit, can also be read precisely as demand for acknowledging a longer genealogy – even if that genealogy might seem imperfect, complex, or even uncertain in its factuality.

The final joke, immediately following the one on Lady Godiva, is a similarly

complex one, both in its comic strategy and its affect. By far the longest out of the twelve jokes altogether, it reads as an anecdote (regardless of its factuality), and it most clearly thematizes being an Asian American woman performer on stage. This last joke reads as follows:

I worked with a famous male singer who'd so excite the women in the audience that they'd throw their underwear on stage. I always thought, gee, that's really something, to be able to move an audience to such a pitch. Well, last week it happened to me. I was performing, and a fellow threw his underwear on stage with a note attached. It said: "Drip dry and no starch, please."

This last joke, in my reading, is a powerful conclusion to the selection because it addresses one of the common anti-Asian stereotypes of laundromats as the only viable career option for Asian Americans, a stereotype that Wong's joke from her dancing days, cited above from a footnote, also addressed ("dancing is strenuous but better than going back to the laundry"). However, unlike the earlier joke, this later formulation puts the onus explicitly on the racist audience member. As a conclusion to the set of jokes, it is as if Wong wanted the reader to leave with a warning: do better!

Wong's "favorite jokes" also had an informative immediate afterlife: they circulated in the press, albeit in tellingly altered forms. Two separate selections of the jokes appeared in newspapers within a year of Wong's original publication. In the first case, in "The Odd Column" of a *Washington Evening Journal*, stuffed between editorials and a "Dear Abby" section, the reader can find the first three of Wong's favorite jokes. A new title has been added on top of them: "Oriental Wisdom of Jadin

Wong.”<sup>57</sup> The strikingly short selection opens with an “Orient v. America” joke and ends with an “Old Chinese proverb” joke and reads as follows (with numbers added by me):

(1) In the Orient when a woman walks behind her husband it means he’s being respected. In America when a woman walks behind her husband it means he’s being trailed.

(2) Diplomacy is telling your boss he has an open mind instead of saying he has holes in his head.

(3) Old Chinese proverb: An egotist is a stupid person who thinks he knows as much as you do.<sup>58</sup>

In this piece, neither the text nor the order of Wong’s jokes is modified per se; this is the form in which they appeared in her original publication. However, the selection and structure, together with the new title, turn Wong’s intentions upon their head.

Here, the material is framed more emphatically through Orientalism (literally appearing under the header that reads “Oriental”), setting up not only the “Orient” as “America’s” Other (and, of course, as “the old”) from the first joke, but also placing Wong herself—and her “wisdom,” per the title, connoting “ancient”-ness as well—as belonging firmly to the former. Put simply, the piece re-frames and encloses Wong herself within Orientalism.

The other occasion Wong’s favorite jokes resurfaced in the press was approximately a month after the Sunday *Parade* supplement (i.e., the original

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<sup>57</sup> Jadin Wong, “Oriental Wisdom,” *Washington Evening Journal*, August 21, 1976, <https://access-newspaperarchive-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/>.

<sup>58</sup> Wong.

publication). In this case, Joey Adams, a Borscht Belt comedian and the president of the American Guild of Variety Artists in the sixties, used some of Wong's material for his regular column "Strictly for Laughs," giving her *some* authorial credit by naming her but also modifying her writing in substantial ways and taking an even more drastic approach to "rendering" her material.<sup>59</sup> For his column, which contains seven jokes altogether, Adams takes five of Wong's "favorite" jokes and in between them, inserts a couple of jokes from other comedians – one time acknowledging the other author (Milton Berle, perhaps falsely); the other time not (Johnny Collins, as I will further explain below). Both in the case of Wong's jokes and that of the other comedians' jokes, the language is slightly modified, to the effect of implying that all jokes had come from Wong herself.

Right at the top of Adams' column, in the shape of a quasi-header, is a joke by Wong, without her name attached yet and with an added opening line that reads, "Chinese fortune cookies tell you many things: [...]," followed by the joke itself ("Old Chinese proverb: An egotist is a stupid person who thinks he knows as much as you do"). This is not the only such opener added by Adams in the piece. In fact, most jokes that come directly from Wong's article open with an added, "Jadin Wong she say [sic]:..."; while the witty remark attributed to Berle appears as, "Milton Berle he say [sic]: 'Television is like steak – it's a medium rarely well done.'"<sup>60</sup> In addition to inserting these openers, Adams also breaks the English within some of the jokes' text

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<sup>59</sup> Joey Adams, "Strictly for Laughs," *Dunkirk Evening Observer (Reprint)*, April 7, 1976, <https://access-newspaperarchive-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/>.

<sup>60</sup> This joke, in slightly modified forms, has appeared in numerous forms since as early as 1949 and has been attributed to a whole host of comedians (perhaps most famously, Ernie Kovacs), but it is unclear—and, arguably, not important—who actually wrote it.

by removing auxiliary verbs (“Man who losing hair...”) and articles (“There is old Chinese proverb” or “In Orient”).

When Adams inserts into his column a joke by comedian Johnny Collins originally published among *his* “favorite jokes” from the same month as Wong’s<sup>61</sup>, Adams does not mention Collins and instead adapts the joke’s text to what he perceives as Wong’s comedic styling. Below are the two published versions of the joke (numbers and notes added by me):

(1) Collins’ own version in his “favorite jokes”: “You could tell Aunt Nora was in mourning for her husband. She insisted on black olives for her martinis.”

(2) Adams’ altered version: “In modern China you can tell when woman [sic] is mourning for husband [sic] — she insists on black olives for her Martinis.”

Placed right after Wong’s own joke about women and their husbands “in the Orient” versus “in America,” the joke blends into Wong’s material as relayed by Adams, although in this joke, China—and, specifically, Chinese women—are aligned with modernity.

Thus, in both publications that recirculate Wong’s jokes, the specific decisions over selection, arrangement, and textual modifications betray how Wong’s material is Orientalized and often simplified when relayed by white comedians and editors. At the same time, these altered versions evince the altogether questionably reliable nature of

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<sup>61</sup> Johnny Collins, “My Favorite Jokes,” *Oakland Tribune*, February 29, 1976, access-newspaperarchive-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu.



our extant and limited archival sources. What if we only had the altered versions at our disposal? What kinds of understanding and misunderstanding of the actual stand-up material do these sources warrant? What other sources may have never made it into our publicly or academically accessible archives? And, of course, what levels of authorial agency and liberties can we assume Wong had in the original publication to begin with? Perhaps most important, how much can we assume about the live, staged performance from these kinds of published pieces?

One might think that contemporaneous reviews speak to this last question. That is true to some degree, as I will show below. Yet, the changes in the above two published pieces that “re-tell” Wong’s jokes, the shifts in framing and language seen there, are not unique or even exceptional. In fact, they are the very same “liberties” that journalists took with Wong’s material when reporting on or reviewing her performances. Two reviews from subsequent years written by award-winning journalist and humorist Norton Mockridge can serve as an elucidating example. At the height of Wong’s stand-up career, in the later part of the sixties, she was a returning performer at Chinese celebrity restaurateur Irene Kuo’s New York City establishments, the Lichee Tree (from where Mockridge reported his accounts below) and the Ginkgo Tree. Wong was in fact a selling point for both restaurants from 1967 to 1969<sup>62</sup>, including performing at the Lichee Tree’s famous Chinese New Year celebrations. Mockridge, an avid fan of these celebrations, reported on them several

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<sup>62</sup> Norton Mockridge, “Confucius Say, ‘Eat and Be Merry.’,” *Redlands Daily Facts*, February 20, 1967; Norton Mockridge, “Happy Chop,” *Cumberland Evening Times*, February 13, 1968, access-newspaperarchive-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu.; Earl Wilson, “How to Beat Today’s Gap,” *Bucks County Courier Times*, February 7, 1969; Earl Wilson, “It Happened Last Night,” September 22, 1969.

times.

In his 1967 report, he published the following description of Wong's performance as part of his event review:

Jadin is a great believer in wedded bliss and she recalled some ancient Chinese sayings along that line. "Every man," she said, "should get married. Man not complete until he married [sic]. Then he finished [sic]." And, "Ideal husband is man who admit when he wrong [sic]. And who keep his mouth shut when he right [sic]."<sup>63</sup>

On the one hand, the same linguistic patterns can be observed in this write-up as in Adams' rendering of Wong's jokes. On the other, this report adds some more insight into the material as it was performed that warrants attention. Clearly, Wong had several jokes up her sleeve suggesting that men stay quiet more often, and while it sounds like Wong may not have framed the jokes as poking fun at her own husband—as Carroll's material did—they nonetheless toy with subverting contemporaneous male stand-up comedians' banter about wives and the sorrows of coupled life, similar to Carroll.

Mockridge also reviewed the subsequent (1968) New Year's celebrations at Kuo's restaurant. There, he writes,

the pretty Jadine [sic] Wong appeared on stage shortly after our terrifying experience and told so many funnies that we forgot the whole business [of blade throwing]. "A married man," said Jadine [sic], "is a wolf who wants his cake—and someone else's cookie." She said that "Paying alimony is like

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<sup>63</sup> Mockridge, "Confucius Say, 'Eat and Be Merry.'"

putting dimes in the parking meter after your car is stolen,” and she said that

“If two cannon balls ever got married, they probably would have BBs.”<sup>64</sup>

Noticeably, while the material here is thematically similar to the previous year’s celebration—the woes of coupled and uncoupled life, albeit perhaps less limited to jokes aimed at men—Wong’s words are not altered quite the same way they were in Mockridge’s earlier report. Perhaps Mockridge was asked not to follow that path; perhaps he just decided not to do so. That he nonetheless (consistently) misspells Wong’s first name is not unique to him or even the era, either. Today, a search for “Jadine Wong” in an electronic newspaper database yields about twice as many results—all about Wong—from the 1960s than her actual name does.

Beyond the content and circulation of some of Wong’s material, newspaper reports and advertisements also illuminate some of Wong’s appearances and tours and, thus, the venues and circuits she (re)joined as a comedian. Extant newspaper advertisements show that, in addition to performing regularly in New York City, Wong toured extensively across the US throughout the sixties. She performed in a wide range of venues at the time—restaurants, clubs, malls, and, of course, army bases—and in a wide range of locations, from gigs throughout the Northeast (including Connecticut,<sup>65</sup> Massachusetts,<sup>66</sup> upstate New York and New Jersey<sup>67</sup>) and the Midwest (Chicago,<sup>68</sup> Nebraska<sup>69</sup>) to a several-month-long engagement in Puerto

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<sup>64</sup> Mockridge, “Happy Chop.”

<sup>65</sup> “Display Ad 73—No Title,” *The Hartford Courant (1923-1994)*, May 20, 1961.

<sup>66</sup> “Advertisement for CAPRI,” *The Lowell Sun*, September 16, 1961.

<sup>67</sup> “Advertisement for Hotel Troy’s Garden Terrace,” *The Troy Record*, October 28, 1960.

<sup>68</sup> Will Leonard, “Condon at London House and Playing Every Set,” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963)*, October 2, 1960, sec. Part 5.

<sup>69</sup> Trump, “Reviews.”

Rico (August to October of 1961)<sup>70</sup> and USO tours taking her to Hong Kong, Tokyo, Hawaii, Vietnam and Europe (1966).<sup>71</sup>

### **Early Television's Orientalist Circuitry and Stand-up Comedy**

As mentioned in the previous section, Wong transitioned from working as a dancer to performing stand-up comedy in the late fifties and the beginning of the sixties. When discussing her career change in interviews, Wong always framed the transition in relation to television's emergence and impact on nightlife. Upon her return from Europe to the United States in the mid-fifties, she suddenly found that "all the clubs were gone... because TV replaced all the nightclubs."<sup>72</sup> In Wong's own narrative, then, the drastic change in the nightclub scene was the final push for her to pursue stand-up comedy instead of dancing. Put differently, television appeared to be the cause both for the death of nightclubs where Wong had previously established herself as a dancer and for the birth of her new career.

Stand-up comedy in this era was still primarily performed in nightclubs, as well as in a growing number of other types and subtypes of venues from restaurants and supper clubs to strip clubs, hotels, resorts, and theaters. Therefore, what Wong suggests about the nightclub scene dying might signal either a trend of certain *kinds of*

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<sup>70</sup> "Current Bills," *Variety*, August 23, 1961; "Current Bills," *Variety*, August 30, 1961; "Current Bills," *Variety*, October 4, 1961; "Current Bills," *Variety*, October 11, 1961.

<sup>71</sup> Wong received Congressional commendation on her lifetime achievements on her 73<sup>rd</sup> birthday in 1986, including acknowledgment of her logging "more than 2000 hours entertaining troops at home and in Europe and in Asia." For the certificate, see Wong's Ephemera box (folder 13) at NYPL's Billy Rose Division. For a report of Wong's travels at the time, see *New York Post*, September 3 and September 30, 1966.

<sup>72</sup> Museum of Chinese in America, "Interview with Jadin Wong," June 9, 2000, [http://ohms.mocanyc.org/viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=2015\\_008\\_006\\_1530025194.xml](http://ohms.mocanyc.org/viewer/viewer.php?cachefile=2015_008_006_1530025194.xml).

*nightclubs* closing, specifically ones that she had typically performed in—i.e., the clubs of the Chop Suey Circuit—or, rather, a shift away from the kinds of *performances* that would find home in these clubs now. Indeed, with Wong’s new career path as the backdrop, the above statement seems to acknowledge that stand-up, compared to certain other forms of vaudevillian performance, was in fact more compatible with the nightlife culture so drastically transformed by television’s massification. If television’s growing popularity in the early fifties was precisely what created the landscape for Wong to establish herself as a stand-up comedian, what place did television of the time have for Wong? More specifically, what opportunity did it have for her as a stand-up comedian?

When Wong started touring as a comedian—or, more precisely, as a comedienne—rather than (just) as a dancer, she was regularly billed in advertisements as the “Chinese Myron Cohen.” As an advertising strategy, this coining can be readily understood as a continuation—with a twist—of Forbidden City’s convention of billing performers as the “Chinese Frank Sinatra” and so on, coining “Chinese” and the name of a widely known (non-Asian) American artist working in a similar mode of performance. In Wong’s case, the coined billing’s humor targeted not simply the incongruity between the two performers’ (Cohen’s and Wong’s) ethnicities and genders but also the outrageous aligning of the aging, balding, famously big-eared, conservatively dressed, and altogether meek Cohen on the one hand, and the gorgeous, long-haired, assertive Wong on the other. That the names of the two comedians would evoke wildly different *images* is obvious.

Yet, beyond the superficial dissimilarities, there are in fact important parallels

between the two artists. Cohen, an Eastern European Jewish immigrant<sup>73</sup> who arrived in the US with his family as a small boy, was well-known for performing a thick Yiddish accent in his act despite having no such accent off-stage. Often known as a “gentle jester,”<sup>74</sup> Cohen believed that his stories and jokes were challenging stereotypes regardless of his use of exaggerated accents. Over ten years Wong’s senior, Cohen started his comedy career later in life, around the same age as Wong did hers, following the second World War. He did so after spending almost three decades in a different profession (a silk salesman), and like Wong, he saw his former profession as deeply related if altogether different from his work as a comic. He quickly became a household name on the Borscht Belt circuit and a regular performer on New York stages such as Eddie and Leon’s, one of Wong’s favorite venues, as a performer, in the city. While Eddie and Leon’s may have served as a shared circuit node between Wong and Cohen, the latter performer went on to appear on *The Ed Sullivan Show* about forty times and became one of Sullivan’s all-time favorites, while Wong was never invited onto the variety and late-night shows of the period.

The difference between Cohen’s and Wong’s circulation among the newly reshaping, television-imbued circuitry of stand-up warrants more attention to how the category of the exotic functioned in the postwar period of the medium. Early television was, indeed, deeply invested in the category of the exotic. Even in its branding as a magical new technology, television’s advertisers made abundant use of

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<sup>73</sup> Some sources claim Polish, others Russian ancestry.

<sup>74</sup> Paula Span, “Myron Cohen, Gentle Jester,” *Washington Post*, March 12, 1983, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1983/03/12/myron-cohen-gentle-jester/1a57e673-61c8-49f1-86de-193d585c739f/>.

Orientalism to sell the new equipment: as Meenasarani Linde Murugan shows, advertisements often used the allegory of the magic carpet for television sets.<sup>75</sup> Relatedly, Alexander M. Thimons highlights the many ways that traveling was integral to early television programming, across genres, creating fundamental associations between television and mobility.<sup>76</sup> And while much early television programming was rooted—directly, or indirectly via radio—in vaudeville,<sup>77</sup> Murugan also draws specific attention to the burgeoning of “exotic” acts on variety shows. The exotic, however, was not a signifier of Asian-American talent only. Murugan shows that during the period of the fifties, several Black women dancers, such as Katherine Dunham, Janet Collins, as well as Eartha Kitt (for instance, as Salome) performed on a range of networks from DuMont to CBS directly under the rubric of the “exotic.” Via this vision of the Oriental, “within the segregated context of early US broadcast television, participation in exoticism offered visibility for various black performers.”<sup>78</sup>

At the same time, early television’s investment in the category of the exotic can also be understood as a continuation of the legacy of the Chop Suey Circuit’s constant negotiation of borders around the Other, in front of a largely white audience.

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<sup>75</sup> Meenasarani Linde Murugan, “Exotic Television: Technology, Empire, and Entertaining Globalism” (Ph.D., United States -- Illinois, Northwestern University), accessed February 28, 2022, <http://www.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/1721391478/abstract/DCC766FB55E0433DPQ/36>.

<sup>76</sup> Alexander M. Thimons, “The Electronic Magic Carpet: Television, Travel, and Place in the 1950s” (Ph.D., United States -- Illinois, Northwestern University), accessed February 28, 2022, <http://www.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/1722049649/abstract/DCC766FB55E0433DPQ/34>.

<sup>77</sup> Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (University of Chicago Press, 1992),

<https://resolver.ebscohost.com/Redirect/PRL?EPPackageLocationID=2471.1211138.4089764&epcusto merid=s9001366>; Susan Murray, *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars: Early Television and Broadcast Stardom*, 1 online resource (xvi, 222 pages) : illustrations vols. (New York: Routledge, 2005), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10751776>.

<sup>78</sup> Meenasarani Linde Murugan, “Electronic Salome: Exotic Dance, Early Television, and Black Modernism,” *ÉcraNoSphère*, 2018, 134.

In early television's constellation of exoticization, Murugan notes, "'the other' is simultaneously presented as a distant stranger as well as an intimate guest in the home."<sup>79</sup> Tele-vision, seeing far, from the privacy of the home, can be understood as allowing for the kind of (safe) transgression and redrawing of the borders around the Other that fueled the dynamic of Chop Suey Circuit performances, as I have noted above. In other words, television may not have only killed the clubs in which Wong performed; it also gained the racial charge and dynamics of their circuitry, (re)creating their images, visions, and affective workings.

One of the key contributors to early television's negotiations with the exotic (and, relatedly, the Oriental) was its close and often disregarded connection to the Korean War. From the 1950 onset of the war in the middle of the FCC freeze, which had threatened the television industry's funding (and, in the view of some pessimists, its whole existence), variety programming was seen as the premier outlet to address political tensions.<sup>80</sup> There was some interest in legitimizing television as a medium via the genre of news programming during the Korean War; however, this effort failed and the war remained one of the least documented by US media. As Benjamin Han explains, "on the one hand, television executives viewed the war as an opportunity to improve the status of television with increased news programming. On the other hand, military industrialists foresaw a devastating effect on the development of television as both an industrial and technological form."<sup>81</sup> This exact move (of news programming

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<sup>79</sup> Murugan, "Exotic Television," 15.

<sup>80</sup> Benjamin M. Han, "Transpacific Talent: The Kim Sisters in Cold War America," *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 3 (August 1, 2018): 473–98, <https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2018.87.3.473>.

<sup>81</sup> Han, 476.



becoming a site of legitimization for television) happened during 1960s, as Torres shows, in writing about the coverage of the Civil Rights movement, as both technological conditions (with lighter, more mobile equipment) and political goals became more enabling for it.<sup>82</sup>

While news programming could not be effectively utilized in the interests of the television industry, the Korean War ignited interest in the potentials of another genre: variety. In 1950, Charles Robert Longenecker, a WWII veteran, successfully lobbied via his company Telepak Inc., for the recording of television programs on film.<sup>83</sup> Longenecker's explicit goal with the recordings was to deliver them to soldiers abroad. He believed that these recordings could become a more cost-effective and improved part of GI entertainment, specifically as an extension of the USO tours. In other words, the USO tours, a circuit of its own kind that was deeply intertwined with comedy already, also became televisual.

USO tours during the Korean War were themselves a revival as well. One of the main new touring circuits established during World War II, the United Service Organizations (USO) tours were shortly disbanded in 1947 but were soon reinstated to serve soldiers during the Korean War. Altogether, "in collaboration with Asian performers... from 1941 to 1959, the USO arranged 450,460 performances and operated twenty-two clubs in multiple countries, including France and Korea."<sup>84</sup> Chop Suey Circuit performers had the opportunity to join the USO circuit, and they indeed

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<sup>82</sup> Sasha Torres, "'In a Crisis We Must Have a Sense of Drama': Civil Rights and Televisual Information," in *Black, White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton University Press, 2003), 13–35, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691186375>.

<sup>83</sup> Han, "Transpacific Talent: The Kim Sisters in Cold War America."

<sup>84</sup> Han, 476.

regularly did.<sup>85</sup> The new geographical mobility of the circuit's performers described in the first section was, thus, animated partly by this new alliance with the military.

While Longenecker highlighted the significance of *variety* television programming as a new and important form of USO entertainment, the culture of variety was, in return, shaped by the country's international conflicts and political goals. As Han shows, U.S. Cold War diplomacy led to increased efforts on behalf of TV producers, on Sullivan's or Dinah Shore's shows among others, to bring "far-away" cultures to American viewers. *The Ed Sullivan Show*, in Han's words, "was indeed a global talent show that aimed to promote international understanding in the form of ethnic spectacle,"<sup>86</sup> a goal very much in line with US Cold War politics in general and Cold War Orientalism specifically. Within this vaudeville-rooted ethnic spectacle, Murugan and Han both identify *musical* acts, especially dancers and singers, as the performers who were granted heightened visibility.

Indeed, some of Wong's former colleagues from the Chop Suey Circuit, who were still actively working as dancers, did appear on shows such as *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Actress Jodi Long's parents, whose family and performance history is mapped out in the documentary *Long Story Short* (Christine Choy, 2008), serve as one such example. Long's parents, Trudie and Larry Leong, worked together as a dancing duo on the Chop Suey Circuit, appearing both at Forbidden City, where they first met Jadin Wong, and later at China Doll. Sullivan, during their episode, introduced the duo as "coming direct from China." Long's father was, in fact, Chinese-Australian, and her

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<sup>85</sup> Lee, *Picturing Chinatown*, 237.

<sup>86</sup> Han, "Transpacific Talent: The Kim Sisters in Cold War America," 473.

mother was a Japanese immigrant and internment camp survivor. Neither had ever lived in China. Once on the stage and in front of the cameras, the duo performed a classic Chop Suey Circuit act: “[they would] emerge in traditional dress, speaking pidgin Chinese. Jodi’s father eventually [took] off his Chinese robe to reveal a tuxedo, and her mother reveal[ed] a ball gown, leading into a jazzy dance number... her parents believed that they were subverting the societal stereotypes of their day.”<sup>87</sup> Han similarly traces in the Kim Sisters’ performance a duality and tension between performing English proficiency and yet being perpetually marked as foreign. While musical acts like the Longs or the Kim Sisters could and would be branded by Sullivan and others as exotic novelty precisely because of this duality, monologist acts did not enjoy this same treatment.

### **Conclusion: A Brassy and Brilliant Dame**

By way of concluding, I turn to the *Flower Drum Song*, a musical that connected to Wong’s circuitries in several, important ways. Adapted from C. Y. Lee’s 1957 bestselling novel of the same title to a Broadway production first (in 1958, directed by Gene Kelly), the Universal film version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical (directed by Henry Koster) came out in 1961, just as Wong had started making headway as a stand-up comedian. An unusual and complicated piece of both cinema and musical history, the staged and filmed versions of *Flower Drum Song* take place in part in a nightclub called the Celestial Gardens, based on Forbidden City.

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<sup>87</sup> David Henry Hwang, C. Y. Lee, and Oscar Hammerstein II, *Flower Drum Song* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2003), xiii.

That is to say, the massively popular 1961 film about this specific night club scene, of which Wong had been a prominent figure, came out right as Wong was mourning the death of that very scene.

For playwright David Henry Hwang, who himself revived the musical on stage in 2000, discovering the movie version of *Flower Drum Song* was a deeply influential moment. In his libretto for the musical, he explains his general viewing experience of early 60s television, a representational landscape somewhat different from the decade before, yet not a considerably better one, as follows:

[a]s a young Chinese American growing up in Los Angeles in the 1960s, I developed a curious habit: if I knew a movie or TV show featured Asian characters, I would go out of my way *not* to watch it. This was a time when Asian characters in American popular culture were consistently inhuman: either inhumanly bad (Fu Manchu, Japanese soldiers) or inhumanly good (Charlie Chan, Asian ingénues who died for the love of a white B-movie actor). There was also the book on Bonanza, but he didn't exactly qualify as a role model.<sup>88</sup>

It is against the backdrop of this general aversion to and frustration with television that he recalls discovering the film version of *Flower Drum Song* – not in a movie theater, but rather on the small screen, on “some late-night television broadcast.”<sup>89</sup>

Echoing the different ways of appreciating the film's potentials but also of bemoaning its—and its era's—shortcomings, Hwang then traces how his relation to

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<sup>88</sup> Hwang, Lee, and Hammerstein II, ix.

<sup>89</sup> Hwang, Lee, and Hammerstein II, ix.

the movie version changed over time: he starts by remembering that a movie focusing on Asian characters “who spoke without accents, singing and dancing to beautiful and jazzy songs [...] [f]or Baby Boomers like myself, this was nothing short of revolutionary.”<sup>90</sup> However, his thinking about the film gradually changed as a young artist in college, when “we rather simplistically condemned virtually all portrayals of Asian Americans created by non-Asians. So, I ended up protesting *Flower Drum Song* as ‘inauthentic,’ though the show remained a guilty pleasure for many of us.”<sup>91</sup> This sense of watching *Flower Drum Song* as a guilty pleasure is, indeed, seemingly universally shared in scholarship on the film.<sup>92</sup>

These viewing positions, the dynamic of finding unexpected moments of identification within and a sense of guilty pleasure over racist imagery on television is, in fact, exactly the way television itself functions within the film, as Juliana Chang shows.<sup>93</sup> Main characters Mei Li and Linda are set up as “the Hollywood bipolar archetypes of the good girl and the bad girl, the small-town ingenue and the worldly woman, the virgin and the seductress [and, more specifically,] as gendered racial forms that are similarly posed as oppositional, such as the subservient lotus blossom and the hypersexualized vixen.”<sup>94</sup> Importantly, as Chang highlights, they are both performers representing different performance modes: Linda, like Wong, is a showgirl

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<sup>90</sup> Hwang, Lee, and Hammerstein II, x.

<sup>91</sup> Hwang, Lee, and Hammerstein II, x.

<sup>92</sup> See, for instance, Juliana Chang, “I Dreamed I Was Wanted: Flower Drum Song and Specters of Modernity,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 29, no. 3 (2014): 149–83, <https://doi.org/10.1215/02705346-2801551>; Anne Anlin Cheng, “Beauty and Ideal Citizenship: Inventing Asian America in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Flower Drum Song* (1961),” in *The Melancholy of Race, Race and American Culture* (Oxford [England]; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 31–64.

<sup>93</sup> Chang, “I Dreamed I Was Wanted.”

<sup>94</sup> Chang, 161.

in the nightclub based on Wong's; Mei Li as an amateur performer in public spaces, in line with "their respective affiliations with modern and folk cultures."<sup>95</sup>

With this binary established between the two main women characters, enters television, in two key sequences of the movie. First, during "Sunday," a song about having a day of laziness, rest, intimacy, and dreaming, Linda and Sammy have guests over, including a little girl dressed in a cowgirl costume. The cowgirl shoots at the television screen, on which a western is playing with a cowboy and an "Indian" character, both of whom proceed to step out of the TV set and into the living room, as if shooting at the screen opened a doorway between the two sides of the television screen. A scene of all characters chasing after one another follows. In the second case, Mei Li watches a television melodrama showing a couple engaging in a moment of forbidden love and intense longing, which culminates in the woman, presumably Mexican, declaring, "I came into this country illegally, across the Rio Grande... I am a wetback!" In the final scene of *Flower Drum Song*, where Mei Ling and Linda have a shared wedding and are about to be married off to each other's love interests, Mei Ling echoes the words of the immigrant woman on the screen in order to resolve the wedding mismatch. In both women's plots, then, television offers stereotypical, racist imagery—that of Native Americans and Latinxs respectively—that become corporealized within the diegetic worlds of the two women in moments of identification, fantasy, and resourcefulness combined. Put another way, demeaning imagery becomes a site of productive (which is not to say politically progressive) cross-racial identification. In thinking of this era as when the myth of the model

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<sup>95</sup> Chang, 161.

minority is created, Chang relates Linda's "dream sequence" (the "Sunday" sequence) of "Indians and Cowboys" back to folk musicals' aim to allegorize settler colonialism; she reads Linda's assimilated world, with the cowgirl as the focalizer, against Mei Ling's "fugitive" identification with the Mexican woman whose self-proclamation she adopts. Chang's close reading of these two scenes is helpful in understanding what the film posits about television's relation to domesticity, romance, citizenship and nationalism.

Returning to the Chop Suey Circuit with a twist, in 2000, when Hwang revived the musical, he made substantial changes to its libretto, including rewriting the character of Madame Liang to be based on his agent, Jadin Wong. "The character [...] was my tribute to Jadin," he remarks, "a brassy, brilliant ex-actress-turned-agent for 'Oriental' talent. An innovator and a pioneer, Jadin was the quintessential Broadway dame: bursting with chutzpah, never less than glamorous, a showgirl - with a showgirl's body - to the end."<sup>96</sup> With this move, Hwang pays tribute to Wong, but only to her as a "showgirl" and "agent for 'Oriental' talent," clearly framing Wong's later career within the continued Orientalism of the industry—or her own internalization thereof, if read less generously—and not mentioning her comedy career, or even her funniness.

Jodi Long, the actress who played the role of Madame Liang in Hwang's revival, also paid Wong a tribute on her own terms. In Long's eyes, Wong was not only a talent agent; she was also a peer of her parents, who were also performers of the

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<sup>96</sup> Wayman Wong, "Famed Dancer and Agent Jadin Wong Dies at 96," *Playbill*, April 5, 2010, [www.playbill.com/article/famed-dancer-and-agent-jadin-wong-dies-at-96-com-167399](http://www.playbill.com/article/famed-dancer-and-agent-jadin-wong-dies-at-96-com-167399).

Chop Suey Circuit. As I mentioned in the previous section, Long's parents were dancers, who even appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. When Long decided to make *Long Story Short*, a documentary about her family, she captured Wong in what might be the last bits of audiovisual footage of her. Recovering from a stroke at the same facility as Long's father, Wong performs some of her signature hand-focused choreography for the documentary (Figure 3). She is once again immortalized as a dancer—"a showgirl to the end," in Hwang's words—with a choreography rooted in the Chop Suey Circuit - yet another revival of sorts.

Long and Hwang's tributes are both touching and loving: the re-envisioned Madame Liang is a great character, and in Long's family movie, Wong is framed as belonging to a generation and performance background for which Long clearly has endless admiration. It is not simply due to Wong's work as an agent that her legacy and memory carry on; it is through the adamant work of tending to her legacy—in the works of artists like Hwang, Long, Arthur Dong, or Joanna Chan—that she stays remembered. If only her almost two decades in stand-up comedy could be more readily seen and heard as part of her long story.





*Figure 4: Jadin Wong demonstrating choreography in the documentary Long Story Short*

## CHAPTER 2: SALLY MARR AND THE “MOTHERLESS” LEGACIES OF EARLY STAND-UP COMEDY

A 1951 “New Acts” section of *Variety* declares Sally Marr to be a comedienne worthy of readers’ and audiences’ attention, and reviews a 14-minute performance of hers at Murray’s Inn in Albany, New York, as follows:

Dark haired, vivacious Sally Marr is one of the better comediennes seen here on nightclub floors. With fresher material and a smoother routine, she would have distinct possibilities, including television. The gal is a clown, pantomimist and *satirist*, who seems to hold a special appeal for women [...] Doubling as emcee, she works easily, intimately and surely [...] She does a takeoff on Margaret Truman that draws laughs, but wisely removes the sting by a complimentary reference to the President’s daughter. A dancing teacher bit is funny; her Bette Davis lampoon might be expanded. So could the comedy dancing [...] <sup>97</sup> (emphasis added)

This short review is one of few archival pieces providing some insight into the kind of material Sally Marr was performing at the time. From the description, we can gather that Marr was doing political humor (jokes that “stung” about the President’s daughter and others warranting the title “satirist”), as well as observational humor (the “dancing teacher” bit<sup>98</sup>) and some physical comedy (“clown [and] pantomimist”).

The review is also informative about the kind of venues and positions in which

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<sup>97</sup> Jaco, “New Acts: SALLY MARR,” *Variety (Archive: 1905-2000)* (Los Angeles, United States: Penske Business Corporation, April 18, 1951).

<sup>98</sup> Marr was working as a dance teacher as well as a comedian at the time.

Marr was working, appearing in nightclubs as well as theaters on the East coast. Besides doing her own act, she also often doubled as an emcee, a position for which, with the notable exception of the Apollo Theater, women were still rarely hired at the time. However, while *Variety* here enlists her among its recommended “new acts,” Marr in fact had been working primarily as a comedienne (rather than a dancer), performing a combination of impressions, satiric monologues, and dialect work, for a decade by this point.

While archival sources about Marr’s work as a *comedian* are scarce, she did not disappear without a trace. A little more than four decades after the above *Variety* article, stand-up comedian Joan Rivers, in a slightly uncharacteristic career move, debuted a one-woman show in 1994, titled *Sally Marr... and Her Escorts*, at the Helen Hayes Theatre. Journalist Leslie Bennetts notes in her rigorously researched biography of Rivers that “of all the creative ventures she took on during a life chockablock with a vast array of professional vehicles, the one closest to her heart may have been the original one-woman show she wrote and performed on Broadway in 1994.”<sup>99</sup><sup>100</sup> Co-written by Rivers, Lonny Price, and Erin Sanders, *Sally Marr... and Her Escorts* was born out of Rivers’ profound fascination with Marr’s life story and, specifically, how little attention and credit she had received: why do so few people know of Sally Marr?

The tagline on the playbill of *Sally Marr... and Her Escorts* reads, “She was more than Lenny Bruce’s mother.” Thus, the play acknowledges that Marr inevitably

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<sup>99</sup> Leslie Bennetts, *Last Girl Before Freeway: The Life, Loves, Losses, and Liberation of Joan Rivers*, 1st edition (Little, Brown and Company, 2016), 459.

<sup>100</sup> Despite the mixed success of the performance—it was commercially unsuccessful, but it also earned Rivers both a Tony and a Drama Desk Awards nomination—she specifically asked for a copy of the script to be buried with her. See Bennetts, page 459.

gets recognized primarily as Bruce's mother (and maybe also aims to benefit from this recognition). At the same time, the tagline also suggests that the play is more interested in what has been eclipsed from Marr's life due to her position as the mother of one of the most prominent and canonized—if also notorious—representatives of early stand-up comedy.

In a gesture akin to that of Rivers, in this chapter I turn to Marr's case to show how her career was short-circuited as a mother and, more specifically, as the mother of Lenny Bruce. I highlight some of the problems with academic and non-academic discourses that position Bruce as a singular, exceptional, and isolated comic genius, and a father figure of all "modern stand-up." As in the introduction above, I begin by focusing on Marr's own career path as a comedian honing her act on the circuits of the Borscht Belt, New York City clubs, and Los Angeles nightclubs and strip clubs. Before Bruce even entered show business, Marr had established herself as a comedian, and her craft and career served as a model for her son when he followed in her footsteps. In the next section, I explore the depths and significance of her lifelong creative collaboration with Bruce, which have often remained unaddressed or underestimated within scholarship focusing on his work and legacy. In these scholarly accounts, Bruce ironically arises as a *father* figure without a mother of his own, and a sole progenitor to stand-up comedy. This discourse, I argue in the third section, can be best understood against the backdrop of Bruce's association with the *Playboy* media empire and his contemporaneous relation to television. Bringing together these arguments about how Marr is sidelined by not simply the fame but rather the image of Bruce as established above, in the final section of the chapter, I analyze one of Bruce's

most recent representations in the contemporary series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. While the show focuses on the titular woman comedian, a Jewish mother turning to comedy like Marr, I highlight how *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* participates in a particularly sanitized and televisual mythmaking around the figure of Bruce that ultimately works to benefit him, at the cost of the titular character. This analysis, beyond its specificities, thus serves as a case study of creative legacies being made “motherless” and women’s labor erased.

### **Marr on the Borscht Belt, New York City, and Los Angeles Club Circuits**

Marr was born Sadie Kitchenberg, in 1906, to Russian immigrant Jewish parents. Although she had a talent for dancing from a young age and regularly competed in dance contests, she treaded lightly towards a career in entertainment due to her father’s strong resentment for show business.<sup>101</sup> Marr changed her last name to Schneider upon marrying Myron “Mickie” Schneider, with whom she had a child, Leonard Schneider (Lenny Bruce), at the age of nineteen. She and her husband subsequently divorced, which left her as a single mother in her twenties, during the years of the Depression.

As she explained in a 1991 radio interview, Marr tried to make ends meet by working not only as a dance teacher but also “as a maid, as a waitress, as a bartender... you know, when you don’t have a *skill*... and I don’t know if there *were*

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<sup>101</sup> Albert Goldman and Lawrence Schiller, *Ladies and Gentlemen - Lenny Bruce!!*, [1st ed.] (New York: Random House, 1974), 79; “Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius,” *Modern Times with Larry Josephson* (American Public Radio, 1991), R:10036, Paley Center for Media NYC.

any skills for women in [the early thirties], it was Depression.”<sup>102</sup> This precariousness of her working opportunities and conditions meant that—as commonly referenced by his biographers—her son often changed schools and stayed with Marr’s extended family,<sup>103</sup> until he decided, at age sixteen, to join the Navy. A few years prior, in 1937, Marr had opened a dance studio in Brooklyn: “imposingly titled The Marsalle School of Dance, it was just another neighborhood dance studio, run by Sally and a partner named Mary—the two of them known professionally as the Marsalle Duo.”<sup>104</sup> Then, once her son left for the military in 1941, Marr decided to fully pursue a career as a comedian.<sup>105</sup> In other words, Marr made the transition from being a dancer and dance teacher to performing comedy more than half a decade before Bruce first started performing in “amateur shows,” in 1947.<sup>106</sup>

Regrettably, no recordings remain of Marr’s actual act at the time. In her own words, she started out by “[doing] a couple of things that I *observed* from my dancing school and [... talking] about motherhood, children [... ] and then I did these impressions.”<sup>107</sup> Besides working as a solo act, Marr occasionally also teamed up with comedian Jackie Gayle and other performers, forming the group Sally Marr and Her Escorts, referenced in the title of Rivers’ play. In her radio interview, Marr explains of the group, “I wrote all the material for the group. [...] I did political things, always fighting with the agents... ‘You can’t do this! You can’t make fun of Clare Boothe

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<sup>102</sup> “Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius.”

<sup>103</sup> Lenny Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People: An Autobiography* (Boston, MA: Da Capo, 2016); “Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius.”

<sup>104</sup> Goldman and Schiller, *Ladies and Gentlemen - Lenny Bruce!!*, 92.

<sup>105</sup> “Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius.”

<sup>106</sup> Goldman and Schiller, *Ladies and Gentlemen - Lenny Bruce!!*, 92.

<sup>107</sup> “Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius.”

Luce!’ ‘What do you mean I can’t? Yes, I can!’ He said, ‘They’ll fire you!’ I said, ‘Let me tell you something. I have fired more audiences than they could ever fire a comic.’ [...] I always did what I wanted, not what somebody else wanted.”<sup>108</sup> Not shying away from poking fun at public figures of the time, such as the anti-communist Luce, Marr’s material tackled politics and was deemed provocative.

While her jokes were at least in part politically charged and observational in their content, it is also clear that Marr’s performance built heavily on dialect work. A 1949 bill for a Syracuse club’s variety show lists her act as “Starring Sally Marr: Accents on Laugh.” Indeed, in the radio interview, Marr confirms that she did celebrity impressions with a Yiddish or a thick German accent. She also adds that she encouraged Bruce to follow in her footsteps in this regard. It is no surprise, then, that in his media debut on *Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts*, Bruce performed James Cagney and Humphrey Bogart impressions with a heavy German accent.<sup>109</sup> It took another decade until Bruce shaped his act into “sick humor”<sup>110</sup> rather than just impressions, upon Marr’s suggestion.

Marr honed her act during the summers in the venues of the Borscht Belt. She considered these Catskills resorts to have some of the sharpest comedians as their performers.<sup>111</sup> At the same time, after World War II and as television more prominently entered the landscape, the circuit’s role also transformed significantly. The postwar period gave way for “the move from the ethnically segregated ‘Borscht

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<sup>108</sup> “Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius.”

<sup>109</sup> “Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts” (CBS, April 18, 1949).

<sup>110</sup> His second comedy album, *The Sick Humor of Lenny Bruce*, in which he responds to being titled a sick comic and the success of which cemented him as such, was released in 1959.

<sup>111</sup> “Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius.”

Belt' circuit into the mainstream by numerous Jewish comedians during the 1950s."<sup>112</sup> While Marr had easy enough access to this circuit, her own relation to Jewishness was complicated, and, as a result, she was cautious about how she—and, years later, Bruce—would incorporate that identity into their acts. Marr had been brought up in a devout Jewish family, but she grew resentful about organized religion in her adult life. She considered it the last straw in her increasingly strained relation to Judaism when she was rejected from getting her son bar mitzvah'ed.<sup>113</sup> As a single mother in the Depression years, she could not afford the hefty \$250 fee that the shul demanded for bar mitzvahs and she was consequently turned away. Thus, Marr raised her son with a deeply critical view of organized religion's relation to money—one of the primary themes of Bruce's later, "sick" material.

In the Catskills, Marr was inspired and challenged as an artist, but she also felt that she was unusual in her material and an outsider within the Jewish community that gathered at the resorts. Reflecting on these years, she asks the interviewer, "what Jewish girl goes up to the Catskills and does a satire on Lady Macbeth saving Duncan?"<sup>114</sup> At the same time, Marr could sense that she did not fit the stereotype of over-caring and dependent Jewish mothers, nor was this stereotype, a staple of Borscht Belt humor and culture, appealing to her in any way. Bruce's biographers often note that she had an unconventional relationship with Bruce, wherein "far from being the Jewish mother with the chicken soup, Sally was the no-bullshit buddy [...] A

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<sup>112</sup> David Kaufman, *Jewhoing the Sixties: American Celebrity and Jewish Identity; Sandy Koufax, Lenny Bruce, Bob Dylan, and Barbra Streisand*, Brandeis Series in American Jewish History, Culture, and Life (Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2012), 41.

<sup>113</sup> "Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius."

<sup>114</sup> "Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius."



Falstaffian mentor, Sally was the furthest thing in the world from a Jewish—or a gentile—mother.”<sup>115</sup> As in the last part of this quotation from Albert Goldman, Marr’s hands-off parenting style is all too often turned into a subject of criticism and dismissal of her role or significance in Bruce’s life.

While Marr’s conflicts with Judaism predate the second World War, her and Bruce’s relationship with Jewish identity in the postwar era is not entirely unusual. As Kaufman notes, Jewish identity as a term and concept “underwent [...] profound change in the postwar era,”<sup>116</sup> with its precise definition—as an ethnic, religious, cultural, or some other kind of identity altogether—more widely discussed and contested. In fact, Kaufman argues that the term “came into vogue in the early 1960s, when anxiety over assimilation began to rise dramatically.”<sup>117</sup>

While Marr sharpened her act in the Borscht Belt’s resorts during the summers, throughout the rest of the year, she performed primarily in New York City clubs, as well as occasionally taking on appearances in upstate New York and in Canada. In the early fifties, when Bruce ventured into filmmaking in Hollywood, he convinced Marr to relocate to Los Angeles. In California, Marr eventually became less active as a performer. This partial withdrawal had less to do with her career fizzling out—as accounts like Goldman’s suggest—and more with the fact that she started taking on a new mothering role. Kitty Bruce, Lenny’s daughter, was born in 1955, to parents who were both struggling with addiction. After Bruce (allegedly) set up his wife to be arrested and paroled in Hawaii for several years and kidnapped their daughter to

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<sup>115</sup> Goldman and Schiller, *Ladies and Gentlemen - Lenny Bruce!!*, 93–94.

<sup>116</sup> Kaufman, *Jewhooing the Sixties*, 20.

<sup>117</sup> Kaufman, 22.

California, he gradually relegated more and more of Kitty's caretaking to his own mother, eventually moving the two of them in together at an apartment separate from his own residence.

Nonetheless, Marr did stay active as a performer in the Los Angeles nightclub scene in the fifties and sixties. In the mid-fifties, she started performing as an emcee (and comedian) under a new stage name, as Boots Malloy, in burlesque houses and strip joints. Advertisements for burlesque nights show that she was a regular emcee, for instance at Club Mandalay, for several years in the second half of the fifties.<sup>118</sup> At the same time, in the early sixties, she also participated in the opening of a woman-owned burlesque house (run by Alice Schiller), The Pink Pussycat.<sup>119</sup> The burlesque house offered classes as the "College of Striptease" to amateur strippers, and Marr worked here again as a dance teacher, as well as overseeing entertainment.

Even after Marr stopped performing stand-up, she maintained a presence in comedy circles. Unlike Jadin Wong,<sup>120</sup> Marr never pursued a career in management or agency, she became a mentor and quasi-agent to a whole host of other comedians. She is credited with "discovering," mentoring, or managing Pat Morita, Cheech and Chong, and Sam Kinison, among other acts.<sup>121</sup> Thus, Marr's case study can also serve

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<sup>118</sup> "Ad for 'Girlesk Revue' at the Mandalay Club," *Long Beach Independent*, July 2, 1955; "Ad for 'Girlesk Revue' at the Mandalay Club," *Long Beach Independent*, July 23, 1955; "Ad for 'Girlesk Revue' at the Mandalay Club," *Long Beach Independent*, August 27, 1955; "Ad for 'Girlesk Revue' at the Mandalay Club," *Long Beach Independent*, September 24, 1955; "Ad for Club Mandalay," *Long Beach Independent*, October 3, 1956; "Ad for 'Girlesk Revue' at the Mandalay Club," *Long Beach Independent*, October 24, 1956; "Ad for 'Burlesque' at Club Mandalay," *Press Telegram*, March 29, 1957.

<sup>119</sup> Alison Martino, "Peek Inside L.A.'s Forgotten College of Striptease," *Los Angeles Magazine* (blog), May 6, 2015, <https://www.lamag.com/citythinkblog/an-education-in-l-a-s-long-closed-college-of-striptease/>.

<sup>120</sup> Wong is the subject of another chapter.

<sup>121</sup> "Sally Marr, 91, the Mother of Lenny Bruce," *The New York Times*, December 20, 1997, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/12/20/arts/sally-marr-91-the-mother-of-lenny-bruce.html>.

as an important reminder of the roles and labor of mentoring, scouting, and the work of agents and managers that is rarely acknowledged in academic accounts of stand-up comedy. Indeed, as Rebecca Krefting points out, this kind of focus would be especially helpful—if not crucial—to feminist comedy studies: “scholarship can benefit from examining larger industry forces—comedy club bookers and managers, agents, network executives, advertising and social media—as networks of power that reproduce social inequalities and perpetuate masculinist comic traditions.”<sup>122</sup> Similar analysis can be seen in scholarly accounts such as Erin Hill’s *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production*, albeit in another industrial context.<sup>123</sup> Stand-up, however, perhaps due to its solo performance form that builds heavily on personal narrative, seems to invite analysis that centers on authorial voice and that may not properly account for the forms and significance of collaborations and support networks essential to its functioning.

### **“I’m alone, help me, Ma”: The Marr–Bruce Collaboration**

As a main source of inspiration for his comedic material (especially in his early years), as a mentor, and as a collaborator, Marr had a profound artistic influence on Bruce. Indeed, in her radio interview, she talks about Bruce even doing some of her *act* during his early appearances in Canada.<sup>124</sup> Academic accounts of Bruce’s work have all too often overlooked, dismissed, or underestimated her role in these

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<sup>122</sup> Krefting, “Hannah Gadsby Stands Down,” 170.

<sup>123</sup> Erin Hill, *Never Done: A History of Women’s Work in Media Production* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016).

<sup>124</sup> “Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius.”

capacities. In outlining Marr's biography above, I already noted some of the ways her comedy career preceded and influenced that of Bruce, whether in terms of stage experience or approach to comic performance, from dialect work to political and religious material, and satire. In this section, I first flesh out the dimensions of the rich and enduring forms of collaboration between Marr and Bruce and then highlight how scholarship on Bruce has taken—or failed to take—proper account of it. This, I argue, is in no small part due to scholarly efforts to posit Bruce as a singular progenitor of stand-up comedy. I suggest that this move is motivated by an understanding of stand-up as a genre of “the loner genius,” an image that to this day haunts Bruce's representations, including the recent streaming series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, which I will analyze in the final section of this chapter.

That Marr was a primary catalyst and formative force in Bruce's becoming a stand-up comedian is clearly highlighted—perhaps dramatized—by Bruce himself, in his autobiography. In the pages discussing his first foray into comedy, he describes taking on a substitute emcee-ing gig in the forties. The job was secured for him by his mother, for a show in which she was also performing. Bruce's description of this first experience of being on stage is also laden with comments on the unusual dynamics of performing in a professional setting with his mother in the audience. Once he finally steps on stage, he is immediately heckled by an audience member. He portrays this first moment of challenge and embarrassment as follows:

I looked at my mother and I saw a helpless smile. Her son, her baby that she nursed through chicken pox, working as a maid to sustain the both of us. Her child was in trouble and she couldn't help him.

Ma, help me; that boy hit me, Ma; gimme a quarter, Ma; I'm in trouble, Ma;  
I'm alone, help me, Ma...<sup>125</sup>

Rather than suggesting that this is *the* true account of the event, I simply propose that it is important that Bruce decides to portray this initial and initiating moment of his career as one of regressing into a small child begging for his mother's help. In describing dizzying stage fright that causes him to vomit before his performance, Bruce draws the image of continually looking at and for his mother for reassurance, instead of either the audience or the band (a staple of Bruce's later performances). In other words, in his own constructed account of his beginnings, Bruce posits a moment of intense professional-personal connection with Marr.

In 1949, during Bruce's breakthrough media performance on the radio program *Arthur Godfrey And His Talent Scouts*, the tables are turned: instead of Bruce bringing his mother on stage, he is introduced by his mother. Godfrey first announces Marr, telling the audience that "we have another talent scout in the audience."<sup>126</sup> When asked for her name, Marr says, "Sally Bruce," adopting her son's artist name as her last name. This, in fact, is a gesture that mirrors the earlier, first emceeing job of Bruce, where *he* opted to go by "Lenny Marsalle," an artist name his mother occasionally used, including in the name of her dancing school (as described in the previous section).

This kind of close and playful professional engagement between the two was not at all unusual in later years, either. Marr appeared in Bruce's (duly forgotten)

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<sup>125</sup> Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*.

<sup>126</sup> "Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts."

filmmaking ventures: his collaborations with director Phil Tucker, *Dance Hall Racket* (1953)—in which Marr also gets to do some of her comic dancing in a short sequence—and *Dream Follies* (1954); as well as his unfinished, self-directed 1955 film *The Leather Jacket*. That is to say, Marr and Bruce consistently gave each other opportunities and supported each other's careers in crucial ways that cannot or should not simply be ignored. In the decade following 1955, the last and most successful ten years of Bruce's career, Marr's contributions as the caretaker of Kitty Bruce—while he was touring or when his living conditions required that his daughter reside in a different abode (that is, with Marr)—need to be recognized as the *precondition* to his success.

In the decades after Bruce's death, Marr took it upon herself not only to raise Kitty but also tend to Bruce's legacy. She appeared in and consulted on films about his life,<sup>127</sup> gave extended interviews on his work and struggles,<sup>128</sup> and participated in televised remembrances in his honor.<sup>129</sup> It is no coincidence that both non-academic and academic written accounts of Bruce's legacy acknowledge her eagerness to assist the authors – that is, when authors cared to involve her in their research. William Karl Thomas, a close friend and collaborator of Bruce, who published a book on the history of his friendship with Bruce, dedicates the book “with love and admiration to Sally Marr [...] without whom the world would never have known of Lenny Bruce.”<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> *Lenny Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth*, Documentary, Biography, Comedy (HBO Documentary, Whyaduck Productions, 1998); *Lenny*, Biography, Drama (Marvin Worth Productions, 1974).

<sup>128</sup> “Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius.”

<sup>129</sup> *A Toast to Lenny*, Documentary, 1984; “Episode #1.20,” *Playboy After Dark*, May 30, 1969.

<sup>130</sup> William Karl Thomas, *Lenny Bruce: The Making of a Prophet* (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, 1989).

Goldman, who built heavily on the extensive research of journalist Lawrence Schiller in writing the “definitive biography” of Bruce, ends the book’s acknowledgements with the note, “Larry Schiller wishes especially to thank Sally Marr for ‘opening so many doors.’”<sup>131</sup> Similarly, radio host Larry Josephson, who interviewed Marr for the four-hour-long *Modern Times* episode dedicated entirely to Lenny Bruce, summarizes his experience of Marr as follows:

It was a wonderful scene... I’ve been on hundreds of interviews... and when I entered her apartment in Hollywood, she handed me a piece of cheesecake and a cup of coffee, and it was sort of... uphill from there! It was a great experience, Sally’s a wonderful person, and knowing her even briefly [...] goes a long way towards explaining where Lenny’s charm and also his lack of inhibitions came from.<sup>132</sup>

As in this interview, Marr actively contributed to the work of scholars and journalists after Bruce’s death, and continued to do so well into the nineties. She was eager to keep Bruce’s legacy alive throughout her whole life.<sup>133</sup>

The question of legacies is precisely what brought Joan Rivers to penning and performing *Sally Marr... And Her Escorts*. For Rivers, Marr was not simply the actual mother of Bruce, a comedian she famously adored and idolized. Rivers was also interested in positing Marr as the figurative mother of stand-up. Marr, as the tagline read, was “more than Lenny Bruce’s mother.” This tagline, the play would show, worked in two senses: Marr was both not only a mother and a mother to not only

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<sup>131</sup> Goldman and Schiller, *Ladies and Gentlemen - Lenny Bruce!!*, 565.

<sup>132</sup> “Lenny Bruce Remembered: Portrait of a Comic Genius.”

<sup>133</sup> She passed away in 1997.

Lenny Bruce. Rivers saw Marr as holding unique figurative significance, as the following lines, uttered by Rivers in the titular role, convey:

Lenny Bruce opened the door for every modern American comic, right? So, in a way, you could say I gave birth to George Carlin and Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy and Lily Tomlin and Robin Williams and Bill Cosby and Gilda Radner and David Letterman.

Through these lines, Rivers—as Marr—combines reclaiming due credit that she feels has not been afforded to women like Marr or herself with aggressively appropriating credit where it may not be due. Opening doors, as a metaphor, is sharply contrasted with giving birth, as another metaphor. If Bruce represents the force enabling opportunities for the performers, then Marr stands for the one creating the performers in the first place. Thus, Rivers aims to unsettle, if not altogether shatter, the logic of the analogy so commonly applied to Bruce, and while doing so, she re-inserts and centers Marr instead.

Indeed, the “door” analogy has been long persistent in scholarship about Bruce. John Limon, in his 2004 theorization of stand-up comedy as a mode of performance rooted in abjection, positions Bruce as the quintessential case study, adding that his other case studies can be understood as being in direct genealogy with him: “David Letterman takes the legacy of Lenny Bruce one way, Richard Pryor the other....”<sup>134</sup> Through this reading, Limon does exactly what Rivers means to *undo*: a model of genealogy that traces all (male) performers back to Bruce, the imagined original opener of all doors. Similarly, Richard Zoglin declares Bruce to be “the

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<sup>134</sup> Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, 5.



original sick comic”<sup>135</sup> “the founding father of modern stand-up comedy,”<sup>136</sup> and “the indispensable comedian for a new generation of stand-up comics.”<sup>137</sup> Bruce is hence posited as a father figure, giving birth to the entire form that is “modern stand-up,” with no Sally Marr in sight.

Marr’s erasure from these accounts becomes most evident when Bruce is understood not simply as a motherless father-figure but also as a motherless *child*. Limon’s close analysis of Bruce’s material closes with highlighting from the autobiography a letter that Bruce writes to his father about going to jail. Via this letter, Limon reads Bruce as an “indulged son whose biography as a comedian reads like a vain attempt not to overthrow the law but, by threatening it, to bring it into play.”<sup>138</sup> Limon concludes from his case study that “stand-up is the resurrection of your father as your child.”<sup>139</sup> Put another way, Bruce is understood by Limon as a father of the form, performing as a child; motherless in both creative-artistic and personal, as well as figurative and literal senses. The chapter makes no mention of Marr, a startling omission considering that this same autobiography opens directly with an anecdote about Bruce and his mother and, as I have mentioned above, places Marr in a crucial position when Bruce turns towards and gains his formative experiences in stand-up comedy.

Even scholarly accounts that recognize Marr’s influence in Bruce’s life tend to

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<sup>135</sup> Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-Up in the 1970s Changed America* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA, 2008), 16.

<sup>136</sup> Zoglin, 8–9.

<sup>137</sup> Zoglin, 9.

<sup>138</sup> Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, 25.

<sup>139</sup> Limon, 4.

underestimate her significance. Kaufman, for instance, acknowledges that others (and Goldman especially) have mistakenly attributed Bruce's early routines to other performers like Red Buttons, instead of Marr. Instead, Kaufman suggests, "Bruce had borrowed [his early impersonations] *directly from* Sally Marr—so in the routine he was 'doing' Humphrey Bogart, a Bavarian mimic, Red Buttons, and his own mother."<sup>140</sup> In another important diversion from the "motherless child" figure Limon proposes, Kaufman reads Bruce's performance instead as follows: "[like] many male comedians, his persona both onstage and off was that of an immature man-child, and Bruce, especially, betrayed the arrested development of a 'momma's boy.'"<sup>141</sup> Nonetheless, throughout the rest of Kaufman's lengthy analysis of Bruce's material, including a section focusing on his Jewish identity and *performance* thereof, Marr is entirely absent.

At the same time, in Kaufman's account, a different image of Bruce emerges instead: "as the Jewish alter ego of *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner, Bruce became a symbol of unbridled sexuality—and together with Hefner, helped inspire the sexual revolutions of the Sixties."<sup>142</sup> The connection between Hefner and Bruce warrants more attention. Bruce's image as a performer aligned with *Playboy's* ideals, an image that was both cultivated and exploited by Hefner, further illuminates how Marr was at the time and has continually been overlooked.

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<sup>140</sup> Kaufman, *Jewwhoing the Sixties*, 108–9.

<sup>141</sup> Kaufman, 100.

<sup>142</sup> Kaufman, 100.

## **Playboy Television/Television Playboy**

Bruce's career was uniquely aided by Hugh Hefner. Hefner's patronage began in 1957 when he invited Bruce to perform in the Chicago club The Cloister Inn, after seeing his act in San Francisco.<sup>143</sup> Two years later, in 1959, when the *Playboy* owner launched his first television series, a variety show of a decidedly different kind (more on this below), he invited Bruce to appear as one of the main guests in its pilot episode. In the sixties, *Playboy* wrote substantially about Bruce's performances, and the magazine also published his regular, autobiographical column throughout 1964 and 1965. These pieces were eventually assembled and published as a book, Bruce's official autobiography, under the title *How to Talk Dirty And Influence People*, by Playboy Press in 1966. As Marr noted during her interview with Hefner on his *second* television series (*Playboy After Dark*, also detailed below): "Lenny felt that you [Hugh Hefner] were most responsible for his success because of the articles you wrote *constantly* about him."<sup>144</sup> Beyond these directly work-related forms of support and collaboration, Hefner also sent money to Bruce when the latter was financially struggling due to his court cases.

Of course, Hefner was not simply an avid fan of Bruce. Rather, he understood well that Bruce's figure and growing recognition as a "sick humorist" could be harbored towards the branding of the magazine and its ideals. These ideals need some elaboration before I return to Bruce's connection to them. The TV show *Playboy's Penthouse* (syndicated, 1959—1961), the first television series of Hefner and *Playboy*,

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<sup>143</sup> Bruce, *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*.

<sup>144</sup> "Episode #1.20."

was not simply a new form of media venture for the magazine owner. The show also heralded the opening of Playboy Clubs nationwide in the early sixties. The titular penthouse of the series represented the lifestyle and ideal of masculinity *Playboy* was selling to its readers and, now, to its viewers and live audiences as well. Pamela Robertson Wojcik highlights that “the bachelor pad reflects a particular philosophy of urbanism that links the urban with sophistication and seduction pitted against the suburban, which is associated with marriage and emasculation.”<sup>145</sup> Paul Preciado further elucidates that the penthouse embodied the postwar hegemonic masculinity that found its footing in the domestic space of the bachelor pad, re-establishing the domestic space as *defeminized* (with equipment such as the “kitchenless kitchen”) and transformed in such a way as to come fully under the bachelor’s control and media surveillance.<sup>146</sup> If, as Lynn Spigel shows, one of the—often conflicting—postwar anxieties about television was that it would “depose the father” and become “the new patriarch”<sup>147</sup> in his stead, *Playboy* Television can be seen as an extreme response to these fears: *Playboy*’s vision both made the bachelor all-controlling, but, at the same time, positioned him as no longer a *father*. After all, the domestic space of the penthouse is not only *defeminized*; it makes no space for the children of the “bachelor,” either. In 1959, it should perhaps be noted, Hefner and Bruce were both already fathers.

The series’ premise was to rethink the variety show as a gentlemen’s party à la

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<sup>145</sup> Pamela Robertson Wojcik, *The Apartment Plot: Urban Living in American Film and Popular Culture, 1945 to 1975* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 91.

<sup>146</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *Pornotopia: An Essay on Playboy’s Architecture and Biopolitics* (New York: Zone Books, 2014).

<sup>147</sup> Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 60.

*Playboy*. As Thompson summarizes the production goals, ethics, and aesthetic of the series, “Hefner and his party/production crew worked hard to enforce [an] informal party air, not just to put his guests at ease and ensure their good time but also to distinguish the show from other variety programs. Guests drank full-power cocktails, hung out around the bar, or chatted on the couches in front of the fireplace.”<sup>148</sup> In terms of programming, segmentation, and the structure of a fixed host and changing guests, the show fit fairly well within the genre of variety shows of the time. However, its (studio) setting was extraordinary: per the title’s suggestion, the studio looked like the inside of a penthouse, where host (Hefner), celebrity guests, playmates and other “attendees” all mingled together, seemingly obscuring the lines between performers and audience, especially compared to more conventional variety programming, where the studio audience was neatly separated from the space of performance (typically a stage).

This set design was intended to represent “the sensibility [...] of the carefully constructed model of sophisticated taste that *Playboy* magazine had been formulating since its debut in 1953.”<sup>149</sup> Just as important, Hefner wanted the show to have progressive racial politics, with guests of different races mingling. Conscious of what this meant for the show’s distribution in 1959, he explained, “[t]he appearance of black performers on ‘Playboy’s Penthouse’ in a social setting in what appeared to be my apartment assured no syndication in the still-segregated South, but it made me a

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<sup>148</sup> Ethan Thompson, “The Parodic Sensibility and the Sophisticated Gaze: Masculinity and Taste in *Playboy’s Penthouse*,” *Television & New Media* 9, no. 4 (01 2008): 284–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476408315116>.

<sup>149</sup> Thompson, 285.

hero on the South Side.”<sup>150</sup> Hefner indulged in branding himself and the magazine as countercultural, and he was eager to position the television show itself as counter to the restrictions of conventional network television as well. As Thompson explains, “Hefner wanted *Playboy’s Penthouse* to be a different kind of television show, as *Playboy* itself had been a different kind of magazine.”<sup>151</sup> In order to set up this juxtaposition from the very beginning of the series, inviting Bruce onto the pilot episode seemed like the perfect decision.

Bruce was already infamous as a different kind of comedian—a “sick” one—by 1959, when the pilot was released. He was the perfect combination of fame and relative but not (yet) altogether prohibitive infamy at the time, one who could access and flow through the circuitry of stand-up comedy including television, but also one who represented a potential for short circuiting (as, indeed, he eventually would be). His material could only be televised after significant censorship, but he nonetheless *had* just appeared on NBC, on *The Steve Allen Show*. He is the perfect guest for the show, yet he is not an easy one. Throughout most of the *Penthouse* episode, Bruce’s demeanor seems somewhat odd, uncomfortable, and out of place. His usual fidgety body language and speech—sometimes almost mumbling, other times changing pace mid-sentence or even mid-word—reads mostly as awkwardness against the backdrop of a stale, manufactured gentlemen’s “party.” His twitchy disposition feels especially mismatched compared to host Hugh Hefner’s slow, deadpan, almost lethargic mannerism, only further exacerbated by long takes.

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<sup>150</sup> Thompson, 291.

<sup>151</sup> Thompson, 285.

During the pilot, Hefner repeatedly pushes Bruce to talk not solely about his comedy but rather about his experience with network television and *The Steve Allen Show*. Indeed, in the episode that is a bit longer than an hour, Bruce is the main focus of attention for more than twenty minutes and lingers around for many more; yet, he does not actually perform a monolog during that whole time. Instead, he is present as an interviewee and “party guest.” More precisely, he seems to serve primarily as a sounding board—if an entertaining one—for Hefner’s branding of the show. Hefner is eager to frame network television as “not like this show”:

HEFNER [*in a complete non-sequitur, to Bruce*]: This is pretty different than the TV shows you’re used to doing... The Steve Allen things, the spectaculars... [this is] a little more *relaxed*, more fun. You work areas of humor that are controversial and, according to some people, pretty sick. Do you consider yourself a sick comic?

Hefner thus casts Bruce as an expert witness in arguing his case for *Playboy’s Penthouse* being better than more conventional network shows. In so doing, Bruce’s *reputation* as a sick comedian, which appears as a question framed by the show’s own desired reputation, is more interesting to the host than his actual material.

Although Bruce answers the question on considering himself a sick comic, he seems reluctant simply to go along with the framing of Hefner’s show as a subversive challenge to Allen’s conventionality. He—perhaps unwittingly—derails a more elaborate response: after categorically saying “no” to considering himself a sick comic, just as he begins a longer explanation of “semantics,” Bruce suddenly snuffles and asks for a Kleenex. He tells Hefner that he has never blown his nose on television

before. Hefner again redirects the conversation to be about the show: “this is a TV first! [...] I think it’s allowed... It’s a *casual* show...” Bruce spontaneously starts to develop a whole bit about becoming the comedian who is known for blowing his nose on television, trying to return to the question of sick comedy (in both senses). Hefner suddenly interjects by asking, “What’s it like doing a show like, well, Steve Allen’s, or any of the big network shows?” At last, Bruce responds, in a way that acknowledges restrictions in network television but is clear on where the blame lies:

BRUCE: [*Jokingly.*] [On those shows,] you can’t blow your nose! [*Pauses.*] No, there *are* some restrictions, [*he looks intensely into the camera, pointing with his finger to emphasize his words*], but not from Steve Allen! [...] I feel that he’s the most literate, he’s probably the most erudite, *humane* humorists on the American scene today. [...] and I really like him. But he doesn’t control the whole show. Profit motivations and sponsors do.

Bruce is careful in framing the question of restrictions and censorship around sponsors not only to defend Allen but also because sponsorship is the issue through which he communicates critique about Hefner’s own show during this same appearance. As in the section of dialog quoted above, Bruce’s body language and his intense direct address communicates an alliance with audience rather than with Hefner. He seems most eager to make viewers understand the nature of censorship on Allen’s show and, as I will show below, on Hefner’s. Below, I will quote at length from the episode in order to highlight Bruce’s body language and engagement with the camera during these moments, as well as to present the dynamic between the two men during the exchange.



Bruce first pushes back when Hefner discusses his concept for the whole show. After playing along and letting Hefner talk about the series, Bruce changes the topic to the financial motivations and function of the show:

HEFNER [*looks at Bruce*]: We're trying to build the personality of the show out of the magazine itself and make the thing a sort of a sophisticated, weekly get together... Just have ourselves a late-night ball.

BRUCE [*looks straight into the camera*]: When I first heard that *Playboy* was going to do a penthouse party, [...] I wondered about the *sponsor*. [...] There has to be some sponsor identification. [...] The magazine is filled with car coats, sports cars [...] you figure that your viewer... suppose he can't afford the sports cars or sports coats. Well, I've been thinking about that. And I'm glad you've got guts. You're not interested in the people that don't have any money.

HEFNER: That's right.

[*Cut to a different camera, which shows the two in a tight two-shot. Bruce quickly follows this change and looks into the camera now on them.*]

BRUCE: I mean, you people out there... This is just my opinion: you people out there are just going to have to wait 'til your *own* magazine comes along... The *Reader's Digest*, maybe. [...] Or *Field and Stream*.

Thus, Bruce equates Hefner's "having guts" to his lack of caring for people who may not be able to afford luxury items or "sophistication" as defined by *Playboy*. By doing so, he at least complicates the terms of Hefner's countercultural image. Just as important, by naming sponsorship as "the first question" to answer in understanding

the new series, Bruce makes it clear that Hefner's show is just as sponsor- and profit-driven as Allen's.

About a decade after this first episode of *Playboy's Penthouse*, Hefner once again decided to create a show meant to represent the lifestyle and ideals of *Playboy*, this time titled *Playboy After Dark* (syndicated, 1968–1970). While the first series had centered specifically on the penthouse, by this time, the operating word of the set design was the *mansion*. In the late sixties, Hefner was already living in the original Playboy mansion in Chicago, but he had not yet moved to the Los Angeles Playboy mansion that would soon become his long-term home and a quintessential symbol of his brand. Nonetheless, the series was shot in Los Angeles, in one of KTLA's studios. In this sense, the television *representation* of the Los Angeles Playboy mansion came before the actual building.

*Playboy After Dark* was launched in 1968, just a couple of years after Bruce's passing, and its ninth episode included among its invited guests Sally Marr. She is mentioned by name early in the episode when Hefner briefly introduces her to musical guest Marvin Gaye. A bit later, she is seen dancing enthusiastically to the music of the Byrds in a crowd of mostly young people. Marr is then properly introduced by Hefner as the mother of Bruce, who is the real focus of the segment: "Lenny Bruce was one of the most important comedians and social critics of our time and also a very close personal friend of mine. And it gives me a lot of pleasure to have his mother here tonight, who's also a long-time friend, Sally Marr." Marr, understanding the box in which she has been put, quickly turns to making a joke about her Jewish motherhood:

MARR: What is that, champagne? That's not my image! [*Looks out to the*

*crowd.*] Would somebody get me a chicken soup? I'm a Jewish mother! [*Picks up the drink.*] But I'll drink it just to be sociable. If there's anything worse than an old Jewish mother drunk, I'd like to know...

It is interesting that Marr would open her segment by evoking the very image of the Jewish mother with chicken soup, which Goldman, cited above in the first section of this chapter, would later use to discredit her. As discussed in previous sections, Marr would have been—and indeed often was—the first one to communicate her lack of personal identification with the stereotypes of smothering Jewish motherhood. And while it is hard to gauge how she used Jewish stereotypes in her material, she certainly communicated unease about how Jewishness would be used both in her own and in Bruce's material. It is remarkable, then, that she leans into this joke when she is invited onto the show, only a couple of years after losing her child, and somewhat paralleling Bruce's use of Jewishness in his own segment of *Playboy's Penthouse* a decade earlier. At the same time, her words immediately draw attention to the oddness of a mother's presence in this idealized *Playboy* space. Similar to Bruce, she both inhabits the space of the show in unexpected ways—and seemingly with much more joy than Bruce—and, with awkwardness, gently conveys critique.

When Hefner anecdotally shares that “Lenny in some wonderful evenings we used to spend together... made the comment more than once that he owed a great deal of his point of view on life to you,” Marr quickly responds, “that's right! I taught him how to talk dirty and influence people,” referencing the title of Bruce's autobiography. Marr thus does not shy away from taking credit for her contributions to Bruce's material, comic style, and persona. Hefner proceeds to show clips from Bruce's

appearance on *Playboy's Penthouse*, introducing them by noting that “as a matter of fact, [Bruce] talks about some of the problems that he had in doing other TV shows and some of the difficulties he had getting his material passed.” Thus, as was the case with Bruce’s original appearance on *Playboy's Penthouse*, Marr also appears to be more important to Hefner as an instrument of affirming Bruce’s alignment with *Playboy* television than as a performer of her own merit.

### ***The Marvelous—but not Marr-velous—Mr. Bruce***

The image of Bruce as a playboy, an image dependent upon the erasure of women’s—and especially Marr’s—labor around him, is one that has persevered not only in academic accounts (as discussed above) but also in media representations. One of the most recent examples of this representation is in the Amazon series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–2023, currently between its fourth and its final, fifth season). The series refabricates two related ideas about Bruce and, by extension, about stand-up comedy: the myth of the *loner* genius comedian and that of stand-up comedy as a form of improvisation rooted in an authentic representation of the self. In this section, I will address the first idea (that of the “loner” comedian). The second idea, which is a larger concern of genre, will be discussed more extensively in the chapter on Jean Carroll. The image of Bruce as the quintessential *loner* comedian—one who did not merit from myriad forms of professional and personal support, from Sally Marr and others—ends up decentering and undermining the titular character of *Mrs. Maisel*, who, fictional as she may be, is herself a woman comedian and a Jewish mother, like Marr. In other words, the show’s recreation of this image of Bruce yields

similar consequences within the show as it has in the legacy of Bruce and Marr.

*The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* follows in a long line of media objects addressing Bruce and his legacy. In fact, few stand-up comedians have been so often and so enduringly posthumously represented as Bruce. Several documentaries and tributes have been produced over the decades, from *Lenny Bruce Without Tears*, directed by Fred Baker in 1972; *A Toast To Lenny Bruce* (Marty Callner) made for television in 1984; and the Oscar-nominated *Lenny Bruce: Swear to Tell the Truth* (Robert B. Weide) in 1998; to *Looking for Lenny* (Elan Gale) in 2011. Arguably the most successful portrayal of the comedian to date is the Dustin Hoffman-led biopic *Lenny* (Bob Fosse, 1974), which earned numerous accolades, including six Oscar nominations and several other awards. A strong recent contender in terms of critical acclaim is *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, which includes a much more heavily fictionalized version of Bruce, as a recurring character across all four seasons of the period comedy series.

In the streaming series, Lenny<sup>152</sup> is played by Canadian-American actor Luke Kirby, who portrays the comedian as slightly more stoic and less twitchy than in reality. Lenny's appearances throughout the four seasons are sporadic; nevertheless, they happen during *defining* moments in the titular character's arc of becoming a professional stand-up comedian. From the beginning, Lenny serves as a model and gradually also a quasi-mentor to Miriam "Midge" Maisel (Rachel Brosnahan), who decides to pursue a career in stand-up comedy after her marriage to a budding yet

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<sup>152</sup>In this section, I will refer to the character of the series as "Lenny" and to the historical figure as "Bruce."

already failed comedian falls apart. As clear even from the short summary of the premise above, the series posits stand-up comedy as constantly wrapped up with or brushing against romance. Stand-up comedy—and the figure of Bruce specifically—is thus romanticized in *Mrs. Maisel*.

The pilot, produced separate from the rest of the season for Amazon's (now defunct) "pilot season," immediately establishes this entanglement of romance and stand-up comedy. The episode opens with Midge giving a toast—a proto-stand-up performance of sorts—at her own wedding, fondly recalling the time she and then-boyfriend Joel Maisel (Michael Zegen) attended a burlesque night at a club called "The Gaiety, Traveling Burlesk."<sup>153</sup> After a striptease act, the emcee (Gilbert Gottfried) introduces Lenny Bruce, and Joel, who dreams of becoming a stand-up comedian himself, excitedly tells Midge that this is "the guy I wanted you to see." Lenny is thus framed as the model for budding comedians like Joel, and indeed, as he performs his act, Midge also gazes (and laughs) at him adoringly. At the same time, the scene is one that marks a milestone in the romantic relationship between Midge and Joel, who are shown having sex in the next moment of the flashback.

The pilot ends with an intoxicated Midge stumbling onstage, full of rage about her dissolving marriage, and performing her first and fully improvised stand-up set. Just as important, the cracks in the seemingly perfect Maisel marriage emerge when Midge discovers that Joel steals his comedy material, confronts him, and causes him to lose his confidence onstage. Therefore, while stand-up is not the only reason the two fall in love or break up, it is certainly a catalyst for both. While Midge's subsequent

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<sup>153</sup> "Pilot," *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, March 17, 2017.

performance seems very well received by the audience, when she uncovers her breasts onstage, she is quickly taken into custody by the police for “public indecency.” In the process, Midge is put in a police car and finds herself seated next to Lenny. Thus, not only is stand-up present at the birth and death of Midge’s romance with Joel, but so is Lenny. Regardless of the likelihood of policemen arresting only comedians across different venues so that they’d be seated together in the back of the same car, with this plot the series also establishes a parallel between the two comedians. Midge’s arrest for similar reasons—albeit different actions—as Bruce suggests that both comedians take risks against respectability and regulations.

The connection (and tension) between romance and stand-up comedy continues beyond the pilot as well. Throughout the remainder of the first season, Midge gains more practice in performing and builds her career while, against her parents’ wishes, she also fights for her divorce from Joel. At the end of the season, when reconciliation between the two momentarily becomes a possibility, Midge’s pursuit of stand-up comedy kills her chances for romance again.<sup>154</sup> Joel inadvertently hears a recording of Midge’s drunk stand-up performance from the pilot in a record store. Later, he catches her performing live at the Gaslight Café, his old performance venue. Joel storms out of the performance, and he soon (in the first episode of the next season) gives Midge the ultimatum to choose between her comedy career and her relationship with him. As was the case in the pilot, Lenny appears in the episode, too, this time serving as the headliner to Midge’s opening act and to bring her onstage. The parallel between the two comedians, established in the pilot, is further highlighted here

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<sup>154</sup> “Thank You and Good Night,” *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, November 29, 2017.

by Lenny, who introduces her by saying, “I have a friend who has been going through some of the same shit that I’ve gone through lately...”<sup>155</sup> While we see Midge’s act, we do not yet see Lenny’s. Instead, the series wittily chooses to show his performance in a flashback scene in the next episode, the first episode of the second season, drawing a parallel to the pilot episode’s flashback. While the first season flashback to Lenny’s performance marked the beginnings of Midge and Joel’s marriage, the second season flashback appears within the story of the marriage falling apart.

This intertwining of romance, stand-up, and Lenny himself in Midge’s life does not end along with her marriage with Joel, either. As soon as Midge has a new romantic interest, Dr. Benjamin Ettenberg (Zachary Levi), she tests him by taking him to a performance by Lenny.<sup>156</sup> Although it is now Midge’s decision to see Lenny, whereas in the pilot flashback it was Joel’s to take her, the parallel between the two occasions is clear: love has a chance when Midge and her date *get*—if not adore—Lenny together. It should come as no surprise, then, that the romance with Benjamin also ends with Lenny: when Midge accompanies Lenny to his *Steve Allen Show* taping during the season finale, she makes the decision to leave her fiancé, Benjamin, and to go on tour with Dwayne “Shy” Baldwin (Leroy McClain) instead.<sup>157</sup>

Thus, the show establishes a pattern, wherein Lenny’s appearances as a *performer* mark milestones in Midge’s *romantic* life, in her stand-up career, and in moments when the two conflict with each other. This pattern changes slightly in the third season. During this season depicting Midge’s time on tour with Shy Baldwin,

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<sup>155</sup> “Thank You and Good Night.”

<sup>156</sup> Sherman-Palladino, “Midnight at the Concord.”

<sup>157</sup> “All Alone,” *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, December 5, 2018.



Midge does not develop any new romantic interests, except with Lenny himself. While the two were already flirtatious during previous encounters, in an episode in the middle of the season, they go from another television taping (more on this below) to a date together.<sup>158</sup> The change in their dynamic is also noted in the dialog when the two dance together, and Midge remarks, “I just can’t think of anything funny to say.” Lenny replies, “Me, either.” So, even though Lenny’s status is different now, the show’s writers continue to confront romantic development with comic ability.

Further developing the dynamic of the third season, the fourth season includes the greatest number of episodes in which Lenny appears (five), yet the lowest number of *performances* by him (one). This shift in showing Lenny less in performance and more in personal interactions signals that his role in the series is increasingly that of a romantic interest for Midge. In the third episode, Lenny shows up at the strip club where Midge is working just to share an anecdote about heckling, and then actually *to* heckle Midge during her act.<sup>159</sup> While this interaction is still at least related to their work, the next time Lenny appears is purely personal: the fifth episode ends with Midge asking her taxi driver to stop because she sees, as we find out at the beginning of the next episode, Lenny passed out in the street.<sup>160</sup> The next morning, an uncomfortable interaction ensues between a very hungover Lenny and Midge’s exhaustingly pedantic parents in her home.<sup>161</sup> While this tension causes momentary rupture in Lenny and Midge’s relationship, they soon end up sleeping together, in the

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<sup>158</sup> “It’s Comedy or Cabbage,” *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (Amazon Studios, December 6, 2019).

<sup>159</sup> “Everything Is Bellmore,” *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, February 25, 2022.

<sup>160</sup> “How to Chew Quietly and Influence People,” *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, March 4, 2022.

<sup>161</sup> “Maisel vs. Lennon: The Cut Contest,” *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, March 4, 2022.

final episode of the season, the night before Lenny's performance at Carnegie Hall.<sup>162</sup> As in their third-season episode described above, sexual advances between the two are verbally framed via comic terms, this time formulated as a prerequisite:

MIDGE: If we do this... If we take our clothes off and we do some very blue things in this very blue room [...] I need you to look me in the eye first and promise me that you will never, ever forget that I am very, very funny.

LENNY: First and foremost.

MIDGE: I'm serious, Lenny.

LENNY: I will be laughing through the entire thing. I promise. [*They kiss.*

*Midge undresses to reveal her "show corset." Lenny looks at the corset.*] Yep, just like mine. [*Cut to a medium shot of the two in bed, kissing.*] I lied. I'm only gonna laugh at the end.<sup>163</sup>

Through this dialog, Midge is established as the one being serious and seriously invested in how she is perceived as a comedian by Lenny, while *he* remains the one making jokes, reestablishing the power imbalance between the two.

As it becomes clear in these moments, Lenny's shift towards more of a romantic interest does not mean he loses his status as the primary professional role model for Midge. In the same episode, in which Midge attends his Carnegie Hall performance as an audience member, he later gives her a long, humbling lecture on "what it takes" to succeed in stand-up comedy as a "business" and tells her to "wise up."<sup>164</sup> This speech comes at the end of the season that opened with Midge setting

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<sup>162</sup> "How Do You Get to Carnegie Hall?," *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, March 11, 2022.

<sup>163</sup> "How Do You Get to Carnegie Hall?"

<sup>164</sup> "How Do You Get to Carnegie Hall?"

herself and her manager a new goal: “no more opening gigs,” because “that’s what Lenny would do.”<sup>165</sup> If the third season’s arc professional arc is Midge doing the Shy Baldwin tour, the fourth season’s arc is most explicitly about Midge’s aspiration to become the next Lenny. And as the tour begins with one professional mishap—against fellow comedian Sophie Lennon (Jane Lynch)—and ends with another—against Shy himself—so does this season conclude with an assertion of Midge’s lack of professionalism and humility.

The show’s investment in interweaving romance and stand-up comedy and in positing Lenny as a loner genius culminate in his performance of the song “All Alone” on (the series’ recreation of) *The Steve Allen Show*.<sup>166</sup> The song, while seemingly not a perfect example of stand-up comedy in that it is not a monolog per se, becomes *the* quintessential Lenny performance of the series. In fact, actor Luke Kirby earned his Primetime Emmy Award for his role as Lenny for this episode in particular. “All Alone” is an almost immaculate recreation of Bruce’s actual performance on Allen’s show. In the song, written by Bruce specifically for *The Steve Allen Show*, the newly single *lyrical I* envisions finding fame and fortune in the future and expresses hoping this would put him at an advantage over his ex, but he ultimately lands on repeating being “all alone.” The song shows how a sense of freedom over finally being “left alone” gradually turns into loneliness that wealth and success cannot cure. The lavish final image is that of “living in my Nob Hill mansion, rich and all alone,” finally able to ignore the former lover. This image is clearly aligned with the ideal of *Playboy*

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<sup>165</sup> “Rumble on the Wonder Wheel,” *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, February 18, 2022.

<sup>166</sup> “All Alone.”

explored in the previous section, living in a lavish bachelor pad or, indeed, a mansion, with traces of the woman (especially as an integral force) erased. Through the increasingly serious and somber tone with which Bruce sings the song's lines, moving from petty but funny jabs at the ex to self-deprecation, he ultimately reaches a similar effect as he does on *Playboy's Penthouse*: embracing but also critiquing the playboy lifestyle and ideals. Just as important, this critique is a romantic one: the valorization of independence is revealed as simply a cover for loneliness. Thus, the critique is a perfect fit for the world of *Mrs. Maisel*, wherein Midge can view it in relation to her own choice between committing to her career or her love life.

The Amazon production's near-perfect recreation of "All Alone" as it was performed on the (actual) *Steve Allen Show* stands out in terms of the series' treatment of footage, especially television footage, of Bruce. *Mrs. Maisel* does not do the same with the rest of Bruce's appearance on *The Steve Allen Show*. The series cuts out certain parts of the performance and places them in other episodes. For instance, the first few minutes of *The Steve Allen Show* appearance are transplanted into the pilot, in the form of Lenny's set at the burlesque club during the flashback sequence. It seems not to matter to the show's producers that Bruce's sets at burlesque clubs were, of course, entirely different from televised ones. Other parts of Bruce's *Steve Allen* appearance, including a longer bit criticizing Hollywood movies that has Bruce performing a stereotypical Latino character with a thick accent, are altogether missing from *Mrs. Maisel*. The series turns Bruce into an affable social commentator rather than the disturbing, discomfiting performer he was, especially in club settings. That is to say, *Mrs. Maisel* presents a specific, television version of Bruce, while also

invoking the *reputation* he gained through his club performances and the legal consequences thereof.

The way the show treats the *Steve Allen* performance stands in almost direct opposition to how it treats *Playboy's Penthouse*. In the fifth episode of the third season, "It's Comedy or Cabbage," *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* incorporates, but also fundamentally modifies, the *Playboy's Penthouse* pilot on which Bruce appeared, and which I analyzed in the previous section of this chapter. In the *Mrs. Maisel* episode, Midge runs into Lenny in Miami, and he convinces her to tag along to a "work thing." The "thing" turns out to be the set of *Miami After Dark*, the fictional show-within-the-show based on *Playboy's Penthouse*. In *Miami After Dark*, Lenny almost immediately drags Midge in front of the camera, and the two engage in a playful back-and-forth, joking about Midge being Lenny's "wife...or possibly [his] sister."<sup>167</sup> They improvise a history of their relationship, and when Midge excuses herself and leaves towards the backstage, Lenny proceeds to engage in an argument with an offscreen Tennessee Williams, for unclear reasons. These interactions (with a woman or another comedian like Midge, or with Williams) never took place on *Playboy's Penthouse*. The Amazon series recreates the original show's aesthetic, together with its awkwardness, its stilted party atmosphere, and even some of the exchanges Hefner has with guests. However, none of Bruce's actual appearance, his nose blowing, discussing television sponsorship, or telling of a Jewish joke that got censored on *The Steve Allen Show*, seems to fit within *Mrs. Maisel's* world or, at least, Lenny as a character.

These two cases of television-within-television on *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*

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<sup>167</sup> "It's Comedy or Cabbage."

share an intriguing *potential* for (re)inserting a Marr-like, or perhaps a Marr-velous, figure. After all, Midge does not simply watch Lenny's performances on a television set; she accompanies him to the tapings and even becomes a part of the performance in the second show. Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that in these scenes, the writers frame Midge as a substitute mother figure to Lenny. This can already be observed in the scene where Lenny invites Midge to the taping of *The Steve Allen Show*.<sup>168</sup> The two comedians bump into each other at a pub, both still sulking about being pulled off-stage the stage for their controversial material: Lenny got arrested again, whereas Midge's performance was cut short by the host of the night. Notably, Midge's transgression was making jokes about *pregnancy* after her friend had given birth. Therefore, motherhood is already thematized in this moment. Lenny then tells Midge about being invited onto Allen's show, invoking a metaphor of childhood by commenting that it is "giving [him] a chance that [he] can play nice with the other kids." Midge responds by taking on a mother role: "First time I took my son Ethan for a playdate with other kids, he was so nervous that I promised I'd stand outside the whole time in case he wanted to leave [...] Want me to come stand outside your playdate?" Bruce accepts the offer. Accordingly, when the taping sequence begins and Midge comes rushing backstage to meet Lenny, he informs the production assistant, "she's my mother." Yet, after this lead-up, Lenny goes in front of the cameras to perform "All Alone," which, I have argued, is the quintessential *loner comedian* performance. Fittingly, Midge is inspired by it to leave her engagement, as well as her children, to go on tour with Baldwin.

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<sup>168</sup> "All Alone."

One could argue that Midge's substitute mother role is short-circuited in this first case by *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel's* faithfulness in recreating *The Steve Allen Show* performance. In that case, it would seem more possible for the second show-within-the-show, for which Bruce's actual performance on Hefner's program is completely rewritten, to re-center Midge – and Marr. Midge's incorporation into the appearance, whereas the original appearance was more of a conversation between only Hefner and Bruce, suggests such a potential. So does the fictional title of the program: rather than keeping with the original title—as was the case for Allen's program—in this case, *Mrs. Maisel* changes *Playboy's Penthouse* into *Miami After Dark*. The latter title is clearly a play on Hefner's second show, *Playboy After Dark*, on which Marr appeared. Yet, even though this time Lenny relentlessly begs Midge to come along with him to the taping, when the two make up an obviously fake relation between them for entertainment, it is one of siblings.<sup>169</sup> Why not re-envision Bruce's account of first performing on the stage, begging his mother, “help me, ma”? Or, why not actually merge the two Hefner episodes, and have Midge ask for chicken soup to support Lenny, the sick comedian? Or, at least, why not have them play-pretend that Midge is his mother rather than his sister? When seen together with—and in contrast to—“All Alone,” it seems that Midge can either be a substitute mother to Lenny and remain offstage and offscreen, as she did during the first taping, or she can join Lenny in front of the camera as his “sister or wife” instead. As with the real-life case of Sally Marr, to be Lenny's mother is to be short-circuited. Thus, even within the logic of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, Bruce remains the motherless “father” of comedy.

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<sup>169</sup> “It's Comedy or Cabbage.”

## Conclusion

The executive producers of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, Amy Sherman-Palladino and her husband and collaborator Daniel Palladino, have explained that the titular character is largely based on Joan Rivers.<sup>170</sup> In a 2017 *Vanity Fair* interview ringing in the pilot episode, with supposedly no information yet on whether the show would be picked up, Sherman-Palladino is also asked more generally where the concept for the series came from. Oddly enough, in her response, Sherman-Palladino mentions not only her personal experience of having a stand-up comedian father but also her acquaintance with Sally Marr (albeit without actually naming her): “Weirdly, my dad was a stand-up comic. So I grew up with a bunch of Jews sitting around trying to make each other laugh. And I knew Lenny Bruce’s mother when I was a kid, because she was sort of the godmother to all the comics.”<sup>171</sup> Still, the series born out of these personal experiences and connections, now four seasons in, has incorporated Lenny Bruce, but we have yet to meet “the godmother of all comics.”

Rivers being a source of inspiration for the character of Midge is all the more reason to remember that while Rivers admired Lenny Bruce, she nevertheless wrote her own one-woman show about Marr. In Marr’s story, she felt the clearest resonance of her own challenges and battles as a woman, and a Jewish mother, working in stand-up comedy. Although a one-woman show, the play’s poster shows two figures. In the foreground, Rivers, as Marr, appears in a bronze-palette ensemble: a crown of big,

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<sup>170</sup> Nast, “Gilmore Girls Creator Amy Sherman-Palladino Explains Her Marvelous New TV Series.”

<sup>171</sup> Nast.



curly, copper-color hair; bold make-up; a heavy-looking fur coat over a brassy dress; and a pair of bright red gloves, half pulled off. In the background, one can see the noir-esque figure of the smoking Bruce, with a microphone stand in front of him. It is clearly Bruce as a *performer*, rather than, say, a small boy. Marr is not just any mother; she is explicitly positioned as the mother of Bruce, the stand-up idol. She is in the center of the image, looking straight into the camera and smiling. Her loud colors stand in harsh juxtaposition to Bruce's solemn shadow behind her. She is now center stage. However, she is also crouched and pointing towards the figure in the back, as if Bruce were not simply a haunting presence in behind her but also had a pull on her body. Thus, the poster shows Marr as both self-assertive and yet undeniably and perhaps uncomfortably oriented towards Bruce's ghost. Even when Sally Marr is fully in the spotlight, she remains in the shadow of her son.

### CHAPTER 3: JEAN CARROLL AND ARCHIVAL SHORT-CIRCUITING

Jean Carroll first appeared on *The Toast of the Town* (CBS, 1948–1954, later renamed *The Ed Sullivan Show*, 1954–1971) in early 1949. Unlike Jadin Wong or Sally Marr, Carroll performed her act on television and did so with much success and longevity. Indeed, Carroll became an instant audience favorite during her first appearance, and she was booked on the series, again and again, altogether almost thirty times, over the next two decades, until she retired from show business. Despite this unquestionably unique feat for a woman monologist, in most accounts of stand-up comedy’s history, Carroll’s name has mostly been mentioned in passing – if at all.

Only in the last few years has Carroll started gaining some public attention. The main reason for this recent interest is television as well (albeit of a very different kind than Sullivan’s program): Carroll served as one of the models for actress Rachel Brosnahan, who plays the titular character of the popular Amazon series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (2017–present). If one were to argue that Marr and Wong have been dismissed from the canon of stand-up comedy because they never performed their comedy on television and therefore reached a high level of popularity, Carroll is the counterexample. As I show in this chapter, Carroll’s professional history and cultural legacy as a comedian has been intrinsically entangled both with television’s potentials and with the whimsicality of its modes of afterlife.

To this day, the singular thorough scholarly account of Carroll’s work remains Grace Kessler’s 2019 dissertation, one that aims to position Carroll as a first, or

pioneer,<sup>172</sup> stand-up comedian. This is, of course, a corrective response to the established canon of early comedians. For comparison, 1949 is also the year Lenny Bruce—hailed by many today as the “first modern stand-up”—just began to gain some recognition for doing celebrity impressions. It would be yet another decade until his first comedy record or major television appearance as a monologist and a “sick comedian.” At the same time, 1949 is also a year after fellow comedian Jackie “Moms” Mabley’s act was recorded in the films *Killer Diller* and *Boarding House Blues* (both directed by Josh Binney in 1948); yet it is also two whole decades before Mabley herself is invited onto Sullivan’s program (among others). Carroll was thus by no measure the “first” woman performer with a stand-up or monologist act in the era, but her work and contributions to televised stand-up history are exceptional.

As is true for Marr and Wong, Carroll’s case is completely unique; and yet, the ways in which her work has been short circuited and in which she disappeared from cultural memory are informative of larger structures and processes of inequity and marginalization. In this chapter, instead of claiming the status of “first” or “only” for Carroll—slippery signifiers that were often used by journalists in the period writing about women to the effect of erasing other women performers’ work—I instead focus on the role of television in both her circulation and short circuiting as a performer. Tracing her performance history, starting from her joining vaudeville circuitry, I highlight how Carroll gradually transitioned from working as a dancer within ensemble acts to performing comedy in duos and finally to crafting her solo act. This

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<sup>172</sup> I discuss some of the problems with frameworks of “firsts” and “pioneers” in the introduction of the dissertation.

tracing, I argue, is crucial to understanding the adaptation and creative re-invention that women performers had to accomplish continually and repeatedly to work as stand-up comedians. At the same time, in discussing this tracing, this chapter explores methodological questions that arise over how we use of archival sources (audiovisual, print, or otherwise). I demonstrate how the archive, and specifically that of SOFA Entertainment,<sup>173</sup> where Carroll’s television performances are kept, locked out of public and scholarly circulation, plays a significant role in our remembering of Carroll – or lack thereof.

### **Carroll in Vaudeville Circuitry**

Born Celine (Sadie) Zeigman in 1911 in Paris and raised in the United States, Carroll ventured into entertainment at a young age. Her family had immigrated from Russia, by way of France, and arrived on the East Coast of the U.S. when Carroll was still a toddler. In the home, the family spoke Yiddish<sup>174</sup> and consequently, Carroll became bilingual. In her later stand-up act, Carroll rarely used Yiddish, as I explore below, and in her appearances on Sullivan’s program, only once does Yiddish appear, during a special appearance. While a *Sunday News* article describes Carroll’s family background as “a poor but fun-loving family of six”,<sup>175</sup> as Kessler highlights, later, more personal interviews with Carroll reveal that she in fact had an abusive father, from whom she wanted to gain financial independence both for herself and for her

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<sup>173</sup> I discuss SOFA, the private company that owns *The Ed Sullivan Show*’s entire archive, in more detail in a later section of this chapter.

<sup>174</sup> Kessler Overbeke, “The Forgotten Pioneer,” 51.

<sup>175</sup> *Sunday News*, August 31, 1958. “What’s on?” Section.

mother.<sup>176</sup> Performance was thus not simply Carroll's passion, but also her way to gain this independence at a young age. She succeeded in her pursuit by the time she was a young teenager, in the early 1920s, when she first appeared and went on to tour on the Shubert Circuit.

When she started working the vaudeville circuits, Carroll did not yet perform as a comedian. Instead, she worked as a dancer in musical revues. This career arc from vaudeville dancer to comic monologist is, indeed, fairly common among women who performed in the post-war stand-up scene. We see it, for instance, in the professional history of Jadin Wong, who started out as an "Oriental" dancer, or of Sally Marr, who began her stage career as a "crazy legs" dancer and instructor and worked with burlesque dancers later in her life as well. Carroll's dancing within musical revues aligned with the prevalent gendered division of labor within vaudeville: women performers tended to get work as dancers and singers, while comedy remained primarily in the hands of men.<sup>177</sup> While she was not in charge of writing or performing comedy within the revue, reviews describe the humor of the act as being "along Yiddish lines."<sup>178</sup> Thus, Carroll was exposed to, if not (yet) performing, conventional Jewish comedy. Decades later, when she molded her solo stand-up act, some reviews suggest, she briefly tried infusing the act with Yiddish language, before deciding to omit this aspect for good.

Carroll's turn to comedy was a gradual shift. Following her tour on the Shubert Circuit, the still young Carroll started to perform in other vaudeville revues, musical

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<sup>176</sup> Kessler Overbeke, "The Forgotten Pioneer," 53–61.

<sup>177</sup> Kessler Overbeke, 61–62.

<sup>178</sup> Kessler Overbeke, 63.

theater productions, and appeared in vaudeville duo acts with male dancers on the Orpheum-Keith Circuit. Within these latter formations, her mode of performance became more comedic and more verbal. She started serving as a comic counterpart, but not quite a “straight woman,” to comedian (and musical performer) Marty May during their years-long collaboration.<sup>179</sup> In another interview, Carroll says that May asked her to join him specifically because he thought she was a talented comedian,<sup>180</sup> adding that “[in the act with May] is how I really started doing comedy.”<sup>181</sup> Some of her recollections of this partnership highlight both the strained relationship between the two performers and her finding her footing in comic banter.<sup>182</sup> While Carroll did not perform the kind of comedy that would eventually crystallize as her stand-up act, she certainly found her footing in comedy by this point.

Yet, one may not deduce Carroll’s comedy turn from contemporaneous reviews of the act. As Kessler observes, *Variety* reviewers, for instance, “[continued] to be dismissive of Carroll’s skills as a comedian”<sup>183</sup> and kept their focus on Carroll’s looks and dancing ability instead. If the gendered division of labor within mixed-modal vaudeville performance relegated women to the side of dancing and singing and men to the side of comedy—and especially verbal comedy—contemporaneous and even later reviews participated in and often expanded this division. Consequently, historical research that works closely with reviews as sources must focus on and take

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<sup>179</sup> Kay Gardella, “What’s On?: Carroll Keeps ’em Laughing Through Comic-Less Season,” *Sunday News*, August 31, 1958, 7, New York Public Library.

<sup>180</sup> Bill Smith, *The Vaudevillians*, 1st edition (New York: Macmillan Pub Co, 1976), 254.

<sup>181</sup> Smith, 256.

<sup>182</sup> Gardella, “What’s On?: Carroll Keeps ’em Laughing Through Comic-Less Season.”

<sup>183</sup> Kessler Overbeke, “The Forgotten Pioneer,” 71–72.

seriously the half sentences, throwaway lines, and sidenotes that suggest comic activity on a woman performer's part. I highlight footnotes and bracketed comments within reviewers' and sometimes scholars' writing about Jadin Wong for this reason. For artists like Wong, whose stand-up act was never recorded or can no longer be found, this is especially important. However, even in the case of Jean Carroll, whose performances were eventually televised and whose act is possibly the most well-documented among her peers in audiovisual form, the trend to omit or undermine women's comedic performances makes it harder to trace the shape and timeline of her artistic progression.

It is clear that Carroll became the primary comedy writer of her formation after she left Marty May's side and joined Buddy Howe, an acrobatic dancer, in the early 1930s. Carroll's relationship with Howe developed along professional as well as personal lines, and they soon got married. In this new formation, officially named Carroll and Howe, Carroll's significance (signaled also by her name being listed first) and level of involvement in the act's comedy were no longer questionable. While the act still contained dance and musical numbers, their "humorous patter [was] written by Ms. Carroll,"<sup>184</sup> and comedy eventually became the primary feature of the act. Thus, Carroll took the creative lead within the act. The two performers pursued a several-years-long theatrical engagement in England before returning to the States, as World War II escalated in Europe. Upon returning to the US, the duo joined the newly established USO circuit in 1941 (similar to Wong, who joined it in the mid-1960s),

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<sup>184</sup> Margalit Fox, "Jean Carroll, 98, Is Dead; Blended Wit and Beauty," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2010, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/03/arts/03carroll.html>.

performing for American troops for the next two years, until Howe himself was drafted. In Howe's absence, Carroll carried on with the act alone. Once Howe returned, he became her manager instead of re-joining her onstage. Thus, a manager-performer relationship between the two was established, which would eventually play an important part in Carroll's television appearances and her later archival disappearance. While in Carroll's case, it is her husband who shifted careers from performing to managing-booking, it is worth noting that Jadin Wong and Sally Marr both served in agent, managing, and mentoring roles during and after their comedy careers. At the same time, Carroll's story shows that women performers, for whom performing in an independent (comedy) act was not a well-established career path, depended more on personal relationships.

It is hard to know what Carroll's solo act sounded and looked like in this earlier, pre-television era, in the second half of the 40s; however, Kessler suggests that at least two major changes can be traced within it.<sup>185</sup> First, there is some archival material suggesting that she briefly integrated some Yiddish dialect into her earliest solo act, but eventually dropped it. Second, that initially Carroll opted for more clown-like costuming, before switching her onstage ensemble to the more elegant clothing in which she would appear both in Sullivan's series and on stage until the end of her career. As I explain below, both of these changes would become crucial to Carroll's popularity and to her reception as she reached exceptional levels of success and media coverage over the next two decades.

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<sup>185</sup> Kessler Overbeke, "The Forgotten Pioneer," 94–95.



### **Carroll in Television Stand-Up Circuitry**

By the time that commercial television broadcasting began in the US at the end of the forties, Carroll had a solo act carefully developed—written, rehearsed, honed, adapted—within vaudeville circuits, and it catered primarily to white (as well as specifically to Jewish) audiences. However, her extensive performance background was not the only force that enabled Carroll to access the newly established televisual nodes of comedy circuitry. It was also important that her husband Buddy Howe started to work as a talent booker for the General Amusements Corporation (GAC), one of the biggest talent agencies of the era, in addition to serving as Carroll’s own manager.<sup>186</sup> In the combination of these two positions, Howe could secure opportunities for Carroll, both on stage and on the small screen, to an exceptional extent, especially compared to other women performers.

This, of course, is not to undermine Carroll’s brilliance, labor, or merits as an artist. On the contrary, her case demonstrates how many enabling forces, people in positions of relative power within the industry, were required for a woman, even as a well-established and outstanding performer, to succeed in the newly and increasingly televisual landscape of comedy. And, as I show below, even Carroll’s unique level of support and success did not guarantee a perfect remedy for what Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant call a “kind of amnesia [that regularly] sets in about women’s long and unruly history of participation in comedy and comic performances.”<sup>187</sup> How could a performer, who regularly appeared on one of the most viewed television series

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<sup>186</sup> Kessler Overbeke, 98–99.

<sup>187</sup> Mizejewski and Sturtevant, *Hysterical!: Women in American Comedy*, 8.

in the network era, and did so for almost two decades, become largely forgotten?

By the time Carroll first appeared on Sullivan's program in January of 1949, her signature comic persona had already crystallized, as I described in the previous section. The changes Carroll decided to make in the first part of the 1940s, such as opting for an elegant, feminine look over a more clownish one, and the reduction or exclusion altogether of the Yiddish elements of the material, are both suggestive of an assimilationist and respectability-oriented performance strategy on her part. She participated in well-established practices of Jewish (women) performers of the era, from changing her name to opting for rhinoplasty, but she also reduced other markers of Jewishness—such as Yiddish phrases or dialect work—that performers on the Borscht Belt did not. Early television inherited vaudeville's emphatically ethnically marked comedy (consider, for instance, *The Goldbergs*, but also *Amos 'n' Andy* in terms of sitcoms; or Milton Berle's *Texaco Star Theater* among variety shows) via radio, but this changed significantly by the end of the fifties.<sup>188</sup> Carroll's strategy clearly worked well commercially: she enjoyed massive success as a stage performer for the next twenty years before she retired, and her act was compatible enough with network-era television. Even when television's industrial regulations became stricter, her act warranted only minor adaptations on her part over this period. Consequently, Carroll's persona and embodiment in the earliest episodes of *Toast of the Town* are largely the same as those we see in the '60s episodes of *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

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<sup>188</sup> David Marc, "Origins of the Genre: In Search of the Radio Sitcom," in *The Sitcom Reader: America Re-Viewed, Still Skewed*, ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, Second edition (Albany: SUNY Press, 2016); Michele Hilmes, "Invisible Men: Amos 'n' Andy and the Roots of Broadcast Discourse," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 10, no. 4 (December 1993): 301–21; Murray, *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars*.

While Carroll's act aimed to entertain a large audience, this is not to say that Carroll did not subvert her audience's expectations, both with how she looked and what she had to say. Linda Mizejewski argues in *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* that Carroll's performance was subversive due to both her choice to appear in a glamorous outfit and her decision to make her husband, her former romantic interests, and her children the butts of her jokes. Carroll's look consisted of neatly done make-up that accentuated her femininity but did not draw attention to itself; an elegant, form-fitting dress that often included sparkling jewelry; and occasionally a fur coat – if she planned on using it as part of her extended bit on “furriers.” In the bit, Carroll tells an anecdote of buying a mink coat from a furrier, and at one point, embodying the salesman, dramatically throws the coat on the ground. In terms of this costuming, Mizejewski writes, “Carroll's shock tactic relied on the belief that a glamorous woman was supposed to show up in a nightclub as a showgirl or singer, not a joker.”<sup>189</sup> Importantly, then, Mizejewski highlights that Carroll's appearance was not subversive simply because it differed from most contemporaneous women comedians' costuming choices. Rather, the comedian's subversiveness is precisely in response to the audience's expectations regarding the performance of gender when it comes to comedy, an expectation rooted in the gendered division of labor in vaudeville entertainment that I described above. If vaudeville relegated women to the side of musical performance and men to the side of comedy, a woman who is not only a monologist but claims conventional prettiness was an outlier.

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<sup>189</sup> Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 13–14.

In terms of her material, Carroll did not simply subvert the norm established by male comics, according to which much of their material consisted of complaining about their wives' deemed shortcomings. While Carroll doing the reverse—joking about her husband and children—may have been surprising in general, her material can also be read, as Kessler demonstrates in great detail, as specifically subverting stereotypes about Jewish women in the era.<sup>190</sup> These stereotypes—of overbearing mothers, women obsessed with shopping, and so on—circulated not only in mass culture, but rather specifically among Jewish male comedians. Kessler's main intervention in reading Carroll's act is precisely to highlight the ways that Carroll performed Jewishness and Jewish humor in coded ways, from excluding Yiddish words but using Yiddish linguistic structures and features, to engaging with the stereotypes commonly circulated in Jewish comedy. Carroll's bits about shopping, for instance, gain a new layer of meaning in this context, as a twist on the stereotype of the Jewish woman infatuated with consumption. Through her performance, Carroll thus crafted a persona that neatly balanced between subverting norms and yet not ruffling too many feathers. Indeed, Joanne Gilbert, in her elaborate and extensive classification of women's comedic types, places Carroll within the category of "The Reporter," naming Carroll "the first real female reporter comic."<sup>191</sup> Gilbert defines "the reporter" as "clearly opinionated, but because she offers sociocultural—and occasionally political—critique through an observational lens, she does not appear threatening."<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Kessler Overbeke, "The Forgotten Pioneer," 207–308.

<sup>191</sup> Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*, 124.

<sup>192</sup> Gilbert, 124.

Indeed, Carroll's prettiness is a feature highlighted in reviews and articles, from the time she began performing in vaudeville and long after her stand-up career. Praised in publications as the pretty "femme comedienne" par excellence,<sup>193</sup> articles often focused on the sophisticated and conventional prettiness her act conveyed. Reviewers always highlight Carroll's femininity and conventional beauty. A *Sunday News* article claims, "she's one of the few female comics who can belt a monologue like 'A Day at the Racetrack' with the kind of delivery and timing usually ascribed to male clowns. Yet, tastefully groomed and attractive, she always manages to keep a tight grip on her one big asset—her femininity."<sup>194</sup> Even her *New York Times* obituary, written half a century later, in 2010, is titled "Jean Carroll, 98, Is Dead; Blended Wit and Beauty."<sup>195</sup>

Carroll's decisions regarding her stage appearance were a result of years of experience and thoughtful adaptation. She even openly addressed the concerns, challenges, and tactics through which she shaped her stage look in a 1959 guest column that she penned. In the piece, she explains that unlike men, women comedians have to "knock down 'the wall of resistance' built up in the minds of men that 'women aren't funny'; and more important, that women 'shouldn't be funny.'" She then highlights costuming as one of the most important sites of negotiating audience expectations:

a comedienne has to be very careful about [...] selecting her onstage clothing.

If she looks too glamorous, it becomes a distraction. The feminine part of the

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<sup>193</sup> Gardella, "What's On?: Carroll Keeps 'em Laughing Through Comic-Less Season."

<sup>194</sup> Gardella.

<sup>195</sup> Fox, "Jean Carroll, 98, Is Dead; Blended Wit and Beauty."

audience will be more interested in the gown and hair-do than in what's being said. On the other hand, few men are willing to concede that a woman, especially one who is chic and well-poised, can be funny. Almost invariably they adopt a “wait and see” policy, and often seem to be almost daring you to make them laugh.<sup>196</sup>

Thus, Carroll understood that appearing “glamorous” on stage, specifically as a comedian, was a risky choice – in front of both women and men in her audiences. It is important that Carroll considered both of these groups as ones to which she wanted to appeal. It is also worth noting that she frames women's reactions as a question of interest rather than assigning to them feelings of jealousy. As I explore below, in her material, too, Carroll framed women’s encounters with each other in such a way as to avoid tropes of cattiness and jealousy.

Beyond the role of outfits as costuming choices for her performances, clothing and shopping were some of the most common themes of Carroll’s act itself. Indeed, the SOFA catalog, which holds all of Carroll’s televised appearances, describes her material through simple keywords, primarily with “women’s topics,” “clothes,” “fur coats,” or “shopping.” However, Carroll’s spin on these subjects often worked with more nuance than these keywords might suggest. Her extended bit on buying a dress at a store (see keyword “shopping”), for instance, takes a jab at the manipulations of salesclerks rather than the more common punchlines degrading women’s qualities, attitudes, behaviors. For instance, she performs the joke in her first *Toast of the Town*

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<sup>196</sup> Jean Carroll, “Dorothy Kilgallen: Around New York,” *Mansfield News-Journal*, June 25, 1959, Newspaper Archive.

appearance: “[When I asked the store clerk if they had the dress in blue,] she says, ‘Blue isn’t your color.’ I said, ‘Why?’ She said, ‘Because we don’t have any.’”<sup>197</sup>

Here, Carroll embodies both the purchasing woman (who is the narrator of the story) and the store clerk as well, and we see both characters as smart and inventive for their own purposes. Another joke on the same topic follows a similar structure:

I got inside, I said to the girl, “What’s the size of the dress in the window?”

She says, “It’ll fit you.” I said, “well, what is it? A10? A12?” She said, “It’s *your* size, take it, that dress was *made* for you!” [She pauses and looks to the side. She continues in a skeptical tone:] I didn’t even know I was gonna be in the neighborhood – she made a dress for me!

These jokes do not show the women characters as catty or demeaning to each other; rather, they appear to be playful and using their wits. Beyond the potential subversiveness of Carroll’s looks, then, the way she approaches beauty culture is more complicated and interesting than simply reiterating dominant, misogynistic tropes about women.

Carroll’s many appearances on television yielded both success for her at the time and an archive of audiovisual material for the future that other comedians in this dissertation could not leave behind. At the same time, television changed Carroll’s act itself; or rather, Carroll adapted her act skillfully to the increasingly regulated medium. As the 1952 ethics code of television was instated (per the National Association for Radio and Television Broadcasters) and politically conservative

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<sup>197</sup> January 16, 1949, *Toast of the Town*.

sponsorship continued to exercise pressure over programs,<sup>198</sup> so did Carroll adapt her material in order to avoid any conflicts. Kessler observes, for instance, that Carroll's pre- versus post-Code performances show some changes in her material and range: Carroll's act becomes more limited in tone, leaving behind some bits entirely. One example was Carroll's well-beloved horse-racing bit, which would fall under the category of gambling and sports betting under the new regulations. In the bit, Carroll describes encounters at the horserace and imitates a commenter. Kessler argues that this was one of Carroll's more gender-transgressive bits, one in which she narratively enters and enjoys a predominantly men's space, and indeed embodies male characters while sharing stories about them. This bit remained in Carroll's on-stage repertoire and would thus be performed in her nightclub appearances; however, it disappeared from her later performances on *The Toast of the Town/The Ed Sullivan Show*.

While Carroll made minor alterations to her act over these decades, television—and Sullivan's series specifically—also changed its own shape. While Carroll's early performances are shot through several camera positions and angles with more cuts, later performances might inevitably feel more "stale," with a single, five-to-ten-minute-long medium shot capturing the entire set. Earlier performances, such as those on *Toast of the Town*, would still start with a long shot introducing Carroll's whole ensemble before switching to medium close-up and medium shots lasting about 30 to 45 seconds (an eight-minute set being captured through about

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<sup>198</sup> While the Code's 1952 birth following the FCC freeze meant that regulation and censorship were legally established, sponsorship had, according to many, much greater political impact on programming. See, for instance, Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 3rd ed (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011), 203–4.



twelve or thirteen angles). While the predominance of variety programming in early television can be thought of as a revival of vaudeville—by way of taking over its surviving forms on radio into television—the medium’s apparatus, with the heavy, largely immobile equipment, the setting up of several cameras for live broadcasting, and the predominance of medium and medium close-up shots, could be seen as a good fit for stand-up comedy, a personal genre focused on a singular storyteller with minimal movement. Carroll also knew how to use the apparatus to her benefit in interacting with both the studio audience and the viewers at home during her performances. She used the pauses after her punchlines to do a masterful side-eye—which one could call an aside-eye—that was also a direct address to the camera. Direct address and asides were, of course, a staple of early television comedy style (both in variety and situation comedies).

While television held unique performance potential for Carroll, her ties to Sullivan’s program also account for her archival disappearance. Husband Buddy Howe, as I mentioned above, worked for GAC as a booking agent as well as Carroll’s manager. Via his position at GAC, he secured spots for Carroll in Chicago, New York, and, eventually, in the *Ed Sullivan Show*.<sup>199</sup> However, Carroll’s appearance on television came at a high cost: he signed an exclusive deal, on Carroll’s behalf, with Sullivan’s program without her knowledge or consent. By doing so, Howe secured for Carroll exposure to a mass audience and the opportunity to appear on television that few women comedians had in the era. While Howe could not have known this at the time, the exclusive deal resulted in Carroll’s eventual invisibility.

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<sup>199</sup> Kessler Overbeke, “The Forgotten Pioneer,” 98–99.

The exclusive deal with *The Ed Sullivan Show* led not only to a kind of containment within a circuit and circulation for Carroll at the time, but also to a limitation in the accessibility of her archival records. Sullivan's entire program, in the form of more than 1000 hours of kinescopes and videotapes, was bought in 1990 by a private company, SOFA Entertainment. British-American documentary producer-director Andrew Solt founded SOFA Entertainment, Inc. in 1990 and purchased the complete library from Sullivan's daughter, Elizabeth "Betty" Sullivan Precht, for several million dollars. Consequently, SOFA Entertainment, Inc, holds exclusive rights to the entire archive of the series to this day. After acquiring the collection, Andrew Solt went on to produce numerous specials, series, and DVDs out of the archival materials. As a consequence, almost all of Carroll's televised performances became practically inaccessible to researchers, except on the condition of a hefty payment. The purchase has even further implications for media and performance studies scholars and the general public: Carroll's performances are not even part of the Paley Center for Media's (formerly the Museum of Broadcasting and The Museum of Television & Radio) holdings, in spite of the Center's well-known, extensive collection of early television programming.

As is often the case with archives and digitization, this archival history might take an unexpected turn, perhaps in the near future. SOFA was taken over by Josh Solt in 2020, who began making publicly available—and then removing—some of the archive during COVID-19, via YouTube. Since then, he has announced that SOFA has partnered with several digital platforms, including Pluto TV and Spotify, among

others, and most recently with Universal Music “to distribute the library globally.”<sup>200</sup> Perhaps in the coming years, we will witness renewed interest in, or at least availability of, Jean Carroll’s work. This story, most of all, represents both the fickleness of archival material being in private corporations’ hands and the multiple, long-lasting consequences of exclusive deals. It also shows that the “whimsicality” of our digital landscape is never simply a question of happenstance but rather inevitably motivated by and tied to financial interests and corporate strategy.

While Carroll had an exclusive deal with Sullivan for her appearances as a monologist, she also made multiple attempts at developing, writing, and performing in her own television series. She was briefly considered for hosting her own variety show on CBS near the end of the forties, which would have been another exceptional feat for a woman, but the series was ultimately not picked up following its pilot episode.<sup>201</sup> Carroll had a contract with NBC for a sitcom centering on her (or rather, her character) as well, but that series never came to fruition, either.<sup>202</sup> In the early 1950s, she finally had the chance to develop a situation comedy on ABC, titled *Take It From Me*. In the series, Carroll plays a conventional housewife character of the time, but the writing and her character are infused with Carroll’s quips. The series, which premiered in 1953, was canceled soon after.

While *Take it From Me* was short-lived, its reviews provide interesting insight into why the series ultimately failed. In a “Television in Review” section (published

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<sup>200</sup> “SOFA Entertainment Homepage,” Ed Sullivan Show, accessed September 24, 2022, <https://www.edsullivan.com/sofa-entertainment/>.

<sup>201</sup> Kessler Overbeke, “The Forgotten Pioneer,” 177.

<sup>202</sup> Kessler Overbeke, 179–80.

Friday, Nov 13, 1953), Jack Gould shares a mostly negative response to the series airing (on ABC) Wednesday nights, at 9 pm. His few positive remarks all regard Carroll's abilities as a comedian: Gould writes, "[Carroll] can put across a gag line with crispness and élan, and her sense of timing is extremely good." At the same time, he takes issue with two particular aspects of the series: first, that the sitcom is formally too close to Carroll's stand-up act, and second, that the husband character is not sufficiently fascinating. In Gould's words,

where *Take it From Me* falls down badly is... [that] it emerges as a night club or vaudeville monologue in which Miss Carroll alone is expected to sustain a continuous stream of diverting patter on a single subject, her spouse. That's asking too much of any artist... Arnie Rosen and Coleman Jacoby, the writers on the program, should make a fresh start. First, they must conceive a strong situation that has a beginning and an end... In particular, the husband should be made to come alive as a human being, perhaps even as an interesting and amusing one.

Of course, the issue of the husband character not being an "interesting and amusing" one could also be considered an aspect of Carroll's act being translated into a sitcom. This kind of translation from a stand-up act into a situation comedy has, indeed, become somewhat commonplace since then, from the most stand-up-infused situation comedies, such as *Seinfeld*, to the ones that have reflected in their fictional worlds the common themes, comedic appeal, or comic stylings of the stand-up comedians playing their main characters, including *Roseanne*, *Ellen*, or *The Bernie Mac Show*. However, in the particular moment of *Take it From Me*, such a series could not succeed, perhaps

due to the rigid divide between variety and situation comedy. Her ventures into different televisual genres show Carroll's continued flexibility as an artist and her willingness to adapt to and explore new modalities with her craft. This versatility, I argue in the next section, is key to understanding women performers' career arcs and to how we frame, compare, and contrast the genres of vaudeville and stand-up comedy in historical accounts.

### **Stand-up Versus Vaudeville: Genre, Authenticity, and Rigidity**

In her 1955 newspaper guest column, Carroll addresses the challenges of making audiences laugh as a woman performer.<sup>203</sup> She maps out, in minute detail, the preparations and tedious labor this position demands of her. With each paragraph of the writing, she highlights processes of research, repetition, rehearsal, and fine-tuning. The following anecdote opens the piece:

Not too long ago, I was performing in a nightclub when I heard a fellow say to his wife, "she talks as much as you do, except she gets paid for it." However, what he didn't realize is that it takes days, weeks and months to create, write and deliver a routine which will sound as natural as a conversation between himself and his wife. The simplicity, the split-second timing and getting just the right word or "laugh line" in the right place is grueling work.<sup>204</sup>

Carroll is clearly aware of how her work, both as a writer and as a performer, is undermined via the misinterpretation that her act is simply her talking casually on

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<sup>203</sup> Carroll, "Dorothy Kilgallen: Around New York."

<sup>204</sup> Carroll.

stage or improvising.<sup>205</sup> Through her description, Carroll wants readers to understand and appreciate how much creative labor and, especially, rehearsal is required to achieve the appearance of “natural” delivery. In doing so, she also highlights that “natural” is a precise stylistic choice on her part rather than a lack of skill to perform in a different manner. This framing of natural style as belabored artifice—and one among many options that Carroll had considered—is an important nuance to how we understand stand-up comedy as a genre. In this final section, I once again return to *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* to show why the series does a disservice to the histories of women comedians in the earliest period of stand-up when it draws a divide between vaudeville as artificial and “tacky” and stand-up as a simple, authentic, and improvised genre. When read together with Carroll’s notes on creating a natural style through (invisible) labor, the Amazon series’ divide between vaudeville and stand-up erases the actual continuity on which and for which Carroll worked so hard.

In the guest column cited above, Carroll explains that the rehearsal of the material starts long before the performance. She writes, “few people realize how much work goes into perfecting a routine before it’s ready to be told on stage.”<sup>206</sup> Her emphasis on creating a natural sound, along with her previously mentioned explanation on her costume choices, all highlight that her work is calculated, planned, and meticulously rehearsed to the smallest detail. While she highlights the meticulousness of her preparation, Carroll carefully avoids giving the impression that she would simply perform the same act every time. She proceeds to illustrate how

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<sup>205</sup> This is not to say that improvisation is unskilled or untrained.

<sup>206</sup> Carroll, “Dorothy Kilgallen: Around New York.”

much additional research, skill, and sensitivity she pours into adapting her act for every single performance, based on the audience of the evening. She explains, “wherever I perform, I like to study the general makeup of the audience before I go onstage”; because “no two audiences react alike. A comedienne should treat each audience as a separate entity; a separate challenge.”<sup>207</sup> Beyond meticulous rehearsal, then, this adaptation to each audience necessitates great flexibility and skill on the performer’s part.

Carroll further explains that fine-tuning her act for different audiences requires additional research and sensitivity. She writes that in her spare time, she enjoys reading psychology books to deepen her grasp of human behavior and thus improve both her material and her engagement with her audience. Reading the room, according to Carroll’s account, requires just as much preparation and rehearsal as the efforts to create the appearance of natural, everyday talk. With all these points together, her guest column aims to undo readers’—and audiences’—general assumptions around her work being easy, impromptu, unresearched, or unrehearsed at any stage of the process.

I take Carroll’s account of the labor shaping the aesthetics of stand-up comedy, with its tensions around arduous yet natural style, as the foundation from which to critique the Amazon series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*’s (2017–present) understanding of the genre. *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* centers on a fictional character in many ways similar to Carroll, Miriam “Midge” Maisel (Rachel Brosnahan), a female comedian working in New York City in the late ‘50s and early

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<sup>207</sup> Carroll.

'60s. Brosnahan has explained in interviews that Carroll was one of her inspirations for the role,<sup>208</sup> and indeed, the two comedians—Carroll and Midge, one historical and the other fictional—share significant similarities in how they appear and sound on stage.

The resemblance between them is due not only to Brosnahan's rigorous dedication to studying Carroll's television performances, but also to their similar onstage costume and makeup. Both appear in elegant but simple dresses, minimal jewelry, and precise, laborious, but not harsh make up, all to the effect of performing a version of conventional, upper middle-class, white femininity. As I explored in the previous section of this chapter, for Carroll, this look was a thoroughly intentional and elaborate response to her position—and challenges—as a woman comedian of her era. In the Amazon series, however, Midge's costume serves to align her with the new generation of stand-up comics, especially her main role model Lenny Bruce (Luke Kirby) and to stand in stark opposition to her archnemesis Sophie Lennon (Jane Lynch), the primary representative of older comedy: vaudeville. I cover the Midge-Lenny relation and its larger significance to how the figure of the stand-up comedian is rendered in both scholarship and popular culture in my chapter on Sally Marr. In this chapter, I turn to the character of Sophie and her relation to Midge and the series' emphatic—if not grotesque—distinction between vaudeville and stand-up comedy, to discuss the ways in which this distinction is not just a simplification of how stand-up crystallized as a genre in the postwar period but also detrimental to understanding how

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<sup>208</sup> Scott Simon, "A Spurned Housewife Turns Stand-Up Comic In 'The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,'" *NPR*, December 2, 2017, sec. Television, <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/02/567631301/a-spurned-housewife-turns-stand-up-comic-in-the-marvelous-mrs-maisel>.



actual women comedians navigated the changing landscape of comedy.

In stark opposition to Carroll's guest column, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* presents stand-up as a mode of performance fueled by *defying* rehearsal, rather than forged through it. Even beyond the pilot, in which Midge's initiation into performing professional stand-up comedy takes the shape of her drunkenly stumbling onto the stage and going on a rant about her marriage falling apart,<sup>209</sup> she advances in her newly found career by rehearsing material only to leave that material behind and spontaneously riff about a recent experience or roast someone instead. This kind of plot twist is perhaps clearest in the seventh episode of season one. With several episodes having established that Midge does have talent for comedy, in this episode she finally tries to solidify her act, working on her "tight ten," a perfectly polished, strong ten-minute performance.<sup>210</sup> In a montage of different rehearsal stages of the same joke, Midge turns an experience, step by step, into more and more abstracted material. First, she catches her parents right after they had sex, which she gradually turns into a bit simply about the embarrassment of such a scenario. Then, she overhears a boy on the subway asking his mother, "why is that man's pants lumpy?"<sup>211</sup> and turns this into a bit about navigating her own young son's interest in sexuality and, eventually, about facing uncomfortable conversations with one's son. Thus, the opening of this episode demonstrates precisely what Carroll wanted her audiences to understand about her craft: it requires skills, unique perspective, creativity in writing and performing, and reading, working with, and adapting to one's daily changing

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<sup>209</sup> "Pilot."

<sup>210</sup> "Put That on Your Plate!," *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, November 29, 2017.

<sup>211</sup> "Put That on Your Plate!"

audience. Yet, at the end of the same episode, precisely when Midge is supposed to perform the “tight ten” in front of an agent, she abandons the rehearsed material and instead goes on a tirade against Sophie Lennon.

It is no coincidence that Midge’s going off-script happens right after meeting Sophie and takes as its target Sophie’s approach to comedy: in the series, Sophie stands for the opposite of Midge, relying too much and too rigidly on the rehearsed material. Sophie has an onstage persona, “Sophie from Queens,” that is wildly different from her own (offstage) personal identity. Her jokes are not only often mean-spirited or fatphobic, but also—and perhaps more important—repetitive and predictable. After almost every joke she inserts her catchphrase, “put that on your plate!” In a later episode, Sophie’s act turns out to be penned by a group of men practically held hostage in one of the rooms of her mansion.<sup>212</sup> With Sophie shown not to even write her own material—much like Midge’s ex-husband, who left her and comedy after the discovery that he had been stealing Bob Newhart’s act—the series clearly presents the work of the “queen of vaudeville”<sup>213</sup> as intellectually inferior to that of Midge. The two comedians accordingly represent polar opposites in terms of how they approach writing, preparation, and rehearsal, and in the series’ confrontation of the two, rehearsal itself takes on a negative value, becoming associated with tired, unimaginative, and unoriginal material. This polarization can be understood as an integral part of the series’ functioning in a melodramatic mode, and as such, it is all the more important that these polarities are not only morally charged but become

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<sup>212</sup> “Panty Pose,” *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, December 6, 2019.

<sup>213</sup> “Put That on Your Plate!”

aligned with the two forms of comedy thus hierarchized and made mutually exclusive.

Yet, while the series posits Midge and Sophie's comedic approach as widely different, *The New Yorker* television critic Emily Nussbaum has drawn attention to how the two acts can both be understood as deeply tied to comedian Joan Rivers' eclectic cultural legacy. While Carroll was an important source of inspiration for Brosnahan, she was not for the writers of the series. In fact, when Kessler contacted one of the writers, he explained that he had never heard of Carroll before.<sup>214</sup> Unlike Carroll, Rivers was on the writers' mind.<sup>215</sup> The similarities in Rivers' and Midge's backgrounds are clear, as Nussbaum elaborates:

[Both are] college-educated rich girl[s] in their twenties, who [are] forced to move back home after [their] marriage blows up. When Midge enters show biz, her shtick—just like Rivers' was—is to dress for a date, in a black dress and pearls, then free-associate truths about women's lives. As with Rivers, the radical 'sick' comic Lenny Bruce is Midge's inspiration...<sup>216</sup>

Although Nussbaum's use of the phrase "free-associate[d] truths" might be misleading, given that Rivers was well-known to meticulously record and archive jokes, Nussbaum's parallel between the two comedians is convincing.

Despite these apparent similarities, Nussbaum notes that Midge's material is largely almost oppositional to Rivers' grittier, often offensive act. Indeed, Sophie can be understood as taking on and amplifying those of Rivers' qualities that might be a

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<sup>214</sup> Grace Kessler Overbeke, "Meet The Real Mrs. Maisel: Jean Carroll," *The Forward*, 381, accessed January 7, 2022, <https://forward.com/culture/film-tv/404027/meet-the-real-mrs-maisel-jean-carroll/>.

<sup>215</sup> Nast, "Gilmore Girls Creator Amy Sherman-Palladino Explains Her Marvelous New TV Series."

<sup>216</sup> Emily Nussbaum, *I Like to Watch: Arguing My Way Through the TV Revolution*, First Edition. (New York: Random House, 2019), 98.

harder sell to contemporary audiences:

In *Mrs. Maisel*, Rivers' more unsettling qualities—her vengefulness, her perception of women as competitors, her eating disorder—all get displaced onto Midge's foe, fat-joking Sophie, who lives in an opulent French-themed apartment, like the one Rivers lived in, collects furs, and, like the real Joan, wanted to be a serious actress. It's as if Rivers has been split into good Joan and bad Joan, because it's too hard to make such a caustic trailblazer seem cute, to acknowledge how much her success derived from being shaped by misogyny, not from transcending it.<sup>217</sup>

The kind of complexity that Nussbaum recognizes in Rivers and misses in both Midge and Sophie is important. The loss of this complexity, not of character in general but of the forces of comedy as a workplace impacting women performers, is a disservice both to the comedians who were in fact working in the era, including Rivers and Carroll, and to our current understanding of their history, aesthetics, and art.

The negative qualities that the series assigns to Sophie, while declaring her the “queen of vaudeville,” align her genre of comedy and her comedic prowess with rigidity and notions of inauthenticity. The series conveys the opposition between Midge and Sophie—and their divergent comedic approaches and appeal—most emphatically through costuming. For the series' (award-winning) costume designer, Donna Zakowska, Midge's elegant, black dress, which stands out from the otherwise bright color-laden costumes of the character (and the series overall), represents simplicity and authenticity. Midge's “simple black cocktail dress,” as Zakowska

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<sup>217</sup> Nussbaum, 99–100.

describes the prototype for Midge’s “limelight looks,”<sup>218</sup> is unusual compared to Midge’s typical clothes, wherein pink, and eventually red, dominates. Indeed, posters of the series consistently present Midge, in pink or red costume, standing out against a backdrop of an almost monochrome, typically grey scene. The little black dress thus represents authenticity not in terms of what is *characteristic* for Midge, but rather in how it stands in stark opposition to Sophie’s multi-layered outfit that “hides” not only the shape of her actual body but also her real-life socioeconomic class. In Zakowska’s own words,

Onstage and off, Sophie Lennon is Midge’s nemesis, the proverbial anti-Midge, and her abrasive, artificial stage persona Sophie from Queens is the antithesis of the captivating, genuine Mrs. Maisel. Equally artificial, but poles apart in her offstage life—more like Sophie from Fifth Avenue!—Sophie lives, dresses, and comports herself like a diva. Surrounded by her imposing Russian wolfhounds and an obsequious staff of butlers and other ‘men-servants,’ her bearing and behavior are virtually impossible to reconcile with vulgar, fat-suited Sophie from Queens.<sup>219</sup>

Sophie’s on-stage costumes are laden with layers, colors, and markers of working class, and are therefore associated—in the vocabulary of the show’s creators—with artificiality, disingenuity, and vulgarity. For Zakowska, this costuming is not only unsightly, but also rooted in desperation. She writes, “the real-life Sophie *hides* her sophistication beneath a multilayered foam fat suit and a simply patterned housedress,

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<sup>218</sup> Donna Zakowska, *Madly Marvelous: The Costumes of the Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. (New York, NY: Abrams, Inc., 2021), 98.

<sup>219</sup> Zakowska, 279.

with the conviction that, for a female comic, the only viable route to success is parody, and so her stage persona is a homely, unattractive, vulgar clown.”<sup>220</sup> Thus, in the series, Sophie’s layers of clothing become shorthand for *hiding*, while Midge’s choice of a “simple” black dress is meant to convey that she dares to be her true self on stage. This understanding of the “simple look” is a far cry from Carroll’s anecdote with which I opened the section, and which concluded with the note that “simplicity... is grueling work.”<sup>221</sup>

As opposed to Carroll’s notion of performing natural style in order to connect with her audience in her desired way, in the marvelous world of *Mrs. Maisel*, “simplicity” means abandoning loud costumes in order to *be oneself* on stage, which the series posits as the ideal of stand-up comedy. The first encounter between Midge and Sophie in the first season already highlights how differently the two comedians relate to onstage personae, when during their private conversation, Sophie uses the word “gimmick” as a synonym for (her) persona, and Midge explains in response to her, “I don’t have a persona. I’m just me.”<sup>222</sup> The fourth season of the series presents the victory of Midge’s approach, as both she and Sophie take a (further) step towards authentic personae. For Midge, this is in line with her direction well-established in the first season and again tied to her model figure of stand-up, Lenny Bruce. She declares to her manager, Susie (Alex Borstein) in the first episode of the season, “I want to be me every time I walk out on that stage... I’m gonna say exactly what’s on my mind all the time. All the time. Every single show... I will only do gigs where I can say what I

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<sup>220</sup> Zakowska, 110.

<sup>221</sup> Carroll, “Dorothy Kilgallen: Around New York.”

<sup>222</sup> “Put That on Your Plate!”

want. That’s what Lenny would do... Make me Lenny Bruce!”<sup>223</sup>

For Sophie, on the other hand, the turn towards being herself as a performer, as opposed to “Sophie from Queens,” is a sharp one. Previous seasons consistently show her unable to perform as anything other than her persona. The first instance of this failure occurs in season two when she appears on a telethon, and she seemingly cannot hold a conversation with panelists in front of the cameras. She does not seem to be able to experience empathy or express emotions and instead wants to keep making tired jokes.<sup>224</sup> Her third-season arc of becoming a “serious” actress on Broadway similarly ends when she regresses into “Sophie from Queens” mid-performance.<sup>225</sup> After this embarrassment, Sophie recovers by returning to the spotlight on television, when she appears as a guest on a late-night talk show. In this episode, her appearance clearly contrasts with the aforementioned telethon debacle: she is now the interviewee rather than the interviewer, and she talks about her failures with seriousness, even pointing out when the audience mistakenly giggles at what she says that it is “not a joke.”<sup>226</sup> Most important, she concludes the interview by exclaiming, “I would like my fans to get to know me... I'd like for them to spend some time with the real Sophie Lennon.”<sup>227</sup> Sophie’s “shedding” of the persona and wanting her audience to “get to know... the real Sophie Lennon” signal that the “queen of vaudeville” is ready to leave her vaudevillian past behind, conveying the series’ conviction that vaudeville as such has no more place in its landscape of entertainment. As the series’ fifth and final

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<sup>223</sup> “Rumble on the Wonder Wheel.”

<sup>224</sup> “Vote for Kennedy, Vote for Kennedy,” *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, December 5, 2018.

<sup>225</sup> “Marvelous Radio,” *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, December 6, 2019.

<sup>226</sup> “How to Chew Quietly and Influence People.”

<sup>227</sup> “How to Chew Quietly and Influence People.”

season is being produced at the time of this writing, it remains to be seen what *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*'s future holds for the new Sophie.

Sophie's repeated inability to be a versatile performer over the seasons of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and her final gesture for authenticity marking a turn toward the "serious," does a great disservice to women comedians' history as I trace them in this dissertation. Women, and indeed men, who worked in stand-up comedy's early decades, had started out in vaudeville, and women especially—as we have seen in the cases of Carroll, Marr, and Wong—adapted to new modes, venues, media, and circuits of performance, with incredible flexibility, talent, and determination – precisely because of the skills and experiences that they had cultivated in vaudeville.

### **Conclusion**

The fourth season of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* can be seen as a celebration of some women performers in early stand-up history: burlesque dancers. Arguably the most visually impressive performances of the season are elaborate choreographies performed by the strippers at Midge's venue of the season. Recovering from the embarrassment of being fired from Shy Baldwin's tour, Midge works as a regular emcee at the burlesque house named The Woldford. As I have shown in the cases of Jadin Wong and Sally Marr, both performing in burlesque houses as dancers and emceeing were integral to women comedians' employment venues and avenues. The series' goal with this particular performance space becoming a regular one for the season seems clear: to take seriously the role of strip clubs in stand-up in the era and, in usual *Mrs. Maisel* fashion, to fabricate a feminist twist on this history via Midge's



transformation of the club. Once she becomes a regular at the boys' club—or, in this case, gentlemen's club—labor practices improve, and it starts being populated by women in the audience. With this change, Midge seems to accomplish the goal she sets at the beginning of the season, when she ambitiously tells Susie, “Let's change the business!”<sup>228</sup>

Yet, this supposedly feminist arc culminates in a scene in the season finale that undermines the whole project and throws the burlesque dancers under the bus. When Midge must attend to personal matters one night and therefore cannot appear at the club, none of the performers manage to take over from her. Midge informs the Woford manager that she shared some of her jokes with three other performers, and a cut to the three dancers on the stage shows them completely incapable of telling jokes, entertaining their audience, or reading the jokes from a paper. Once they do figure out what one of the jokes is, they comment, “I don't get it.” To further emphasize their humorlessness and lack of comic ability, in a later scene, when Midge does perform and meets these performers backstage, one of them greets her by asking, “which part is the setup and which part is the joke again?” Thus, perhaps in an effort to highlight Midge's unique skills or value, the series positions not one but seemingly all burlesque dancers as incapable of anything other than performing their choreographies, resonating with the rigidness and lack of adaptation skills on Sofie's part. As a result, in the world of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, precisely those performers and artists—vaudeville comedians and dancers—who in actual history so often transitioned to a career in stand-up comedy in the postwar decades serve as the lesser performers to

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<sup>228</sup> “Rumble on the Wonder Wheel.”

Midge.

By insisting on the creative inflexibility of women performers on one hand and on the rigid distinctness of modes of performance—vaudevillian comedy, stand-up comedy, or burlesque dance—on the other, the Amazon series thus makes exactly the kind of error I have critiqued in this chapter and throughout this dissertation. Jean Carroll was a foundational and influential stand-up comedian; just as important, she was also a vaudevillian, a dancer, and a singer when needed. Treating stand-up as a mode of performance born in the late fifties and performed by artists who “threw away the scripts”—both literally and figuratively—simply cannot account for the nuanced and complex paths through which women performers contributed to the genre’s definition in the postwar period. Only by shifting our historical understanding and narratives of stand-up will we be able to better account for the roles of performers like Jean Carroll, Sally Marr, Jadin Wong, and so many others short-circuited—missing from or forgotten—within our archives.

## CODA

Via the three case studies analyzed in this dissertation, I have argued that circuitry and short-circuiting are key concepts through which to study women performers' work within, and disappearance from, postwar stand-up comedy. Circuitry directs our attention to the connections, spaces, and labor and industrial conditions that these performers navigated, as well as to the role of the varied performance histories that were channeled into stand-up comedy in this period. Short-circuiting, on the other hand, highlights the means and manifestations of marginalization that women performers have faced, both in their own careers and in our scholarly approaches to stand-up and its history. Like circuitry, short-circuiting is structural in nature as well. In this coda, I point out some of the directions in which the implications of these concepts and method could expand this project beyond the scope of the three case studies of this dissertation.

I have argued that, especially in studying this period, using the definition of stand-up in flexible, generous, porous ways is crucial. A fuller version of this project would have to include another case study, that of Vivian Harris. Harris was a Black comedian who started out in vaudeville and had a performance background as a chorus girl, performing at the Cotton Club and several Broadway musicals. Unlike Marr, Wong, or Carroll, Harris did not exactly become a stand-up comedian. Rather, she held a position as the emcee in one of the most important hubs of stand-up comedy: the Apollo Theater in New York City, as soon as the former burlesque house was turned into a theater under the management of Frank Schiffman in the mid-1930s. Due

to her work announcing acts, Harris gained the affectionate nickname “the Voice of the Apollo.” She also tried to cross over into television as a comedian: she auditioned for the role of Sapphire, Kingfish’s wife, on *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, but was allegedly turned down because her complexion was “too white.”<sup>229</sup> The complexities of how vocality and visuality played a part in Harris’ story of short-circuiting, the intertwined roles of both vaudeville circuitry (including radio) and television’s recalibrations of racist logics would warrant extended analysis. While emceeing was a male-dominated profession, the first emcee of the Apollo was thus a woman, and Harris stayed at the Apollo for about three decades. The work of women emcees warrants more attention as part of the range of different types of labor—creative, managerial, service, and more—that together built and continue to build the space of stand-up in club settings. Harris’ case study therefore also demonstrates that performers who do not fit a pure definition of stand-up comedian can be informative in understanding the complexities of the industry.

Throughout the dissertation, I have argued for using the definition of stand-up with flexibility and, relatedly, treating notes on women’s participation in comedy within historical sources with generosity. To this day, this kind of generosity around generic definition is more easily afforded to men than women. For instance, Louis CK, before allegations of his sexual harassment came to light, was often praised for creating material, whether in the form of television series or his stand-up, that

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<sup>229</sup> Douglas Martin, “Vivian Harris, Comedian, Chorus Girl and Longtime ‘Voice of the Apollo,’ Dies at 97,” *The New York Times*, March 26, 2000, sec. New York, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/26/nyregion/vivian-harris-comedian-chorus-girl-and-longtime-voice-of-the-apollo-dies-at-97.html>.

stretched “beyond” being simply funny and invoking more complicated affective responses. Yet, when Hannah Gadsby’s groundbreaking Netflix special, *Nanette*, challenged the conventions of tone, affect, and rhythms of comedy specials, its reception was mixed. On the one hand, Gadsby gathered significant praise, especially from feminist critics; on the other, she received a seemingly endless tirade against her work. Predictably, most of the latter criticism ultimately boiled down to the argument that *Nanette* did not fit the form—one popular article simply argued it was instead a “TED Talk”—and therefore was not funny.

The rigidity with which *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* treats stand-up and sets it up as oppositional to vaudeville has also been one of my main critiques regarding the series. In doing so, *Mrs. Maisel* fabricates a character along paradigms—within an exceptionalist and individualistic framework, with an understanding of stand-up as improvised (and yet magically perfectly structured) rambling, and so on—that they themselves have (re)produced women’s marginalization within the contemporaneous scene and sometimes even in our current narratives and research on it. While the Amazon series is perhaps the most directly connected to the era and focus of this dissertation, I argue that it fails to meaningfully capture both early stand-up’s circuitry and women’s short-circuiting in important ways.

Consider, as a better example of presenting stand-up’s circuitry and women’s short-circuiting, the 1988 comedy-drama *Punchline* (directed by David Seltzer). The film centers on two comedians, Lilah Krytsick (Sally Field) and Steven Gold (Tom Hanks), who both struggle to make it in their comedy careers but for different reasons. Lilah, like Midge Maisel, is a mother who wants to break into the world of comedy

but is conflicted in her efforts due to the demands of her family and especially her controlling husband (John Goodman). Steven, on the other hand, the first shot of whom shows a poster of Lenny Bruce on his wall next to his bed, is hoping to get discovered by a talent scout for television so that he can finally break out as a comic after failing out of medical school.

Yet, the film's real value lies in its portrayal of the comedy club where all the different characters come together: the Gas Station.<sup>230</sup> To give the Gas Station a rhythm and community of its own, the filmmakers carefully assembled about a dozen actual comedians active in the stand-up scene at the time, including Damon Wayans, Ángel Salazar, Taylor Negron, George McGrath, Joyce Katz, and Pam Matteson, through whose performances a decidedly eclectic vision of stand-up emerges. This eclecticism includes a range of acts, performers, approaches, and outcomes, from observational humor and one-liners to sound impressionist, juggler-mime, singing nun (in drag), and vaudevillian (played by actual Borscht Belt veteran Mac Robbins) acts; from comedians who bomb to ones who kill; and from those that simply circulate racist stereotypes to ones who go against them. At the end of the film, a competition among the comedians is taped for television, with the winner rewarded with an appearance on *Carson*. *Punchline* consistently demonstrates Lilah's potential short-circuiting due to the pressures of her family life, but the conclusion of the film is somewhat disappointing in this regard: upon winning the competition, Lilah insists on Steven getting first place instead of her and walks home with her husband. At the

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<sup>230</sup> The name of the club resonates with The Gaslight Café, a real-life club in the Greenwich Village that operated from the late fifties to the early seventies and which is fictionalized, with the same name, as the home performance venue for Midge in *Mrs. Maisel*.

same time, the film consistently maps out stand-up as circuitry: it conveys both a sense of community and lines of mutual support among the comedians, upon which everyone depends. Just as important, it invokes a deep sense of empathy for the vaudevillian who is denied from participating in the competition as he is deemed not to need a breakthrough given his old age.

While both *Mrs. Maisel* and *Punchline* present the woman characters' short-circuiting, *how* they do so is night and day. Midge repeatedly gets demoted because she makes unprofessional and inconsiderate choices: outing Shy Baldwin, a gay Black performer, right before he steps on stage at the Apollo; sharing personal information about Sophie Lennon onstage to make fun of her; or turning down well-paying gigs, secured by her associates, because she deems them not prestigious enough. Lilah, on the other hand, works as hard as she possibly can, while being put in charge of childcare and other domestic duties. *Mrs. Maisel* thus presents short-circuiting as due to Midge's own choices and personal failures, whereas *Punchline* ties it to the nuclear family structure within which mothers are made responsible for all domestic labor.

If *Mrs. Maisel* fails at showing short-circuiting as a structural phenomenon, and *Punchline* has a less clear vision on ultimately counteracting Lilah's short-circuiting (or is just not investing in presenting one), the 1986 film *Jo Jo Dancer: Your Life is Calling* (Richard Pryor) might offer a more interesting alternative. *Jo Jo Dancer* is Richard Pryor's autobiographically inspired, self-directed film, in which he tackles his process of self-reflection after setting himself on fire while under the influence of drugs. At the same, the titular Jo Jo Dancer (Richard Pryor) looking back on his own life leading up to the incident reveals the formative moments of him

becoming a comedian. After leaving his home and searching for a job as a comedian, Jo Jo gets his break at Club Shalimar with the help of burlesque dancer Satin Doll. An immediate alliance is formed between the two, which culminates in a scene where Jo Jo performs Satin's full act in drag. Pryor's choices to name his own character Jo Jo Dancer, to present this first club engagement as one where he is instantly helped by Satin, and to convey such a deep affinity and performance kinship with her, are unique among representations of stand-up comedy. These choices show an intimate understanding and appreciation of women's participation in early stand-up circuitry, as I have highlighted in the previous chapters. Just as important, after the drag performance, when Jo Jo finds out that the racist club managers do not intend to pay the Black performers, he decides to threaten them (albeit with a fake pistol they immediately clock), demanding their pay. The performers eventually get their money but must leave the club behind. While *Jo Jo Dancer* is altogether more interested in the complex short-circuiting that drug addiction has created in the titular character's life, the scenes at Club Shalimar show an exceptional instance of resistance to short-circuiting more typical of women performers' lives.

While this dissertation focuses on the "beginnings" of stand-up as a mode of performance, the conceptual lenses of circuitry and short-circuiting could be expanded in its timeline. Questions of how women (and especially women of color) and queer performers have navigated the ever-changing, and ever-changingly mediatized, landscape can be re-examined in later periods. This is precisely because, while white supremacy and heteropatriarchy remain constant forces within the United States, their manifestations shift and transform over time, as well. This kind of study will not only



help us better understand inequity within the industry—or, rather, industries—of stand-up, but also the related labor conditions, artistic practices, and media forms.

The 1970s, the era that follows the scope of my dissertation, saw a fundamental—if, as in the previous period, gradual—industrial shift, as comedy clubs opened across the United States. If the period I focus on throughout this dissertation can be considered a period of definition, then the seventies can be thought of as seeing a new type of institutionalization and containment, both in live comedy and television programming. In this changed landscape, labor conditions changed drastically, leading to, for instance, the comedy club strikes in the Los Angeles scene. While this period deserves attention on its own beyond the project of this dissertation, I would argue that the emerging comedy clubs, as well as the fraternal organizations interweaving comedians' professional and personal lives, such the Friars Clubs, could merit from being analyzed through the concept of circuitry. In what ways have organizations, both exclusionary in terms of race and gender, built enabling circuits for their members and determined the shape of stand-up?

Each of the chapters of this dissertation tackled aspects of early television, and how television entered into and (re)shaped stand-up comedy. It is no coincidence that fictional representations of stand-up also often focus on television: from the '50s telethon and '60s late-night talk show of *Mrs. Maisel*, to the club competitions to get booked for Carson's show in the '70s and 80's in the series *I'm Dying Up Here* (Showtime, 2017-2018) or in films like *Punchline*. Television has, indeed, been an integral part of stand-up's infrastructure and a crucial force of stand-up circuitry (and, of course, short-circuiting). From appearing on *The Ed Sullivan Show*—much-

referenced throughout this dissertation—or, later, *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*, to working as performer or writer on *Saturday Night Live* from the seventies onward, to getting a spot during television’s comedy boom period on shows like *Comedy Def Jam* (1990s) or BET’s *Comic View* (1992–2008), and to getting one’s special in one of the many television networks that have invested in this genre (including HBO, Comedy Central, Showtime, and Netflix most recently), stand-up performers’ work has continued to be entangled with television, and television has in turn been shaped by stand-up comedians.

Even beyond television, stand-up circuitry can have important merits for contemporary media research and can help us better understand present-day pathways of digital comedy as well. Indeed, a concept of circuitry, specifically rooted in its vaudevillian meaning, has been recently taken up, for instance, by Sarah Florini in her writing on Black podcasters.<sup>231</sup> Circuitry could also be expanded to analyze how communities of audiences are built through current media infrastructures, such as the focus of Nick Marx and Matt Sienkiewicz’s recent book-length study on how right-wing comedy (and its figures) circulate,<sup>232</sup> or Raúl Pérez’s work on how racist comedy continues to build and bind communities in everyday spaces, such as police precincts.<sup>233</sup> Circuitry and short-circuiting can, thus, be applied to the contemporary comedy landscape, across varied media forms.

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<sup>231</sup> “Rumble on the Wonder Wheel.”

<sup>232</sup> Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx, *That’s Not Funny: How the Right Makes Comedy Work for Them*, 2022.

<sup>233</sup> Raúl Pérez, *The Souls of White Jokes: How Racist Humor Fuels White Supremacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

The concepts of circuitry and short-circuiting can serve as a framework through which to expand this current project and perhaps others as well. As I mention in my introduction, every story of a woman performer for which documentation is to be found raises the question of how many others may have worked with no such materials left behind. At the same time, many others are still to be told. While circuitry and short-circuiting are both structural in nature, that does not mean that there are no meaningful forms of resistance to their workings and impact. My hope is that this dissertation shed light on some of the ways in which circuitry, in such forms as connections, communities, mutual aid, caretaking and mentorships, can also be utilized to fight against short-circuiting.

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