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The Forgotten Pioneer: Jean Carroll and the Jewish Female Origins of Stand-Up Comedy

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Dissertation Abstract

Although Jewish studies, sociology, and performance studies texts abound with productive scholarship on Jewish men and their contributions to comedy in the mid-century United States, there is remarkably scant attention devoted to the equally significant contributions of their female counterparts. Nowhere is that bias clearer than the peculiar case of Jean Carroll—the first Jewish female stand-up comedian, whose name is typically omitted from both histories of comedy and Jewish-American performance writ large. Using evidence from the unpublished archive of Jean Carroll’s scrapbook, documentary footage, and television clips, as well as three kinds of periodicals (Jewish, mainstream, and industry), I have drawn on archival and ethnographic research models to argue that both Carroll’s groundbreaking success and her historiographic erasure reveal the limits of tolerance in the post-WWII United States.

The first chapter functions in part as the most thorough biographical work on Jean Carroll to date, while also making the case that from its inception, stand-up comedy was a forum to rehearse the same subversively autonomous principles that pioneers like Jean Carroll enacted in their own lives. It examines her background as a Jewish child who immigrated to the United States amidst intense xenophobic sentiment (legislated through policies like the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924); and her attempts to wrest control from her abusive father by joining the variety circuit at age eight.

The next chapter builds on this foundation, arguing that although Carroll did not characterize it as such, her career in stand-up comedy was nonetheless a feminist intervention against Jewish male discourse about Jewish mothers and wives as vulgar and demanding. By invoking but then subverting this stereotype with her physical beauty and persona, Carroll was able to capitalize on it while also humanizing it for mainstream audiences. This chapter also examines the entertainment industry’s enduring institutional barriers to being both caregiver and comedian. In a sense, these barriers ended Carroll’s career, as critics found new ‘pioneers’ in rising stand-ups like Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers.

Chapter three examines Jean Carroll’s work as a reflection of the complex negotiation of assimilation and difference that American Jews were enacting after World War II. This chapter draws on sociological texts to argue that the shift towards multiculturalism in the mid-1960s was reflected in Carroll’s changing engagement with Jewishness in her act. She still eschewed overtly Jewish content, using instead what Henry Bial would call ‘double-coded’ references to Jewish culture and practices. However, she became markedly more involved in benefit performances for Jewish organizations, making her Jewishness a cause to champion, not a character to perform.

The final section examines Carroll’s far-reaching impact on stand-up comedy. It gives particular focus to Carroll’s impact on women stand-up comics. I use testimonies by contemporary comedians (such as Lily Tomlin and Joy Behar) who claim her as an influence, as well as performance analysis of live shows by Jewish female stand-up comics, many of whom continue to use the style of ‘confidante comedy’ and respond to the same negative stereotypes of Jewish women that Carroll addressed in her work. This observation reveals that while Carroll may be overlooked by most publications, her legacy lives in this alternate archive of women standing up and speaking out.
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Introduction

Argument

True to the Jewish female stereotype, Jean Carroll proved demanding. When I sat down to write a history of Jewish female stand-up comedians and their negotiation of stereotypes, Jean Carroll was simply the subject of Chapter One. But as I pieced together the elements of her life and work, I realized that her body of work—its achievements and limitations—strained at the seams of a chapter like a zaftig figure in a Barbie-doll dress. There was too much. She was too much. The way that she adapted to the shifting media landscape as Vaudeville fell and television rose, the way she disavowed feminism while enacting its core tenets, the way she navigated the changing terrain of American Jewry, the way she pioneered the breezy, intimate tone of personal disclosure that now distinguishes stand-up comedy, and the way that she seemingly disappeared from the public record—it demanded deeper analysis than a single chapter could offer.

This dissertation attempts to tell the story of Jean Carroll, which is also an entry-point into the stories of stand-up comedy, third wave Jewish immigrants, female empowerment, systemic sexism, and the trials of working motherhood in the mid-century United States. Just as Barbara Wallace Grossman’s *Funny Woman: The Life and Times of Fanny Brice* used the story of a “major American comedienne who deserves more substantial treatment than she has previously received” to illustrate the immigrant’s “fervent ambition...to be accepted,” the “working mother...juggling the needs of her family with the demands of a successful career,” and the “changes in the American entertainment industry,” I use the ‘Life and Times’ (and work) of

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Jean Carroll—from her live tours headlining at major theaters in the United States and abroad, to her 29 appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, to her short lived sitcom—to illuminate three general spheres of American performance: Gender, Jewishness, and Stand-up Comedy. This study argues that Jean Carroll’s scant biographical record and historiographic presence belie her major significance as the first Jewish female stand-up comedian. When Jean Carroll took up the microphone as the first woman stand-up comic in 1942, she was asking audiences to listen to and affirm her experience as an empowered woman, a Jewish-American immigrant, and a frustrated wife and mother. Both her groundbreaking success and her historiographic erasure reveal the limits of tolerance in the post-WWII United States.

This argument for Carroll as a ‘first’ female stand-up comedian demands some qualifications. Most importantly, it is important to note the distinction between stand-up comedy and other forms of comedic solo performance. As a female comic monologist, Carroll was standing on the shoulders of the legendary Loretta Mary Aiken, an African American woman who performed monologues as Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley, an old woman in a floppy hat whose jokes about lusting for young men belied her subversive critique of racism and sexism. Although Aiken gained mainstream exposure through programs like *The Ed Sullivan Show* in the 1950s, she had been a huge success within African American media since the 1920s. One of the most remarkable elements of her work was the way that this savvy, queer young woman was able to inhabit the character of elderly, man-hungry ‘Moms.’ As *Ebony* magazine wrote, “Offstage, Moms Mabley is a striking figure in tailored slacks, matching sports shirt, Italian shoes…She looks utterly sophisticated. Onstage, however, is a different story. She creates the impression that
the theater cleaning woman has somehow wandered into the spotlight.”

The clear distinction between the artist and her comic persona contrasts with the ambiguous, seemingly nonexistent boundary that characterized Jean Carroll’s career—and those of subsequent stand-up comics like Joan Rivers or Richard Pryor. Similarly, as a Jewish female comedian, Carroll was part of a lineage that included predecessors like Fanny Brice. But the historic success of Brice’s comedy was also a genre apart from what would now be called stand-up, due largely to the divide between artist and persona. While the offstage Brice was American-born and claimed not to speak Yiddish, the characters portrayed by Brice onstage typically featured a heavy parodic Yiddish dialect and expressive physicality that she referred to as “grotesque Yiddish steps.” Part of the virtuosic quality of solo comedians like Mabley and Brice was their ability to craft and inhabit a distinctive onstage character.

What was notable about Jean Carroll—and what prompts me to position her at the beginning of a new stand-up tradition—is that she had no distinct stage character. Like her male colleagues Bob Hope and Sam Levenson, her jokes were framed as observations and anecdotes from her authentic experience. Her most remarkable trait was a breezy conversational style that was at the time deemed “too intimate,” but which is now customary in stand-up comedy. One of Carroll’s more notable audience members—comedian Lily Tomlin—describes her persona as “a new type of person,” gushing “You were so cool, you had your own kind of style. It was very breezy and off-handed.” I call this “breezy, off-handed style,” confidante comedy, because it

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2 Grossman, 46.
3 Grossman, 46.
5 Lily Tomlin, Stephen Meredith Silverman Interview with Lily Tomlin, interview by Stephen Silverman, Transcripts, November 6, 2006, 7-1--7-12, Stephen Silverman Personal Collection.
shifts from the presentational style of Henny Youngman or Jackie Mason to a more conversational style that one might find among confidantes. To use Jean Carroll’s language, “I try to make the audience feel that we’re good friends or neighbors having a chat.” Even as she performs in the public sphere, Carroll invokes the stereotypical association of women with the private sphere. Or, as she put it, “I make it seem as if I were talking to someone in my home, and the audience feels it, too.”

The sense of confidante comedy finds apt expression in Carroll’s album “Girl in a Hot Steam Bath,” (1960) the title of which alludes to this attitude of casual intimacy among ladies at the sauna. The text on the back cover promises to reveal to men “a world they never made.”

The cover of the album shows Carroll and three other women, dressed only in towels, looking aghast at the presence of a man—towed up and immersed in the paper—in this female space. While the three women in the background look towards the man in horror, Carroll in the foreground looks directly at the audience, eyes wide and mouth open in delighted shock, inviting them in on the scandal. The image suggests Carroll as the audience-liaison into the confidential conversations of women. She is exposed, but not indecent—participating in this ‘sneak peek’ with playful shock, but also forthright friendliness and candor.

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It is an apt depiction of Carroll’s persona, who presents her public with the kind of breezy, offhand banter usually reserved for intimate conversations among ladies.

This breezy, offhand delivery, which seemed to blur the boundary between ‘performance’ and ‘chit-chat’ was a consistent subject of Carroll’s reviews. Critics often used the metaphor of “tossing” or “throwing” to describe her style. For instance, a *New York Post* review in 1954 effused:

She's a master (or mistress) of the throwaway line, casually tossing a joke to the listeners; as they are digesting one she is offering half a dozen more. “Nice night club, huh?” she asks, "I bet you wish you could afford to live like you're living. One guy left here and went to his car. Almost made it, too, till someone stepped on his fingers." She tells of the big throat doctor (“He only examines big throats”), and the new diet (“This pill paralyzes your mouth so you can't eat”), and the wolfish guy (“He has bedroom eyes—a pillow under each one.”)

The critic’s punctuation—with its preponderance of parenthetical phrases—astutely captures Carroll’s way of peppering a sentence with a collection of jokes smuggled in as afterthoughts or clarifications. He recognizes Carroll’s ‘throwaway’ delivery—in which she twists a sentence into a joke with the turn of a subordinate clause. This subtle mode of delivering punchlines allows Carroll to appear casual and conversational, while also maintaining a high jokes-per-minute ratio. Carroll speaks directly to this constructed casualness in an uncharacteristically candid interview with *The Voice of Broadway*, when she complains about a male audience member who remarked to his wife “She talks just like you, except she gets paid for it.” Asserting the intense labor involved in crafting her seemingly authentic persona, Carroll exclaimed, “What he didn’t know is that it takes days, weeks, and months to create, write, and deliver a routine which will look as natural as a conversation between him and his wife.”

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meticulous craftsmanship—and the man’s dismissive response to it—is a fitting introduction to Jean Carroll’s life and work.

Methods

The evidence used to reconstruct Carroll’s life and career was an eclectic patchwork of resources. My first method of data collection was online research using archival databases, exploring three distinct types of publications. In order to examine trade publications, I used Proquest’s Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive, which encompassed periodicals like Variety, Billboard, and several others from throughout the United States and the United Kingdom. In order to explore Jewish publications, I used a temporary membership to ProQuest’s Historical Newspapers American Jewish Newspapers, which includes The American Hebrew and Jewish Messenger, The Jewish Advocate, The American Israelite, and The Jewish Exponent. I also made use of Carnegie Mellon University’s Pittsburgh Jewish Newspaper Project, which offers over one hundred years of digitized, searchable copies of Pittsburgh-based Jewish newspapers. Additionally, I used the open-source online database Historical Jewish Press to examine English-language papers including The Forward, The American Jewish Advocate, and The B’nai B’rith Messenger, among others. And in order to research mainstream American publications, I used ProQuest’s Historical Newspapers database, which includes The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, the L.A. Times, the Washington Post, and more.

In order to organize this data, I constructed an Excel sheet in which distinct columns contained the article title, date, author, periodical title, periodical category (industry, Jewish, or mainstream), key quotations (or occasionally full text) from the article, and notes regarding dominant themes or trends. This convention of organizing data with an eye to emergent themes is
a staple of grounded theory.\textsuperscript{11} Also adhering to grounded theory methods, I chose a brief three-letter code to signify each emergent theme and went back through all the data labeling each article with the relevant codes. The codes began as broad categories. For instance, language regarding Carroll's femininity was simply labeled "FEM." However, over time and with accumulated knowledge, this broad code became refined into more nuanced categories. For instance, articles that attempted to use Carroll's female gender to masculinize her were coded F-MASC. Although the coding scheme was not as formalized as it would have been in a sociological study, the organization was inflected by this sociological approach.

Next, I examined resources available in physical archives. The New York Public Library Performing Arts Research Collections has a folder of press clippings containing advertisements, tabloid articles, and a few of Carroll's headshots, from the collection of Lester Sweyd (1892-1978), actor and pop culture enthusiast. In their Recorded Sound Section, they have Carroll's record \textit{Girl in a Hot Steam Bath}, as well as the rare recording of Carroll performing live at the eleventh annual Crystal Ball Dinner, in Detroit, Michigan. The Paley Center Media Archive has two clips of Carroll performing on \textit{The Gary Moore Show}, three clips of Lily Tomlin discussing Carroll's impact on her career, and three clips of Carroll performing on \textit{The Ed Sullivan Show}. In order to access the footage of Jean Carroll's other 26 appearances on \textit{The Ed Sullivan Show}, I reached out to SOFA Entertainment, the private corporation that now owns the complete archive of \textit{The Ed Sullivan Show}. Although they have a policy against sharing this footage, they made an exception for research purposes, and a fee of $50 per clip. As with the newspaper articles, each item from the Paley Center and NYPL archives was organized by transcribing all recorded

media, then annotating it with notes on nonverbal performance elements (such as costume, tone of voice, physicality, etc.) and then coding those notes using the three-letter codes.

However, the rarest and most significant sources of evidence came from the unofficial archive of Carroll's friends and family. The online networking site Facebook led me to Carroll's granddaughter, Susan Chatzky, who was in possession of Jean Carroll's personal scrapbook, in which Carroll meticulously saved selected press clippings. Carroll often marked these press clippings by underlining or circling her own name, and occasionally scrawling the date in the margins. In addition to participating in several in-person conversations about her grandmother, Chatzky generously provided me with access to the scrapbook, which I was able to photocopy for further reference. Facebook also led me to find Stephen Meredith Silverman, who had been referenced in Carroll's obituary as the writer/director of the work-in-progress *I Made It Standing Up*, a documentary about Carroll's life and work. Silverman disclosed that the documentary had lost its funding in the economic crash of 2008, generously agreeing to share the hours of footage of interviews (many of which were transcribed) with Carroll, her daughter Helen Tunick, her fans Lily Tomlin, Alan Zweibel, Jane Wollman Rusoff, and the entirety of a 2007 event at the Friar's Club honoring Carroll's career. This event had been organized with Diane Krausz, the film's producer, as a way to gather footage for the documentary. The articles included in Carroll's scrapbook, and the transcripts from the documentary interviews were added into the Excel Database and similarly coded.

Concurrent with the archival methods used to gather evidence to analyze Jean Carroll's life and work, I used ethnographic methods to gather data on Carroll's legacy in the "alternative
archive”\textsuperscript{12} of contemporary performances by Jewish female stand-up comedians. My main methods of gathering data for this study—which went through a process of IRB approval—were participant-observation, online surveys, and follow-up interviews.

Between Friday, March 15, 2015 and Thursday, June 16\textsuperscript{th} 2016, I conducted participant-observation research at live performances by a number of Jewish female stand-up comedians. These performances included Amy Schumer (at The Chicago Theatre in Chicago, IL on March 15, 2015); a line-up of comics including Cathy Ladman and Cory Kahaney (at the "Dirty Mouths, Dirty Martinis Comedy Night to Benefit Planned Parenthood, in Honor of Jean Carroll," at the Irvington Town Hall Theatre in Irvington, NY January 11, 2016); Sandra Bernhard (at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in Skokie, IL on March 10, 2016); Elayne Boosler (at the Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center in Westhampton, NY on May 15, 2016); Sarah Silverman (at the A.V. Club Comedy. Festival at the Civic Opera House in Chicago, IL on June 5, 2016) and Judy Gold (at the LPAC Comedy Benefit "Levity and Justice for All" at Town Hall in New York, NY on June 16, 2016).

At the performances I attended, in addition to taking notes on the performance and venue, I made a point of engaging in conversations with audience members who were near me in ticket/merchandise/bathroom lines, or who were seated in my immediate vicinity in the theatre. Another method I used to gather data on the reception of contemporary Jewish female stand-up comedians was an online survey, created on SurveyMonkey and distributed through social media. The final survey is included as a separate appendix. In total, the survey had nearly

\textsuperscript{12} Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, \textit{Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources} (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2010), xiii. Chaudhuri defines the alternative archive as “a fragmented yet coherent body of material located outside of the conventional primary source repositories”
four-hundred respondents. My third mode of data collection was follow-up phone interviews conducted with 35 of the online survey participants. Each interview was fully transcribed and coded. The ethnographic methods will be described more fully in Chapter Four.

Methodologies

The methodologies that I used to analyze the newly-collected Jean Carroll archive varied depending on the media of the data. In order to analyze the periodicals gathered through online databases, I looked for overarching trends that distinguished Jewish newspapers from trade publications or mainstream newspapers. Using Susan Manning's *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* as a model, I read the diverse sources of evidence "against gaps in documentation." For instance, comparing Jewish periodicals to trade and mainstream papers revealed that Jewish periodicals did not begin featuring Jean Carroll until well after she had gained mainstream exposure, but they were more likely to cover her benefit appearances for Jewish and Zionist organizations than the mainstream or trade counterparts. Trade magazines like *Variety* and *The Billboard* provided far more insight into the backstage politics surrounding Carroll's casting (or lack thereof) in television sitcoms.

When examining the periodicals gathered by Jean Carroll herself, I attended also to the scrapbook as complete narrative, looking at the differences between the press clippings curated by Jean Carroll herself, and those that emerged from my archival and database research. For instance, while the clippings folder from the New York Public Library contained a series of articles detailing Carroll’s arrest and trial for the alleged attack on model Dorothy McHale, her

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scrapbook contained nothing on this event. These divergences speak to the way that the scrapbook was, in a way, another one of Carroll's carefully curated performances.

Probably the most common research methodology in this study was the performance analysis applied to Jean Carroll's television appearances and live recordings. Performance analysis attends to both the language in the performance, as well as other elements including tone of voice, gestures and nonverbal communication, costume, production design, and external frames such as venue and audience response. For instance, I chart her negotiation of Jewishness by attending to her changing vocal mannerisms, such as accent and Yiddish linguistic devices. I trace her gender performance through her body language, costume and makeup choices. And I gauge audience response by noting (and occasionally timing) their laughter and applause.

When interpreting interviews, both those gathered as footage for the documentary and those that I conducted personally with Jean Carroll’s family, I use an ethnographic approach, noting emergent patterns and analyzing their significance. One of the more interesting discoveries I have made from these interviews comes from subjects’ repeated insistence that although Jean Carroll was proudly Jewish, they did not think of her as a ‘Jewish comedian’ suggesting to me that Carroll’s refusal to employ stereotypical Jewish accents and gestures played a role in her removal from the Jewish comedy canon. This ethnographic approach also characterized my methodology when analyzing data gleaned from participant observation, survey, and interviews. I coded my field notes from participant observation, as well as the survey data and transcripts of follow-up interviews, charting the trends in audience response, and noting the pattern that emerged regarding the increasing salience of ethnicity in Jean Carroll. Elayne

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Boosler, and Sandra Bernhard. My mode of text analysis also had a visual dimension when looking at survey data, in which I constructed Word Clouds based on the frequency of terms that an audience member used when responding to a given survey question.

Significance

This project has two main contributions. In the field of Jewish Studies, it offers a new way to read Jewishness in performance. While scholars like Julius Novick, Harley Erdman, and Heather Nathans have explored theatre about Jewish characters and subjects on the American Stage,¹⁵ and Henry Bial and Andrea Most have examined more subtle, 'coded' performances of American Jewishness on stage and screen,¹⁶ this study examines the performance of Jewishness in a new way: by attending to the outer frames of the performance, such as its venue and financial beneficiaries. For instance, although a musical revue featuring the Rockettes, Frank Sinatra, and Desi Arnez may not intuitively be considered Jewish American performance, the musical revue featuring the Rockettes, Frank Sinatra, and Desi Arnez, that took place in 1949 to raise money for the Actor's Temple Synagogue certainly could be.¹⁷ Similarly, even discounting her frequent but coded references to her Jewish identity, Carroll could be considered active in Jewish American performance by virtue of her frequent public appearances to benefit Jewish causes and organizations. In sum, my intervention offers another way to read Jewishness in performance--as a cause to champion, not a character to inhabit. Rather than look exclusively at

Jewish content—or even for codes of Jewishness like dialects, behaviors, and mannerisms—scholars can turn to other frames of performance, including the venue and financial beneficiaries, to look for signs of Jewish identity.

Perhaps the more pressing intervention of this piece is in the still-emerging field of comedy studies. Within the last ten years, this still-nascent field has seen the emergence of the Comedic Arts majors at Emerson College, Comedy Studies majors at Columbia College, and the Comedy program at the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California. However, before comedy studies becomes a standard department of study within universities, it demands some major adjustments to the canon. The choice to devote a full monograph to a female artist like Carroll intervenes against the overwhelmingly male bias in the extant literature on stand-up comedians. The false portrait of the nation’s first stand-up comics as an all-male Jewish cohort has resulted in an ongoing perception of stand-up comedy as aggressive, dominating, and inherently masculine. This project, showing that a member of the very first cohort of stand-up comics was female takes important steps towards removing the unjustly gendered perception and study of stand-up comedy.

Relevant Literature

This work responds to a variety of disciplines, many of which already intersect with one another. Jewish studies is a particularly broad field, encompassing everything from sociological studies on synagogue affiliation, to historical studies of race and gender, to a small but robust collection of Jewish performance studies. Theatre studies is equally capacious, including subjects ranging from the history of stand-up comedy to the role of the audience in theatre for social change. Both these vast fields produced myriad conversations to which this work is indebted.
The Pew Research Center’s “Portrait of Jewish Americans” in 2013 prompted a fresh round of hand-wringing on the dilemmas of American Jewry when they announced that one in five American Jews describe themselves as having no religion.\(^\text{18}\) By reflecting that Jewish identity was detachable from religion, the study illuminates the ambiguity of ‘Jewishness’ even within the social sciences, where it has referred—in different historical moments—to a race, religion, ethnicity, and culture.\(^\text{19}\) E. L. Goldstein examines the racialization of American Jews in the period between 1875 to 1895, explaining that it was not merely a form of discrimination, but also a source of comfort to American Jews "because it gave them a sense of stability at a time when many familiar markers of Jewish identity were eroding.”\(^\text{20}\) Sander Gilman also examines Jews as a racial group, both through their bodily attributes and through their language (which was once considered a basis for race).\(^\text{21}\) Sociologists Roger Amyot and Lee Sigelman, however, locate religion as the lynchpin of Jewishness, arguing that declining religiosity poses a substantial threat to Jewish identity.\(^\text{22}\) And mid-century social scientists like Nathan Glazer, Milton Gordon, and Herbert Gans defined Jewishness as an ethnicity.\(^\text{23}\) Gans highlighted the concept of "symbolic ethnicity," in which ethnicity played "an expressive rather than

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\(^{20}\) Goldstein, 11.


instrumental function in people's lives, becoming more of a leisure-time activity." Gans also credits the mass media with the growth of symbolic ethnicity. Synthesizing these ideas with those from critical race theory and history are social scientists like Vilna Bashi, Matthew Frye Jacobson, and Karen Brodkin, who have examined the process of Jewish American assimilation as one in which Jews "became white." This conversation, in particular, provides a foundation to understand Jean Carroll's comedy, which I argue supports the 'whitening' of Jewishness by embodying it in a subtle, secular, and virtually indistinguishable manner. The paradigm of Jewish ethnicity as a matter of consent (rather than descent)—a repertoire of behaviors and actions rather than a set of theological beliefs or essentialized racial identity—also dovetails with a robust subgenre within Jewish studies: Jewish performance.

The study of Jewish performance is connected to Gans's notion of symbolic ethnicity in that it recognizes the significance of performing an action or behavior, even without an underlying theological framework. However, while Gans views symbolic ethnicity as superficial and inauthentic, a performance studies approach privileges behavior, rendering secularity and Jewishness compatible. Pioneering work on performing and Jewishness, like Harley Erdman's *Staging the Jew: The Performance of an American Ethnicity, 1860-1920* traces changing attitudes towards American Jews mainly by analyzing the representation of Jewish characters, like Shylock or Fagin, onstage. In his literary analysis of Jewish drama, *Beyond the Golden Door*, Julius Novick argues that Jewish playwrights anticipated sociologists in their dynamic

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depictions of American Jewishness. Heather Nathans added significant insight to the subject of American Jewish theatrical representation in *Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans: Performing Jewish Identity on the Antebellum American Stage*. Arguing that "stage types serve as useful indices for interpreting the status of Jewish Americans during critical periods in the nation's history," Nathans examines performances of Jewish rituals onstage, as well as performances of Jewish masculinity (looking at the trope of Shylock and the "avaricious and aggressive" Jew, and the 'Wandering Jew') as well as Jewish femininity (looking at the stage Jewess as Republican mother). Commenting on the always-slippery task of defining Jewishness, Nathans offers, "I have found little consensus among my sources whether 'Jewish' connoted a race, a religion, an ethnic identity, or even a collection of character traits." This hermeneutic openness is precisely what allowed Jean Carroll to shift her own performance of Jewishness in dialogue with shifting attitudes towards and understandings of Jews.

Jewish American artists of the so-called 'legitimate theatre' have exhibited similar shifts in the language they use to depict Jews in the media. During the early twentieth century, when Jews were considered a race, Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* describes them in racial terms. David Quixano refers repeatedly to his 'race' being melted away in the crucible of America. Traces of this racialized understanding of Jewishness have endured into present day, documented by performance historians. For instance, Rebecca Rossen describes Benjamin Zemach's efforts to use makeup to 'de-Judaize' his face speaks to Jewishness as a physical

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27 Nathans, 13.
28 Nathans, 9.
And both Roberta Mock and Jonathan Freedman write expansively on the Jewish body being described and viewed as 'Oriental.' At the turn of the century in the United States, as sociologists began to use rhetoric of religion, theatre scholars observed ways that performances were likening Judaism to Christianity, depicting as one of the many sects tolerated and embraced by a country established on principles of religious freedom. For instance, Henry Bial discusses Gentleman's Agreement, in which the protagonist describes Judaism to his son in terms of Christianity, explaining that just as some people go to Catholic church, and others go to Protestant Church, some others go to Synagogue. Finally, as the post-war idea of 'symbolic ethnicity' came into vogue and people viewed Jewishness as a choice, Jewish drama by playwrights like Wendy Wasserstein and Tony Kushner began depicting the struggles between maintaining or discarding their 'Jewishness.'

Henry Bial and Andrea Most are particularly influential to this study because of how they shift focus from explicitly Jewish characters and content to implicitly Jewish ones. One of the most central concepts of this dissertation is the idea of "double coding" that Bial introduced in Acting Jewish, his analysis of Jewish American performance between 1947 and 1998. In this seminal text, Bial defines double coding as "the way the [performance of Jewishness in mass

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33 Bial, Acting Jewish Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen.
culture] speaks to at least two audiences: a Jewish audience and a general or gentile audience."\(^{35}\) This subtle strategy of speaking about and to a Jewish experience without alienating mainstream audiences epitomizes Carroll's practice of what I term 'playing Jewish without saying Jewish.' Likewise, Andrea Most's *Making Americans* broadens the category of what constitutes 'Jewish performance' by finding subtext about Jewish assimilation in musicals of the 1920's-1950s by Jewish creators, as well as in the film.\(^{36}\) Both Bial and Most expand the field of Jewish studies by illuminating the implicit ways that artists communicate their Jewish identity without compromising their bid for 'whiteness.'

Another field within Jewish studies that is foundational to this piece is Feminist Jewish Studies. One of the major scholars in this field, Pamela Nadell, articulates a compelling reason for this project, when discussing a seemingly unrelated context: the struggle of women to become ordained rabbis. Drawing from Gerda Lerner's work on feminist consciousness, in which women denied access to history must "use their energy to reinvent the wheel," Nadell writes,

> For a century, the women who wanted to be rabbis and their supporters invented over and over again the same arguments to prove that women were worthy, that they were capable...Given that Jewish men and women still debate the issue today, uncovering the history of the women who would be rabbis unequivocally brands this scholarship political...\(^{37}\)

This passage gives eloquent expression to the cycle of incredulity surrounding female comedians. My efforts to document Jean Carroll's work as a confident woman whose successful stand-up career began in the 1940s are "unequivocally political" in their efforts to stop this

\(^{35}\) Bial, *Acting Jewish Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen*, 16.

\(^{36}\) Most, *Making Americans*.

century-long repetition in which each generation's women comedians are invoked as part of a
moronic debate over whether women are funny.

A pillar of feminist Jewish studies to whom this work is heavily indebted is Riv-Ellen
Prell, whose work on Jewish American assimilation, gender, and the circulation of gendered
Jewish stereotypes informs nearly every page of this study. In particular, Prell's scholarship
*Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish
Men*, in which she outlines and historicizes the stereotype of the 'Devouring' Jewish mother and
wife, is crucial to my understanding of the stereotype that Carroll was invoking and revising in
her comedy. Succinctly, Prell argues that the stereotype of the Jewish woman as demanding and
aggressive were heavily circulated by their husbands as a response to their own insecurities
regarding their ability to be providers in their new homeland.\(^38\) This work, in turn, builds on the
scholarship of Paula Hyman, who acknowledged the male bias in the history of Jewish
assimilation into the United States, emphasizing the assimilatory function of economic
consumption for Jewish women.\(^39\)

Just as Jewish Studies houses a sub-genre of Jewish performance studies, so too does
Feminist Jewish studies house a small but mighty collection of works specifically exploring
feminist Jewish performance studies, from which my project draws heavily. The text perhaps
most influential to my own work is Joyce Antler's research on Jewish female comedians as proto-
feminists, embodying a tradition of subversive humor.\(^40\) The theme of comedy as a subversively

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\(^{38}\) Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish

153–61.; Paula E. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of

\(^{40}\) Joyce Antler, “One Clove Away from a Pomander Ball: The Subversive Tradition of Female Comedians,” *Studies in
empowering practice for women in a patriarchal society underlies both my own reading of Carroll's life and work and my interpretation of her personal narrative. Antler also provided the kind of historical contextualization of the Jewish Mother stereotype that Riv-Ellen Prell gave to the Demanding Jewish Wife stereotype, chronicling representations of the Jewish Mother in American popular culture to show how "representations of the Jewish mother reveal deep-seated anxiety about Jews' relation to the culture at large and to each other."\textsuperscript{41} Another of the key texts of this collection is Roberta Mock's \textit{Jewish Women on Stage, Film, and Television}. In this collection of historical performance analyses, Mock demonstrates how Jewish actresses like Rachel Felix, Sarah Bernhardt, Theda Bara, and Anna Held spun anti-Semitic stereotypes of greed into positive characterizations of glamour.\textsuperscript{42}

This mode of synthesizing performance analysis and cultural theory is also pronounced in the growing body of work focused on ethnic and gender identity in dance. Rebecca Rossen uses the synthesis of performance analysis and cultural theory to demonstrate how dancers and choreographers were able to 'revise, embody, and subvert' negative Jewish stereotypes in \textit{Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance}. Rossen's work was foundational, outlining a vocabulary of Jewish gestures ranging from "a comic series of shoulder shrugs" to "davening" to "dancing a buoyant grapevine around the perimeter of my spotlight."\textsuperscript{43} And while the majority of her case studies are female, her treatment of how Jewish male dancers like Benjamin Zemach, David Gordon, David Dorfman and Dan Froot communicate and comment on stereotypes of Jewish masculinity modeled analysis of nonverbal

\textsuperscript{42} Mock, \textit{Jewish Women on Stage, Film, and Television}.
\textsuperscript{43} Rossen, \textit{Dancing Jewish Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance}, 21.
significations of gender and Jewishness. Similarly, Hannah Schwadron's research on dance, gender, and Jewish joke-work in U.S. popular culture in The Case of the Sexy Jewess builds on Rossen's work, analyzing the way that "Jewish female performance modalities perpetuate stereotypes in order to disrupt them." Her analysis of Jewish female performers--mainly comedians, but also burlesque dancers, pornographic impresarios like Joanna Angel and actresses like Natalie Portman--also models the kind of interdisciplinary synthesis of performance analysis, ethnography, and archival research methods employed by this study. Although not strictly about Jewishness and dance, Susan Manning's Modern Dance, Negro Dance, introduces the useful concept of “metaphorical minstrelsy”—“a convention where white dancers’ bodies make reference to nonwhite subjects”—not using burnt cork makeup, as in traditional minstrel performance and vaudeville, but using music, movement, and themes. For instance, white-presenting Jewish modern dance choreographers such as Helen Tamiris choreographed and performed Negro Spirituals, out of an anti-racist politic and sense of alliance with black people. This concept of metaphorical minstrelsy is useful both as a way of understanding more subtle forms of appropriating race and ethnicity, and also as a reminder that “conventions of performance that appear strictly racist or ethnically offensive from an early 21st century perspective carried diverse ideological implications in its own time.”

In a way, this dissertation adheres to the models set by this small but powerful body of literature, examining the way that Jean Carroll negotiated stereotypes of Jewish women by invoking but humanizing them, much the way that Mock describes Sarah Bernhard doing to the

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45 Manning, Modern Dance, Negro Dance, 11.
belle juive; the way Rossen demonstrates David Dorfman and Dan Froot doing to the schlemiel, or the way Schwadron shows Gilda Radner doing to the Jewish American Princess. However, it also adds to this discourse by suggesting that the consequence of moving too far afield of these stereotypes is becoming illegible as a Jewish performer, and getting left out of the (small) canon of performance analysis documenting and historicizing these artists. Stereotypes, beyond being harmful social stigmas that limit people's sense of possibility, can also function as useful indices of in-group membership.

Comedy Studies

The other field into which this study intervenes is a genre that overlaps heavily, but not entirely, with theatre and performance studies, known as comedy studies. This genre suffers from a heavily masculine focus that is particularly pronounced in literature on stand-up comedy. One of the key arguments of this piece is that Jean Carroll did not simply arrive on the stand-up scene near its beginning; she was a part of its beginning. When Jean Carroll began performing stand-up comedy, the genre was so nascent it did not even have a name yet. However, Jean Carroll has been generally written out of the history of stand-up comedy, resulting in the misconception that the first generation of stand-up comics was exclusively male. Partly as a result of this fallacious male origin myth, stand-up has been characterized as a masculine form. Comedy scholar Sharon Lockyer noted;

The study of stand-up comedy is a ‘masculine discourse’…which is designed to promote and maintain male power and dominance across the stand-up comedyscape. Richard Zoglin argues that the stand-up comedy landscape is largely ‘defined by testosterone’ and notes that
conventional wisdom suggests that women are ‘less suited by nature to stand-up comedy, an aggressive, take-charge art form’.

A brief examination of the literature surrounding American comedy demonstrates Carroll’s erasure and its far-reaching impact.

The history of stand-up as it is currently written in the academy is short—and a bit nasty and brutish as well, based on its ruthless erasure. Anthropologist Stephanie Koziski wrote one of the first academic analyses of stand-up comedy in 1984, arguing for stand-up comedians as “cultural anthropologists,” given their shared task of exposing social structures in order to make invisible tacit knowledge documented and emphasized for public consumption and discussion. However, her analysis was based on close readings of overwhelmingly male performers—namely, Bill Cosby, George Carlin, Dick Gregory, Hal Holbrook, Steve Martin, Bob Newhart, Richard Pryer, and Flip Wilson, with Lily Tomlin being the only female comic.

The trend of erasure and subtle misogyny was particularly evident in the next publication on stand-up comedy: Phil Berger’s history *The Last Laugh: The World of Stand-up Comics*, an immersive and mind-bogglingly extensive collection of interviews with stand-up comics from the little-known to the legendary. Despite the fact that Berger begins his history in the late 1940s and early 1950s—precisely the period of Jean Carroll’s popularity—her name does not appear once in the book’s 441 pages. He does, however, devote a considerable discussion to her contemporaries Henny Youngman, Joe Ancis, and even barely-known comics like Adam Keefe. Berger deserves credit for his discussion of later stand-up comedians such as Joan Rivers and

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Sandra Bernhard. However, his praise for them is laced with either a disregard for or an ignorance of Joan Carroll as their antecedent:

Up to a decade ago, the only female stand-ups worth mentioning...could be counted on the fingers of one hand. There were such seasoned pros as Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, Totie Fields, and Lily Tomlin, a relative newcomer...in part, the scarcity of new comedians was the result of the nature of the job. To do stand-up comedy is to commit an aggressive act. Think of Milton Berle, Don Rickles, Alan King—all of whom come at the audience with the impact of a battering ram. 48

Within the space of a maddening few lines, we see both the erasure of Jean Carroll and its lingering effects on the perception of stand-up comedy. First, Berger shows with his list of “seasoned pros”—including Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, Totie Fields, and Lily Tomlin—that either he had not heard of Jean Carroll, or did not think her “worth mentioning.” Second, he recalls the exact cohort of pioneers of which she was part—“Milton Berle, Don Rickles, and Alan King”—as proof that “the nature of the job” is masculine. Indeed, as a result of associating stand-up comedy with that male cohort, people continue to gender "aggressive acts" and "battering-ram" delivery as male.

Seven years later, Laurie Stone released her study of subversive comedy in the 1980s and 1990s, which began with a cursory history of stand-up. Stone does an admirable job tracing stand-up comedy back to its Vaudeville roots, and includes a number of female performers such as Sophie Tucker. Yet she too surveys Myron Cohen, Jackie Mason, Henny Youngman, and Jean Carroll’s other contemporaries without once mentioning her. An even more notable moment of erasure occurs as Stone quote Phyllis Diller saying, “I was 37 when I started in stand-up. There were no models.” 49 Phyllis Diller was 37 in 1954, at the height of Jean Carroll’s popularity.

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Although we cannot know why Diller chose to omit Jean Carroll from the comedy landscape, the fact that Stone accepted and printed this revisionist history reinforces Carroll’s erasure. Therefore, when Stone considers the “vets” of stand-up comedy’s first days, she names “Alan King, Don Rickles, and Carson” who “talk to men. Women can listen, and women are invited to laugh if they can stomach chuckling at their own humiliation.” Had Stone known that King and Rickles had a female colleague that is every bit as ‘veteran’ as they, it might have revised her understanding of women’s place in the early days of stand-up.

In 2000, John Limon introduced the first comprehensive theorization of stand-up comedy, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, Or, Abjection in America*. Limon’s work includes both male and female case studies, but his theorization definitively enforces a masculinist understanding of stand-up comedy. Limon’s erasure of Carroll happens both concretely and theoretically. On a concrete level, when Limon discusses the first stand-up comedians in America, he specifically describes them as “heterosexual Jewish *males*” (emphasis added). Theoretically, his essays are held together using the idea of “the microphone as erect phallus,” and he proposes that the dynamic between a stand-up comedian and an audience recapitulates the Freudian dynamic of father resurrected as son.

This decidedly masculine analytic is taken up by Eddie Tafoya in his exploration of stand-up comedy as the great American literary form. Tafoya adjusts Limon’s theory of the stand-up comic “from ‘father resurrected as son’ to ‘father resurrected as 13-year-old’” with the rift of paternal abandonment temporarily healed because the audience sees the comedian as both an accessible and emotionally available figure and also one with a booming

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50 Stone, 6.
voice, towering above them like a father. These masculine analytics are supported by Tafoya’s selective history of stand-up. Both his ‘Stand-up Prehistory’ in chapter four and his ‘History of Stand-up Proper’ in chapter five not only ignore Carroll, but are largely devoid of female performers.

The first time Carroll appeared in a mainstream history of stand-up comedy was in 2009, in Gerald Nachman’s *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*. Nachman’s brief but notable discussion of Carroll draws attention to her previous erasure, as he writes: “The earliest successful aboveground comedienne of that period, Jean Carroll, is now almost forgotten.” And yet Nachman too renders Carroll invisible for a good part of her career. While he references her appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, he puzzlingly asserts that she “vanished” in 1954—in spite of the fact that the majority of her *Ed Sullivan* appearances took place after that time. Richard Zoglin, who mentioned Jean Carroll in passing in his history of stand-up *Comedy at the Edge*, acknowledged a few more years of her career, stating that it was the 1960s when she “got out of show business and was largely forgotten.” But Zoglin too mentioned Carroll in a marginalized fashion, citing her as “one of the few exceptions” to the rule of male stand-ups comics.

It was seven years until Jean Carroll’s name would make a significant appearance in another mainstream text on stand-up comedy. In the meantime, several more publications added to the growing literature on the genre. William Knoedelseder published his history *I’m Dying Up Here: Heartbreak and High Times in Stand-Up Comedy’s Golden Era*. Although Knoedelseder

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focuses on the 1970s, when he reported on stand-up comedy for the *L.A. Times*, he still includes a discussion on the stand-up comedians that inspired his case studies, and Jean Carroll’s name is noticeably absent. For instance, when discussing Elayne Boosler’s intervention, he states that her success showed female comedians that they “didn’t have to be Phyllis Diller or Joan Rivers,”

reinforcing these women as the starting points of female stand-up. And while Lily Tomlin has repeatedly cited Jean Carroll as one of her major inspirations as a comedian, Knoedelseder’s discussion of Tomlin overlooks Carroll entirely. Rebecca Krefting’s study of charged humor makes a point of examining both male and female case studies, and addressing the sexism inherent in the perception of men as the more successful stand-up comics. However, her early chapter, charting a brief history of twentieth-century stand-up, takes its cue from Nachman, mentions Jean Carroll only in passing, as one of several “progenitors of a shift in style” towards a more confessional, personal mode of stand-up comedy. I argue that Carroll was not simply a progenitor of the personal mode of stand-up, she was a practitioner, as any substantive look at her work makes clear.

In 2016, Kliph Nesteroff published *The Comedians: Drunks, Thieves, Scoundrels, and the History of American Comedy*, which encompasses a number of comedy genres, but focuses mainly on stand-up. This work marks the most substantive coverage of Jean Carroll to date, with an unprecedented three (out of 432) pages. Nesteroff takes major strides in restoring Carroll to

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the historical narrative of stand-up comedy, explicitly stating, “she predated Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers” and even including some of her vaudeville history and bits from her routine. However, Nesteroff uses curiously accusatory language when discussing Carroll’s retirement, asserting that the reason “Carroll was forgotten in her lifetime,” is that

when her husband was named head of the massive talent agency General Amusement Corporation, she retreated. In typical 1950s fashion, after several appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, she abandoned her trade and became a housewife.\(^{58}\)

In fact, Carroll worked well after her husband became the head of GAC, making television appearances into the 1960s. And the language of “abandonment” and “retreat” puts the blame squarely on Carroll, rather than interrogating the systemic forms of sexism at play in the entertainment industry.

Jean Carroll’s absence is even more pronounced in the robust literature at the intersection of Comedy Studies and Jewish Studies, focusing specifically on Jewish comedians. One would think that authors on this topic would be eager to claim the distinction that the first female stand-up comedian in America was Jewish. However, that fact is curiously overlooked. Anthony Lewis’s essay “The Jew in Stand-up Comedy” argues that American Jews used were well-suited to careers in stand-up because the predator-prey dynamic that characterized their position in society was also central to stand-up comedy.\(^{59}\) And while Lewis clearly made a special effort to recognize the contribution of women to these early days of comedy, he did so by focusing on Jewish Stage Mothers, such as Minnie Marx (mother of the Marx Brothers) and Sadie Berlinger (mother of Milton Berle), rather than acknowledging female practitioners like Carroll.


Perhaps the most striking omission is Carroll’s absence from Lawrence Epstein’s nearly comprehensive text *The Haunted Smile, The Story of Jewish American Comedians in America*, which is foundational to this study. Epstein has an in-depth chapter charting the rise of the Borscht Belt, where Carroll performed so many times that she eventually bought a cabin nearby. But Epstein never mentions Carroll, even though he names a slew of other Borscht Belt ‘tummlers’ ranging from Judy Holiday and Jackie Mason to Joan Rivers and Henny Youngman. Epstein devotes an equally extensive chapter to modern stand-up comedy, charting the rise of Carroll’s colleagues Sam Levenson and Myron Cohen, as well as the next generations, including Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Mel Brooks, and Woody Allen. Epstein clearly makes an effort to recognize female Jewish comedians, citing Elayne May, Belle Barth, Rusty Warren, and Marie Alvarez as players in the “changing world of stand-up comedy,” and even devoting a full chapter to “Jewish Women Comedians.” Yet even his remarkably robust history is oblivious to Jean Carroll. Epstein’s assertion, “It was Jewish comedians, almost exclusively male, who had helped introduce American audiences to Jewish women and who had shaped audience perceptions of what those Jewish women were like”\textsuperscript{60} precisely ignores (or disregards) one of Carroll’s major interventions—being the sole Jewish female stand-up comedian to take charge of her own representation, introducing Jewish women to mainstream America on her own terms.

Authors less egalitarian than Epstein and Lewis chose to ignore women entirely, or relegate them to a footnote in the history of Jewish comedy. Asa Berger, for instance, wrote the history of Jewish comedy through a series of exclusively male “Jewish Jesters” including the Marx Brothers, Jack Benny, Henny Youngman, Rodney Dangerfield, Sid Caesar, Lenny Bruce, Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story Of Jewish Comedians In America* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002), 254.
Mel Brooks, Jackie Mason, Woody Allen, and Jerry Seinfeld. Berger also quoted a number of Jackie Mason’s more anti-women jokes without any kind of critical engagement—and even reifying some of the misogynistic sentiment, stating that Mason was able to derive humor from the way women “avoid sex by claiming they are too tired.”\(^{61}\) And recently as 2006, Donald Weber authored a genealogy of Jewish stand-up that was entirely male, and not even entirely Jewish. Weber started with Milton Berle and moved through Don Rickles, Jeff Ross, Alan King, Freddy Roman, Jerry Seinfeld, Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Richard Pryor to John Stewart, including a footnote acknowledging his omission of women. In addition to using solely male subjects, Weber used the masculine analytic of Albert Goldman’s “Boy-Man Schlemiel,” viewing stand-up comedy in part as an attempt to rebel against “overbearing Jewish mothers.”\(^{62}\)

Overall, the eagerness that Jewish authors exhibit towards claiming the outsized Jewish impact on American comedy does not extend to one of its earliest female pioneers.

Female Comedy Studies scholars, and scholars in the discipline of Women and Gender Studies have made great strides in restoring female voices to the history of American comedy, but they too often ignore or underestimate the role of Jean Carroll. A notable exception is Mary Unterbrink, who created one of the earliest histories of female comedians. Unterbrink specifically wrote the collection of biographical snapshots to memorialize “comediennes making themselves heard in a world that has been economically, politically, and psychologically dominated by men.”\(^{63}\) And she includes a full two pages on Carroll, charting her move from


double acts on Vaudeville to a “solo act,” and even quoting some of her material. The 1980s also saw a vigorous debate in Women and Gender Studies on the existence and nature of “female humor” or “feminist humor.” Much of this discourse uses case studies drawn from literature. However, Lisa Merrill’s essay “Feminist Humor: Rebellious and Self-Affirming” characterizes a polyvocal feminist humor that shows a broader spectrum of sexuality, class, and race, examining a lineage of female stand-up and solo-performance comedians going from Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller to Lily Tomlin, Whoopi Goldberg, and Danitra Vance. Her argument—that the rage that Rivers and Diller directed at themselves and at other women turned outward to society in later years—would certainly have been complicated by Jean Carroll’s confident, assertive style predating Rivers and Diller.

Responding to these conversations around women’s humor, scholar Joanne Gilbert—a former stand-up comic—argued against essentialist titles like ‘female humor’ or ‘male humor,’ asserting, “Just because humor is inherently aggressive, however, does not mean that it is inherently male….the essentialist labels ‘male’ and ‘female’ are not useful for discussions of contemporary comic (or other) discourse.” This refusal to use a male analytic, or to position female comedians as responding to male norms, constitutes a major step in mitigating the masculine bias in the historiography of stand-up comedy. Yet Gilbert does not seem to be aware of Jean Carroll’s existence, as she traces the history of women in comedy from Mae West to Sandra Bernhard with nary a mention of Jean Carroll’s name. Like Merrill’s argument that the

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first generation of female stand-up comics embodied self-directed rage, Gilbert’s characterization of the “Whiner” persona that typified the first women stand-ups would have been complicated by Jean Carroll’s cheerfully assertive persona.

The literature recuperating women’s place within the comedy canon took a specifically Jewish bent in the work of Giovanna P. Del Negro and Joyce Antler, whose contemporaneous essays look at Jewish American female comedians as participating in a subversive movement to draw attention to gender and ethnic norms. Giovanna P. Del Negro’s “The Bad Girls of Jewish Comedy” argues that comics Belle Barth, Patsy Abbott and Pearl Williams used explicitly ethnic, bawdy humor to draw attention to gender inequity and the performativity of middle-class whiteness in post WW2 American society. And Joyce Antler’s “One Clove Away from a Pomander Ball: The Subversive Tradition of Jewish Female Comedians” constructs a genealogy of three ‘waves’ of subversive Jewish female comedians. Her ‘first wave’ of comedians actually predates Carroll, consisting of musical-comedy performers like Sophie Tucker, Fanny Brice and Molly Picon. Yet then she skips over Carroll entirely, locating the next significant wave of comedians in the 1960s with Elayne May, Joan Rivers, and others, before moving into an extensive (if brief) list of the many subversive Jewish women performing comedy in the new millennium. Notably, one of the contemporary comedians that Antler profiles is Corey Kahaney, whose comedy revue “The J.A.P. Show” specifically highlights Carroll as a pioneer of the form of subversive Jewish comedy. But even Kahaney’s attempts at acknowledging Carroll’s

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68 Antler, “One Clove Away from a Pomander Ball.”
contribution have not restored her to the historical narrative of female comedians, Jewish or otherwise.

Jean Carroll’s erasure from the history of female comedians is all the starker when it is replicated in texts that so directly comment on her field and intervention. For instance, Yael Kohen’s oral history of comedy *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* explicitly identifies the unjustly masculine bias surrounding comedy as a product of insufficient documentation of previous generations of female comedians. She sets her book as an intervention against this trend in which “the coups of the previous era [of female comedians] are washed away under the set of new challenges a younger generation of women inevitably face.”

Yet her omission of Carroll’s crucial role as the first woman comedian to take part in stand-up comedy repeats the very “washing away” that her book attempts to prevent.

In sum, the few—mostly male—scholars who have published books historicizing and theorizing stand-up as a performance genre have done so with a pronounced masculine bias. Their work generally depicts Jewish heterosexual men as the pioneers of stand-up. Familiar case studies in this narrative include Milton Berle, Bob Hope, and the ubiquitous Lenny Bruce. It is by drawing on predominately male case studies that John Limon concluded that stand-up recapitulates the Freudian struggle between father and son. These case studies also formed the basis for Asa Berger’s conclusion that stand-up comedy is an ‘inherently masculine’ form. Even the relatively new body of scholarship representing female stand-up comics tends to position

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stand-up comics like Joan Rivers and Phyllis Diller making an intervention against a predominately male cast of characters\textsuperscript{73} or using a female perspective to subvert a masculine form\textsuperscript{74} (Mizejewski, Antler, Blacher-Cohen).

The erasure of women may indeed be, as Sharon Lockyer asserts, a move "designed to promote and maintain male power and dominance across the stand-up comedyscape."\textsuperscript{75} Alternatively, it may be a product of reiteration, in which comedy scholars have drawn on published histories in the academic and popular press, rather than consulting primary sources like trade publications. Intervening in this literature, I draw on a new archive of previously unavailable resources like Stephen Silverman's documentary footage, the SOFA Entertainment archive, and Jean Carroll's personal scrapbook (as well as periodicals) to argue that close readings examining Jean Carroll’s responsive, confessional, confident style can reveal her true innovation as a pioneer of stand-up comedy.

A Note on Terms

Two of the terms that are foundational to this study—'Jewish' and 'stand-up'—require some clarification. The term 'Jewish' is notoriously ambiguous. I have--with a few exceptions that are noted in the text--used the term to refer to people and practices connected to the religion of Judaism, \textit{as well as} to secular cultural markers associated with (mainly Ashkenazic) Jewish people. When discussing people or things that are Jewish in an ethnic, cultural, or otherwise

\textsuperscript{73} Kohen, \textit{We Killed}. “WHO SAYS WOMEN AREN'T FUNNY? Finding Humor in the Tragic, 12 of the Funniest Females in Show Business -- Including Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and Sarah Silverman -- Get Tarted up as Today’s Tabloid Train Wrecks for Annie Leibovitz’s Camera, While Alessandra Stanley Debunks the Notion That Comedy Lies on the Y Chromosome. (Wonder Where She Got That Idea...),” \textit{Vanity Fair.}, 2008, 182.


\textsuperscript{75} Lockyer, “From Toothpick Legs to Dropping Vaginas.”
secular sense, I will use the term 'Jewishness.' When discussing people or things that are Jewish in a religious sense, I will use the term 'Judaism.' In the ethnographic portion of this study, I was mainly concerned with Jewish identity, and so I extended the term 'Jewish' to any participant who self-identified as partially or fully Jewish.

The term 'stand-up comedy' is also ambiguous within theatre studies, sometimes getting subsumed into the larger category of 'solo performance.' Currently, the OED defines a stand-up comic as one "whose act consists of standing before an audience and telling a succession of jokes." However, this definition omits the crucial distinction of modern stand-up comedy: the direct address between the comic and the audience, unmediated by a separate writer or a "character" distinct from the comic themselves. In 2015, the OED was modified to specify that the entertainer speak "directly to an audience," and also to include "or amusing stories," nodding to the deviation from a strict set-up/punchline formula.76

A brief exploration of the term ‘stand-up comedy’ shows how the development of the genre and of Carroll’s career were in step from the outset. In 1947, when Carroll was first making her way as a solo act, there was no such term as ‘stand-up comic.’ Reviewers categorized her as they did Milton Berle—using the term ‘comic monologist.’77

According to a potentially apocryphal explanation in Kliph Nesteroff’s The Comedians, the term ‘stand-up comic’ arose after the repeal of prohibition, as speakeasies became legitimate nightclubs and, over the course of two decades, the Mafia switched their attention to booking nightclub entertainment. As Nesteroff claimed, “If you were a stand-up comedian, you worked

for the mob.” And so the mob’s term ‘stand-up fighter’—a fighter who threw out nonstop punches—found its entertainment industry counterpart in the term ‘stand-up comic’—used to describe comedians who threw out nonstop punchlines.78

The first time that the term ‘stand-up comedian’ appeared in Variety was in two separate articles in the April 12, 1950 issue. One columnist, reporting on CBS’s summer radio lineup, showed his tentativeness surrounding the term through qualifiers and quotation marks, referencing “Steve Allen, a so-called ‘stand-up’ comedian.”79 The other reviewed “stand-up comedian” Bob Hope as he became the “First of Major Air Comics to take the TV plunge.”80 Within two years of the term ‘stand-up comedian’s appearance in Variety, reviewers were using it to describe Carroll’s work. In 1952, they reviewed her performance at the Riviera night club in Fort Lee, New Jersey by commending her as “an excellent stand-up comic.”81 However, critics outside trade publications still felt the need to explain the nascent form, evident in The Daily News’s article promoting Carroll’s appearance at the upcoming Harvest Moon Festival: “Perhaps the best—and certainly the simplest—size-up of Jean’s performance is that she walks onto the stage, talks, and walks off.”82 This assessment (‘walks onto the stage, talks, and walks off’) would be almost comically redundant in a world where the form of stand-up comedy was common knowledge. But, again, at this point, both the term and the performance genre itself

78 Nesteroff, The Comedians, 52.
were unfamiliar. By the late 1950s, the term began appearing a bit more frequently in *Variety*. However, it was not until the mid 1960s that the term ‘stand-up comedy’ was consistently used in both the entertainment and mainstream lexicon. By 1966, when Jean Carroll’s career was winding down, but her regular appearances on the Ed Sullivan Show kept her a household name, the term trickled down into both the Oxford English Dictionary and Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary.83 This exercise in tracking the media’s use of the term ‘stand-up comedy’ both clarifies its usage, and also illuminates how Jean Carroll’s career came of age alongside the budding genre.

Chapter Overviews

The first chapter, “Taking the Stage: From Celine Zeigman to Jean Carroll” functions in part as the most thorough biographical work on Jean Carroll to date, while also making the case that from its inception, stand-up comedy was a forum to rehearse the same subversively autonomous principles that pioneers like Jean Carroll enacted in their own lives. It examines her background as a Jewish child who immigrated to the United States amidst intense xenophobic sentiment (legislated through policies like the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924); and her attempts to wrest control from her abusive father by joining the Vaudeville circuit at age eight.

The next chapter, “A Woman in the Stand-up Fraternity: Jean Carroll and Gender,” builds on this foundation, arguing that although Carroll did not characterize it as such, her career in stand-up comedy was nonetheless a feminist intervention against Jewish male discourse about Jewish mothers and wives as vulgar and demanding. By invoking but then subverting this stereotype with her physical beauty and persona, Carroll was able to capitalize on it while also

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humanizing it for mainstream audiences. This chapter also examines the entertainment industry’s enduring institutional barriers to being both caregiver and comedian. These barriers ended Carroll’s career, as critics found new ‘pioneers’ in rising stand-ups like Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers.

The third chapter, “Cause, not Character: Jean Carroll and Jewishness” looks at Jean Carroll’s work as a reflection of the complex negotiation of assimilation and difference that American Jews were enacting after World War II. This chapter draws heavily on sociological texts to argue that the shift towards multiculturalism in the mid-1960s was reflected in Carroll’s changing engagement with Jewishness in her act. She still eschewed overtly Jewish content, using instead what Henry Bial would call ‘double-coded’ references to Jewish culture and practices. However, she became markedly more involved in benefit performances for Jewish organizations, making her Jewishness a cause, not a character.

The final chapter, “The Legacy of Jean Carroll” examines Carroll’s far-reaching impact on stand-up comedy. It gives particular focus to Carroll’s impact on women stand-up comics. I use testimonies by contemporary comedians (such as Lily Tomlin and Joy Behar) who claim her as an influence, as well as performance analysis of live shows by Jewish female stand-up comics, many of whom continue to respond to the same negative stereotypes of Jewish women that Carroll addressed in her work. This observation reveals that while Carroll may be overlooked by most publications, her legacy lives in this alternate archive of women standing up and speaking out.

Overall, this work speaks to Jewish studies, Gender studies, and Theatre studies by putting analyses of Jean Carroll’s work into conversation with literature on gender stereotypes and Jewish identity formation, in order to establish stand-up comedy as a key mode of circulating
(and perhaps revising) cultural stereotypes. Just as Jean Carroll ‘pushed her way’ to the stand-up microphone, this study must push its way into the masculine historiography of stand-up comedy, to contribute a new archive, new history, and new perspective.
Chapter 1: Taking the Stage: From Celine Zeigman to Jean Carroll

“The history biographers write about will not be the way it happened; it will be the way they remembered it” - Hermione Lee

Introduction: A Not-Quite-Biography

Although this chapter is not a biography, it does share some of the ambiguity of the genre. Biography straddles the lines between history and fiction, often smoothing over what Henry James referred to as “a swarm of possibilities.” In a way, Jean Carroll’s interviews are a kind of oral history—a personalized account of a particularly turbulent period of American history. However, along with her scrapbook, they are also the autobiographical narrative of a creative storyteller, gathered for I Made It Standing Up, a documentary film intended for a mainstream audience. And so Carroll uses all of the dramatic skills at her disposal to craft a rags-to-riches story that will entertain her audience. Although the loss of funding stopped the documentary from being produced, the interviews and transcripts gathered for it still constitute a robust archive and performance.

This first chapter attempts to compile, critique, and contextualize the story of Jean Carroll’s journey from immigrant to stand-up comedian as she constructed it for I Made It Standing Up. This narrative helps to inform my analysis of her comic writings and performances, analyzed in the subsequent chapters.

Some of the recurring themes that emerge from Carroll’s narrative are overcoming hardship, undying devotion to her family (especially her mother), and a naive comic genius that belies the intense labor that went into getting (and staying) in the public eye. As Susan Ware notes in her

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analysis of the autobiographies of seven women from Jean Carroll’s age cohort, “celebrity does not just happen.” Like Ware’s subjects, Carroll repeatedly deflects agency, despite the fact that all “worked long and hard to sustain public interest in her unusual individual achievements.”85 Carroll’s themes of triumph over difficulty, familial love, and naive genius help her construct a persona that is at once relatable and remarkable.

Coming to America

Jean Carroll—or, as she was known in her youth—Celine ‘Sadie’ Zeigman, was part of what is often known as the “Third Wave” of Jewish immigration to the United States, which consisted mainly of Eastern European Jews after the 1880s. She, her sisters, her mother and father were part of 2.5 million Jews who left Eastern Europe for the United States between 1880 and 1924.86 Carroll’s mother Anna was a Russo-Polish Jew who had been orphaned at birth.87 Her father Max had been a soldier in the Russian army. Both had survived pogroms, land shortages, famines, and Czar Nicholas II’s anti-Semitic policies before deciding to immigrate. After Carroll’s father deserted his post with the Russian army, he was jailed in Paris. There, her mother gave birth to Jean’s two older sisters, Rachel and Mary, and then, on January 7, 1911, to Celine, who was nick-named Sadie. When he was released from prison, Carroll’s father went to the United States in advance of his family, in order to find a job and earn money to send for his wife and children. Carroll’s account of her father’s immigration was cursory: “I guess he served his time. Went to America. Got a job. He was a baker. And anyone in those days who had a

87 Jane Wollman, “First Lady of Laughs Fifty Years Ago, Jean Carroll Was America’s No. 1 Female Stand-Up Comic. But Comedy Wasn’t Always a Funny Business,” Sun-Sentinel (Fort Lauderdale, FL), June 16, 1991, Newsbank, Inc.
trade, oh, boy, you fought over somebody like that. And we stayed until my father sent for us,"88 about four or five months later.89 According to both Carroll’s account and the census data, in 1912, she, her mother, and her sisters came to Ellis Island from the Le Havre port in Cherbourg aboard the S.S. Philadelphia.90

Carroll’s family followed Max Zeigman’s employment, moving around a great deal in their first few years in America. In Carroll’s words, “In those days, wherever there was a job is where the family lived.”91 Their first home was in Harlem, which she described as a mélange of immigrants, commenting, “You know, there were whites and…and …colored people. There was a mixture.”92 Next, they moved to Englewood,

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89 Carroll, 1–3.
90 Carroll, 1–6.
91 Carroll, 1–6.
92 Carroll, 1–5.
New Jersey, followed by New Britton, Connecticut, where Carroll said she “really grew up…”. It was there that she stopped using Yiddish as her primary language and “learned to speak English properly,” although she and her mother continued speaking Yiddish privately throughout their lives. In 1920, when she was eight and a half, Carroll’s family moved back to New York, settling in the Bronx. For the most part, Carroll had positive associations with her time there, saying, “It was a happy time because…we played…Nobody was afraid to be outdoors. When it was hot, we didn’t have air conditioning. We had Katonah Park.” However, she also spoke of the prejudice she encountered, stating, “That’s where I learned about…anti-Semitism…I couldn’t understand it.”

Anti-Semitism would not have been difficult to find as Jean Carroll came of age in the 1920s. There had been a large influx of Jews, particularly in Carroll’s neighborhood—by 1925, Jews comprised 40% of the South district of the Bronx, and 70% of the South Central district. And with this surge of immigrants came nationwide backlash—most notably in the form of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, a restrictive immigration policy which curtailed immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. Jews were only one of many immigrant populations discriminated against by the anti-immigration legislation and sentiment of this period. However, as Russian-Jewish immigrants, Carroll’s family may have faced a particular antipathy. In The Eager Immigrants, historian Robert J. Wechman asserts that the 1920s saw a “Red Scare” in

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93 Carroll, 1–6.
94 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
95 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 1–7.
96 Carroll, 1–7.
which Jews were the “favored targets.”

Beth Wenger affirms that “in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, and given the overrepresentation of Jews in leftist politics, the KKK and other hate groups portrayed Jews as dangerous radicals.” Even later in her life, Carroll preferred not to designate herself as Russian-American, offering instead her technical birthplace of Paris, France.

Mama’s Girl

Although her father’s career determined their whereabouts, it was clearly Carroll’s mother Anna who was the more animating force in her life. When speaking of her mother, Carroll revealed a fierce affection and loyalty, declaring, “I adored my mother. I loved her with such an overwhelming love that it’s impossible to describe to anybody.” Carroll often spoke with a romantic quality of her mother’s Old-World ways, reminiscing about nights when she was allowed to “sit quietly and listen” to her Anna and her friends in their tenement building: “They weren’t educated. They weren’t literate. They weren’t well read. But they had such wisdom. Life had taught them such lessons.”

It was to her mother that Carroll attributed her earliest experience at mimicry, explaining, “I wanted to give this wonderful person a reason to smile…when I’d imitate the old ladies, she’d say, ‘You shouldn’t make fun of other people.’ Then she’d crack up and tell all the

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100 Wenger, *The Jewish Americans*, 201. 201.
101 Carroll, *Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts*, 1–12.
neighbors."

But the most potent example of Carroll’s love for her mother is her assumption of the role of her protector against her father’s mental and physical abuse. Carroll’s detailed but halting account of witnessing her father’s domestic violence attests to its searing impression:

My father was...he was a baker, but he was also a drunk...My father worked nights and came home in the morning. When he came home in the morning, that was his big meal...and I was sitting out...we lived in a two-family house in New Britton, with a separate staircase. And I was sitting outside on the...like the landing. And my mother...had just put down...she...my mother was a wonderful cook. And she had put down the dinner for my father. I looked up in time to see my father take this boiling hot food and fling it at my mother....Fling it at my mother who was standing up against the back wall cowering like some trapped animal. And I sat there and watched her. And he did it more than one time. And I thought, ‘Oh...oh...oh...God, I gotta stop him. I gotta stop him. What can I do to save my mother?’ And there in those few minutes of horror...I realized that the only reason my mother was trapped in that horrendous situation...well, she had no place to go. She had three children and herself...to feed and to clothe, and to try and bring them through life. And I made up my mind. I was only eight years old, but I made up my mind at that moment that never, ever ever in my life would I be beholden...to a man...or a woman, but mostly to a man. NEVER would I be subjected and accept what he was doing to my mother.

Carroll’s description of this event captures her impulses towards economic autonomy—an impulse intimately linked to her perception of Jewish familial power dynamics. As she explained to friend and journalist Jane Wollman, "In a Jewish family, if you brought home the pay, you ruled supreme."

Carroll’s assertion linking Jewish family culture and financially-based power exemplifies ways that her family’s Eastern European Jewish background was at odds with American gender

102 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
103 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 1–12–1–13.
104 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
roles. Paula Hyman argues that Jews from Eastern Europe were accustomed to a different system of gender roles, “in which the ideal was a scholarly husband who absented himself from the marketplace, and a wife whose economic activity supported the family.”

Women were accepted as economic agents and major decision-makers. However, in the United States, gender norms mandated men as heads of the household, and women as subordinate, regardless of their role as financial providers. Riv-Ellen Prell’s history of Jewish immigrants and assimilation at the turn of the century demonstrates the norm of daughters as providers, quoting a Bureau of Labor study of wages from 1900 to 1910 that finds, “In Jewish families, working daughters produced almost 40% of the family’s total yearly earnings on average. Jewish daughters turned over sometimes as much as 100% of their wages, in contrast to Jewish sons, who gave only 70%.”

Yet in spite of their role “bringing home the pay,” Jewish daughters did not generally “rule supreme” in their households.

Nonetheless, Carroll’s narrative pivots on a conviction that she could protect her mother through financial independence:

I realized it was all economical. I was only eight years old. But at the finish of that episode, I was no longer eight…I was an old woman. Old in my thoughts…I knew I had to grow up quickly, quickly, quickly. Grow up. Get a job. Take care of your mother. Take her out of this.

And so Carroll pushed herself to graduate early, zooming through grades due to a policy called “Rapid Advancement.” She was ten and a half when she graduated from the eighth grade at P.S. 55—the same year that she launched the show business career that brought her economic

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106 Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, 37.
107 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 1–13.
A ‘Natural’ Entertainer

Carroll’s account of her first big break both emphasizes her refusal to be dominated and deflects agency through the theme of ‘natural genius’—one that returns throughout her autobiographical narrative. After being mocked by her oldest sister Mary for being too ‘yellow’ to audition for the school play, Carroll allegedly snapped, “Oh, don’t say that to me. I’m not yellow…I’ll take your dare.” As her story goes, she appeared at the audition, dowdy in her “standard dress for school” alongside “all these pretty little girls in their pretty little dresses.”\(^{109}\) But by the end of the audition, the dramatic coach Miss Dawson had proclaimed her “a genius.”\(^ {110} \) “That started it all,” Carroll declared, “The lead in the play…Scholarships. Hellen Muller School of Dancing. El Perkins School of National Speech…Dramatic training that would have cost a fortune, but [Dawson] gladly gave it.”\(^ {111} \) That same mixture of outspoken fearlessness and naïve talent characterized the story that Carroll told to explain her first foray into performance, in which she won a talent competition for amateur children:

For my big debut in show business, for the amateur contest, I did the Italian laborer who comes home and finds his little girl…dead…I put on mascara. And I’m doing this recitation…I’m down on my knees, and

\(^{109}\) Carroll, 1–11.
\(^{110}\) Carroll, 1–11.
\(^{111}\) Carroll, 1–11.
I’m holding the Rosa, my little girl, in my arms, and I’m saying (FAKE ACCENT) “Who killed my little Rosa? Who killed my little Rosa? …I started crying…and the black mascara and the tears are running into my eyes…I’m rubbing my face. And the guy in the front row stands up and he says, ‘I did! What are you going to do about it?’ So I rubbed off this smudgy black gook from my eyes and my face, and I go down to the footlights, and I look down, I said, “Ah! I know you! You used to take my sister to the movies, and she dumped you.” So, of course, the audience laughed. They thought it was part of a gag. …I go back. I get back down on my knees…finish the thing. And now, I have an encore…and someone in the galley howls, ‘No! Oh no, oh no! You stink!’ I said, ‘Nevertheless, I have an encore!’ So…of course, the audience is laughing. This is when the first sweet sound of laughter came into my ears. And I was only saying what I thought. I wasn’t saying it to be funny. I was saying it because it was so.112

Whether or not Carroll’s story is an accurate account or a fictionalized version is less significant than what is revealed by her storytelling choices, which suggest a desire to paint herself both as an empowered performer and also as a naïve vessel of genius. By choosing a tale of overcoming a heckler as her entrée to show business, Carroll painted herself as an underdog whose fierce determination and pluck won over her audience. However, by explaining that her jokes were both improvised and unintentional, said not “to be funny” but “because it was so,” she emphasized the uncalculated and essential nature of her humor.

The emphasis on spontaneity and natural genius that characterized Carroll’s ‘origin story’ would be consistent throughout her career. Describing her early comedy performances, Carroll states, “I’d tell the band, ‘Wait! Wait! I’ve got something to tell the people. And I’d walk down to the footlights’ and begin “saying what I was thinking.”113 Again, she discusses her comedy as a kind of unfiltered honesty, or, “saying what I was thinking”, rather than discussing it in terms

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of technique or craft. Moreover, this element of spontaneity would become a defining and robustly analyzed characteristic of stand-up comedy and solo performance. John Limon writes of the stand-up condition as “a non-condition between nature and artifice. They are neither acting nor conversing, neither in nor out of costume”114 And Susanne Colleary’s work The Comic ‘I’, asserts the centrality of authenticity as she writes, “Stand-up comedy is fundamentally rooted in the projection of an ‘authentic self’ as integral to the form…telling ‘genuine’ versions of the self is a vital and central component of stand-up.”115 However, while Colleary identifies the turn towards authenticity as originating “with the rise of the sick comics [Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, etc.],” Carroll’s narrative of naïve genius suggests a revision of this this lineage, putting her ‘naïve genius’ as the authentic antecedent to the sick comics.

As Carroll concluded the anecdote of her first foray into the world of amateur talent contests, the portrait of a naïve genius child gave way to emphasize a fierce and empowered advocate.

They line you up, and they say ‘And the winner is’ and they hold a hand up over you. Whoever gets the most applause wins. Well, it came to me, and I got the most applause. So, the announcer said, ‘Sadie Zigman [sic] is the winner!’ Okay. Come off stage, and my eyes are burning like crazy…And I went over to the announcer…he was the one in charge of this. And I said, ‘Where’s my money?’ He said, ‘What are you talking about?’ I said, ‘I want my money. I won. You said so.’ He said, ‘Oh, you’re not from the office?’ I said, ‘No. I’m not from an office, I’m from P.S. 55. And I want my money.’ He said ‘You don’t understand.’

…Then I found out that really out of maybe eight contestants…only myself and one other person were really amateurs who had submitted their names. The rest was…it was a business!

…I said…‘If you don’t give me my five dollars, I’m going out on that stage and tell the audience that this is a fake!’ He said, ‘You wouldn’t.’ …And he didn’t give me my five. The movie was on.116 I didn’t care. I

114 Limon, Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America, 2000, 110.
116 At that point, it was common for Vaudeville shows to be paired with movies
walked right out on the stage right in front of the movie screen. I said, ‘Ladies—-aaaaah!’ I got the hook. \(^{117}\) He said, ‘You...you were telling them!’ I said, ‘I told you I would tell them. I don’t say anything I don’t mean.’ He gives me five bucks. I said, ‘I’m still going to tell them.’ He said, ‘What can I do to make you promise not to tell anybody? I said, ‘...I drive a hard bargain...’ He said, ‘Well, if I let you do every night, will you promise not to tell?’ I said, ‘How much can I get?’ He said, ‘Well, it’s five, three and two. And there’s a two-dollar guarantee. I said ‘I’ll take it.’ \(^{118}\)

Again, the perhaps apocryphal tale may reveal more about Carroll’s career motivations than the actual events that transpired. On one level, the tale was an amusing anecdote in which a young girl stood up to an adult man and won her deserved prize. And yet a deeper consideration of her family situation reveals that Carroll’s precocious hard-nosed business sensibility was part of her ongoing attempt to wrest familial control from her abusive father and protect her mother.

The financial autonomy that Carroll gained through the amateur-show racket came with an increased level of assimilation. As she relayed the story of how she got her stage-name, it was clear that the spectre of anti-Jewish sentiment was never entirely absent from her career. She describes one of her childhood talent competitions thus:

The announcer says, “What is your name, little girl? I said, ‘Sadie Zeigman.’ He said ‘Oh no...all the German buns are right here, 86 street. Yorkville...they'll kill you.’ He said, ‘You’re Jean Carroll.’ I said, ‘I am?’ ‘Yeah, you’re Jean Carroll.’ ‘Okay.’ \(^{119}\)

This tale stands in contrast to the earlier announcer story; while the former showed Carroll stubbornly rejecting the announcer’s refusal to pay her, the latter showed her amenably acceding to his refusal to introduce her by her real name. The difference being, one could perhaps conclude, that in the latter story, she felt that that announcer was acting in her interest. While

\(^{117}\) Some Vaudeville announcers kept a hook backstage to pull off bad performers

\(^{118}\) Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 1–17–1–19.

\(^{119}\) Carroll, 1–19–1–20.
there was nothing to be gained from going home empty-handed, there were social and material advantages to ‘passing’ as non-Jewish.

And still, Carroll’s career narrative placed her family—particularly her mother—at the center. In her early days doing amateur shows, she recalled, “night after night, I’d come home and my mother…she’d wait up for me.” And when, in a rare published interview, Carroll described the day a talent scout came to her home in the Bronx to add her to his roster, the majority of the anecdote centered around her mother:

He spoke to my mother and said he had seen me in the amateur shows, thought I was very talented, and would she be interested in having them, more or less, take me under their wing? I was still going to school. He said they would treat me as their own daughter, they would see that I didn't make any wrong associations, and they would train me… Oddly enough, my Mom agreed to let me go…which floored me because there was nothing more important to my mother than my education.

Similarly, when she discussed the significance of the job placement offered by her school, Walton High, it too was in the context of its impact on her mother:

If you were indigent…the school would get you a job. They got me a job, starting at one o’clock in the afternoon. My classes ended at twelve. And this was a job in a real estate office on East Tremont Avenue. But I got…I got ten…TEN dollars a week! Ten dollars! Do you realize what ten dollars a week was? Your rent was only about eight dollars a month…I was finally…reaching a point where I could get my mother out of her entrapped situation with my father

Based on an interview with Carroll’s daughter Helen Tunick, it appeared that Carroll was able to fully “get her mother out of her entrapped situation” when she was about eleven or twelve years old. According to Tunick’s (admittedly spotty and secondhand) summary of events,

There was a lot that went on in that house that was really bad. And of the

five of them, she and her two sisters and her two brothers, she was the strong one, though she was in the middle. And basically she threw him out when she was twelve. I don’t really know how she did that or why he would leave. But she insisted.123

In Carroll’s account, her ousting followed a period in which he would “come in and out of [family] life as he pleased.”

Once he came and he said [to my mother] “You’re looking too good—and you’re having too good a time. I think I’ll move back in.”

What the dialogue offers is less an explanation of how a twelve-year-old banished her father, and more a vivid repeated sense of her precocious commitment to independence for herself and her family. As Carroll reflects, ”I went from age 11 to age 40…I really never was a child.”125

And so the extant accounts of Jean Carrol’s first steps towards show business suggest that they were rooted not in starry-eyed dreams of glory, nor even a particular interest in comedy. Rather, they came from a steely determination to supplant her father as the breadwinner of the household, protecting herself, her siblings, and her mother. This narrative, it should be noted, was relatively commonplace in the 1920s. Allison Kibler’s historical work on Vaudeville demonstrates that, “depictions of actresses as reluctant stars, turning to the stage out of family loyalty, not personal ambition, had long been popular,” citing biographies of Fanny Kemble and other celebrities of that period.126 The fact that this breadwinning was accomplished through comedy (as opposed to a different one of the few careers open to women at that time) in Carroll’s

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124 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts.
125 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
telling, is the result of her kind of naïve genius—an utterly natural and unhidden sense of humor.

Heading to Variety Theatre

The same year that Carroll was banishing her father from home, she was beginning her career in variety theatre. Vaudeville and variety theatre, a nation-wide network of theaters that presented family-friendly shows, was the primary form of entertainment in the United States between the mid-1890s until the early 1930s. Theatre historian Allison Kibler also finds that variety theatre gave women more authority than the ‘legitimate stage’ in the form of “creative freedom and financial control.”

Carroll’s variety career was first recorded in Variety magazine in 1922, when she appeared in a touring musical revue called “Midnight Rounders” opening at the Shubert-Crescent in Brooklyn. One review described the show as “chockful of meaty entertainment, comedy, clever people, pretty girls and snappy action.” The act had previously toured starring Eddie Cantor, and was “somewhat condensed for vaudeville usage.” It seems that Carroll joined after Cantor’s departure, as the show was being reworked for its tour on the Shubert circuit. Her initial noted appearances in the act included a “brief dancing interlude” and a “fast little stepping bit.” A review of the Midnight Rounders appearance at the Palace noted that Carroll was garbed in “black net skirts and silver bodice.” A week into the act, Variety notes that the “petite ingénue”

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128 Kibler, Rank Ladies, 85.
132 Bell, “New Shows This Week: SHUBERTS’ NEW STYLE OF COMBINATION SHOW.”
133 Ibee, “New Shows This Week: WINTER GARDEN.”
Jean Carroll was given “many of the songs originally allotted Tot Qualters,” such as “A Mouthful of Kisses.” By February, reviews noted, “Jean Carroll, a pretty blonde dancing soubrette, was out front in several numbers, leading ‘A Rattling Good Time,’ ‘Back to the Farm,’ and ‘A Bushel of Kisses,’ all backed by the chorus.”

Carroll was not included in the comedy sketches of the show, of which there were several. An issue of Pittsburgh’s Jewish Criterion reviewing the Midnight Rounders featured a large picture of Jack Strouse, one of the ensemble members, with a caption boasting, “Jack Strouse, a clever Jewish comedian.” Whatever tribal pride could be suggested by Strouse’s prominent featuring clearly did not extend to Carroll, whose name was crunched in at the end with the other ensemble members. The act was not totally devoid of female comedians (or, comedienues, as they are quaintly termed). One article notes a “peppy” comedian named Lulu McConnell, who “tore off the first real score” of the night. Another author commends “Jane Green…a wise-cracking chorus dame” Yet the majority of the reviews described a trend of male performers doing comedy sketches and monologues, and female performers doing musical and dance numbers.

The politics of the act, and the impression they might have made on the young Carroll,

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are worth considering. In her first major exposure to show business, Carroll was cast as a dancer and singer, while the lion’s share of the ‘talking acts’ and monologues—at least one of which uses Yiddish mannerisms for comic effect\textsuperscript{140}—were given to male performers. The underlying message of this casting may have been, ‘The men will speak and be funny—the women will sing and dance and be spectacular.’ This assignation was particularly clear in the \textit{Jewish Criterion}, which contrasted “clever” male comics like Strouse with the female “collection of beautiful and blushing buds selected personally by Messrs. Shubert from the New York Winter Garden.”\textsuperscript{141} And yet Carroll’s time as a hand-selected ‘beautiful and blushing bud’ in the revue also served as her education in the basic mechanics of comedy, for the elements of comic performance that critics highlighted—such as “impromptu manner and ad-libbing”\textsuperscript{142} the “comedy along Yiddish lines,”\textsuperscript{143} and the comic monologue—appeared in Carroll’s later work.

Within a year, Carroll’s work in show-business made her a breadwinner for her mother and four siblings. In addition to taking a leadership role in the family finances through singing and dancing, she continued her studies so that she could graduate and work full-time. In 1925, the fourteen-year-old high school graduate was eager to begin touring.\textsuperscript{144} However, according to

\textsuperscript{140} Ibee, “New Shows This Week: WINTER GARDEN.”
\textsuperscript{141} “Plays and Photoplays.”
\textsuperscript{142} Bell, “New Shows This Week: SHUBERTS’ NEW STYLE OF COMBINATION SHOW.”
\textsuperscript{143} Ibee, “New Shows This Week: WINTER GARDEN.”
\textsuperscript{144} Wollman, “Funny Business.”
Carroll, she felt tremendous pressure to marry. In her words, “In those days, the Jewish girl... you had to be married when you were 14 or 15 or 16 at the most... I was not interested in anything like that.” However, this statement exemplifies her tendency to exaggerate the truth for the sake of the narrative. It is unlikely that marriage was expected to take place by age “16 at the most.” In both 1920 and 1930, census data shows that the median age at first marriage among Black women was 19.5, and ‘Native White’ women was 21.5. Even judging by memoirs of other Jewish immigrant girls at the turn of the century, ages fourteen to sixteen were still considered young for marriage. For instance, Sadie Frowne, an immigrant girl from Poland told her story in 1902, disclosing that when she was sixteen, her sweetheart had proposed to her, but she had turned him down, writing, “I am not seventeen yet, and I think that is too young.” It seems that in order to emphasize her exceptionalism, Carroll exaggerated the extent to which her fourteen-year-old self deviated from tradition.

Rather than seek her mate, Carroll spent her teenage years on the road, learning to become not only a performer, but also a fierce advocate and leader. Bill Smith’s oral history The Vaudevilleans includes a passage in which Jean Carroll characteristically paints herself as a plucky, precocious leader:

I’m now about fourteen and we now have a four-person act. Pearl Saxon, two fellows whose names I won't mention, and me. I was appointed the manager because I could talk longer. We came to the theater every morning and rehearsed because we were going to do a good act. And since they appointed me manager, I decided I would really manage. During a show I saw one of the fellows flirting with some girl and carrying on a

145 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 1–7.
147 Wenger, The Jewish Americans, 147.
little conversation. I was angry. You can't carry on a conversation doing unison dancing. So when we came offstage I told that guy, "I don't want that to ever happen again." It wasn't fair to the three of us. I guess he became angry. I don't remember now. Anyway, come pay night and instead of going with us he said, "You girls go ahead to the next stop"—it was some small town in Pennsylvania, I don't remember the name—"We'll be there tomorrow morning." His excuse was they had something to do. So Pearl Saxon and I went ahead. We checked into a small hotel we had been told about and went to the theater and waited for them to show up. They had the music and the wardrobe…When they didn’t show, I did what any normal American girl would do. I bawled…The manager asked, “How good are you?” I forgot my tears and said, “We’re really two great hoofer. We dance as well as any two men.” He said, “I’ll tell you what we’ll do. Can you manage without music? I said, “Sure, if you have a good piano player.” …We opened as a duo, she and I. I did my “five-foot-two with eyes of blue” with just the piano, and we managed to do six numbers. We really did a fine act. We never saw the fellows again. I don’t know what happened to them. I think they put on our dresses and went away.148

Carroll’s story clearly positions herself as a leader. For example, she began the story by explaining her designation as manager. In her account, it was because she took this leadership seriously that she took on the uncomfortable task of chastising one of the male performers for flirting instead of working. Another instance of Carroll’s leadership occurred when, after being abandoned by the resentful male performers, she figured out a way to stop crying and salvage the act. In her telling, she is careful to explain the response of a “normal American girl”: weeping. Yet it was only for a moment that she followed this norm, for as soon as the venue manager questioned her ability as a performer, she snapped back into her managerial role, “forgot her tears,” and asserted herself and her dance partner as the equal of “any two men.” As the result of her impassioned advocacy, she and her partner were able to keep their spot and execute a “really fine act,” proving that they had no need for the men. As a parting shot, Carroll concluded her

narrative by disparagingly suggesting that their male partners were not only superfluous, but also effeminate. While they “put on our dresses and went away,” the women of the act stayed and put in their work.

Carroll continued to perform as a musical-theatre dancer through the late 1920s. In November of 1926, she was listed in the ensemble of a Broadway production of “Oh, Kay!” at the Imperial Theatre. The next year, her name appeared in a review of a Vaudeville show at the Riverside Theatre, performing with Carl Shaw in a “corking dance revue that had both talent and class aplenty.” She continued dancing with Carl Shaw through September of the next year. At the State/Lake theatre in Chicago, the review of their act emphasizes Shaw’s prominence, stating that while Carroll is “there with the graceful movements,” “Carl Shaw’s tanglefoot hoofing is the outstanding thing in the turn.” Perhaps inspired by Shaw’s ‘tanglefoot hoofing,’ throughout the next year, Carroll took jobs as a featured tap dancer in her own right. By September of 1929, a blurb in Variety announced “Carl Shaw and Jean Carroll have split. Shaw will head a new flash, “Not a Chance.” Although it is unclear why the partnership dissolved, it allowed Jean Carroll to begin her slow and somewhat unintentional journey from dancing to comedy.

The Comedy Double Act

According to her interview with Wollman, Jean Carroll’s entrée to comedy began in earnest with her partnership with comedian Marty May, who “saw her horsing around backstage” while she was working in the “short lived comedy act of Saranoff & Carroll,”155 and chose her to be “as Carroll put it, ‘his little stooge.’”156 Even by 1937, “man and woman acts” of this kind were already a long-running form, indicated by Joe Laurie Jr.’s article in Variety Magazine highlighting its history. Laurie characterizes the “early days of variety,” by describing man and woman acts that “consisted of the man doing the comedy and the woman contributing good looks” and “added class to the act.” These roles seem to have held for May and Carroll, in which she initially played the role of the ‘feed’ or straight man. However, Laurie Jr. notes a trend in which, starting in the 1890s, “funny women were in great demand.”157 In the years that Carroll and May worked together from 1930 to 1934, a similar trend played out, and Carroll’s role in the man-woman acts shifted to be more comedic.

Carroll gave two contradictory accounts of how she began her partnership with Marty May. In her published interview in Bill Smith’s oral history The Vaudevileans, she portrays herself in a more irreverent way:

I was on a bill working with a man, Saranoff, and in those days some theaters used to have what they called Green Rooms. This theater we were in had one, a sort of lounge where the performers could sit, read, and play—they had a piano. I had a ukelele. I used to love to strum that uke and sing. Make up songs. So we are sitting there one day, all of us, kibitzing, and I’m playing the

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156 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
uke, and this chap, Marty May, he was the star on the bill, says, "You know something, you're really a talented girl and you're really funny." I used to do imitations of the Kentucky Colonel. I'd stick a pillow on my belly underneath and do the fat colonel and stuff like that. So May says to me, "How would you like to work with me?" I say, "Aw, come on." He's a star, and how would I like to work with a headliner? I say, "You're joking." He says, "I'm not joking at all, I mean it. You're one of the cleverest girls I have ever seen and you're funny. I could use someone like you." I went to Saranoff and I said I had an offer to do a double act with Marty May. He told me May couldn't mean it. I said I wanted to take it and Saranoff became angry because he also wanted me. He said, "Why don't you stay in my act and we'll also do some talking?" but I said no. That is how I really started doing comedy. It was with Marty May. 158

In this rendition, Carroll again used the theme of 'natural genius'—an unintentional but eminently observable comic talent that came out as she was naively 'kibbitzing' [socializing]. She also emphasized her audacity in the face of her male partners. Not only did she greet May’s proposition with an irreverent, “You’re joking”, she also refused Saranoff’s offer to modify their act to keep her on board. This lack of deference is particularly notable when considering that Marty May was both a senior headliner and a World War I veteran 159

Later in life, Carroll gave a gentler account of her transition:

[Marty May] said, ‘How would you like to work with me?’ I said, ‘Doing what?’ He said, ‘Just...Talk. I will say something to you, and you will answer me.’ …I said, “Well, I don’t know. I have to see how my boss feels about my leaving his act. Maybe it’ll be a hardship on him. So we spoke to Saranoff. And he said, “No, that’s a wonderful opportunity, and you are funny. And you should do something about it.” 160

In this version, Carroll changed Saranoff’s response from anger and bargaining to

158 Smith, The Vaudevillians, 255–56.
159 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 2–2.
160 Carroll, 1–24.
encouragement, which has the effect of deflecting agency and making her seem less irreverent and more considerate (or even uncertain). It may be that the context in which she gave the second interview—a retrospective honoring her career—afforded her the luxury of downplaying her fierce determination and allowing her success to seem more like a glowing inevitability than a hard-won act of will.

By 1930, May was bringing Carroll to Chicago to give a “guest appearance…warbling and hoofing” in his act. The act in its embryonic form was blend of jokes, fiddling and dance that often evoked comparison to Jack Benny. As one review put it, “Marty May…not only looks, acts, and plays a fiddle like Jack Benny—he uses a few of Benny’s gags. He’s a good performer, and should get a few gags he could call his own.” Critics also noted that Jean Carroll “comes on for a number and a little gab.” Reflecting on her routine with May, Carroll provided some insight as to the kind of material that constituted this “little gab.” Her remembered version of the act positions her as a driving force—speaking the majority of the dialogue and delivering all the punch lines:

I’d say, ‘I haven’t seen that suit…I bet whenever you’re down in the dumps you get a suit.’
He said, ‘Yeah.’
I said, ‘I wondered where you picked that one up!’
…Then he said something about ‘Well, with my broad shoulders…’
I said, ‘Broad shoulders? You forgot to take the hanger out’
….And he said something about, ‘I don’t understand your attitude. You’re very unfriendly.’
I said, ‘I’m not unfriendly. I just…you haven’t paid me in three weeks.’
He said, ‘I paid you last week.’
I said, ‘In bottle caps? You call that getting paid?’

164 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 2–1.
This dialogue clearly positions Marty May as the ‘straight-man’ to Jean Carroll’s comic. In a separate interview, Carroll again paints a picture of herself as the comic of the act, reflecting on how she “made audiences roar” in her days with Marty May. However, Carroll’s accounts are generally at odds with that of Variety reporters, who either didn’t hear or didn’t choose to write about her supposed punchlines. Instead, they praised Jean Carroll as “a looker and a smart tap dancer,” effusing, “her dancing is plenty hot, and guarantees a good finish.” These early reviews established a trend in which reporters from all three spheres of journalism (Jewish press, mainstream press, and trade press) repeatedly privileged Carroll’s appearance and dancing ability over her comic dialogue.

This trend continued even as their act became more egalitarian in its title and pay-scale. November 24 of 1931 marks the first issue in which Variety advertised an act with both May’s and Carroll’s names on the bill: “Meet Marty May, Friend of Thousands, Annoyed by Jean Carroll.” Carroll’s explanation revealed that even this comically disparaging billing constituted a hard-won victory:

It used to be Marty May & Company. And at one point the devil entered the scene with the two horns and he said to me, “Do you realize that you are the major player in this little act?” I said, ‘No, I didn’t realize that.’ I said it was his act. He…he asked me if I’d work for him, in it. He said, “Well, you’re the act, kiddo.” …So I went along with that and then I said to Marty one day, “Why does it have to be & Company? Why can’t it be my name?” He said, ‘Because it’s Marty May. It’s my act.’ …And I began to think about it and I realized that his salary had skyrocketed after I became a part of the act. So, we were booked at the …I don’t know if it was the Roxy in New York or one of those big theaters…I said to him, “It has to be a totally different arrangement.” I said, “…Here’s my proposal.

165 Wollman, "Funny Business."
It’s going to be ‘Marty May & Jean Carroll, and I get half the salary, half…what the act is getting. He said, “Oh, you cra…[sic]” I said, “That’s my proposal….you have a choice. You worked by yourself before. You did very well. You can go back to doing that.’ But I said, ‘I feel that I’m grateful that you did ask me to work with you, but I still have to think of myself and my contribution to the act and to the success and to the increase in salary.’ And he said I was taking advantage. I said, ‘I’m making a proposal. You can turn it down. I’m not taking advantage of you. You still can go back and do your Marty May act, which was very entertaining.’ So he accused me of all kinds of things, and I said, ‘Well, in that case it’s just Marty May from now on because no longer will it be ‘& Company, and a salary of I don’t know what I got—$70 a week or something like that, while he was raking it in!’ And that was it.\(^{168}\)

As with Saranoff, Carroll had to face up to a man whose interests opposed her own, and advocate for herself in the face of his hostility. And though she comically deflected agency by casting her impetus to renegotiate her salary and billing as the work of “the devil…with the two horns,” what she was actually describing was a feminist action: the pursuit of equal pay and recognition for equal work.

What continued to be unequal—and drastically so—was the allotment of punchlines. Although Carroll stated that “nothing was written…nothing was ever prepared,” nonetheless “we had a nucleus. You don’t dare go out without a framework.”\(^{169}\) In a separate interview, she went into more detail on what constituted that framework, describing, “Marty used to talk to me on the stage and I would answer whatever came into my head, and this developed into a little style of naïveté….I became a little bit of a patsy.”\(^{170}\) And so while the comic dialogue was relatively improvisational, the one consistency, it seems, is that Carroll occupied the role of ‘patsy’ or ‘stooge.’ And while this role does demand a certain amount of skill, it did not stop *Variety*
reviewers from continuing to be dismissive of Carroll’s skills as a comedian.

One critic described the piece as a ten minute “patter act with the girl doing the dumb cluck and May wiseguying.” It is possible to glean a bit more information about the piece and its reception based on various Variety revues. One notes that “on his entrance, May unloads a flock of instruments, but makes little use of them outside of the violin for several clowning bits.” Also towards the beginning of the act, Carroll speaks for some length of time—a segment that critics often disparaged as “long winded auto-flirtation monolog” a “long-winded tale” or “dumb patter.” During this portion of the act, on reviewer describes how “[V. May’s] comments on Miss Carroll’s naïve patter had the house doubled up.” It appears that the main joke of the act was Carroll trying to speak (or, as the reviews put it, “chatter”) while May undermined her with humorously derisive comments. Some of the banter between Carroll and May leaned towards the risqué, as several reviews referred to “blue” material such as the “nudist tweezer gag” and the “baby on the arm gag.” Another element of the act revisited familiar territory with a “brisk hoofing windup by Carroll” and May’s “hoke fiddle playing.”

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175 Odec, “Vaude House Reviews: STATE, N. Y.”
177 “Variety House Review: PALACE, N. Y.”
180 “Variety House Review: PALACE, N. Y.”
While reception to the Carroll & May partnership was generally positive, critics seem to discourage Carroll from stepping further into comedy. For one thing, there is a sharp disparity between the frequent praise given to Marty May for his comic skill and the rarity of praise for Carroll’s. Out of the seventeen reviews of their act printed in Variety, six of them praised May’s “nonchalant” comic delivery, exclaiming over how his “relaxed technique weakens venerated ideas concerning punchiness” and how “he pushes things over without appearing to try, but getting full results.” In contrast, Carroll’s comic skills received praise in only two of the seventeen Variety reviews, one commending her “chatterbox style” as “chiseled and to the point.” The other may not even count as praise for her comic skill, since the wording—“The Carroll line and personality seemed to have special appeal for the Fox clientele” suggests that it was not craft, but “special appeal” that prompted such a strong response. It may be that “the Fox clientele” is a coded name for Jewish audiences, since the Fox theatre was located in Brooklyn—an area heavily populated with Jews in 1933. More frequently, critical response to Carroll’s work as a comedian was distinctly lukewarm. One reviewer’s tepid response says that she “makes a good foil, though too self-conscious of her jokes.” Likewise, another declares, “Miss Carroll’s chatter is not sufficiently surefire, nor loud enough to be socko.” Still another accuses her “chatter” of causing the act to “drag badly.”

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182 Land.
183 Chic, “Reviews: MET, BROOKLYN.”
185 Odec, “Pictures: Film House Reviews - FOX. BROOKLYN.”
186 Chic, “Reviews: MET, BROOKLYN.”
Reviewers were considerably more enthusiastic when writing about Jean Carroll’s dancing ability and physique. This preference for dance over speech is particularly evident as a critic writes, “Her personality is pliable, but her feet have a firm touch when tapping out a routine upon the cleats.” Her appearance as a “nifty looker” would occasionally take bizarre prominence in the review, as was the case when a critic—referring to Carroll only as “May’s vis-à-vis”—complains that she “evidently has gone in for extra modesty…it was the payees’ loss. Perhaps the chilliness of the weather had something to do with it.” Based on the reviews in Variety, it seems that Carroll’s role in her partnership with Marty May was to be attractive but silent, expressing herself through dance but speaking only as a vehicle to make May look as funny as possible as he interrupted her. After four years of this role, Carroll left the act. A three-line article entitled ‘Jean Carroll on Own’ published in Variety reads “Jean Carroll leaves Marty May after the current week at the Palace. She has been foiling for the light comedian for the last four years. Miss Carroll will essay a comedy set of her own.” Her choice to “essay a comedy set” is remarkable, given the press’s subtle discouragement of her efforts as a comedian.
A New Double Act: Carroll & Howe

Another factor contributing to Carroll leaving her act with Marty May was her romantic relationship with Buddy Howe (born Buddy Zolitan), a dancer whom she met on the Vaudeville circuit. Their meeting resulted in courtship, marriage, and a stage act that lasted for about eight years—approximately 1935-1943, in which they toured presentation houses, British music halls and the United Service Organizations (U.S.O). And although in marrying a ‘nice Jewish boy,’ Carroll was in one way conforming to the prescribed path for a Jewish woman, the way that she narrates the romance suggests that her relationship with Howe was very consistent with her core determination not to become subordinate to a man.

Carroll’s account of her relationship with Howe suggests that her feelings towards him were always in conversation with her commitment to autonomy. For instance, her initial aversion to him was a direct result of his dominating posture. The first time they met, Howe was smitten.

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194 Trav.
He was performing in a dance act with ‘Fat Jack’ Leonard (later known as stand-up comedian Jack E. Leonard) and Elise McLaughlin at the Oriental Theater in Chicago, where he shared a bill with May & Carroll. As Carroll recounts, “He [Howe] made a comment to Jack that he thought I was the funniest and the cleverest and the bah bah bah.”\textsuperscript{195} The feeling, however, was not mutual, based primarily on a backstage exchange that Carroll witnessed in rehearsal in which she perceived Howe as domineering. In her words, “I didn’t like him because at rehearsal time, in a very loud voice so that everybody could hear it, he said, “Jack, wash my stairs!” He used to do a little stair dance, a tap dance. He was asserting his supremacy and I didn’t like that…”\textsuperscript{196} Conversely, she speaks of her affection for him as a result of his losing that domineering quality. Telling of the moment when her negative opinion of Howe shifted, Carroll described how “Jack came to visit me… and he brought Buddy with him. And this Buddy was nice. He was pleasant, he was gentle and he wasn’t trying to show his insecurity by being Mr. Big.”\textsuperscript{197} Her word choice of “pleasant” and “gentle”—adjectives commonly associated with femininity—and her dismissal of “being Mr. Big” make it clear that it was only by shedding the traits stereotypically associated with toxic masculinity that Howe was able to shed Carroll’s animosity. Even Carroll’s anecdote about professing her romantic interest in Howe reveals ambivalence between affection for him and aversion for his gender:

[He [Buddy] got up and came towards me. I could tell that he was going to come over to try to kiss me or something… I put my hand up and I said, ‘Listen, I don’t like men. I have no respect for most men. I don’t like them. I didn’t like you when I met you, but I like you now. I like you a lot.”\textsuperscript{198}

\textsuperscript{195} Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 2–7.
\textsuperscript{196} Carroll, 2–8.
\textsuperscript{197} Carroll, 2–8.
\textsuperscript{198} Carroll, 2–9.
Carroll did not specify what she meant by “I have no respect for most men. I don’t like them,” but her relationship narrative suggests that the qualities that she initially found repulsive in Howe—his “supremacy” and affectations of being “Mr. Big”—are the qualities that cause men on a wider scale to lose her respect. Therefore, in choosing to be with Howe only after he gave up these qualities, Carroll shows an ongoing determination to maintain her own autonomy.

Another way in which Carroll’s union with Howe demonstrated her commitment to autonomy is the way in which she leveraged it to gain the creative control that she had been denied by Marty May. Shortly after forming a relationship with Howe, Carroll decided to leave “May and Carroll” in favor of a new team, “Carroll and Howe.” In her telling, their love and desire to spend time together was the key reason for the shift. This foregrounding of romance is evident as Carroll states, “We were in love and we wanted to be together. So I sat down and wrote an act, and that’s how the act of Carroll and Howe began.”

Howe’s account of the event is similar, but with slightly more emphasis on the professional considerations of their partnership:

She was then very successful working with Marty May in a very fine comedy act. We started to see each other, go out together, fell in love, and decided maybe we could work together. That was about 1933-1934. So Jean wrote us an act and taught me to read lines. I had never done any lines before. Jean was very experienced. She was also a good writer who knew the business…I was essentially a hoofer.

What Howe’s perspective adds is the key sense that by trading in Marty May for Buddy Howe, Carroll was doing more than trading a colleague for a lover. She was also trading becoming the less experienced partner for becoming the more experienced partner. Howe’s recognition that

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199 Smith, The Vaudevillians, 257.
200 Smith, 18.
“Jean was very experienced” and “knew the business,” coupled with his self-proclaimed lack of acting experience suggests a kind of professional deference on his part. Furthermore, he took on the very role to which she had been relegated in her act with May—a “hoofer”—allowing her to become the writer. Even the billing ‘Carroll & Howe,’ in which her name is listed first, points to the new dynamic. Typically, male-female comedy duos gave the man the first billing, as was the case in “Shaw & Carroll” and “Marty May Annoyed by Jean Carroll.” More importantly, while she had been the foil to May, in her partnership with Howe she reflected, “he was my straight man; I was his funny lady.”

Based on Howe and Carroll’s accounts, the duo act received positive reception and increasing success. Howe recalls:

We broke in the act on the state fairs...If the state fair wasn’t too big, we did the talking act. In others, we just danced. Jean could dance, sing, and do a little of everything. But she was essentially a comedienne.

Howe affirms the key shift taking place in Jean Carroll’s career: while she could “dance and sing”...she was “essentially a comedienne.” This shift in viewpoint was a significant turning point for Carroll’s career, and it constituted a fairly radical move, given the critics’ attempts to recognize her as a dancer more so than a comic.

Carroll & Howe continued touring, between 1934 and 1936, ultimately playing the Palace Theatre. Howe reflects that as soon as they “brought the act into New York” they were “immediately bought by all the circuits. We played the Palace a couple of times and every major theater from coast to coast.” Carroll adds, “Milt Berger—he was then with Jack Davies—got

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201 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
203 Smith, *The Vaudevillians*.
204 Smith.
us booked into Loew’s State when Sid Piermont was the booker. Then came the RKO theaters, the Pantages, there was so much work. Then finally, the Palace.” 205 And by 1936, the team of Carroll and Howe took a big step both personally and professionally: they married and embarked on a performance tour of England. Their marriage was recorded as taking place in Brooklyn, New York on June 16, 1936.

The story—or, rather, stories—of Jean Carroll’s wedding to Buddy Howe reveals the ways that family mythology embroders and distorts events over time. When telling the story of her wedding for I Made It Standing Up, she recalled:

My husband lived in Flatbush, Brooklyn. And the wedding took place in his mother’s living room. And my sister, my older sister Mary, her little boy then was four years old, Danny…he’s now my godson. And the rabbi had another gig. After he married us, he was going to audition for a job in one of the…shuls there, one of the synagogues…So he’s there, and he starts the…the davening type of thing. And my nephew whines, “I want to go home!” …So the rabbi says, “We’ll start over again.” Now da da da ,”I want to go home!” The third time the rabbi says, “That damn kid is ruining the whole ceremony!” So we ended up doubled up in laughter. That was my wedding…it was so romantic, you have no idea. And how did we spend our wedding night? There was a prize fight on television and we sat in the living room and watched it. 206

205 Smith.
206 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 2–21.
This version does seem corroborated by the record book, which lists the marriage as taking place on June 16, 1936 in Brooklyn, New York.

However, in the version which came to me through a conversation with Carroll’s grand-daughter Susan Chatzky, Carroll was basically tricked into marrying her husband. Chatzky describes the story of their wedding as a surprise affair aboard a ship bound for international waters.

This story I know from her:..He booked them voyage to England on some ship. And when she got on the boat, she said, ‘Okay, where’s my cabin?’ And he said, ‘We’re in the same cabin.’ And she said, ‘We can’t be in the same cabin Buddy, that’s ridiculous! Where’s my cabin?’ And he opened the door to the cabin that they were going to share, and her whole family was there with a rabbi. And that’s how they got married.\(^\text{207}\)

Chatzky clarifies that by the time she heard this story, it was one of her grandmother’s funnier tales. Yet it was not lost on her granddaughter that Howe put Carroll in a situation in which “she

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\(^{207}\) Susan Chatzky, Grace Overbeke Interview with Susan Chatzky, interview by Grace Overbeke, Personal Interview, October 7, 2016.
had no choice” but to marry him. According to Chatzky,

She was not going to marry him. She was being a pain in the ass about getting married, and that’s how he solved that problem…after thirty years of marriage, she thought it was funny, but having known her, I’m guessing she did not think it was funny at the time.208

The two accounts are as notable for their consistencies as their divergences. While her granddaughter’s story presented the wedding as a kind of nuptial-nautical ambush, Carroll’s leaves out this element of surprise. But both renditions specify that the wedding was officiated by a rabbi, and attended by Carroll’s family. This consistency suggests Carroll viewed these two elements—religious tradition and family—as key to the narrative, regardless of the particular location of the ceremony. And even though it may push the limits of credulity that there would be an ordained rabbi and Carroll’s family hiding aboard a ship about to set sail for the United Kingdom, her choice to tell the story to her granddaughter in this way suggests a desire to emphasize Jewishness and family.

Carroll’s account of the next three years of her life—traveling through England with Howe as a newly-wed couple and increasingly popular comedy team—continued to foreground her personal and professional self-determination. Regarding her personal life, she shared a backstage tale from her first year in England which highlighted her refusal to be marginalized—or even defended—by a man.

We were in England, at the Palladium theater…
And I’m up on the stage and the pit band is down there…
and as I’m leaning over to talk to the conductor, one of the British acts comes along and gooses me!
I turn around, I said, “Did you just accidentally bump into me?”
He said “No.”
“You mean you did that on purpose?”
“He said, “Of course. We know how you American girls are.”

208 Chatzky.
I said, “Listen, you!”
Now, we had been prompted, you know, prepped to go to England. Ambassadors of good will. And they resented American acts coming over there and performing, they’re taking acts, work away from their British performers.
I said, “I want to tell you something. If you ever, ever come close to me or put your hand on any part of my body, I will knock your teeth down your throat. Do you follow me?”
He laughed…this idiot walked over to my husband, whose back was turned, hadn’t seen any of this, and he says, “Your wife has no sense of humor…all I did was grope her, and you know what she did? She said if I ever touched her again she would knock my teeth down my throat.”
And my hero who had just married me squared his shoulders, stood up and looked this guy in the eyes and he said, “And if my wife says she’ll do it, she’ll do it.” Oh, my hero! My Sir Lancelot! 209

In this anecdote, Carroll positioned herself both figuratively and literally as a representative of America. Not only was she perceived by the British actor as being promiscuous due to the reputation of how “American girls are,” but she was specifically cast [by the American government] as an “Ambassador of goodwill.” And so in this story, Carroll metonymically casts herself as all American ‘girls.’ Thus, we could read her impulse to stand up for herself against the British actor’s molestation as a distinctly American act. Similarly, she did not cast her husband as a “Sir Lancelot”—protecting his wife by taking on her foe. Instead, Howe’s retort threatened the British actor indirectly, by referring him back to Carroll’s aggression. In this scenario of an American woman standing up for herself while her more passive husband stands by, one could read a more positive version of the Jewish American gender stereotypes of aggressive Jewish wives and browbeaten husbands.

Carroll’s recollections on her professional experiences in England also emphasized her role as a leader. First, she established their success as an “the darlings of…the British people” 210

210 Carroll, 2–23.
effusing,

We were supposed to stay in England four weeks. We stayed there three years! …We worked the London Palladium…We were just a little number-two act. But we were an instant smash and we became headliners. We played all the provinces, nightclubs, made a couple of little movies, some shorts, and we became the big thing. After Burns & Allen, we were the big thing. We loved the people there and they loved us…

Carroll’s comparison to the Vaudeville comedy duo of Burns & Allen was evidently one that she maintained for many years, for her daughter Helen also characterized the routine (which she had never seen) as “a kind of George Burns/Gracie Allen Act.” This comparison is key both because it provides a sense of the genre of their act and because it implicitly positions the female as the breakout talent. In his memoirs reflecting on the 40-year life of the Burns & Allen act, George Burns cites a series of reviews that make it clear that his partner (and wife) Gracie Allen was the undisputed star. Burns accepted—and even confirmed—the audience’s preference declaring, “…she was the whole act.” The legacy of Burns & Allen, then, includes the rare instance of a female comedian outshining her male partner. And so comparisons between Carroll & Howe and Burns & Allen carry with them the ghost of comedy success springing from the woman’s—rather than the man’s—comic chops.

In the case of Carroll & Howe, it is even more the case that “she was the whole act,” for unlike Gracie Allen, Carroll both performed in and wrote the act. In Bill Smith’s oral history, Buddy Howe reflected on Carroll’s ability as a comedy writer:

Jean wrote many, many pieces, developed them, and performed

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211 In a separate interview with Stephen Silverman, Carroll gave more details of the journey’s timeline, explaining, “Initially, we did the Palladium and one or two other places and came back. Went back four weeks later, four weeks later for what was supposed to be a two-week gig, stayed three and a half years.” Carroll, 2–23.
212 Smith, The Vaudevillians, 257.
213 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 2–2.
214 George Burns, Gracie: A Love Story (Signet, 1991), 75–76.
215 Burns, 75–76.
them, starting many of the things that comics are doing today…The thing that was so good about our act was that I was lucky enough to find a girl who could write material that was so distinctive they had to play us. We did material that nobody had ever heard before. All fresh. We seldom, if ever, resorted to an old joke. In fact, it was never a joke, it was always a "bit"; a routine. It was never "Two Jews met on a corner" or "Two Italians met in the street." I think Jean got her comedy out of natural happenings.216

In his telling, Howe was happy to cede authorial control to Carroll, claiming, “I was strictly a straight man. If she wrote "When are you coming to dinner?" that's what I said every show, exactly as written. I was essentially a hoofer.”217 Just as in the May & Carroll reviews, there seems to be an exclusivity drawn between being a writer-comedian and a dancer. The more Carroll & Howard performed, the more polished the routine became. Carroll observed that over the course of their tour, “We both had the excitement of seeing slow but steady improvement in what we were doing.”218

216 Smith, The Vaudevillians, 18.
217 Smith, 18.
218 Smith, The Vaudevillians.
Thanks to an excerpt filmed at the Pathe studios in 1937, it is possible to analyze at least a fragment of the comedy routines that Carroll was writing and performing with Howe on their tour of the U.K.²¹⁹ The scene begins with Howe wearing a three-piece suit and sitting alone on a set featuring a small table with a wine bottle and two empty glasses. The table is surrounded by other empty tables, chairs, and a potted palm, suggesting a nightclub atmosphere. Carroll rushes in, glamorously attired in black T-strap heels, a long, fitted coat with a ruffled collar, matching pocketbook, leather gloves, and satin hat.

“Hurry up, will you? What’s the idea of making me wait?” Howe demands, as Carroll breathlessly takes her seat, exclaiming, “I can’t help it, I was talking to a man out there—you

know that man out there (she extends her arm, gracefully gesturing offstage) he almost gave me an automobile for nothing!” Her tempo is quick, her voice high and birdlike, and her gestures frequent and animated. If you listen closely, you can catch a hint of a Brooklyn accent as she pronounces the words ‘talking’ and ‘automobile.’

“Whaddya mean for nothing?” is Howe’s gruff reply.

“Really, it’s true!” Carroll chirps, her voice breaking and then dissolving into giggles as she nods eagerly.

“It is…” Howe fills in dubiously, as Carroll explains, “Yes, he was out there and it was a beautiful car! I walked up to him and I said, ‘Are you the owner of this car?’ He said ‘Yes.’ I said ‘Well, I like it very much—give it to me?’ He said ‘No!’” Her eyes widen with incredulity as she repeats his rejection.

Howe squints, unfazed. “He said ‘No’. So you almost had an automobile for nothing,”

“Sure!” Carroll replies with a giant grin and a little laugh, “Imagine if he’d a said yes!”

Howe grunts and holds his head in his hand with despairing incredulity as the scene continues.

Carroll’s opening chastisement and giggling demeanor belies the tremendous amount of control that she has in the scene. On the surface, the sketch bears similarities to the many ‘Dizzy Dame’ and ‘Dumb Dora’ scenes circulating Vaudeville. As George Burns observed in his memoirs, “There had been a long line of ‘Dumb Doras,’ as ‘silly’ women were called. Harriet Lee had worked with Benny Ryan. Gracie Deagon. The ‘Martin Family’ had a ‘dumb’ mother.” Comedy historian Susan Horowitz also writes about ‘Dumb Doras’ who “deny their intellect,” extending the genealogy from Gracie Allen to Jane Ace and Fanny Brice, on through

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Lucille Ball and Goldie Hawn. In some ways, Carroll’s stage persona fit into this trope. She had the same giggly, childlike mannerisms of Allen and other Dumb Doras. And she responded to Howe’s set-up conundrums with the same kind of comically outlandish solutions. For instance:

HOWE: I’m troubled with Insomnia.
CARROLL: Well, why don’t you send her home? Hah hah! Some joke—I like that!
HOWE: Some joke…
CARROLL: (putting her hand on his shoulder, concerned) No, seriously, can’t you sleep nights?
HOWE: No, I can’t!
CARROLL: Well, I’ll tell you what you’ll do! (her hand still on his shoulder, moving to his lapel) You’ll go out and get yourself a nice big bottle of scotch, like that you see? (gesturing to the bottle on the table) And um…(she grabs her hat, momentarily puzzled), at night, when you can’t sleep, pour yourself a big tumbler of scotch every half hour—
Every! Half! Hour—mind you! (here, she punctuates her words by holding a wine glass with one hand and hitting the table and his lapel with her index finger) And you see what that’ll do for you!
HOWE: Will it make me go to sleep?
CARROLL: No, but it’ll make staying awake a pleasure! (Giggles).

Carroll’s persona’s impractical solution again recalls the kind of material Gracie Allen often performed, which Burns and Allen termed “illogical-logic.” Burns recounts an exemplary bit of ‘illogical logic’ in his memoirs:

I said, “I’ll take you home if you’ll give me a kiss.”
“All right,” she agreed…we started walking across the stage, and I suddenly stopped.
“Wait a second,” I asked suspiciously. “Is your mother home?”
“Sure she is, but my father won’t let you kiss my mother.”

This illogical logic appears in a near-parallel bit as Carroll and Howe engage in semi-flirtatious

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222 Burns, Gracie, 52.
banter about her dog:

    CARROLL: …How about coming to my house for dinner?
    HOWE: Oh no, I’m not coming until you get rid of your dog!
    CARROLL: You don’t have to eat the dog! 223

In one sense, using this illogical logic paints the logician as foolish, or, in the terminology of the period, “dizzy.” And yet in her scholarship of Burns & Allen, Margaret T. McFadden makes a strong case for illogical logic as a subversive display of power, arguing, “Gracie Allen could use her ‘alternative’ knowledge of the world and her ‘illogical logic’ to thwart the attempts of her male counterpart George Burns to impose patriarchal control over her sexual and economic circulation.” 224 In other words, illogical logic is subversive because it refuses to dismiss an unorthodox perspective as ‘nonsense.’ Another way in which illogical logic was empowering was that it allowed Carroll (like Allen) to deliver the lion’s share of the punchlines and made her the focal point of the sketch. Even within the act itself, Carroll comments on her own wit, following up her more risqué (and thus risky) joke on the ‘lady’ insomnia with a faux-self-congratulation, and giving Howe the chance to shift her status with a dismissive, “Some joke…” It is difficult to judge how Carroll and Howe were received in this particular performance. It seems to have been filmed without a studio audience—the jokes are followed by a rather conspicuous silence. And so the clip cannot confirm whether Carroll’s use of ‘illogical logic’ stole the scene in quite the same way that Allen’s did. However, it may be revealing that the camera spent much more time in close-ups of Carroll’s animated face than it did on Howe’s, or on wider shots of the two of them. And upon their return to the United States, it became clear that

223 Pathé, “Carroll And Howe Aka Garroll And Lowe.”
224 Margaret T. McFadden, “‘Anything Goes’: Gender and Knowledge in the Comic Popular Culture of the 1930s” (1996).
Burns’s comment “she was the whole act” was as true for Carroll & Howe as it had been for Burns & Allen.

The Rise of WWII

It was 1939 when the increasing danger of World War II prompted Carroll & Howe to leave England. Although the period between September of 1939 and May of 1940 saw no military action in Britain, there was an upswell in anti-Semitic sentiment. According to historian Aaron Goldman, anti-Semitism in Britain had reached new heights in the mid-to late 1930s, spurred on in part through propaganda disseminated by the British Union of Fascists. Even outside of directly anti-Semitic political messages, Goldman asserts, “disagreeable literary stereotypes, middle-class professional antipathy, and continued social discrimination were all clearly present in Britain during the 1930s.” While Carroll & Howe may have been relatively insulated from this prejudice due to their celebrity, it is unlikely that they were wholly oblivious to the wartime-exacerbated anti-Semitism. Moreover, the dangers of being in a country that had formally declared itself at war were considerable. By January of 1940, well before any of the bombings on England began, Carroll and Howe were safely returned to the United States.

Back stateside, reviews show their growing domestic success, and also an increasing preference for Jean Carroll, celebrating her comic skill even at the expense of her partner’s. Critics praised her as “especially clever with comedy” and “always a surefire comedienne.”

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A particularly effusive critic wrote, “Jean Carroll is one of the best comedy femmes in the business, and with half a break she will score in a big way. She has a way of working, a style of delivery that is top-notch in any league.” In contrast, Howe’s comic ability was generally unremarked upon, other than the reviews when critics complained that he “seemed tired” or “might perk up a bit.” By the end of 1941, Carroll had become so recognized for her comic skill that she was performing as an emcee at Baltimore’s Hippodrome Theatre. Typically, the emcee was a male performer—in fact, it had only been in 1928 that Gracie Allen became the first female emcee ever to work the Palace Theatre. However, Carroll’s critic praised the “nice switch,” commenting that she was “holding down an emcee spot and doing all right.”

Ironically, it was not long before Carroll and Howe’s success brought them once again into the sphere of war.

**Carroll & Howe on the U.S.O.**

Like many of the popular American vaudeville acts of the 1940s, Carroll and Howe made the transfer to the United Service Organization tours. As tensions surrounding World War II escalated and American military involvement seemed increasingly likely, both army enrollment and the need for morale boosting increased. In 1941, President Roosevelt formed the United Service Organization (USO) by urging private groups like the Salvation Army, and the National Travelers Aid Association to merge with religious groups like the Young Men’s Christian

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230 Scho, “House Review: STATE, N. Y.”

231 Burns, *Gracie*.

Association, the Young Women’s Christian Association, the national Catholic Community Services, and the Jewish Welfare board to pool their resources and produce ‘Camp Shows’ and other recreation for growing military troops.\textsuperscript{233}

Conditions on the USO circuit were, admittedly, rough for the performers. A critic from \textit{Variety} commended cast members of the Camp Shows not only for their performances, but also for being “troupers” and “taking everything in stride: one day a tent, the next a theatre; long distance bus halls from downtown to camps; bad hotel accommodations with raised rates…”\textsuperscript{234} However, another \textit{Variety} author points out the benefits of the circuit, such as covered costs for transportation and especially and “a chance to get in a solid 24 weeks of work without worrying whether or not they are doing any business at the box office.”\textsuperscript{235} According to Howe, he and Carroll got involved because “Abe Lastfogel, who was then the head of the USO and also the William Morris office, asked us to go on USO and we did. We stayed on it for two years until I was called up…”\textsuperscript{236} Carroll & Howe participated on the USO’s Red Circuit in such revues as Unit 52’s “Looping the Loop.”\textsuperscript{237} By \textit{Variety’s} account, the Carroll & Howe’s USO act continued to mix dance and comedy. It began with comic dialogue or “smart crossfire.”\textsuperscript{238} The standout number—mentioned in five out of the fourteen \textit{Variety} notices the act received—was Carroll’s vocal performance of ‘Lady Be Good,’ in which she did an imitation of a trumpet-player “using

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{233} Ways to Support et al., “Our History: About the USO,” United Service Organizations, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.uso.org/about.
\item \textsuperscript{236} Smith, \textit{The Vaudevillians}.
\item \textsuperscript{237} Sahu, “Reviews.”
\end{itemize}
only her hands.” Carroll & Howe appeared alongside the “Line Girls” dance troupe, “The Four Macks” roller-skating act, “The Lane Brothers” acrobatic dancers, Chester Dolphin the comic juggler, and the Randall Sisters singing trio. The tour hit around 70 camps, performing for as many as 12,000 soldiers at each one. Jean Carroll herself wrote an article for *Billboard Magazine*, touting the benefits performers accrued on the USO:

We have concluded a run of 12 months for USO, working in two different units, appearing in nearly 200 camps for soldiers, sailors and marines. It is as an experience that we will long remember and cherish, despite the many difficulties and hardships encountered during this unusual engagement.

From a purely business standpoint, one cannot help feel that many acts will benefit financially from USO dates after the war. After our job for Uncle Sam, we did two and a half weeks in theaters with Glen Grey and his band. During that time in each town, a number of uniformed men stopped back to see us and tell us that they came in to see the show because they remembered the act from camp. They were total strangers to us, but they acted like old friends and loyal fans. We have been stopped in the streets by greeting soldiers, remembering the act from a camp showing. This type of reaction is bound to prove of some benefit to acts.

Transportation problems are many and so are living conditions, due to zigzag jumps and wartime conditions. While the higher-ups in uniform do not always appreciate the performers’ efforts, the enlisted men do and that really counts in the long run. You feel that you have done something to help lift the morale of our boys.

Although the piece concludes that “what really counts in the long run” is the patriotic value of supporting “our boys,” it also explains the practical benefits of the USO tours as exposure and the chance to grow a fan base. By building their reputation with the USO, Carroll & Howe were able to position themselves both as entertainers and as patriots.

However, as the draft took effect, Buddy Howe went from entertaining troops to serving

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239 Sahu, “Reviews.”
240 Sahu.
241 Jean Carroll and Buddy Howe, “Comedy Team Sees USO Tour as Build-Up for Talent After War” (The Billboard, July 24, 1943), Page 5, Jean Carroll Scrapbook. Personal Collection of Susan Chatzky.
in them. Show business was no exception to the wartime phenomenon of young men being
taken from their careers and recruited to the military. Variety began publishing a column called
“Uncle Sam’s Callboard,” listing the many performers who had been drafted that week. On
October 6, 1943, that column read:

Carroll & Howe, standard act for 10 years, has been broken up with the
induction of Buddy Howe into the Army. Jean Carroll (Mrs. Howe) will
continue as a single. Team did its last date together two weeks ago at Camp
Grant, Ill., when Pvt. Buddy Howe was called up from the audience and did
the old routine, in uniform, with his wife.242

Ironically, the only time that Jean Carroll was reviewed (even parenthetically) under the name
“Mrs. Howe” or referred to as “his wife” was in this piece announcing her impending career as
“a single.” Likewise, she never described her relationship with her husband in such
melodramatically romantic terms as when she recalled his decision to leave the act:

When he was drafted, I said to him, “Don’t worry about it. When you get
out after you serve, or even if you have to go overseas, when you come
back, we’ll continue with the act.”
He said “No…I’ve held you back long enough. You’re great. You will do
great things on your own.”
I said, “No, no, no. I married you to be with you, not to be without you.
We will do an act.”
He said, “No, we will not. You will do an act.”243

Like so many wives of the period, Jean Carroll found an increased level of professional
autonomy as a result of her husband’s military recruitment. What was less customary was that in
Carroll’s case, her newfound professional independence confirmed a trend that had been growing
increasingly evident to audiences: in Carroll & Howe, she was the whole act.

From Double to Single

242 “Uncle Sam’s Callboard: Carroll & Howe Broken Up,” Variety (Archive: 1905-2000), October 6, 1943,
1285829318, Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive.
243 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 2–11.
The early years of Jean Carroll’s solo career saw her transitioning from the ‘Dumb Dora’ character of Carroll & Howe to the savvy persona who eventually held court on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. When writing for Carroll & Howe, Carroll had drawn a great deal of humor from incongruity and status shifts between the two partners. The incongruity mainly sprang from a gendered contrast in affect. Her persona was distinctly feminine—light, bubbly, and eager to please, full of lively stories and absurd plans (e.g. get a free car by asking for it, cure insomnia with whisky). Howe’s persona, in contrast, was more stereotypically ‘masculine’—truculent wry, and resigned, speaking only to chastise her or offer tersely-delivered feed lines. Even without any actual jokes in the dialogue, the incongruity of their energies provided a comical friction. Moreover, the quick energy exchanges between the two people allowed for their status to shift back and forth relative to one another, with one person cutting the other down only to be swiftly undermined themselves.

Without Howe, Carroll had to figure out how to create these incongruities and shifts in status within herself. Based on her account given to Stephen Silverman, her first step to try and create a solo act was one of intense self-reflection: “I stood for hours and hours in front of the mirror. I used to do mimicry…I’d listen to radio and I did takeoffs. I would lampoon the different radio shows, especially the giveaway shows…and I sang and I did imitations, and I put together an act.”244 Her first review as a solo performer, published in *Variety*, confirmed that her nascent act experimented with a range of voices and bits. When she served as the emcee at the National Theatre of Louisville, the critic praised the “petite and dark-haired miss” for her “good impression of various radio announcers delivering trite commercials.” The review also noted

244 Carroll, 2–12.
that she told stories, “a couple in Yiddish dialect.” It seems that this first stab at solo performance was experimental in nature, casting about for a persona that could stand on her own. Her decision to perform stories in a Yiddish dialect is particularly notable given the success of Fanny Brice, who had become a successful comedienne largely through her parodic songs, delivered in a thick (and fake) Yiddish accent. However, it seems that this Yiddish storyteller persona was short-lived, for no other reviews of this period refer to a Yiddish dialect. By her next solo engagement, this time in Baltimore, Carroll seems to have settled on impressions as her winning gambit. The trumpet-player impression that had so impressed audiences from her Carroll & Howe days resurfaced, though to remain topical, she switched it from Louis Armstrong to Harry James. A critic of her next publicly-reviewed performance cited the Harry James impression as “a strong highlight in an otherwise punchless layout.” Without the incongruity of an actual man to play off, Carroll drew on the incongruity of a singing woman performing the role of a trumpet-playing man.

Carroll’s transition into being the first female ‘comic monologist,’ was gradual. She maintained the musical elements of her act for several years. Indeed, a critic in Baltimore makes sure to qualify that although Jean Carroll “holds down a niche of her own” with her “swift routine of comedy patter” her act is also “pointed up by a brace of vocals.” Even Carroll’s early television appearances incorporate both stand-up comedy and brief musical interludes. In 1950, when appearing on The Ed Sullivan Show, she interspersed her jokes about her husband

with musical refrains from the song “It’s So Nice to have a Man Around the House,” and in 1955, she bookended her comedy set with a parody of Gershwin’s “S’wonderful.” While her ultimate intervention was the straight comedy monologue that is now legible as stand-up comedy, she began her solo comedy career with a more familiar blend of musical parody and comedy patter. In her interviews, Carroll reflects on this period of her life, finding her voice as a burgeoning stand-up comedian, with nearly reverent fondness, stating, “My first time really where the burden of success was on my shoulders… I get goose flesh now just thinking about it.” The satisfaction she gained from this self-determination provides an important parallel to her childhood vow of proto-feminism, in which she declared that she would never be dependent on a man.

Carroll’s excitement at the prospect of self-determination also points to a defining feature of the genre that would come to be known as stand-up comedy—the focus on individualism. In the words of stand-up comic Emily Levine, “You’re in charge. If you fail, it’s your fault. If you don’t, it’s your credit.” The individualism of stand-up comedians has been supported by research from communications and theatre scholarship. In his study using textual analysis to compare the US’s ten top-earning comedians in 2009 and 2010, Don Waisanen found that all the stand-up comics had an “ego driven scope” meaning that they located themselves as the source of action and “skirted social and collective emphases.” Theatre scholar Eddie Tafoya argues that the emphatic individualism central to stand-up comedy makes it a uniquely

248 “Toast of the Town” (CBS, September 17, 1950), SOFA Entertainment.
250 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 2–12.
251 Unterbrink, Funny Women, 215.
American genre, writing:

It is an art form which, at its very core, is about pluralism and individualism and thus could have been born only in the United States. It is the singular person standing against the crowd, exercising the right to free speech and sinking or swimming (or killing or bombing, as it were) on unique merits.\(^{253}\)

Tafoya’s assessment of stand-up comedy captures not only the individualistic nature of stand-up in which a performer “sinks or swims on unique merits,” but also suggests the political dimension of this act, “exercising the right of free speech.” Traversing the literature is the claim—made in one way or another—that individualism, and the assumption of individual agency, is built into the form of stand-up comedy. Jean Carroll’s life and career narrative provide a clear view of the centrality of individualism and self-determination in her own stand-up career. Her personal narrative makes it clear that from the very beginning, her career in show business was rooted in a desire for self-determination; she performed in order to be free of financial dependence on her father. As a stand-up comic, her performance mimicked the fierce autonomy of her personal life.

**The Return of Buddy Howe, Husband-Manager**

By the time Buddy Howe returned from the war, Carroll had settled into a solid comedy act that used her unapologetically female perspective to provide a resonant and wry new subject of mockery: men. Specifically, she riffed on the men in her love-life—her husband and past boyfriends. An early reviewer of Carroll’s solo act wrote that her “monolog [sp] is really pretty sharp, but possibly too intimate…”\(^{254}\) Some insight into the ‘too intimate’ content of her

\(^{253}\) Tafoya, *The Legacy of the Wisecrack*, 203.

monologue might be provided by some early material published in Kliph Nesteroff’s history of comedy:

Love! Does anybody know what love is? That’s a moot question.
So I asked Moot.
Moot was my first boyfriend.
I was crazy about him.
Our romance was one of those triangles.
You see, he and I were both in love with him!
Then there was Jack.
Oh, let me tell you how I met Jack.
I was standing on the corner—as usual…
We went out and lemme tell you something, he was a real sport. Money?
Money meant nothing. Nothing! He didn’t have any.
I shouldn’t make fun of him. After all, he is my husband.
Nothing bothers him…he drinks.
Well, he doesn’t drink because he likes it. He drinks to steady his nerves.
The other night his nerves got so steady he couldn’t move at all! 255

While women had long been lampooned by male comedians, Carroll’s jabs at ‘Moot’s vanity and ‘Jack’s’ drinking problem were relatively novel. Perhaps the author critiquing Carroll’s ‘too-intimate’ content was unprepared to hear men’s private foibles and flaws mocked in such a public setting. Buddy Howe, however, recognized how marketable this new approach was, and far from being upset, he decided to become her manager. Throughout her career, mockery of her husband (whose pseudonym ‘Jack’ soon disappeared) became the bedrock of Carroll’s act. And as her words put him down, her popularity bolstered them both.

Howe’s decision to represent Carroll from the managerial side of the entertainment industry proved a fruitful one for both Carroll and himself. In 1945, he took a position at the General Amusements Corporation (later called to General Artists Corporation or GAC), handling act bookings in the Chicago office 256 Perhaps not coincidentally, Jean Carroll was booked for an

255 Nesteroff, The Comedians.
extended engagement at Chicago’s Oriental Theatre shortly after Howe’s new position was announced. 257 Carroll’s and Howe’s careers grew in step with one another. In 1948, as Carroll began booking more gigs in large New York theaters, Howe was relocated to the New York branch of GAC, and put in charge of the cafe division.258 When the television boom of the 1950s took place, Howe moved to that department, and Carroll was often scheduled as a guest on The Ed Sullivan Show. It appears that Howe was responsible for that contract, based on Carroll’s claim, “I didn’t do any business…I did not know that they had agreed to my being exclusive with Ed.”259 Although she felt in retrospect that the exclusive contract was a “bad move” she signals business-based deference to her husband with the remark, “I probably would have gone along with it anyhow.”260 After Carroll left show business in the mid-1960s, Howe continued at GAC as chairman of the board, through their merger with Creative Management Associates and International Famous Agency, making him one of the most powerful men in the entertainment industry. As a man, Howe had access to levels of administrative power that would have been inaccessible to Carroll. For instance, his success as an agent also put him at the center of social and professional networks like the men’s only Friar’s Club, where he served as Dean alongside Ed Sullivan as Abbot. And as a woman, Jean Carroll had access to a perspective and embodiment that was inaccessible to Howe. In that sense, the partnership was mutually beneficial.

In her interview for “I Made It Standing Up,” Jean Carroll describes her relationship with Howe as “a wonderful marriage,” remarking, “We worked together…we golfed together, we

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259 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 3–10.
260 Carroll, 3–10.
swam together, we took long hikes together.” In her telling, their shared career, like their shared fondness for exercise, was a point of connection. At one point, she waxes sentimental, declaring, “this was my life, this man. And that’s the way it was until he died of cancer in 1981.” Indeed, Carroll’s scrapbook supports this idealized vision of a husband and wife team whose professional relationship complements their personal one. The articles that she curates in her personal scrapbook suggest that it was a desire to spend more time with her husband and daughter that prompted her to leave show business (this subject will be explored more thoroughly in the following chapter).

However, again, Carroll’s account has is tinged by her focus on triumph over obstacles and familial loyalty, in a way that does not always square with accounts provided by other publications. For instance, a rather heavily storied incident in the press that was totally omitted from Carroll’s documentary interviews and scrapbook was her alleged attack on former-model Dorothy McHale, the wife of Robert McHale, with whom Carroll was allegedly romantically involved. As reported by The Daily News and The Daily Mirror, Carroll was having an affair with Robert McHale, an engineer who had borrowed $5,000 from her for a business deal, and helped remodel her summer home in Wurtsboro, New York. On October 2, 1950, Robert McHale and his wife Dorothy sat down at the Pick-a-Rib Restaurant with Jean Carroll and Buddy Howe to discuss their situation, and when Dorothy announced that she would not divorce her husband so that he could marry Jean, Carroll allegedly jumped up and attacked Mrs. McHale. According to Carroll, Dorothy McHale had invented the affair as a way to blackmail Carroll for

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261 Carroll, 2–27.
262 Carroll, 2–10.
263 Albelli and Schlegel, “Mate, Caught With Comedienne, Paid $150 to Hush It, Says Ex.”
The case went to trial, as McHale, represented by Bernard Sandler, sued Carroll (represented by Harold Lipton) for $25,000 of injuries. The case was thrown out by a jury of “four women and eight men”\(^{264}\) presided over by Justice Joseph A. Cox, leading Carroll to comment, “The whole thing was fantastic. I knew I’d be vindicated.”\(^{265}\) However, the sordid episode did lead to a rare public acknowledgment in 1954 in which Carroll “admitted that she has been separated since early 1951 from her husband, agent Buddy Howe.”\(^{266}\) The separation lasted approximately six years, according to her daughter Helen’s documentary interview.\(^{267}\) The closest that Carroll ever came to publicly acknowledging the more troubled aspects of her marriage was her comment in the documentary interview, “People read stuff in the…in the newspaper, or in the gossip magazine, and they give it credence, and they shouldn’t. They shouldn’t. Because nobody knows but the two people directly involved.”\(^{268}\) Indeed, the challenges of chronicling a life increase exponentially when recounting relationships. This chapter mentions the McHale scandal not because of its salacious elements, but to illustrate the broader point that Carroll’s narrative of her life is constructed around themes of triumph and familial devotion. Understanding the complexity of her marriage alongside its cheerful public face helps to inform analyses of Carroll’s comedy, which is rooted not only in the frustrations of domestic life, but also the disjunct between appearances and reality.

**Conclusion**

‘Jean Carroll’ is as much a narrative authored by Celine Howe as she is an actual person.

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264 Prevor, “The Love Rivals Said: ‘Let’s Be Civilized’ - Then Wham!”
265 “Ex-Model Loses $25,000 Action: Jury Votes Out Suit Against Jean Carroll.”
267 Tunick, Helen Tunick Interview Transcripts.
268 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 3–30.
Even this rough chronology of Carroll’s life invokes the “swarm of possibilities” that Henry James described as endemic to biography. For Jean Carroll, her personal narrative seems to be the triumphant tale of a poor Jewish immigrant whose devotion to her family propelled her to use her naive comic genius to achieve riches and fame, until familial devotion again called her from the stage back to her happy home. This narrative deflects her own agency and ambition, emphasizing ‘natural’ qualities of leadership and comic skill. However, the reviews tell the story of an ambitious young dancer whose comic chops were barely evident until she found a partner willing to do the sketches she wrote, giving herself all the punchlines. Likewise, Carroll’s narrative connects her career in show business to her family; through comedy, she could win independence for her beloved mother and siblings, and foster a productive thirty-year partnership with her husband. However, her family members’ accounts (as well as those of gossip columns) add the nuanced understanding that Carroll’s commitment to her family does not necessarily preclude dysfunction and discontent. The disparities between Carroll’s narrative and others are not intended to discredit or undermine her account, but instead to reveal the values on which she built her version of her biography: triumph over struggle, autonomy, family, and ‘natural’ ability. These same values are at the core of much of her comedy, and can therefore provide special insight when analyzing her work.
Chapter 2: A Woman in the Stand-up ‘Fraternity’: Jean Carroll and Gender

“Humor has no gender” — Jean Carroll

Introduction

Jean Carroll was a frequent inhabitant of so called ‘male spaces.’ She was an avid gambler at the horse races, and a dedicated golfer who awoke before dawn to practice on the green. A reporter from TV Guide marveled at how she “shot rings” around her male competitors, exclaiming, “The weaker sex, hoo hah!” And most of all, she was the only woman in what Variety magazine called “The Younger Fraternity”—the emerging cohort of comic monologists performing what would later be known as ‘stand-up comedy.’

And yet Jean Carroll would probably not characterize her stand-up career as a feminist intervention. In fact, she would not even characterize it as a career—preferring instead to call it simply a “job.” In interviews, she consistently downplayed the more feminist elements of her entry into stand-up, stating dryly, “It never occurred to me that only men were supposed to talk.” “I didn’t say, ‘My God, I have to go out there and do battle against the male species,’” she insisted in a separate interview. And yet from a young age, Carroll’s stated motivation for entering show business—to become financially autonomous so that she and her family would not be dependent on men—was a touchstone of feminism. Even later in life, her daughter observed:

272 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 2–11.
274 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
She was a feminist before there was a word for it...she was only really comfortable really knowing that she was in charge of herself in lots of ways: her income, where she lived, how she would live her life and so forth...I don’t think she was ever really comfortable spending someone else’s money, because that could be taken away if they disagreed...275

And so regardless of whether she chose to couch her work in the language of feminism, it did function to empower her and resist the norms of a patriarchal society.

In choosing to enact the principles of feminism rather than swearing public allegiance to the feminist cause, Carroll was part of a pronounced trend among her contemporary female celebrities. In Susan Ware’s insightful collection of biographical essays Letter to the World, she examines the public and private lives of Eleanor Roosevelt, Dorothy Thompson, Margaret Mead, Katharine Hepburn, Babe Zaharias, Martha Graham, and Marian Anderson, finding that this cohort of high-profile women from the 1930s-1960s “on the whole...did not publicly identify with feminism and women’s causes...Instead, they presented their accomplishments and successes as the result of individual achievement, regardless of gender.”276 In other words, they lived the agenda of feminism without explicitly endorsing it. Ware contextualizes this paradoxical trend within the historical moment of the feminist movement, writing:

This seemingly contradictory stance was very much in keeping with a specific moment in the history of modern feminism—the decades between the passage of the suffrage amendment in 1920 and the revival of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s, the very years when these women built their careers and enjoyed the peak of their influence and fame. In the absence of a broad-based feminist movement, women of achievement had little choice but to think in individualistic terms and to fight their battles, both personal and professional, on their own. Yet in order to make it as women in a man’s world, they had to embrace many of the tenets of liberal feminism, especially a belief in women’s equality and a commitment to breaking down artificial barriers set by sex. They were the forerunners of contemporary women who say, “I’m not a feminist, but...”277

275 Tunick, Helen Tunick Interview Transcripts, 2–13.
276 Ware, Letter to the World: Seven Women Who Shaped the American Century, xxiii.
277 Ware, xxiii.
And so just as Susan Ware contends that these women’s “lack of identification with the feminist movement does not mean [their] lives hold no relevance for the history of modern feminism,”\textsuperscript{278} I assert that Jean Carroll’s lack of identification with the feminist movement does not make her career any less a feminist narrative. Like Ware’s case studies, Carroll “still functioned as a symbol of women’s advancement…the media’s celebration of individual achievement spread their message of the new possibilities for modern women’s lives throughout popular culture.”\textsuperscript{279}

Indeed, Jean Carroll’s work empowered other women to ‘stand up’ themselves, demonstrating that women could be both feminine and funny. Lily Tomlin, who took the 1980s by storm with her ground-breaking feminist solo performance, cites Carroll as her key inspiration, stating:

Other women doing comedy were scatterbrained, fat or homely…Jean was very attractive. She was in control but not aggressive. She was her own person, and she was funny. Standing up and talking about their family was something you'd see only men doing. You never saw a woman comedian with that kind of command, but she was good-natured and light-hearted.\textsuperscript{280}

Ultimately, Carroll paved the way for Tomlin, as well as Joan Rivers, Phyllis Diller, and generations of female comedians, even without explicitly setting herself as their standard bearer.

This chapter argues that in spite of Jean Carroll’s fame, fortune, and place in the comedy ‘establishment’, her gender caused her to occupy a peculiar and contested space on the comedy landscape. While her performance was in many ways transgressive of restrictive gender norms, the larger systemic forms of sexism that mandated a separation between caretaking and career

\textsuperscript{278} Ware, xxiii.
\textsuperscript{279} Ware, xxiv.
\textsuperscript{280} Rusoff, “TELEVISION; Milton Berle, With Charm and a Mink.”
ultimately erased her from the historiography of stand-up comedy. First, I demonstrate how even as critics drew attention to her status as the only woman performing stand-up comedy, their reviews consistently describe her work in either masculinizing or marginalizing terms. An equally pronounced trend in her reviews was incredulity at her ability to be both (as Tomlin noted) “funny” and “very attractive.” As a woman, Carroll’s appearance was part of the equation in a way that her male colleagues’ was not, but she was able to use that difference to her advantage. Carroll’s embodiment of both the grace expected of women and the power expected of stand-up comedian—a duality that has continued to foreground discussions of women and comedy to this day—constitutes a major intervention. Next, I look at the social and official limitations placed on Carroll by network censorship restrictions and expectations of mid-century American femininity, using performance analysis of some of her most famous pieces to show how Carroll navigated restrictions and used her comedy as a space to rehearse transgression of gender norms. Finally, I look at the systemic ways in which Jean Carroll’s career as a comedian was made to be mutually exclusive to her role as a mother and wife. As Ware points out, “domestic life and career remained an either/or proposition for many women achievers of [this] generation.” Indeed, an examination of Jean Carroll’s botched transition into the world of domestic sitcoms reveals that in order for Carroll to fully care for her actual family, she had to give up her televised family—and perhaps her legacy.

Masculinized or Marginalized

For the most part, Jean Carroll enjoyed robust and effusive press coverage from the late 1940s

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281 Ware, Letter to the World: Seven Women Who Shaped the American Century, xx.
through the 1950s, as critics took note of the lone female in the cadre of emerging ‘stand-up’ comics. Her unique status as a woman stand-up comic was both a selling point and a deterrent; reviews in trade publications like *Variety* celebrated her, but always in a qualified way. Either they described her work in terms of her male colleagues, explaining her as a female version of popular male stand-ups and describing her rapid delivery as masculine; or they held her to the side in a separate category of ‘comedienne,’ comparing her not with her stand-up peers but instead with other comedic actresses and singers of the day. Here, we can see the beginning of the erasure of women from the history of stand-up. Rather than look at Jean Carroll’s staccato joke delivery as evidence that such a style was bound more by genre than gender, critics reached the chauvinist conclusion that she was an anomalous woman working in an inherently male style.

‘The female so-and-so’

“*Humanity is male and man defines woman not herself but as relative to him.*”

- Simone De Bouvier, The Second Sex

Carroll’s reviews in mainstream and trade publications insisted on describing her work through comparisons to her male colleagues. Often, this comparison took the form of identifying a specific popular male stand-up comic and explaining Carroll as the female version of him. This convention appears in an account of one of her early breaks, as Bea Pepan of *The Journal* reports that an ad man signed her to appear on Jack Haley’s NBC radio show “Village Store” after seeing her perform at Washington’s Capitol Theatre and finding her “a kind of female Bob Hope with a bit of Frank Fay added.”

Carroll was also frequently described as a female Milton

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Berle, with such comparisons drawn by Variety,283 as well as critic Ralph Pearl,284 Frank Quinn,285 and even the Gagwriters Institute.286 It is a relatively strange comparison, given Carroll’s animated but casual delivery, held up against Berle’s manic antics and demeanor. Nonetheless, their shared jokes-per-minute ratio seemed enough to draw this recurring parallel.

In his New York World-Telegram and Sun column Tips on Tables, Robert W. Dana declared, “Having followed in their ups and downs such trigger-shooting wits as Milton Berle, Jackie Miles, Jan Murray, Henny Youngman and Harvey Stone, I am amazed at the precision and finesse of this girl who stands alone among her sex.”287 Dana’s comparison is less overt, not explicitly describing Carroll as the ‘female version’ of Berle (or Miles et. al.) However, he still feels the need to invoke Carroll’s male counterparts in order to legitimize her talent. Over the course of her career, Variety referred to her as a “distaff Joey Faye,”288 a “female Henny Youngman,”289 and a “rather risqué female counterpart of Sam Levenson.”290 It is striking that Carroll could have been compared to both Joey Faye, the “last of the burlesque clowns” and mild-mannered family-man comic Sam Levenson, who were never compared directly to one another. This bizarrely diverse list of male comparisons suggests that critics were ‘translating’

Carroll into their female analogue not to draw attention to any specific stylistic or content-based parallel, but specifically to make her legible as a stand-up comedian. In other words, it was maleness, rather than a specific stylistic quality, that critics were eager to apply to her performance.

Indeed, Carroll’s wide net of comparisons became so pronounced that even critics began commenting on it. A reporter in *The Daily News* noted “critics are unanimous in lauding her talent though they are somewhat baffled in analyzing her style” pointing out that she has been compared to such disparate performers as “Groucho Marx,” and—for a change—female comic singers like “Gracie Fields” and “Bea Lillie.”291 A British columnist noted wryly that Miss Carroll has “been described as a female version of every living comedian.”292 By 1961, the Carroll comparisons were almost a running joke, and Ramsdon Grieg printed a humorous column reading: "The American comedienne Jean Carroll has been described as a female Bob Hope, a female Charlie Chaplin, and a female Benny Hill. I have also seen her

![Figure 9 Photograph of Jean Carroll in various costumes, saved in Carroll’s personal scrapbook, n.d. (Private collection of Susan Chatzky)](image)

described as a female Tallulah Bankhead, which should give Miss Bankhead something to think about.”

This convention of making Jean Carroll into the ‘female’ version of male comics found visual expression in a published photo-shoot saved in her personal scrapbook. Although the remnant is torn so that the publication and date are not included, it is clearly the second page of an extensive two-page spread, signaling her celebrity. A caption under a large print of her headshot reads, “Jean Carroll’s charm and wonderful sense of comedy have made her one of the top night club and television comics. Her routines are comparable to those of the best funny men. Above, Miss Carroll is her own lovely self.” The press characteristically qualifies Carroll’s praise by masculinizing her—assuring audiences that she is “comparable to…the best funny men.” Carroll’s headshot—the same used in her promotional ads in 1950—presents as extremely feminine. Garbed in a simple black blouse and pronounced jewelry, her makeup is heavy and meticulous, and her hair is perfectly curled and held back in combs as she demurely tilts her head over her shoulder. Below the headshot however, Carroll poses in a number of outlandish costumes—a Western cowgirl, a whiskey-clutching drunkard, a ‘Private Eye’ (in which her hair covers her whole face except her eye), and, most notably, Groucho Marx. Here, she literally embodies the comparison that critics have consistently insisted upon, costuming herself as a celebrated male comic in order to further her career as a female comic. In her Groucho photo, she wears an oversize black coat which obscures her figure entirely, and a wide-brimmed hat to cover her hair. Only her feet, clad in feminine ankle-strap pumps peeking out from beneath the

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coat, belie her male comic drag. Of course, she wears the iconic circular glasses and painted-on eyebrows and mustache. Her feet planted shoulders-width apart, she strikes a signature ‘Groucho’ pose, holding a cigar to her lips with her eyes wide and askance. The caption reads, “She’s Groucho Marx. What has Groucho got that she hasn’t, asks Jean, except Harpo, Chico and Zeppo?” The juxtaposition of this ‘Groucho-drag’ image, in which Carroll garbs herself as a male comic, alongside Carroll’s headshot, in which she gazes out from heavily shadowed lashes with an almost knowing smirk, under the questioning masthead ‘Commedienne?’ is a neat visual synecdoche of the need to translate this woman into familiar masculine form in order to help skeptical viewers understand her as a stand-up comic.

Often, critics would justify masculinizing Carroll because of her rapid tempo. Of course, there is no reason that speaking with a quick tempo should be essentially male. A closer look at the need for celerity shows that a rapid tempo is not so much a product of gender as it is of genre—the emerging genre of stand-up comedy. Cultural scholar Henry Jenkins traces the roots of this quality to the turn of the century, where he identified Vaudevillian “New Humor,” which was focused on filling each minute with as much pleasure as possible:

Not only did Vaudeville players and audiences consider pleasure a desirable goal in its own right, they also recognized that time was at a premium for working people, and vaudeville bookers paid for the number of jokes per minute. 295

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This idea of paying based on jokes per minute monetizes this fixation on time—specifically, on packing the smallest unit of time with the largest amount of laughter. This need to maximize the laughter-to-time ratio continued into the mid-century, when the success of this first generation of stand-up comedians was assessed in terms of jokes per minute. Henry Youngman’s obituary in the *New York Times* eulogized him with the telling metric, “He could tell six, seven, sometimes even eight or more jokes a minute, 50 or more jokes in an eight-minute routine.” Hal Ericsson’s tribute to Bob Hope was rendered in similar terms, memorializing his ability to “rattle off jokes at a rate of six per minute.” Carroll typically came off well with this metric, as she was keenly aware of the clock. In one interview, she even referenced spending evenings at home doing “a time test with my eight-year-old daughter and husband checking me.” Carroll’s prowess in the eyes of chronomaniac critics was particularly evident in a spate of articles surrounding Carroll’s appearance at the London Palladium in 1953. A metrically non-rigorous publication simply referred to Carroll’s work as a “laugh-a-second performance.” The column called “After Dark” went into slightly more detail, specifying “In the space of one minute, [Carroll] can deliver at least three major guffaws and two minor ones.” London’s *Evening Express* was slightly less generous, estimating “she averages a joke about every seven seconds,” a figure also quoted in a column entitled “Rapid Fire Wit” The ‘Night Spot’ column made such quantifiable laughter the feature of their article, entitled “Six Laughs a

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302 Russell, “Rapid Fire Wit.”
Minute.” Mathematically deducing her humor (with a twist of misogyny) the columnist wrote, “She talked for thirty-two minutes, and her machine-gun wit was getting laughs every ten seconds. That makes around 200 laughs at one go—no woman comic has ever been so funny.” After she returned to the United States, Variety evaluated her appearance at Chicago’s Palmer House in ratio terms, praising her ability to “touch off more than a laugh a minute.” In emphasizing the need for constant laughter, these critics established that as far as stand-up comedy was concerned, success was determined on a second-by-second basis. This fixation on time continues to characterize the form of stand-up to this day, evidenced by the popularity of software programs like ‘Comedy Evaluator Pro, ’a which measures the ratio of a comic’s stage time to the audience’s laughter.

In spite of the fact that rapidity was a feature of genre, not gender, the critics repeatedly used Carroll’s staccato delivery as a way to masculinize her. A reviewer from The Miami Herald stated outright, “What sets Jean Carroll apart from other comediennes is the fact that she works like a man—that is, she punches her material…” A nearby Miami paper praised her as “a femme comic who is as fast with a gag as any male counterpart.” Again gendering rapidity, the Variety critic from Carroll’s debut at the Paramount Theatre commented on her “skillful rapid-fire timing…unusual delivery for a femme comic, handling the audience exactly like one of her

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303 Clifford Davis, “Six Laughs a Minute!” (Daily Mirror, May 12, 1953), Page 61, Jean Carroll Scrapbook. Personal Collection of Susan Chatzky.
male counterparts.” Reviews continued highlighting her staccato delivery in masculine terms with such comments as “She can project patter in a hard-hitting style that would do credit to a male comic” and “she punched out [jokes] with the vigor of a masculine stand-up comic.” One critic even referred to her “quick delivery” as “the usual gag-man fashion.” Her contemporary [male comedian] Jan Murray recalled that Carroll was the first woman comic he had ever seen who “banged out jokes like a guy.” The very language that was used to describe Carroll’s delivery provides a clue to why critics were so eager to masculinize it—words like “rapid-fire” “hard-hitting,” “punched out,” “banged out” betoken an assertiveness that many would find threatening in a woman. Rather than acknowledge that men did not have special claim on rapid-fire delivery and the confidence and aggression that it suggests, critics instead chose to brand Carroll with epithets like “the funniest gal funnyman I know,” and generally to masculinize her performance style.

In some cases, critics used the trend of masculine comparison to show Carroll in a favorable or even superior light. For instance, the Variety review of Carroll’s debut at the Copacabana was familiarly full of references to masculine style and male comedians—but it also noted the marketability of her transgression of comedy gender norms:

… She works like a man; but fundamentally her personality is distinctive and her own. The overtones of [Milton] Berle, [Jackie] Miles, et. al. are more suggestion,

312 Nachman, Seriously Funny.
certainly not carbon copies. As a monologuing comedienne, she's a rarity in or out of niteries…For the Copa, it's a smart booking indeed…The No. 2 act has never been a comedienne, and by contrast alone it's a socko booking.314

And indeed, the booking was “socko” enough that that the Copacabana repeated it several times over, and it was replicated by over 100 hotels, clubs and presentation houses where Carroll performed between 1948 and 1964. Likewise, a critic from *The Miami Herald* invoked Carroll’s male contemporaries in order to show her superiority, declaring, “The trim gagstress is on par with the best of her male counterparts, and in some instances, rises above them with her incisive humor.”315 One review even held Carroll up as having gone “a step farther in the Freedom Drive of Females, proving that a woman can handle comedy lines with the speed, assurance, and originality usually associated with male funsters.”316 However progressive or even ‘proto-feminist’ these assertions of equality might seem, it is crucial to consider the back-handed nature of these seemingly complimentary comparisons. The *Variety* review’s suggestion that it is Carroll’s status as a “rarity” that makes her marketable may be true, but by suggesting that the booking is socko “by contrast alone,” the critic qualifies his praise of her skill as a comic performer. And the article praising Carroll’s “speed, assurance, and originality” is undermined by the painfully ironic title, “Jean Carroll Does a Man’s Job as a Comic.” And so even when clearly writing with an agenda of praising Jean Carroll as exemplary in her field, the critics’ insistence on defining her relative to her male colleagues masculinizes both Carroll and the genre of stand-up.

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315 “Five O’Clock’s Show Sets Smash Pace.”
“For a Woman…”

Critics who were not masculinizing Jean Carroll were often marginalizing her—relegating her to the secondary category of ‘femme comic.’ As a ‘femme comic,’ Jean Carroll’s status as a comedian was always positioned relative to her gender. Again, this marginalization sometimes came with celebratory intent. Critics frequently combined praise of her skill with reminders of its anomalous status. For example, an early review gave her the dubious compliment, “Women comedians are rare and rarely good. Jean Carroll is an exception.”317 A similar sentiment was expressed—even more colorfully—after she gave a performance at the Studio Theatre in Galveston, Texas, where she appeared on the bill with a famous pickpocket. That reviewer declared, “Usually, when a gal starts trying to act funny, we get up and leave, but this Carroll cutie will roll you in the aisles.”318 That same year, Variety gave her the barbed praise, “She’s one of the few femme comics who can give vigor to a funny line.”319 A review of her television pilot in 1951 tempered their praise with the qualifier, “Ordinarily femmes seldom make good funmakers.”320 And a review of her set at a Miami nightclub contained the charged compliment that she “can match most of her male confreres in the stand-up comedy ranks.”321 In 1952, Comedian Joe Laurie Jr. wrote an editorial for Variety providing a kind of ‘state of the industry’ reflection on the passage of comedy from one generation to the next. He characterized the new generation of comedians as “The Younger Fraternity,” making sure to note that Jean

Carroll was “the one and only lady monologist.” Non-trade publications also saw fit to comment on the exceptional nature of a female comedian. *The American Jewish Outlook* did a profile on Carroll promoting her upcoming appearance at Pittsburgh’s Carousel Theatre, in which they wrote that Miss Carroll “defies every ancient law of show business by working with material usually associated with male comics.” While their intent may have been to recognize her achievement as a pioneer, it also had the effect of reifying the “ancient law of show business” in which only men were comics.

Furthermore, Carroll’s status as a ‘femme comic’ kept her at arms-length from the rest of her stand-up cohort and made her an easy target for the damning qualifier ‘for a woman.’ Critical praise was frequently qualified along these lines, with *Variety* naming her “one of the few, if not the only femme comic to hit the bigtime.” Other reviews declared, “few femme comics, if any, can touch this gal,” and trumpeted her as “the best femme monologist in the business” or “the top femme comic in the business.” Perhaps the clearest instance of Carroll being simultaneously lauded and marginalized as a ‘femme comic’ is her receipt of National Laugh Foundation’s “Female Comedy Discovery of the Year” in 1949. A *Billboard* article saved in Carroll’s personal scrapbook references an awards show specifically devoted to “the seven laughing arts” (radio, theatre, film, literature, music, art [cartooning] and dance) with special awards given for Male Comedy Discovery of the Year, and Female Comedy Discovery of the Year.

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322 Laurie, “Review-Preview: The ‘39 Going on 50’ Bracket.”
327 Jose, “Night Club Reviews: Old Romanian, N. Y.”
Year, and overall Comedian of the Year.\textsuperscript{328} In 1949, when Carroll was named ‘Female Comedy Discovery of the Year,’ Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis were named ‘Male Comedy Discovery of the Year,’ and Carroll’s erstwhile male-analogue Milton Berle was named overall ‘Comedian of the Year.’ The very categorization of this now-defunct awards show recapitulates ongoing debates about awards shows like the Academy Awards, which divide performances along binary gender lines. Depending on how it is viewed, this division came from either a progressive impulse to recognize women, carving out a specific sphere devoted to celebrating their achievements; or a marginalizing impulse to ghettoize women, refusing to let them stand side by side their male colleagues as equals.\textsuperscript{329} By separating the “Female Comic Discovery” from the “Male Comic Discovery,” the National Laugh Foundation guaranteed that there would be at least one female comedian honored each year. However, it is telling that winner of the overall category of ‘Comedian of the Year’ (regardless of gender) was a man, not only in 1949, but also the following year, when Groucho Marx was awarded the title. In light of the fact that the non-gender-specific ‘Comedian of the Year’ category existed, and was awarded (evidently) to men, it does seem that the ‘Female Comic Discovery of the Year’ category was a kind of consolation prize upholding the tenet “separate is never equal.”

In an editorial in \textit{The Atlanta Journal} in 1959, Jean Carroll responded to this faux-celebratory marginalization with indignation:

Why do people keep adding on ‘for a woman’ whenever they start to say something nice about one of us?” Challenges dark-eyed Miss Carroll. Such gender differentiation is a sort of chronic handicap to distaff achievement, says the star,


whose travels on the national night club, theater, and TV scene provide ample opportunity for observation.\textsuperscript{330}

This “chronic handicap” of gender differentiation has endured as a major issue prohibiting female comedians from receiving their due recognition in the genealogy of American comedy, for each successive comic is both celebrated and dismissed as an anomaly. Clearly, Carroll’s much-vaunted status as a “top femme comic” did not translate into the same enduring legacy that her male colleagues—never referred to as “men comics”—enjoyed.

Furthermore, her ‘comedienne’ label occasionally grouped her with (and pitted her against) other women, ignoring the fact that she was performing in an entirely different new genre. While most critics positioned Carroll as the female analogue of Milton Berle and Henny Youngman, she was occasionally held alongside female. In 1948, a critic of the Glenn Rendezvous stated, “There’s a lot of the Fanny Brice approach in the work of Jean Carroll, a comely young woman who proved her skill as a topflight comedienne…”\textsuperscript{331} Joe Pihodna of The New York Herald Tribune termed her “the Beatrice Lillie and Gracie Fields of the United States rolled into one.”\textsuperscript{332} These comparisons are understandable only in the sense that Fanny Brice, Beatrice Lillie, Gracie Fields, and Jean Carroll were all female solo performers of comedy. But the fact that these critics did not distinguish between Brice, Lillie and Fields’ brand of musical comedy and Carroll’s brisk, conversational one-liners exemplifies the kind of mis-categorization which, over time, lead to erasure from the history of stand-up. Keeping Carroll within the

restrictive bounds of ‘female comedian’ also created a competitive dynamic between her and the very few other female comic performers. A review of Carroll’s album Girl in a Hot Steam Bath gave her the prickly praise, “[Carroll] is, with the possible exception of Phyllis Diller, the world's funniest lady, and in saying that I know very well that Bea Lillie is still around.” By qualifying Carroll’s compliments with slights to Bea Lillie and negative comparisons to the newly-emerging stand-up star Phyllis Diller, the reviewer demonstrates that the world of ‘comediennes’ is zero-sum—one woman’s success must come at the expense of another, for there cannot be too many. Of course, this trend of fostering a competitive dynamic amongst women in order to maintain their marginalization is not limited to the world of comic performance. Rather, it is yet another manifestation of the problematic tokenism that Lynn Zimmer identifies as endemic to the workplace in male-dominated occupations.

In sum, when critics were not transforming her into the female version of a man, or characterizing her performance in masculine terms; they were shoving her to the marginal ‘comedienne’ category to fight over scraps of recognition with other women, some not even in her same genre. In both scenarios, Jean Carroll’s status as a comedian was always already in tension with her gender. Carroll’s reception shows that even though she began practicing stand-up comedy before the specific stand-up genre was formed, she was not starting with a clean slate. There were still rules governing women in comedy, and perhaps most pronounced among the rules of women and comedy was that her gender would—for better, worse, or a poisonously praiseful mixture of the two—be her defining feature. In the next section, we will examine how

Jean Carroll used the rules to her advantage. Rather than disparaging the way that her gender defined her reception, she figured out a way to thematize her ‘femininity’ to her advantage.

**Pretty/Funny**

Even as Jean Carroll blazed a trail in stand-up comedy, she had to watch where she stepped to obey certain rules governing women and comedy. One of the most pronounced of these rules what Liz Mizejewski terms “the historic binary of ‘pretty’ versus ‘funny’”³³⁵

Mizejewski examines the ways that female comedians negotiated expectations to be both pretty—which carries with it social, racial norms of femininity such as youth, delicacy, and whiteness—and funny—which carries social norms of masculinity such as power and aggression, pointing out that historically, “in 'doing' comedian the woman ceases to 'do' female.”³³⁶ While she complicates this binary by showing how “notions of ‘pretty’ are often what women’s comedy exploits as funny,”³³⁷ she also shows the ways that the tension has been upheld through time. The lineage that she traces begins with the Ziegfeld Follies, in which comedians like Fannie Brice and Sophie Tucker foregrounded their bodily abnormalities in their humor, alongside the Chitlin Circuit, where Moms Mabley used her blackness and faux-age to comic effect, to Mae West, whose transgressively abundant figure was central to her act. It is easy to draw a line from these performers, whose shortcomings in ‘prettiness’ was prime comic fodder, to the women often credited with being the first female stand-up comics: Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers. Both Diller and Rivers used humor based on a kind of flamboyant self-loathing, primarily appearance-related. This narrative allows Mizejewski to position her millennial case

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³³⁶ Mizejewski, 16.
³³⁷ Mizejewski, 3.
studies—including Kathy Griffin, Tina Fey, Sarah Silverman, Margaret Cho, Wanda Sykes and Ellen DeGeneres—as the product of both second and third wave feminism, who “resisted and lampooned” the pretty/funny dynamic.

Mizejewski also acknowledges Jean Carroll, mentioning her in several sentences of the introduction. She quotes Carroll’s obituary asserting that doing comic monologues “in a shimmering evening dress, dripping diamonds and mink…was in itself subversive” and asserts that Carroll’s brand of humor was a “shock tactic” that “relied on a belief that a glamorous woman was supposed to show up in a nightclub as a showgirl or singer, not a joker.” While ‘shock’—or at least incongruity—may have been part of Carroll’s humor, I argue that her humor was less about the shock of incongruity than it was about leveraging the power of ‘prettiness’ into the power to be funny.

A close examination of Jean Carroll’s early career in stand-up comedy show that in the period between 1945 and 1950, she went through a kind of transformation that resulted in her shifting the relationship between pretty and funny. In short, she used her ability to be ‘pretty’ to gain power, which she then wielded over her audience, enhancing her ability to be ‘funny.’ By the late 1950s, she deployed her looks as a professional advantage, adopting this pretty/funny reconciliation as a staunch and publicly-held belief.

Reviews from Jean Carroll’s early days as a solo comedian suggest that she began by taking a page out of Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley’s book—playing down her looks and garbing herself in unflattering clothing. A review from 1943 states that Carroll referred to herself as “a pin-down

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338 Mizejewski, 12.
339 Mizejewski, 13–14.
girl”—a self-deprecatingly comic contrast to the glamorous ‘pin-up girls.’ A year later, a reviewer gestures towards an unusual costume, describing her as “so off-beam she’s a treat,” and adding, “Her costume fits her act.” A separate review mentions that she performed wearing a “business suit,” while a critic in 1945 pronounced her “dressed like a yokel.” Although I have not found photographs of her act in this period, the reviews suggest that her apparel was intended more for comic effect than aesthetic pleasure.

A women’s column by M. Oakley in the *Hartford Daily Courant* sheds more light on how Carroll was presenting herself in the early 1940s. In unabashedly sentimental language, the columnist depicts Carroll as a sort of ‘weeping clown’ character, who relied on her sense of humor because she was too afraid to “show off her prettiness”:

If you were a girl who could keep the boys (and the girls) in stitches...laughing gaily and continuously telling stories with the joke on yourself...if you were pretty but didn't dare show off your prettiness but went strictly for laughs, even though you'd rather have the boys ooh-and-la about you...if you knocked them in the aisles, so to speak, but didn't make yourself happy in making others that way...if when the party was over you went home alone? ...What would you do about it when you saw yourself as others saw you? ...Gosh, we're asking you? But that's the act Jean Carroll has at the State Theater and is so good in it that she has the standout name on the bill. She got it watching such gals (and maybe hearing them cry afterwards) ...And if you're that kind of a gal, be sure and see the act...Barbara Stanwyck [glamour girl] used to be that way before she got smart. Did you know that? ...Gee, it has set us thinking. Jean, by the way, is on her own now. Her husband is in the service. They used to be a double act.

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341 “Varied Program Currently Offered on State’s Stage” (The Hartford Daily Courant, March 11, 1944), Page 9, Jean Carroll Scrapbook. Personal Collection of Susan Chatzky.
On a descriptive level, the article reveals that Carroll’s act consisted of “stories with the joke on [her]self”—a self-deprecating thread that remained throughout her career (albeit with varying levels of pathos). But the assumptions in the piece are even more telling. Enforcing the pretty/funny binary, Oakley asserts the divide between women who “knocked [boys] in the aisles” and those on whom boys “ooh-and-la”. And the favor falls squarely on the ‘ooh-and-la’ side. Those women unfortunate enough to choose ‘funny’ over ‘pretty’ are doomed to go “home alone.” Barbara Stanwyck is praised for her decision “get smart,” stop being “that way” and become a glamorous actress and model. The underlying message seems to be that—at least based on this critic’s interpretation—Carroll’s act reinforced the divide between funny and pretty women, with humor stemming from Carroll’s pathetic embodiment of the former. In an interview from this period, Carroll comments on her efforts to downplay her looks, stating, “Look, if I wanted to look like a toothpaste ad, I’d become a professional model. My field is comedy.” At this point, Carroll seems to have noted the pretty/funny divide, chosen a side, and stuck to it.

345 “Jean Carroll Does a Man’s Job as Comic.”
And yet even then, Carroll’s bizarrely-garbed crying clown comic persona was in tension with her role as a pretty young performer. Within a year of her protestations against looking “like a toothpaste ad,” Carroll appeared on the cover of the NBC newsletter with a smile that could have pedaled many a tube of Crest. The large photograph shows her in a figure-flattering gown with a plunging neckline and a corseted waist. Her gloved hand sits on her hip, with her head thrown back, her dark hair loose in voluptuous shoulder-length waves. The caption of this glamour shot predictably downplays her role as a comedian, noting instead that she “helps out Jack Haley in the fun department” on the radio program “The Village Store.” Based solely on this publication, there is little to suggest that Carroll was anything but another attractive actress.

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Her beauty is foregrounded, her stand-up comedy is not referenced, and even her comic role is put in secondary terms as “helping out” the primary male character. Ironically, the character that Carroll was playing in *The Village Store* was very funny, but anything but glamorous. She was called in as a summer-long replacement of Joan Davis’s “forlorn frustrated female, as utterly devoid of glamour and allure as a cold fried egg.”

The period between 1945 and 1950 seems to mark a turning point, during which Carroll discarded her pretense of homeliness. Her reviews began commenting on her attractiveness—often in terms of how unusual it was for a comedian. In 1946, a *Variety* critic who praised her as a “show-stopper” also saw fit to remark that she was “a cute-looking trick with a load of acsexories.” A different *Variety* review pronounced, “The chances of finding a good female comic, with good looks to boot, are few indeed. So it can be appreciated what a stroke of luck it is for Beverly Hills to come up with a gal who can not only roll you in the aisles with laughter, but also impress you by her beauty.”

Another critic, Mal Hallett commented, “A rarity in the comedy field is Jean Carroll, who is as attractive as she is funny.” In 2006, Carroll’s contemporary comic Freddy Roman, recalled her as a “standard bearer in the field of stand-up comedy” exclaiming, “she was not outrageous! She was not dressed with the flaming hair! She dressed magnificently.” The shock in his voice attests to his lingering astonishment at her innovative sartorial sophistication.

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In Carroll’s personal scrapbook, these effusive descriptions are illustrated by a series of plastic-encased headshots, each showcasing her glamorous good-looks. One photo, used to promote an upcoming appearance “on the stage of the Capitol,” is a headshot in which Carroll peers out from under heavily lidded eyes with meticulously manicured brows. Her expression is softly pensive, and the lighting makes it seem as though her carefully-coiffed finger-waves are encircled by a halo. The other picture—saved without comment or context—looks like it would not be out of place on the cover of a romance novel. The shot displays Carroll’s torso in profile, with her head tossed back and her eyes downcast. The bodice of her dress and its short sleeves are pleated and ruffled, and her dark hair is worn long, spilling down her back in romantically unkempt curls. Her features are heavily defined by dark makeup, with her brow heavy and her lips pouted, giving a brooding effect. Both seem curious images to promote a comedian in a society where comedy and beauty were thought to be mutually exclusive.352

But this was a time in which Carroll seems to be expending an enormous amount of effort to counter that assumed exclusivity. Her appearances on the Ed Sullivan Show (then called Talk of the Town) showed a perfectly-coiffed, elegantly made-up woman always dressed in

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the fashionable clothes that accentuated her trim figure. On January 30, 1949, her hair was curled and pinned, her makeup heavily but impeccably applied, and she was dressed in a form-fitting long skirt slit up to the knee and an artistically-printed blouse. In her later appearances, it was not uncommon for her to appear in a full-length evening gown.

Women came to rally round Carroll as source of sartorial and cosmetic authority. A reporter for the women’s column “Chatter” commended her “talent for dress that is the last word in chic.”

Another “Chatter!” column was devoted to Carroll’s cosmetic hints:

For women who appear in television, Jean Carroll, one of our favorite comediennees, passes on following hints which she’s discovered for herself: Wear ordinary stage makeup, but with no rouge...omitting the rouge makes a woman look prettier, Jean says...and don’t wear any dress that has sequins or other shiny ornaments...Jean herself favors a plain black dress and, believe us, is one of television’s good-looking gals!

Carroll’s sophisticated appearance was also emphasized in trade publications. A Variety columnist who briefly characterized Carroll’s act as “a smart line of patter that runs the gamut” devoted considerably more detail to rhapsodizing about how “diminutive brunet (sic) wearing an off-shoulder black gown, a gold necklace, and elbow-length gloves.”

An advertisement for her appearance at Miami’s Five ‘O’ Clock club endowed her as a representative of her sex, noting that she was “hailed as women’s answer to man’s superiority” below a full-body image of Carroll looking confident and glamorous in a long black gown.

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353 “Toast of the Town,” January 16, 1949, SOFA Entertainment.
gloves, and perfectly coiffed hair and makeup. By proving herself a master at ‘pretty,’ Carroll was able to claim one of the few modes of power and authority available to women.

**A New Relationship for ‘Pretty’ and ‘Funny’**

By 1950, Jean Carroll’s scrapbook portrays her as a veritable champion for destroying the pretty/funny binary. In an interview entitled, “She Tells Tricks of the Trade”, the columnist reports,

Jean believes the biggest problem facing a new comedienne is that she usually lets her femininity get in the way…It’s Jean’s opinion that femininity can be a great asset to a comedienne if applied in the right way, and judging from the pretty star’s cross-country triumphs, her formula is airtight.  

However, Carroll’s relatively vague pronouncement raises questions about what she means by the ‘right way’ to apply femininity. Carroll’s public discourse on this topic is somewhat muddled and at times contradictory. For instance, her claim that femininity can be an asset is at odds with another interview, in which she identifies her looks as an occupational hazard, telling reporter Edmund Leahy that the “Greatest difficulty she experiences is overcoming audience reluctance to believe that a good-looking woman in an evening dress can be a comedienne.” But overall, it seems that what Carroll tried to do was reconfigure the relationship between ‘pretty’ and ‘funny.’ If ‘pretty’ and ‘funny’ used to be in opposition, Carroll seems to be trying to shift their relationship to a more transactional mode of power brokering, in which being ‘pretty’ buys a female performer the power to transgress social norms in a way that is ‘funny.’ In other words, the ‘right’ way to apply femininity was to leverage attractiveness to achieve power, and then

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357 “She Tells Tricks of the Trade,” September 17, 1950, Page 38, Jean Carroll Scrapbook. Personal Collection of Susan Chatzky.

translate that power into the audience’s laughter.

One way of unpacking the way that a pretty face could be a way to gain the power to be funny is to look at the commentary surrounding female comedians and funny faces. In her “Tricks of the Trade” interview, Carroll specifically references comical facial expressions, asserting that one of the problems facing female comedienne is that she will “shy away from making comic gestures and funny faces because she's afraid she may look something less than glamorous.” The implication there is that Carroll herself does not share this fear. And an assessment of her Toast of the Town appearance on January 30, 1949 affirms that she was not intimidated by animated facial expressions. The following images highlight the way that the meticulously made-up canvas of her face moves through an animated array of sometimes goofily high-affect expressions.

Therefore, it is puzzling that in the same year as her “Tricks of The Trade” critique of funny-face-phobic females, a reporter from the Miami Herald praised her specifically for her restraint from “extreme mugging,” writing:

Something new has been added to local cafe show front in the nicely stacked form of Jean Carroll, a gay comedienne who is unique in her craft in that she depends not on extreme mugging and physical gaucheries as do most other funmakers of the distaff side.

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359 “She Tells Tricks of the Trade.”
361 Bourke, “Night Life.”
Why is it that Carroll’s high-affect expressions and the “comic gestures and funny faces” that she references making do not constitute “extreme mugging and physical gaucheries”? What is that mysterious distinction? Partially, it is that Carroll was participating in the hyper-verbal form of stand-up comedy, in contrast to the more character-based comedy of Jackie Mabley or the musical comedy of Fanny Brice. But partially, the answer lies in Bourke’s allusion to her “nicely stacked form.” Perhaps because Carroll has chosen to participate in the parade of ‘prettiness,’ she can ‘get away with’ displaying a wider range of emotive—even goofy—expressions than her female forbearers without being dismissed as ‘mugging’ or ‘gauche.’ Instead of downplaying her attractiveness, as Mabley and Brice did before her, Jean Carroll instead used it to set herself apart as a new breed of female comedian.

A series of critics commented on the novelty of this seeming paradox: a woman who was both observably participating in the female social norms of ‘prettiness’ while simultaneously transgressing social norms of demure, understated, ‘lady-like’ behavior. Vaudeville critic Bill Smith exclaimed, “Miss Carroll is a phenomenon of showbiz. She's as feminine as any glamour gal but belts out comedy with the unabashed skill and savoir faire of a top male gag thrower.” Another critic enthused, “Comedienne Jean Carroll is a very pretty brunette, but she doesn't rely on physical comeliness entirely to win the audiences that have flocked to her performances on Broadway…” One reviewer almost explicitly identifies the relationship between Carroll’s appearance and her perception as funny but not gauche, writing, “Besides being at the top of her field, Jean is also a stageful of feminine pulchritude... Her looks alone are reason enough why

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she needs no props or gimmicks, no clowning or buffoonery to command attention from the audience.\textsuperscript{364} (Jean Carroll to Spice Harvest Moon Menu", September 5, 1955, Daily News, Monday, September 5, 1955). Rather than detract from her ability to be funny, Jean Carroll’s beauty gave her an expanded ability to be funny without audiences dismissing her as ‘gauche’ or ‘gimmicky.’

**Dignity...always Dignity**

Jean Carroll’s own commentary on female comedians reinforces the equivalence that she sees between pulchritude and power, or, as she puts it “dignity.” In 1953, *The New York Daily News* published an interview with Carroll, in which a subsection read:

> Should Be Dignified: "I don't like prop or grotesque comedy," she'll tell you frankly, "I can't stand to see a woman lose her dignity," she adds, pointing to Martha Raye as a prime example. "The top TV comedienes, in my opinion, are Ann Sothern and Lucille Ball." Doesn't Lucille Ball frequently lose her dignity with some of those pie-in-the-face routines? we asked. "There's a big difference when Lucille does it," Miss Carroll explains, "Because she's so elegantly dressed when she does fall or engage in a bit of slapstick, it's ludicrous."

At first, there seems to be a double standard in Carroll’s estimation of her fellow female comedians. Namely, when Martha Raye engaged in slapstick humor, Carroll felt that she was “losing her dignity.” But although Lucille Ball did similar material, she was considered one of Carroll’s “top TV comedienes.” But Carroll’s rationale for this double standard is revealing. It is because Lucille Ball is “so elegantly dressed” that when she got a pie in the face, she may be “ludicrous,” but she has not lost her dignity. Again, it seems that by participating in well-groomed, well-dressed displays of femininity (prettiness), Ball garnered enough power that she

\textsuperscript{364} Smith, “Jean Carroll to Spice Harvest Moon Menu.”
could afford a pratfall or two without disempowering herself.

Three years later, Carroll spoke on a similar theme in the colorfully titled, “Feminine Comic Tells Her Woes,” again, criticizing women who sacrifices her dignity for comedy:

Practically everybody will laugh at a woman who lets down her dignity and makes a fool of herself in public. "But if she tries to be feminine and funny at the same time, "said Jean Carroll, "men and women both subconsciously resent her" This curious [foible] of human nature, she found, was the biggest obstacle she met in becoming one of the nation's highest-paid comedienne. Miss Carroll, who avoids using props in her half-hour monologues, is a quick-witted, handsome woman with grey-green eyes who writes most of her own material. Her good looks have been something of a handicap, and she feels that her onstage life would be easier if she were the dowdy type--or even dressed that way. But she firmly refuses to. Many comedienne...[win over crowds] by ridiculing themselves or falling back on boisterous, pie-in-the-face routines. So far, Jean has heroically resisted the easy way out. She said, "I have an aversion to seeing a woman make a buffoon of herself on the stage."

The way Carroll sets herself apart from her female comedy contemporaries—dismissing them as ‘making buffoons of themselves’—is an oblique way of addressing the substantial intervention she was making by refusing to reinscribe the ‘pretty/ funny’ opposition. Although the article’s language of “heroically resisting the easy way out” seems a touch hyperbolic, Boyle is not wrong in recognizing Carroll’s contribution to broadening representations of funny women. After all, many of her fans—including pioneering comedian Lily Tomlin—describe being bowled over by Carroll’s mixture of beauty and wit, calling her “a whole new kind of person!” Carroll’s elegant clothes and meticulous makeup were innovative, not incidental. They were the price she paid in order to maintain her ‘dignity’ (the power conferred by prettiness) even while insisting on being funny.

367 Tomlin, Stephen Meredith Silverman Interview with Lily Tomlin, November 6, 2006.
Unlike her predecessors (and immediate descendants) Jean Carroll discovered that successful displays of femininity could allow for—and even be conducive to—comedy. Because she firmly established herself as a successful embodiment of “feminine pulchritude,” she was able to push the boundaries of what beautiful women say and do. Alan Zweibel, both a fan of Carroll’s and a producer of the comedy institution Saturday Night Live noted:

I think that it was very important that Jean Carroll looked and dressed the way she did because she looked like a woman who was not necessarily in need of anything—she didn’t look like somebody who you felt sorry for…You look at Alan King—not to say that he’s necessarily her male counterpart, but here was a man who dressed nicely…and he spoke with authority. You listened to him, and when he was victimized, there was a part of you that said, “If he can be victimized by an insurance company or a salesperson, well, so can I.” …There was an everyman quality. Jean Carroll had an everywoman quality about her also…

Zweibel succinctly summarizes Jean Carroll’s move to master norms of feminine beauty to operate from a place of power—rather than present herself as someone “you felt sorry for,” she had “an everywoman quality.”

Because Carroll was so obviously competent—even skillful—at embodying ideals of 1950s American female beauty, her jokes criticizing her own appearance took on a quality of social criticism rather than pure self-deprecation. Joanne Gilbert offers insight into this distinction by addressing the difference between the butt and the victim of the joke. While later comedians like Phyllis Diller joked about her own ugliness, she was both the butt of the joke and its victim. But when Jean Carroll began trafficking in self-deprecatory humor, she may have been the butt of the joke, but more often than not, it was the unrealistic expectations of

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369 Gilbert, Performing Marginality.
women’s bodies that were the victim. In other words, Jean Carroll was someone who could play the ‘pretty’ game, win, and then show that the game is more flawed than the players.

Carroll’s insider-critique of norms of female beauty are particularly keen on her record *Girl in A Hot Steam Bath* (1960). By this point, she was a seasoned veteran of show business, accustomed to the vicissitudes of critics, particularly on the topic of her body. In 1955, the September issue of *Harper’s Bazaar* published an article entitled, “Making Less of Yourself” describing “this year’s lady” as “slender as a willow wand, and the less of her there is, the better.”370 That same year, a reviewer in Las Vegas criticized Carroll by chastising, “She’s put on a few pounds since her last turn here.”371 However, within a year, a different critic wrote that in addition to having “lots on the ball in the way of material and delivery”, Carroll was also “a shapely looker.”372 Her body, while always

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carefully exercised and meticulously coiffed, was always a subject of conversation in a way that it simply was not for her male colleagues. And so Carroll thematized this preoccupation on her record quipping, “You know when I walk out on stage the first thing I do is stand up... let everybody take a good look at me... and then I say “Oh my, didn’t she get fat?” Carroll’s weight-related jokes have a particularly sharp edge, given her hourglass figure. An image from her scrapbook with 1958 penciled across the top of the page depicts her in a figure-revealing gown that plainly displays a petite waistline. Therefore, her constant jabs at her own need to lose weight draw attention less to her own shortcomings and more to the oppressive body ideal foisted upon women.

Her material on body image in Steam Bath...is particularly significant because of the way it expertly alternates jokes with seemingly earnest statements about her sense of vulnerability. To illustrate Carroll’s shifts in tone, I have coded the text below so that set ups are plain, punch lines are underlined, and personal disclosures are italicized.

People have all these excuses for putting on a few pounds.  
Like “Today they’re blown up with air”  
Or else lately they’ve been retaining fluids …like martinis and beer!  
Or else there’s another one, they have ‘big bones.’  
…and the bones get bigger with every meal!”
Well, I have no such excuses, I’m sorry to say.  
My husband says I’ve reached the age where a good meal means more to me…
Let’s face it.
I joke about it.
People say to me, “Gee, you have such a wonderful disposition, always making jokes.”
Well, I’m not always making jokes.
Sometimes it’s a barrier.
It’s a defense mechanism that I develop.
Cause I’m...(hesitation) …self conscious  
...about being overweight.
Actually, I’m not that fat.
I still wear a size 12 dress, but I break the seams every time I get in it

373 Carroll, Girl in a Hot Steam Bath.
My husband keeps reminding me of the times when I weighed 105 pounds. I remind him that there was a time when I weighed less—when I was born, I was 7 ½! In any case, I joke about it... but I am seriously quite unhappy about the state of my figure. I’m taking pills now—they’re just wonderful—they paralyze my mouth so I can’t eat!

Carroll’s affect changes noticeably in these personal disclosure segments. Her speech becomes slower—interrupted by pauses and hesitations that sharply contrast with her usual confident machine-gun delivery. Rhythmically, this shift adds interest; but its real impact is emotional. These moments of personal disclosure give a sense of vulnerability that bonds Carroll to her audience. She hops in and out of the ‘joke’ frame—performing sincerity for a moment to set up the ‘truth’ that she then punctures with punchlines. It is a disarming move—teasing the audience with a glimpse of seriousness to make the punchline surprising and potent, artful and arch.

A Limited Repertoire

At the Friars Club event honoring Jean Carroll, emcee Freddy Roman gave her an irreverent introduction as “That Jew broad who talked about shopping.” It is easy to dismiss Jean Carroll’s extant material—much of which has to do with the kind of issues one might find in women’s magazines (beauty, housework, children, etc.) as conventional and not terribly boundary-pushing. However, it is important to recognize that what currently remains of Jean Carroll’s work is only a fraction of the repertoire she performed in comedy clubs. Early reviews allude to multiple bits, like imitations of “recruits at an Army Induction center.” that were never preserved through recording. Carroll’s nightclub routines take the ephemerality of theatre to its fullest extent, for unlike plays, they have no scripts, and unlike film or radio, they have no

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375 Sahu, “Hotel Jefferson, St. L.”
recording. One notable exception is Carroll’s appearance at the eleventh annual Crystal Ball Dinner in Detroit, in 1956, which was privately recorded and donated to the New York Public Library. This rare audio of Carroll’s nightclub act confirms that her live show was considerably more risqué than anything recorded for mainstream consumption. She opened with a one-liner about a hotel clerk who asked a guest, “Are you entertaining a woman in your room?” He said, ‘Wait, I’ll ask her.” She then moved to ‘Old Maid’ one-liners (e.g. “Did you hear about the Old Maid who died and on her gravestone was the following inscription, ‘Who says you can’t take it with you?’”) The jokes got progressively ‘bluer,’ as Carroll described a suitor who asked, “Will you have breakfast with me? Shall I call you or nudge you?” disclosing that “he was separated from his wife—she was eating dinner in the living room, he was in the dining room, that was the separation.” The routine even involved Carroll doing an imitation of the noises of amorous couples that she heard through the air vents in hotels.376 And so the nightclub forum in which Carroll was most free—and thus most likely to push the limits of what was acceptable to say—is also the least accessible to contemporary scholars.

It is also important to understand the limitations that were put on Carroll by gender expectations of the period, which dictated social norms, and also—with the rise of television—network policy. As television sets made their way into family living rooms in the mid-century,  

376 Mitch Miller et al., Entertainment Excerpts from 11th Crystal Ball Dinner, sound recording ([S.l: s.n, 1956). This is not a word-for-word transcript, because the policy at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center does not allow recordings, pausing the record, or playing records multiple times, so my notes had to come from hearing it twice through with no pausing.
networks had to make sure that their programming appealed to the widest possible audiences—and part of that meant depicting women in a way that conformed to more conservative gender norms. The subtle shifts in the material that Carroll performed on her televised appearances reveal the increasing restrictions on what people—particularly women—could say on stage in the early 1950s.

**Gender Norms and the Television Code**

In spite of getting around the ‘Pretty/ Funny’ binary, Jean Carroll still had gendered ideas of propriety to contend with, and therefore could not fully escape the limitations imposed on her as a female comedian. Throughout her career, Jean Carroll spoke publicly about audiences resisting her performance on account of perceived transgressions of ‘ladylike’ or ‘nice’ behavior. In 1952, Carroll reported that “the audience is “slow to warm up to a woman gagster…” because they felt “getting laughs for a living just isn’t ladylike.”377 A year later, while performing overseas, Carroll explained to British audiences, "To get where I am I had to break through the sex barrier…It's OK for Hope and Jack Benny, but there's a prejudice against women being funny."378 In a separate interview, she again referenced double standards of propriety, remarking “It seemed that people didn't mind if a man said the sort of things I do, but coming from a woman, it was somehow not 'nice.'”379

The gender-based resistance that Jean Carroll described is affirmed by critical response, with some reviews affirming the audience’s hesitation to warm up to a female stand-up comic, and others openly dismissing her abilities on account of her sex. Supporting Carroll’s contention

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377 Cook, “Woman Comic Plays to ‘Guy With a Sneer.’”
378 “Evening Express.”
379 Mosedale, “Women Do Too Have a Real Sense of Humor, So One of Them Insists.”
that ‘the audience is slow to warm up to a woman gagster,’ the reviewer of her performance at Club Martinique attributes the audience’s being “a tough room” to her sex, stating, “It’s especially tough on a distaff side comic because of the fact that the customers are accustomed to male funsters. Consequently, Miss Carroll finds the going there a bit tough. …There are some laughs in her lines, but not enough to convulse the crowd.”380 The crowd proved equally reticent in Chicago, where “Jean Carroll had a tough time of it before her rapid delivery stint managed to provoke laughter.”381 In one of Carroll’s overseas appearances in London, a critic implied gender-based inequality in the marketing, observing, “On the Palladium posters around town Eddie Fisher gets 100 percent top billing and Jean Carroll gets about 80 percent billing. Now, I’ve heard of Jean but Fisher's a new one on me.”382 Precedent dictates that the bigger celebrity gets the top billing. And so Carroll being superseded by someone less well-known than she raises the question of whether her gender might have something to do with being relegated to Fisher’s opening act.

In some case, the critics themselves demonstrated gender bias, as when the critic at The Capitol Theatre noted that “she had her audience in giggles and gets a solid reaction”, but slammed her “peculiar monotone with only a handful of lines bright enough to get attention,” concluding that “it’s the novelty of a gal comic that puts x-tra hop on what from a male funny-man would be ordinary egg-slants. Whatever it is, she gets ‘em with very little.”383 This instance of a critic speculating that audiences are responding to the ‘novelty of a gal comic’ rather than

382 “London.”
her wit or delivery exemplifies a kind of malfunctioning cross-viewing. Rather than see the crowd’s positive response as an opportunity to understand how Carroll might offer audiences new and different forms of connection, he dismisses it as “very little.” Similarly, when she appeared on Perry Como’s Chesterfield tele-broadcast, the critic from Variety dismissed her monologue by saying that she “was much more effective participating with Como in a running gag involving his search for a secretary.”

It is telling that the reviewer preferred Carroll when playing second-banana to a male comic to her standing alone and delivering material in her own voice. Taken together, these critical responses suggest that the hesitations surrounding Carroll as a female comedian were not figments of her imagination. Rather, they were the product of Carroll’s violation of social norms in which men joked and women laughed.

These social norms had particularly important ramifications at the historical moment of the late 1940s and early 1950s, as domestic television sets became popular and there was widespread anxiety surrounding their effects on the family. Conservative impulses regarding everything from gender norms to necklines drew headlines, as Americans took up FCC Chairman Coy’s cry, “The American home is not a night club!”

Taking the pulse of the society, the FCC encouraged networks to take responsibility for the morality of their programming. By 1952, the National Association for Radio and Television Broadcasts approved the US Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters (also known as the NARTB Code or Television Code), and by the end of March of that year, 80 percent of TV stations and all four networks subscribed.

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Murray writes, “the code likened the relationship between telecaster and viewer to one of guest and host,” and therefore required even programming not specifically oriented towards children to be child-friendly. The code even included such strict mandates as “Profanity, obscenity, smut, and vulgarity are forbidden, even when likely to be understood by only part of the audience.”

The problem with terms like “smut” and “vulgarity” is that they are vague enough to leave a lot up to interpretation. As Robert Pondillo asserted in his biography of NBC censor Stockton Helffrich, “vagueness becomes a fundamental part of any censorship document in order to allow for myriad situations and multiple interpretations.” The hermeneutic openness of ‘smut’ leaves a lot of room for interpretation, and this room also allows for social biases, gendered and otherwise, to creep in.

An examination of the enforcement of the Television Code and network-specific rules governing “vulgarity” makes it clear that certain male comedians were able to bend or even break the rules with impunity, while women were more strictly policed. In “Regulating Swish: Early Television Censorship,” Chelsea McCracken demonstrates how Milton Berle was able to flout NBC’s strict rules against men performing effeminate material known as ‘swish’ routines. These routines were strictly forbidden because they were well known to be coded representations of homosexuality—which was then considered ‘immoral’ content. Berle’s tendency to perform fey mannerisms and sketches in drag did occasionally prompt pushback. McCracken found that after Berle played Cinderella, 58 people called to complain, “taking offense at effeminacy” — compared to the fewer than ten who complained about the blackface number in the same

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387 Murray.
episode. But Berle’s overwhelming popularity with fans and sponsors meant that network executives gave him “special consideration” allowing him to continue ad-libbing ‘swish’ bits and playing in drag. Other male comedians were able to get away with similar transgressions of the ‘smut ban.’ For instance, Variety reported that Arthur Godfrey made an on-air ad-lib that was so objectionable that they could not print it, saying only that it was off-color that it “jeopardized CBS.” However, Arthur Godfrey had four television programs, bringing in 17% of CBS’s total ad revenue, and so the incident passed without Godfrey losing his prominence. Likewise, The Saturday Evening Post reported that Groucho jokingly called a woman a “strip-teaser” on air, “wholly ignoring the fact that he was endangering TV investments running to millions.” Yet Groucho was never in danger of losing his position or forced to make a public apology for his transgressions. So although the network and the National Association for Radio and Television Broadcasting set up strict prohibitions of vulgarity, as McCracken puts it, “The process of censorship was less an enforcement of hard and fast rules than a constant negotiation over content and allowable material.” And in this process of constant negotiation, high-profile male comedians were allowed a certain amount of latitude.

This latitude was not, however, extended to female performers. Even Lucille Ball was famously not permitted to say the word ‘pregnant’ on television, using instead the less vulgar ‘expecting.’ Perhaps the most notable instance of female entertainers being subject to more

391 Gerald Nachman, Right Here on Our Stage Tonight! Ed Sullivan’s America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 21.
392 Pringle and Pringle, “Congress vs. The Plunging Neckline.”
393 McCracken, “Regulating Swish,” 354.
394 John Corry, “AMERICAN CENSORED, ‘ON CBS TONIGHT,’” accessed January 24, 2019,
rigorous scrutiny on the issue of ‘smut’ is the so-called ‘Neckline hearings’ of 1952. Senator Ezekial Candler Gathings of Arkansas headed a Congressional investigation into “immorality and offensive behavior in radio and television.” Among the issues discussed was women’s display of their breasts. Covering these proceedings with its tongue firmly in its cheek, the *Saturday Evening Post* reported,

> A display of cleavage, one broadcaster told the subcommittee solemnly, is sometimes quite unintended. He mentioned seeing—too late—one gown which shocked him and for which he rebuked his program director. The disastrous incident ended, he said, with a very apologetic letter from this young lady, who is extremely well known, pointing out in all honesty that the thing was completely accidental. As she left the wings to go on the stage, something slipped unbeknownst to her. And it was not a complete exposure; it was just a little on the questionable side.

The comparison is striking. While Milton Berle could intentionally flout the networks’ codes with a swish routine or drag performance and not think twice, the female performer accidentally displaying a ‘questionable’ amount of cleavage responded with a “very apologetic letter.”

What these drastically divergent enforcements of the Television Code show is that even though the NARTB and Network regulations were technically the same for men and women, the social norms on which these policies are based allowed male comedians to ‘get away’ with bending the rules in ways that females could not. In 1959, Carroll contributed to Dorothy Kilgallen’s famous “Voice of Broadway” column, writing on this double standard:

> …Unlike a male comic, who needs only to be funny to get laughs, a comedienne has new obstacles to overcome. In addition to good material, she has 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." I'm not trying to take anything away from such wonderful and talented fellows as Bob Hope, Milton Berle, Jack


395 Murray, “Television Wipes Its Feet.”
396 Pringle and Pringle, “Congress vs. The Plunging Neckline,” 49.
E. Leonard, Myron Cohen, and Joey Bishop, but male comics have it much easier. A comedian has more latitude with his material. He can do pie-in-the-face routines and pratfalls and get big laughs, he can use risqué lines and can imitate a woman putting on a girdle. A comedienne can’t. Her material must be selected with the utmost care. If she uses "blue " lines or attempts to impersonate male characteristics, it's considered undignified. A man can jump off a stage, run into the audience, take off his jacket, roll up his sleeves, pull off his tie, mess up his hair or poke fun at the bandleader and get a lot of laughs. A woman who does these things loses the respect of her audience.\textsuperscript{397}

Carroll’s editorial supports the findings that effeminate actions (such as imitating “a woman putting on her girdle”) and “risqué lines” were practiced among male comedians, even though network regulations clearly prohibited them. She notes however, that for her to engage in this same behavior would violate not just network rules, but also social norms, and therefore “lose the respect of her audience.” Thus, the comedienne was forced to comply with network censorship far more strictly than her male counterpart.

**The Racetrack Routine**

Some of Jean Carroll’s early hits, particularly ‘The Racetrack Routine’ illuminate the limits of toleration regarding what performers—particularly women—could say onstage—and how those norms shifted with the implementation of The Television Code. ‘The Racetrack Routine, a staple of her nightclub act, was named her “best” bit\textsuperscript{398} and “the highlight of her act,”\textsuperscript{399} prompting her to be invited to perform it on CBS’s *The Ed Sullivan Show* (then called *Toast of the Town*) in 1949. In appearing on major network television, Carroll was approaching not only a wider audience, but also a more stringent set of restrictions on what she could and could not say. Fortunately for Carroll, the Television Code was not proposed until 1951, and not

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{397} Carroll, “The Voice of Broadway: Comedienne’s Material Only Part of the Act.”
\item \textsuperscript{398} Marc, “Night Club Reviews: El Morocco, Mont’l.”
\item \textsuperscript{399} Jose, “House Review: Capitol, N. Y.”
\end{itemize}
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implemented until 1952. Had the Code been in effect, it is likely that her Racetrack Routine would have gone against the rules prohibiting “smut” and “gambling.”

Even in the more permissive nightclub setting, Carroll’s Racetrack Routine had raised several eyebrows. When Carroll performed the racetrack routine at Club Norman in Toronto, the critic said that her “rousing mimicry of Ted Husing at the track…skirt[ed] the edge,” saying that she could only “remain in the bounds of good taste because of her innocent, wide-eyed delivery.”

A reporter from the New York Telegram also praised her rendition of “day at the racetrack,” by reassuring potential audience members,

Comedy patters seem too alien and too susceptible to falling into the embarrassing trap of vulgarity when attempted by a woman. Yet Miss Carroll handles it with ease. She not only maintains a rapid-fire patter that is the match of her male colleagues, but she keeps it on a lofty line. Such salty bits as are included are neatly clothed in innuendo. [Emphasis added]

Likewise, the reviewer at the Copacabana praised it as “punchy” and “a bit reminiscent of the Jackie Miles technique,” but chastised that “the constant references to the Racing form, etc. more becomes a Joe E. Lewis than a femme.” Overall, the critics’ stance seemed positive, but in a distinct patronizing way—allowing Jean Carroll to ‘get away’ with material that ‘skirted the edge’ as long as the ‘salty bits’ were ‘neatly clothed’ and maintained a ‘wide-eyed delivery.’

In her performance of The Racetrack Routine on The Ed Sullivan Show (then called Toast of the Town) on January 30, 1949, Sullivan introduced her by turning conspiratorially to the

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402 Dana, “Tips on Tables.”
Ladies and Gentlemen, everybody in show-business bets on the horses—everyone! …And occasionally—quite frequently—they come up with winners, and the question has always been, ‘Who is giving them the winners?’ Well I’m gonna give you the truth! The girl who comes up with the winners is a very fine comedienne, Jean Carroll. She’s playing at Paramount Theatres now, but she doesn’t have to because she makes so much money on the races that this is actually a hobby with her. Ladies and Gentlemen, let’s have a great big hand for the number one handicapper of the theatrical profession, Jean Carroll! \(^{404}\)

Carroll strode onto the stage with purpose, leading from her shoulders and swinging her arms with just a hint of swagger. She clasped Sullivan’s hand, exchanging playful banter as he thanked her for a tip on a winning horse and she retorted, “He won and I gave him to you? What’s the matter I didn’t win?” She then turned to the audience, one hand planted firmly on her hip, the other gesturing animatedly as she addressed the audience, exclaiming, “He says I make a lot of money!” Drawing her chin to her chest into a sort of shrug with a disbelieving raise of her eyebrows, she continued:

Well…I make it, but I haven’t got it, because everything I have I give to Charity…that’s the name of my bookmaker. As a matter of fact, I went to Eddie the other day… I went to him and I said, “Ed, this is a little embarrassing, but I’m broke!” He said, “Well, don’t be ashamed, how much do you want? 50? 60? 80? A dollar?” Well look, he’s telling you about how I’m a great handicapper? Don’t you believe it, it’s not true. The way I’ve been picking those horses lately, I don’t bet them Win, Place or Show, I bet them to live now…

Already, by opening with a bit about finances, loans, and gambling, she placed herself squarely in transgressive territory typically discussed only by men. And in her next bit, she continued stepping into male territory, actually embodying a male character! She first complained about the

\(^{404}\) “Toast of the Town” (CBS, January 30, 1949), SOFA Entertainment.
unsavory men who hang out at racetracks, including “a tout with a chain…a real hep shmoe.”

Then, she assumed the stance of said ‘tout,’ pursing her lips, pulling at her collar, and periodically jerking her shoulders up to her ears. She mimed his nervous tic, continually twirling a mimed pocket chain with her left hand and adjusting her “pants” with his right. Each time she twirled the ‘pocket chain,’ she jutted her pelvis out spasmodically. Momentarily dropping the stance, she turned to the audience and remarked, “Well right away, I know this guy isn’t doing good, or he’d bought suspenders!” As Carroll resumed her parodic ‘tout’ stance, the camera panned out, moving from an above-the-waist shot to a full-body shot, giving the viewers a chance to appreciate the comedic contortions she used to illustrate machismo. She continued, going deeper into her parody of hip-gangster masculinity:

He says “Kid, I got a horse for you. This horse wins, you go home with the track!”
I figured that would be a nice change— I had been going home with the bus!
He says, “…I don’t want you to spread it around…I just came from the stable.”
That he didn’t have to tell me!
He said, “I’ve been talkin’ to the boys—I got a hot tip on a 26-year-old Maiden. The jockey’s been holdin’ her back, waitin’ for a price! Don’t worry about a thing…the race is fixed, the jockey’s got a battery and a long hatpin. We give the horse a little mara-joo-ini [marijuana] and a couple of shots of Benzedrine!”
I said, “That’ll make her win?”
He says, “who knows, but she’ll be the happiest horse in the race!”

The last joke of this passage is basically an updated version of her old Carroll & Howe quip about using alcohol to get over insomnia. However, placing it in the context of crooked gambling and hard drugs gave it a more sharply illicit connotation. She then launched into the part of her routine that received the most recognition in reviews—the “takeoff on Ted Husing announcing a horserace.”

Assuming a low staccato monotone, she sped through a mock-commentary:

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405 A tout is a person who gives tips on racehorses, usually with the expectation of reward.
Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen, this is Ted Husing, talking from Beautiful Belmont Park! It’s a lovely day, and what a crowd has turned out to witness this event! Just listen to the hum of the crowd (Hums). Now, the horses are being wheeled around at the starting gate—while we’re waiting for them, we have a number of celebrities here, I’d like to get their opinion, see who they think is going to be the winner. Here we have a young man, Sgt. Dumbrowski, just back from three and a half years in the Pacific. Sergeant, what have you got to say?

“I want woman!”

“Thank you very much Sergeant, I didn’t know that horse was running.”

...And now they’re all lined up at the post—18 horses going a mile in the sixteenth, nine left over from the last race. Number 5 is on his knees; I think he’s praying. The outside horse has a leg missing, but they say he’s the fastest thing on three legs. Now they’re ready to go—watch it, get that full horse in there AND THEY’RE OFF! There they go, it’s a good start, they all get away with Prima Donna taking the lead around the clubhouse turn by a length and a half, Lady Flash is running second a half-a-length over Supermarine. On the outside Gaybit is running fourth. (Barks) There’s that dog I bet on!

Around the turn they go, into the back stretch it’s Prima Donna by two and a half...Nylon is starting to run and Banana comes out of the bunch! At the top of the back stretch, it is Girdle going wide and dropping out! There goes Danny Jay moving up fast, taking over the lead, Prima Donna dropping back. She should drop into a sewer and get lost with my landlord together! Around the far turn they go, and Underwear is creeping up on the inside! As they turn into the stretch, it’s Gaybit a longshot, leading by a half a length! Cabbage is second by a head! Crab-shooter is fading and Detective is trailing! And now with less than 1/8 of a mile to go, the favorite is beginning to move! Here comes Blue Boy!

He’s on the rails!

Now he’s back on the track!

It’s Blue Boy taking the lead by a head! Make it a nose—Danny Jay moving up again on the outside—and now it’s Blue Boy ahead a half a length—and Danny Jay...it’s gonna be close! Down to the wire they come, and the winner is...Twilight! By six legs!407

It is indeed a virtuosic acting feat, moving through over 400 words and four voices in seventy seconds, all in a perfectly coordinated rhythmic signature. And the sheer ratio of jokes to time is impressive; Carroll crafts jokes by weaving together puns and wordplay involving the horse’s names and racing behaviors. For instance, “Prima Donna” “takes the lead,” “Nylon” “starts to
run;” “Banana” “comes out from the bunch” “Cabbage” advances “by a head” and “Detective” “trails”.

However, it was the subject matter of this meticulously-calibrated performance that made it unique. The fact that she set her routine in a racetrack—a generally ‘male space’ was unprecedented. The fact that she was able to do so with such authority—using insider racetrack jargon such as “tout, length-and-a-half,” etc, even more so. What audiences probably did not know was that this routine was, according to Carroll’s daughter Helen, her most honestly autobiographical. Carroll truly was a racing enthusiast. An image published in The Middletown Daily depicts Carroll happily collecting her winnings after picking a horse with 60-1 odds. And so Carroll’s facility with the atmosphere and terminology of the track was rooted in her real-life presence in a male space.

Had the Television Code been in place in 1949, when this episode was shot, the routine would probably not have gotten past the censors. As of its implementation in 1952, the Code specifically banned the advertising of “tip sheets” and “race track publications,” and mandated that representations of gambling be restricted to “scenes necessary to the development of plot or as appropriate background,” and only “when presented with discretion and in moderation, and in

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408 Tunick, Helen Tunick Interview Transcripts.
a manner which would not excite interest in, or foster betting, nor be instructional in nature."  

Although Carroll’s racetrack routine was far from instructional, it did not relegate gambling to “background,” and it may well have excited interest.  

Equally boundary-pushing was the fact that this sketch allowed her to embody several male characters—the ‘tout’, Ted Husing, and a brief ‘cameo’ by Sargent Dumbrowski. Her embodiment of the ‘hep shmoe’ offering unsolicited advice was a devastating parody of machismo. Her impression of Dumbrowski poked fun at newly-returned veterans’ ineloquent libido. And her Husing impersonation was not only accurate to his vocal inflections and ‘masculine’ rapid pace, some of her machine-gun wordplay was rather risqué. Jokes about “underwear creeping up on the inside” and “girdles going wide” as well as the ‘Seargant’s baldfaced assertion “I want woman!” are mild by contemporary standards, but could well have been considered ‘smut’ by network censors. The Television Code was particularly clear on the subject of innuendo, firmly stating that “Profanity, obscenity, smut, and vulgarity are forbidden, even when likely to be understood by only part of the audience.” There was even a subsection restricting mention of women’s undergarments. And so again, the material that Carroll performed in 1949 was so transgressive that within three years, it would be formally prohibited.  

What Carroll did not perform on television can be as revealing as what she did perform, in terms of showing the aversion to women and “dirty” material. Carroll explains that “there were some lines that I did in nightclubs that I did not do on the Sullivan Show.” Those lines were mainly ones that flirted with sexual vocabulary or innuendo, which she recounted in her

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411 National Association for Radio and Television Broadcasts.  
412 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 3–18.
interview at The Friar’s Club:

In the nightclubs, I did a line where I’m the announcer, and I’m sitting next to Colonel Parker, who’s sitting, looking at the rear end of the horse as they’re at the starting gate, with the most thoughtful look in his eyes that I’ve ever seen. I said “Colonel, I see you looking over there…a penny for your thoughts? And he says, “I was just thinking, isn’t that an awful thing for a man’s wife to call him?”

The joke alludes to—but does not say—the insult “horse’s ass,” which Carroll says struck her as funny because, “I could hear some woman saying that to her husband!” But while it might have been something a woman would say in private, or in a nightclub setting, it was certainly not permissible on national television, even before the Code.

Further revealing the contested nature of women “playing blue,” Carroll tells an anecdote about some audience interaction concerning another of the racetrack bits that had been performed in nightclubs but excised for television:

I said, “The horses, they’re all in the starting gate, but number four is on his knees, I think he’s praying. The sixth horse is giving them a hard time. He’s kicking up—oh, they can’t control him! He’s got his leg caught in his own stirrup. The jockey is dismounting! He says “If the horse wants to get on, he’s getting up”…A guy came up to me and said, “I’m surprised at you doing that dirty stuff!” I said, “Dirty stuff? Like what? I don’t do dirty stuff.”

The fact that one of the audience members was moved to express his surprise at what he disparagingly calls, “that dirty stuff” suggests that he received her joke as a risqué allusion to the horses’ sexual impulse to “get on.” But her coy response, “Like what?” points to the way that any risqué humor she included had to be oblique enough that she could feign obliviousness if criticized.

413 Carroll, 3–18.
414 Carroll, 3–18.
415 Carroll, 3–18--3–19.
After the implementation of the Television Code in 1952, the Racetrack Routine was largely absent from Carroll’s television repertoire, though she continued to perform it in nightclubs. This signature piece, with its many edited variants and ultimate disappearance from television, demonstrates both Carroll’s willingness to transgress gender norms and also the limitations on how far she was permitted to take those transgressions.

**Buying a Dress**

One of Carroll’s more enduring pieces of early work was the ‘Buying a Dress’ bit, which she performed on her very first appearance on *Toast of the Town*. The ‘Buying a Dress’ bit, which was far more pointedly circumscribed to ‘women’s matters,’ exemplifies a performance falling within the limited scope of material available to female comedians. A 1952 article entitled “Female Comedian Hits Handicap” published Carroll’s telling complaint, “Being a woman, I can joke about the foibles of my sex, as long as I leave men alone...I can be as funny as I’m able about the gullibility of women shoppers, but I don’t dare make the same sorts of gibes about their husbands.” Her jokes on “the gullibility of women shoppers”—transcribed here from Carroll’s appearance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (then called “Talk of The Town”) on January 16, 1949—took the form of an exchange between Carroll’s persona and a pushy saleswoman:

Salesgirls! You never saw anything like it in your life. See this dress? I didn’t want it, I was only looking. So, I waked into the store—well, I didn’t exactly walk in—there was a hook helping me! And 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? A 10? A 12?” She says, “It’s your size. Take it, this dress was *made* for you.” I didn’t even know I was gonna be in the neighborhood, she made a dress for me!” I said, “I don’t think the lines are right for me, my legs are too short. She said, “They reach the floor don’t they?”

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416 “Jean Carroll Hits Handicap Of Femininity.”
I said, “I really want something in blue.”
She says, “Jenny” (sidelong glance)…….Look who wants blue.”
I said, “What’s wrong with blue?”
She says, “Blue isn’t your color”
I said, “Why?”
She says, “We haven’t got any.”
Well I said, “I really would like my husband to come down and look at the dress”
She says, “Jenny! Look who’s married!”
I said, “What’s the matter? Can’t happen I should have a husband?”
She said, “Certainly, a husband you can always get—a dress like this is hard to find!”
I said, “Well, I’m sorry, the dress doesn’t exactly send me!”
She said, “Who sent for you? …Listen, we don’t use pressure in this store! You don’t like the dress? Try it on! Believe me, if you don’t like that dress, we’ll give you the store!”
I figured I’d be in partners, so I tried the dress on.
She said, “It’s stunning, it’s gorgeous. That dress is you. That dress is you!”
I said, “If this dress is me, I’ll take you!”
Forget that I own the store, my best friend, give me an honest opinion!
Look at that little doll. Go on, —force yourself—look at that little doll!”
All right, they convinced me I was a doll. I said, “How much is it?”
She says, “Have you been up the next block?”
I said, “No, they haven’t got a hook that long.”
She says, “I take an oath—I’m not a well woman, I have arthritis, it doesn’t matter.
I’m not interested in making a sale. Because it doesn’t matter—Do me a favor, buy it, whatever you pay me—I lose money on every dress I sell.”
I say, “Really? How do you stay in business?”
She says, “Eh, I fool around with the books.”417

For this piece, Carroll moved from the ‘male’ space of the racetrack to the ‘female’ space of the dress shop—though even the first gag about her persona being forcibly pulled into the store with a hook suggests that this is a space imposed on her rather than sought by her. And the dramatic situation—in which her persona is hesitant to buy a dress for a number of reasons—one of them being that she would like her husband to look at it—stays firmly in the realm of patriarchal notions of ‘women’s matters.’

417 John Wray, “Toast of the Town (Rudy Vallee, Nanette Fabray)” (CBS, January 16, 1949), The Paley Center for Media.
But even within this limited range of subject matter, Carroll finds interesting ways to rehearse a kind of subversive deconstruction of stereotypes. First, the ‘Buying a Dress’ piece allows Carroll to play two separate roles—both her persona as the baffled shopper, and the saleswoman. This pushy saleswoman, whose tactics include gross overstatement (“This dress is you!”) guilt (“I’m not a well woman, it doesn’t matter”) and cunning (“I fool around with the books”) in many ways embodies the period’s stereotypes of Jewish women. Even the salesgirl’s context within the garment industry of the 1950s suggests a Jewish connection.418 And if the piece were a scene between two actresses, it would be easy to write off the actress playing the salesgirl as simply reinscribing that stereotype. However, the fact that Carroll embodies both the pushy (crypto)Jewish salesperson and the shopper wryly confiding to the audience puts the contrast between stereotype and ‘reality’ into dramatic contrast. And the fluidity with which she slips from one character to the next reveals the performativity of the stereotype. The following chapters will do a more thorough analysis of Carroll’s comedy and its relationship to common stereotypes of Jewish women. But ‘Buying a Dress’ illuminates both the gender-based strictures imposed on Carroll, and the innovative ways she found to subvert those strictures.

Systemic Sexism

Even with critics that masculinized or marginalized female comedians; even with the tricky binaries between ‘pretty’ and ‘funny’; even with the restrictive network codes and gender norms; even with all these impediments and drawbacks for women, the onstage dimension of show business was still not as systematically sexist as its offstage dimension. For Jean Carroll was able

to navigate all of these onstage obstacles and still enjoy a robust and successful career. What ultimately led Carroll to leave show business and forego a more lasting legacy was the institutional ways that the show business industry forced women to choose between being a comedian and a caretaker.

**Caretaker/Comedian**

The drive to protect and provide for her family that animated Carroll’s ambition as a child continued as her family grew. In her words, “There was nothing more important to me than my family—my sisters, my brothers, my mother. Certainly my own daughter and later on her children.”

This prioritization of the family falls in line with stereotypical gender norms positioning the women’s ambition revolving solely around their role as custodian of family life. But the reality beyond the stereotype is that Carroll’s dedication to her family was put in competition with—and certainly complicated by—her life as a performer.

Public and personal interviews reveal that Jean Carroll’s career as a performer was often in tension with her role as her daughter’s primary caregiver. The exigencies of juggling these two roles determined even such practical decisions as where to live. An interview with the *New York Tribune* states that rather than live in one of the more upscale apartment buildings near Central Park, Carroll, her mother, and her daughter lived “in a comfortable apartment just off Broadway,” explaining, “this way I can get home fast and spend as much time with my family between shows as possible.”

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419 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 4–10.
421 Cook, “Woman Comic Plays to ‘Guy With a Sneer.’”
the Friar’s Club event, where she reflected, “[We lived] between Broadway and Seventh, and from our window I could see the lights of the Paramount Marquee when my mother was appearing there. It was great. I loved it.” 422 Indeed, the account that Helen gave of her upbringing was generally rosy, depicting Carroll as an involved and exciting mother:

When she traveled, she took me with her…I think it mostly depended on whether or not there was a babysitter, you know. But I went with her a lot. I went when she worked six, eight weeks in Vegas and Florida and so on…I was like Eloise…I had the best life in the world! …My mother was a lot of fun to be with, and regardless of the fact that she worked hard, she worked what, two, three hours a night…and the rest of the time she could be with me…My mother used to sneak me in, and I would stand under the craps table while she played…I did go along on club dates here and there…Oh, and Atlantic City, how could I forget the Steel Pier? That was a little dull for me. She did five or six shows a day in those days at the Steel Pier! 423

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422 Tunick, Helen Tunick Interview Transcripts, 1–2.
423 Tunick, 1–2–1–5.
As Helen reminisces, she paints a relatively idealistic portrait of togetherness. Her reflections of being “like Eloise” living in hotels and sneaking into casinos with her mother, gives her childlike perspective of “the best life in the world.” This cheerful account is depicted in a press clipping from 1958, included in Carroll’s personal scrapbook. The photograph shows Carroll, seemingly backstage at the Fu Manchu, in heavy show-make-up and seated in a monogrammed “celebrity chair” with young Helen, attired in a ruffled dress and hair bow, stands smilingly by her side, pointing to her mother’s name.

However, Tunick also gestures towards some of the difficulties of her mother’s position. Undermining her earlier assertion that her mother “only worked two, three hours a night,” Tunick later disclosed,

She wrote for hours. When she was writing a new routine, she would sit at this crummy portable typewriter...And write and write and revise and revise and walk around and think, and try things out, and rewrite it again and again and again. A lot of work. A lot of work. Very serious work. There was nothing light-hearted about it. I mean, it was just...it was work.⁴²⁴

Her daughter’s emphasis on the long hours of writing and revision reveals that Carroll’s

⁴²⁴ Tunick, 1–10.
audiences—critical and popular—only really saw a fraction of her labor. While Carroll’s work as a performer was public, her work as a writer took place in a more private sphere.

Tunick also points out that her presence on her mother’s work trips was the result of her being unable to find a baby-sitter. Although for a time, Carroll’s mother lived with them, health problems made her a less reliable source of child care. The necessity of a baby-sitter reveals that Helen’s father was either unable or unwilling to take over the role as her guardian, even temporarily. Helen’s daughter Susan describes her grandfather’s role in childrearing as minimal, explaining

> He was born in 1910, and he had a serious job, so he was as hands-on as much as men *were* hands on, but that wasn’t…like now. She did everything. My grandfather was like…wallpaper, comparatively. She was the heart of our house, and he was there…sometimes. He was important at ICM [the talent agency] but in my life, he was just this guy who *sometimes* came home for dinner.”

And Helen’s reflections on ‘dull’ trips to Atlantic city point to the rigorous schedule demanded of the performers—most of whom were not coming home to a young child. Carroll’s own account of traveling the nightclub circuit with a small child gives an even clearer picture of the ways in which life as a stand-up comic was not designed to accommodate childcare responsibilities. Her anecdote about trying to find medical treatment for her daughter while on the road provides one example:

> My little girl got sick. I’d had her in the pool, and apparently she ingested some of the water, or whatever, she got so sick. She’s an infant! And I went to [the manager] and I said, “Can you tell me anything about a doctor in town? Is there a pediatrician? Is there anything?” He wouldn’t lift a finger. He wouldn’t even make a phone call. “I don’t know.” I said, “You don’t know if there’s a doctor in town? Don’t you have a family?”

425 Tunick, Helen Tunick Interview Transcripts.
426 Chatzky, Grace Overbeke Interview with Susan Chatzky.
427 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 3–24.
Carroll’s plea, “Don’t you have a family?” highlights the gendered distribution of labor characterizing that time period; women were in charge of maintaining relationships with pediatricians and managing the health of the family. And so whether or not the manager had a family, he was either not able or inclined to share resources on how he managed their health. Put another way, Carroll approached him as one family-member to another, but he shut down the interaction, insisting on limiting their relations to that of a stage manager and performer. Unlike so many female workers, he was presented with the luxury of divorcing his career from his family life. Another of her stories specifically references a time when her role as a mother adversely affected her performance onstage:

“My little girl was just a year old, and my niece was taking care of her. But I didn’t know that my niece would sneak out, you know, hang out in the back and watch me perform. And this baby was in the crib, covered with black ants, which I found all over her when I walked in. And I’m out there, and I wasn’t good. I really wasn’t…I doubt that any comic, doing a routine act, could have been a success there. Given those conditions.”

Again, what is key about ‘those conditions’ is that they are specific to a performer who was also taking responsibility for her child. While many male stand-up comedians were also parents, they typically did not take on the role of a primary caretaker such that they would ever be put in the position of dividing their attention between the audience and an ant-covered baby.

By 1950, a press clipping from Carroll’s scrapbook reveals that she was so divided by her coexisting roles as caretaker and comedian that she was “counting on quitting the footlights for

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428 Carroll, 3–21.
good come Christmas to devote herself to husband Buddy Howe, the theatrical agent, their five-year-old daughter Robin, and homelife in general.” However, this intended turn to domesticity came precisely at the time when Carroll’s comedy career was gaining momentum, with the paper referencing “a starring engagement at the Latin Quarter starting in October, a new television show to begin later this winter, and a series of comedy films for the Columbia Studios.”

Carroll’s husband—who was also her manager—urged her to take advantage of this momentum, both because “you owe it to your public” and because she was making “pots of money.”

Therefore, Carroll continued to juggle her multiple roles, in spite of the strain.

Both Carroll’s and Tunick’s accounts depict a mother-daughter relationship in which deep love and attachment was intertwined with the separation anxiety that came with the long-term gigs and late nights of the entertainment industry. Carroll subtly referenced abstaining from the socializing that took place after performances by quoting Marlene Dietrich’s chastisement, “You never join us at night to have a drink! Why don’t you join us at night?” The likely answer to Dietrich’s query was that Carroll knew her daughter was at home waiting for her. For when asked about whether it was exciting to see her mother perform on The Ed Sullivan Show, Tunick responded that when watching the show, she was primarily paying attention to the time-slot that her mother was given, “because that would affect what time she got home.” Carroll affirms that she too was eager to return to her family after her Ed Sullivan appearances, stating, “I didn’t mix. I did my show, I took my shopping bag, and I went home.”

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430 “She Tells Tricks of the Trade.”
432 Tunick, Helen Tunick Interview Transcripts, 1–8.
433 Nachman, Right Here on Our Stage Tonight! Ed Sullivan’s America, 195.
occurred at post-show drinking sessions also had a professional valence—it was a form of networking in which coworkers solidified social relationships that could translate into professional opportunities.\textsuperscript{434} And so on a microscopic level, Carroll’s need to return home to her family rather than cozy up to Dietrich, Sullivan, and the other A-list names of the show business world was a deterrent, professionally speaking.

Carroll’s personal scrapbook is in many ways a testament to her intense, sometimes fraught efforts to interweave her family life and career. For this carefully curated collection of press clippings shows a remarkable emphasis on her daughter. In a sample of approximately 100 clippings, Carroll’s daughter is referenced twenty-nine times, and referred to by the name ‘Robin’ (her mother’s pet-name) an additional thirteen times.\textsuperscript{435} The narrative of Carroll’s career, seen through the lens of her scrapbook, becomes a kind of worms-eye-view biography of Helen, whose appearance is first charted in a trade column “Behind the Mic,” when the columnist covered Jean Carroll’s upcoming appearance on Jack Barry’s “Juvenile Celebs,” commenting that by appearing alongside her daughter, Carroll was “giving her 5-year-old daughter Robin an early start in showbiz.”\textsuperscript{436} Throughout the newspaper features on Carroll, Helen grows from an “eight-year-old daughter”\textsuperscript{437} to “eleven-year-old Robin”\textsuperscript{438} to a 14-year-old “lovely flower unfolding”\textsuperscript{439} to a 15-year-old artist whose charcoal drawing was displayed alongside the

\textsuperscript{434} Jerry Della Femina and Charles Sopkin, \textit{From Those Wonderful Folks Who Gave You Pearl Harbor: Front-Line Dispatches from the Advertising War} (Text: Melbourne, 2010).
\textsuperscript{435} Jean Carroll, \textit{Jean Carroll’s Personal Scrapbook}, n.d., Newspaper Article, n.d.
\textsuperscript{436} “Behind the Mike,” May 29, 1950, Page 35, Jean Carroll Scrapbook. Personal Collection of Susan Chatzky.
\textsuperscript{437} “Fastest Female Talker Ever,” May 16, 1953, Page 60, Jean Carroll.
family’s recently-purchased Picasso, to the “artistic daughter Robin, now married.” Articles that mention ‘Robin’ are consistently from mainstream press publications, rather than trade magazines like Variety, underlining the disinterest that the professional world showed in recognizing Carroll’s role as a mother. In most of these mainstream publications, Carroll’s constant references to ‘Robin’ seem to be attempts to convince the public to accept the coexistence of Carroll’s comedy and family life.

The Jean Carroll that exists in these ‘family’ profiles shows remarkable agility, nimbly hopping from comedian to parent personae. In the Milwaukee Green Sheet profile, she immediately transitioned from ‘proud mama’ mode, showing off Robin’s paintings and praising her as “a wonderful, sensitive child” to ‘stand-up comic’ mode, using her daughter as comic fodder:

I asked her the other day, "Robin, why do you talk so much?" …She talked herself pale once. I said to her, "Honey, you have to stop long enough to take a breath." She even talks under water. I ask her a question when she's on the diving board and she doesn't stop or wait to come up—strings of bubbles appear.

Mosedale acknowledges the shift into stand-up, remarking, “This, of course, is the Carroll material on which are built the monologues that have won her fans at home.” But he still comes away commending both her talent as a comedian and her housekeeping of “Hollywood's idea of what a Park Avenue Apartment looks like.”

Another profile begins by identifying Carroll as “one of the country’s top comedienne,” explaining “on stage or TV, being funny is her business,” before neatly pivoting to a contrasting
assertion: “But to Jean, the business of motherhood is a serious thing.” In her quotations, Carroll employs a jovial ‘kids-say-the-darnedest-things’ playfulness, quoting her daughter’s naïve questions (“What does it mean when Lassie is in heat?”). But within the very same paragraph, she moves to earnest parenting philosophy, asserting:

Questions like these…give me a chance to spark discussions that invariably bear fruit. I get a better insight into the depth of Robin’s mind, and it gives me a perfect opening to get across my own ideas and beliefs. The better we know our children—and the better they know us—the clever and tranquiller our relationship is bound to be.  

\[444\] Judson, “Speaking of Families: They Talk Things Over.”
The photograph accompanying this profile is an apt summary of the dual roles of comedian and caretaker that Carroll represents. Featured in the center of the background is a print of Carroll’s headshot, hanging prominently on the wall in an opulent frame. In the foreground, Carroll and her daughter pose with Lassie, their collie. Carroll is dressed in a high-collared plaid shirt, with one hand holding a cup of tea and the other being licked by the dog. Her daughter sits by her side, hair neatly plaited. Both are smiling widely. The palimpsest of Jean Carrolls is striking. In the background is the impeccably coiffed and revealingly-dressed glamour girl, alone and aloof, her gaze peering coyly off to the right. In the foreground is the flannel-clad mother, Lassie and Robin by her side, her bright smile directed frankly to the left. The photograph, holding the two Carrolls side by side but separated by frames, visualizes the very objective of ‘domestic profiles’ like these—the coexistence of Carroll’s role as a performer and mother.

*The New York Daily News* released a similar profile a few years later, declaring “Jean’s
just as talented in the role of mother as she is comedienne.” A section of the article was subtitled “Mother and Daughter,” reading:

While it's true the comedienne enjoys star billing on TV, at home her role is definitely that of co-star to her lovely, attractive daughter Robin. Not once during our interview did Miss Carroll upstage her or treat her like an intruder. Theirs, as any stranger could quickly detect, is a genuine, warm relationship based on mutual understanding and honesty.  

The register of this piece is distinctively ‘show-biz’—positioning Carroll’s motherhood as a “role” and contrasting her “star billing on TV” with her “co-star” status with her daughter at home. The writer implies some degree of surprise that Carroll does not try to “upstage” Robin, concluding that the Howes were a “contrary situation” to the “unhappy second banana role usually allotted the children of theatrical parents.” Like the profiles in the Providence Evening Bulletin and the Milwaukee Journal Green sheet, this New York Daily News feature is an instance of the press attempting to reconcile Jean Carroll, the celebrity comedian with Jean Carroll, the devoted mother. The fact that multiple widely-circulated publications felt that the coexistence of comic and caretaker was newsworthy—even from a human interest angle—attests to its unusual nature. In the 1950s (as in 2017), stories of women attempting to ‘have it all’ were noteworthy.

“Not Without My Daughter”

Some of the articles that Carroll kept reflected the professional sacrifices that she made on her daughter’s behalf. A British publication in 1953 bemoaned the fact that “Jean will not be touring the provinces or the suburban theatres,” because “her eight-year-old daughter has had the measles.” The article reveals at least some measure of ambivalence on Carroll’s part, who

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446 “Fastest Female Talker Ever.”
made a point of telling the reporter, “They’re trying to talk me into staying…but I talked myself out of it.” This article sets an important precedent in Carroll’s press coverage: the character of a reluctant comedienne, sought after by the entertainment industry, but whose priorities lay with her family. Over the course of her career, Carroll returned to this character several times, giving interviews in which she made impassioned declarations of loyalty to her family, while also highlighting the intense demand facing her from show business.

Carroll’s narrative of sacrifice for her family was not lost on Helen, and it may have been part of the wedge that arose between them as Helen approached adolescence. In an interview at her mother’s Friar’s Club retrospective, Helen recalled expressing frustrations with her mother’s career:

I remember, as a kid, 11, 12 years old, maybe, now and then making some cracks like, “Nobody else’s mother worked”…I think I did say something one time about, you know, “Why can’t you stay home and bake cookies like everybody else’s mother?” Because I really didn’t get it. Why she ‘had’ to work.447

Perhaps to Helen’s dismay, her crack about staying home and baking cookies made it into several newspapers, including an article in which Carroll gave a paragraph-long defense of herself:

Her 13-year-old daughter has a good sense of humor, [Carroll] says, especially when she suggests that Mom quit the stage and bake cookies for her. "At times like that I remind her that she sees more of me than many children see of their mothers, that she eats dinners out with us, and spends weekend and vacation trips with her parents, unlike her friends. I tell her though that even if I did stay home all the time, I wouldn’t be in the kitchen baking cookies. I’d probably be forced to become social and join the bridge club of the other mothers.” 448

Amidst her defensive language, Carroll manages to work in some jokes—such as being “forced” to “join a bridge club.” This early material recalls one of her later monologues “Moving to The

447 Tunick, Helen Tunick Interview Transcripts, 2–14.
Suburbs” with jokes about this predicament of coercive suburban social groups:

In the country, everything is organizations, everything is done in groups!
Two women meet on the street:
“Oh Agnes, I’m going to have a baby!”
“Isn’t that wonderful, so am I—who else can we get? 449

As comedically profitable as the subject of suburban living might have been, the overarching tone of articles like this one reveal its more anxious dimension, as Carroll defends herself by invoking other more negligent parents.

Carroll’s defensive stance became even more pronounced in a lengthy feature detailing her many shifts between retirement and career plans. A profile in the Kleiner TV Notebook reveals a complex mixture of self-aggrandizement and defensiveness:

Pioneer Jean Carroll can look back at the trail she blazed with satisfaction. She was one of the first comediennes, and it used to be tough for a girl to make a living with laughs. "Believe me," she says, "the women were the hardest to please. They'd give me that "Why-aren't-you-home-minding-the-baby?’ look. But now it's easy—there are a lot of girls in the field.” Jean in fact, now turns down more work than she accepts. She limits herself to TV (she has upcoming dates with Ed Sullivan and Gary Moore and a month or so in New York and Florida). She'll accept no big tours and won't consider the offers of a TV show of her own.

"It's because of my daughter" she says. "Robin is 14. Well, really, I guess it's not because of her, but because of me. I don't want to miss any of this—she's like a lovely flower, unfolding." It wasn't too long ago that Robin came home from school one day with a problem. "Something had happened in school," Jean says. "Robin said to me, "I don't think I have a normal home life." She was thinking about the times I was away from home. So I said, "Don't other girls' parents go on vacation?" "I'm up at seven with her, and at night, I get her dinner—I like to cook—and I'm her friend. I take her to school, go to the PTA meetings and all. So I said to her, "How am I remiss?" She had no answer. "You know, parents who don't work at all often spend less time with their kids than I do with my daughter—than most show business parents do with their children." She wasn't a comedienne then. She was deadly serious. “Dick Kleiner-NEA Staff Correspondent. 450

This profile continues Carroll’s trend of asserting that her choice to depart from show business is

449 “The Ed Sullivan Show” (CBS, October 18, 1959), SOFA Entertainment.
450 Kleiner, “The Viewers Spoke, so Gene Kelly Is Back.”
not a matter of decreased demand, for she still “turns down more work than she accepts.” Rather, it is a testament to her prioritization of family over show business (and the implied mutual exclusivity of the two). Carroll’s first quotation, remembering the way that women in the audience gave her an “why-aren’t-you-home-minding-the-baby-look” reveals her sense that female audience members were accusing her of neglecting her role as caretaker. But the unmistakable focus of the article is Carroll’s almost melodramatic account of her commitment to her daughter, the “lovely flower unfolding.” The fact that she depicts Helen’s complaints, foregrounding them as the main ‘conflict’ of the story, suggests that she wants to highlight the difficulty of being both a parent and a performer. And the fact that Carroll spends twice as long countering her daughter’s complaint with a description of her own intense involvement (cooking, chauffeuring and meeting with the PTA) before comparing herself favorably to “most show business parents” suggests her need to defend herself to the public, protesting (a bit too much, methinks) that her career has not come at the expense of her motherhood. Still, the columnist sees the roles in tension, evident in the wording of his final statement—that when Jean Carroll spoke of her commitment to motherhood, “She wasn't a comedienne then. She was deadly serious.” The play on words betokens a larger worldview, in which the playful role of comedienne is at odds with the serious role of mother. Overall, the piece captures Carroll’s fraught emotions surrounding her need to juggle a career and motherhood.

**ATV-Sitcom**

The recurrent tug-of-war between motherhood and show business came to a head in the early 1960s, when Carroll was offered a high-profile sitcom overseas. The ATV (Associated Television) network, based in London, aired programming in England, Canada, and Australia,
and was eager to book Carroll for a 26-episode family sitcom.\footnote{Harold Stein, “Jean Carroll in Series Swim” (The Reporter Dispatch, White Plains, NY, January 3, 1961), Page 79, Jean Carroll Scrapbook. Personal Collection of Susan Chatzky.} Carroll had gained recent accolades in England with performances at the London Palladium and long term (four-week) engagements at the Savoy, prompting the sitcom offer with the hefty and well-publicized fee of £50,000. Carefully pasted into Carroll’s scrapbook are a series of articles emphasizing this exceptional sum, one headlined “Dream Contract,”\footnote{“Dream Contract,” n.d., Page 75, Jean Carroll Scrapbook. Personal Collection of Susan Chatzky.} and another—illustrated with a cartoon of Carroll draped in a mink stole and opulent hat—proclaiming, “Talkative Miss Carroll has a £50,000 problem.”\footnote{Grieg, “Talkative Miss Carroll Has a $50,000 Problem.”}

The problem, it seems, was the same as it has always been: how to pursue show business while also being the kind of caretaker that she wanted to be. The article attributed her indecision over the television series to three causes: “(a) I am not desperate for money (b) I don't like leaving my 16-year-old daughter alone in New York and (c) I am frankly beginning to get very tired of

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\caption{Caricature of Jean Carroll in British periodical, saved in Carroll’s personal scrapbook, n.d. (Private collection of Susan Chatzky)}
\end{figure}
hearing myself talk.” Her allusion to her daughter, couched inconspicuously between a reference to her successful husband’s career and her quip about growing tired of hearing herself talk, became more of a focal point of Carroll’s argument in other articles documenting her fraught process of decision-making. “It’s most important that I should be with her now. She’s leaving adolescence for womanhood,” Carroll declared in a separate interview. Carroll explained that Helen bore the brunt of her absence when she was gone, explaining “We don’t have a housekeeper or anything like that. When I’m away, Helen looks after everything” and concluding “This TV series means big money, but if I can’t do it with Helen by my side, then I shan’t do it in Britain.”

Again, Carroll is not an unimpeachable narrator. Compounding her professed concern about Helen’s increased household responsibilities in her absence was the issue of Helen’s health. According to Helen’s daughter Susan, Helen struggled with addiction from a young age. Just as Carroll’s public narrative of her life omits the marital discord suggested by the McHale trial, so too does it omit any mention of her daughter’s health complications.

The “Dream Contract” clipping gives a bit more information on what Carroll meant when she said that she would not do the show without Helen “by her side.” First, she asked ATV to schedule the filming of the series around Helen’s school calendar. A British publication wrote, “She wants the series to be made in the summer so that her 16-year-old daughter, at present at school in America, can be here with her during vacation.” The same article includes a bit of commentary in which Carroll seems intent on softening the perceived ‘demand,’ insisting, “I

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454 Grieg.
456 Chatzky, Grace Overbeke Interview with Susan Chatzky.
457 “Dream Contract.”
have not presented them with an ultimatum or anything like that. I have just asked if it could be arranged for the shows to be done while Helen can be here.\textsuperscript{458} Evidently, Carroll’s summer-schedule demand was met, for an article in The Reporter Dispatch revealed that filming was scheduled to start in June of 1961. This article reveals another of Carroll’s attempts to integrate her daughter into her career: casting her actual daughter as her sitcom daughter:

‘My 16-year-old daughter Robin will do the series with me,’ Jean commented. “Since I’m going to use a teen-ager in the series, why shouldn’t I use my daughter? She claims she has no talent, but if she can act natural and take direction, she’ll be fine. I’ve been working with her and with a little prodding and a little aggravation she’ll do all right. I told her if she feels like reacting differently than the script calls for to go right ahead—put the burden on me. I’ll have an answer. If worse comes to worse, I’ll hit her. I always have an answer.\textsuperscript{459}

In this context, Carroll’s statement “I always have an answer” seems to work on multiple levels, ostensibly referring to her ability to turn her show-business neophyte daughter into a working actor, but perhaps also referring to her ability to figure out the ‘answer’ to her chronic problem of balancing family and career. Yet the resistance suggested in Robin’s claim that she “has no talent” suggests that the ‘answer’ that her mother found may have been a one-sided solution.

Ultimately, the ATV sitcom did not go through. Carroll’s carefully preserved clippings, with headlines like, “£50,000 TV Offer, But Jean Thinks of Daughter.”\textsuperscript{460} and “With Jean, it’s the family first, Show Biz Second”\textsuperscript{461} suggest that the television show was halted in its tracks by her decision to prioritize her family. In one of the articles, Carroll explicitly states,

You know, I’m too much in love with my family to keep going away from my home. My husband and 16-year-old daughter are dead-heat for first place and I just don’t

\textsuperscript{458} “Dream Contract.”
\textsuperscript{459} Stein, “Jean Carroll in Series Swim.”
\textsuperscript{460} Daily Mail Reporter, “$50,000 TV Offer, but Jean Thinks of Daughter.”
\textsuperscript{461} “With Jean It’s the Family First, Show Biz Second,” n.d., Page 78, Jean Carroll Scrapbook. Personal Collection of Susan Chatzky.
want to travel around anymore. The only dates I want are those on home ground—and not more than a mile away from where I live. Yes, I still love show business, but I love my family more.462

This declaration, “I love show business, but I love my family more” reveals how the two were—had long been—at odds with one another. The fact that Carroll saved these particular articles, arranging them into a narrative of family-based self-sacrifice, suggests that the choice to prioritize family over show business is how she viewed her own professional and personal narrative. Indeed, the cancellation of the ATV sitcom marks the first time that one of Carroll’s many attempts to retire from show business actually stuck. However, there may have been other factors influencing her shift from comedy to caretaking, connected to her fraught history with the medium of television.

The Rise of Television

*If you don’t make it with TV, there’s practically no show business.*—Jean Carroll463

The ATV sitcom offer was not Carroll’s first foray into the world of televised domestic sitcoms. In order to understand a potential cause of her reluctance to pursue the ATV show, one must understand her history with the medium—of sitcoms, and television in general. From the beginning of the television boom, Carroll was projected to be a star of that sphere. However, her brief forays into TV stardom revealed the limits of her creative control, as her own voice was repeatedly overlooked in favor of her male collaborators.

462 “With Jean It’s the Family First, Show Biz Second.”
The moment of the 1950s, as Jean Carroll’s career was peaking, was a heady period of shifting from theatre and radio-based entertainment to television. In *Make Room for TV*, Lynn Spigel describes how in its early days, television was trumpeted for its ability to “simulate the entire experience of being at the theater.”\(^{464}\) Therefore, the two genres that network executives turned towards for programming were theatrical forms such as the drama and Vaudeville. Spigel reports,

> The legitimate theatre particularly inspired television’s live anthology dramas such as *Kraft Television Theatre*, and *Philco Television Playhouse*, while Vaudeville, and, to a lesser degree, burlesque and nightclub performances served as models for variety shows such as *Texaco Star Theatre* and *Your Show of Shows.*\(^{465}\)

One of the specific elements variety shows drew from Vaudeville was the structure, which Spigel describes as an “olio” organization, “in which a series of separate acts did fifteen-minute sketches that had little relation to the others.”\(^{466}\) Vaudeville comedians like Milton Berle and Red Skelton became television stars on Vaudeville-inspired variety programs with a condensed version of this olio format. Perhaps the most famous, and certainly the longest running, vaudeville-inspired show was Ed Sullivan’s “Toast of the Town,” later renamed “The Ed Sullivan Show.” Comedy historian Gerald Nachman notes “Only 16 years separated vaudeville’s official death—the closing of the Palace Theatre, in 1932—from the debut of “Toast of the Town” in 1948. Sullivan could book the historic, legendary vaudevillians.”\(^{467}\) And one of those vaudevillians that Sullivan brought to the small screen was Jean Carroll. *Toast of the Town* premiered in Sunday, June 20, 1948, and within seven months, alongside balloon-animal makers

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\(^{465}\) Spigel, 138.

\(^{466}\) Spigel, 145.

\(^{467}\) Nachman, *Right Here on Our Stage Tonight! Ed Sullivan’s America*, 30.
and other ex-vaudevillans, Carroll made her debut.

Carroll enjoyed an auspicious beginning in the world of television. In addition to her early features on *Toast of the Town*, she appeared on several other programs. A notice reviewing her guest spot on a CBS TV-Quiz “This is Show Business” exclaims, “Miss Carroll zinged over her cafe floor routine with such impact that she’ll have no problem getting more TV guest shots.” She also enjoyed a critically-praised “guest shot” on *The Perry Como Chesterfield Show*. The industry column ‘Nite Side’ reporting that Carroll’s guest spot on the Como show ended January 15, predicted that it was merely a “warm-up for the comedy series Tommy Rockwell [General Artists Corporation President] has in mind,” asserting, “Tommy figures she’ll be one of 1950’s television biggies.”

At first, Rockwell did not seem far off in his conviction that Carroll would be a “television biggie.” In April of 1951, Jean Carroll was mentioned as a potential host for a weekly variety show on CBS. This was the first instance of a female-led variety show in network history. A complimentary ticket for what seems to be a rehearsal of this variety program, called “The Jean Carroll Show” is depicted below:

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By the end of April 1951, CBS was “handing its new comedy show starring Jean Carroll an on-the-air audition” Thursday night from 10:30-11:00 pm. These auditions were basically one-time shows “for the benefit of agencies and potential sponsors” to decide whether they would pick it up for a longer run.

According to Variety, Carroll worked that variety show for all she was worth. She performed a comic domestic scene in which she “bandied words with a husband who ‘disappeared five years ago behind a paper,’” she acted in a sketch about “a rich couple who marry off their daughter” and she “did some challenge tap dancing with Bill Callahan,” all while carrying on comedic monologues in between acts. The reviewer praised Carroll’s “versatility” and “fine sense of timing in handling her lines.” They even nodded to her significance as a

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473 Gilb, “Television Reviews: JEAN CARROLL SHOW.”
474 Gilb.
woman host, stating “Ordinarily femmes seldom make good funmakers. However, the CBS find proved a mistress of wit who could turn a phrase for maximum effect.”\textsuperscript{475} However, one thing that Jean Carroll did not do for her program was write. Despite the fact that she had always written both her stand-up material and the celebrated Carroll & Howe sketches, she was not given a writing credit on the variety show. Instead, the listed writers were Colman Jacoby and Arnie Rosen, who had gained acclaim with their work on Jackie Gleason’s comedy \textit{Cavalcade of Stars}. The writing ultimately proved to be the show’s most criticized point, with the reviewer dismissing it as “so-so,” saying that the sketches “reminded me of the poorer Sid Caesar-Imogene Coca bits.”\textsuperscript{476} Perhaps due to the negative response to the writing, \textit{The Jean Carroll Show} did not win the time slot, which ultimately went to the program \textit{Casey, Crime Photographer}, starring Richard Carlyle. In denying Jean Carroll a writing credit on her own show, CBS foreshadowed the difficulties that were to plague Carroll’s would-be television career.

Networks continued to dangle opportunity in front of Carroll before snatching it away in favor of male artists. In May of 1951, \textit{The New York World-Telegram and Sun} reported that “she is slated for her own half-hour show on CBS-TV this summer.”\textsuperscript{477} However, no such show seems to have aired. Two years after the failed CBS pilot, Carroll seems to have moved from CBS to NBC, as \textit{Variety} published that NBC-TV “in its search for new faces to augment its comedy stable, has signed comedienne Jean Carroll to a five-year pact.”\textsuperscript{478} The column also mentioned

\textsuperscript{475} Gilb.
\textsuperscript{476} Gilb.
\textsuperscript{477} Leahy, “Jean Can Laugh at Herself.”
that they were “considering putting Miss Carroll in as a summer replacement for part of the Saturday night ‘Show of Shows.’”\textsuperscript{479} This deal never came to fruition. While NBC was musing on what to do with her, Carroll had to turn down Henny Youngman’s invitation to be in “American Comedy Quartet” an (ultimately unaired) show featuring himself, Willy Shore, and Ish Kabibble.\textsuperscript{480}

By 1953, however, a shift had already begun taking place in the still-nascent medium of televised entertainment. In \textit{Make Room for TV}, Lynn Spigel shows that the huge popularity of CBS’s domestic sitcom \textit{I Love Lucy} prompted both CBS and other networks to develop the genre, until within ten years of \textit{I Love Lucy}’s debut, there were twice as many sitcoms as there were variety shows, and anthology dramas had all but disappeared. Theorizing this shift towards sitcoms, Spigel writes:

\begin{quote}
The development of the situation comedy can be seen in part as a compromise between the two types of theatrical aesthetics that were embraced by the early television industry... Blending the wild spontaneity of vaudeville performance with the more genteel—and decidedly noncontroversial—aspects of theatrical realism, this genre became the network’s preferred form for reaching a family audience.\textsuperscript{481}
\end{quote}

And so when NBC began contemplating a new television program as a vehicle for Jean Carroll, it took the form not of a variety show, but of a domestic sitcom, in the tradition of CBS’s “The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show” (which premiered in 1950) “I Love Lucy” (which premiered in 1951); ABC’s “The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet” and NBC’s “I Married Joan,” which both premiered in 1952.

In theory, the plethora of domestic sitcoms filling television schedules was a great

\textsuperscript{479} “Miscellany: Jean Carroll Pacts 5-Year NBC-TV Deal.”
\textsuperscript{481} Spigel, \textit{Make Room for TV}, 144.
opportunity for women. As Spigel notes, “In place of the bad-boy Berles and soda-squirting Skeltons, situation comedies usually put the spotlight on female comics such as Lucille Ball, Joan Davis, and Gracie Allen.” Columnists of the period such as Jack Gould reasoned that “Since the TV audience is the family at home, the domestic comedy, revolving around the woman of the house is a natural formula.” However, it appears that in Jean Carroll’s experience, her artistic agency was limited to her performance on-camera. As her show made its fraught journey to network television, Jean Carroll’s creative control seemed to dwindle into near-nothingness.

Take It From Me…and they did.

While under contract with NBC in 1952, Carroll began planning the kind of sitcom that she wanted to create. An in-depth interview saved to her scrapbook gives a sense of what Carroll had in mind for her NBC sitcom, reading:

…Comedienne Jean Carroll is now set to become a regular television attraction on the NBC network. The contract was signed some weeks ago and the only thing that has held up her debut as a weekly living room headliner--she has done numerous guest shots since TV took over the American nights--has been script trouble. "They haven't been able to get a suitable story line for me," she explains. But she expects that gigantic detail to be attended to within a short time and will be bowing on a situation comedy show, scheduled for Saturday night, any week now. And if she isn't the least bit afraid of what lies ahead, neither is she turning handsprings to show her eagerness.

"I want to know that when I do this thing, it's going to be right." she told us last night at the Latin Casino, where she is the star of the new show. Miss Jean Carroll, a New Yorker who has been convulsing people in nightclubs and theaters for eight years by showing them how others see them, has always done nothing more than an uproarious monologue.

482 Spigel, 152.
483 Spigel, 152.
…The style will be changed, naturally, for television, but Carroll will still be Carroll. "I'll be strictly myself," she says, "I'll have a household and a child and I'll be the kind everybody comes to with their problems. Of course I'll say some funny things. But I don't want it to be a joke show. There is not enough material in the world for jokes for shows that go on week after week. All I want to do is make the audience smile and enjoy themselves inside."

Miss Carroll realizes that the future can be something of an ordeal. "TV is the hardest work in show business," she says. "It's much tougher than clubs and theatres, and it's ten times as hard as movies. On TV, if you blow a line, you don't get another crack at it. You can not only burn out your material on TV but you can also wear out your welcome--unless you do the type of thing that is so normal, so casual so everyday that people can poke each other and say, "She's talking about you." That is what Miss Carroll accomplishes on a nightclub floor.484

Several things become apparent through this article. First, Carroll’s comment that her show was being held up by “script trouble,” and that a mysterious “they” were unable to devise a “suitable story line” suggests that she did not have a leading role in the writing room. Another striking element of the article is her insistence that the show be done “right,” which, she elaborates, means that it is more than “a joke show.” Here, she shows an astute understanding of the differences between the demands of stand-up comedy and of sitcoms. Instead of merely reiterating the punchlines that comprised her stand-up act, she keyed into the need for her show to depict her as a more rounded character—“the kind everybody comes to with their problems.” In her prediction that a “joke show” would not only “burn out” her material, but also be unsustainable “week after week,” she actually anticipates much of the critiques that would later plague her sitcom. At the time however, it seems that Carroll’s voice went unheeded; the “script trouble” continued, and within a matter of months, NBC dropped her contract.

In 1953, ABC signed up to produce a new half-hour sitcom centered around Jean Carroll,

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where it was promptly dropped from the schedule in favor of “Back That Fact” a quiz-show hosted by Joey Adams. Although the show was restored to the ABC line-up, several drastic changes were made that undermined Carroll’s voice in the project. Much to Carroll’s dismay, executives replaced Louis Nye, the actor playing Carroll’s husband, with Art Carney. Not long after that, Carroll lost her director Dick Linkroum, to one of her ex-network NBC’s “pet daytime projects.” Adding insult to injury, the columnist announcing Linkroum’s move disparagingly referred to his leaving Carroll’s show as having “the chore dropped from his schedule.”

By the time Carroll’s sitcom “Take It From Me” premiered on ABC, Wednesday November 11, 1953, Carroll was no more than a cast member, albeit a leading one. The writers—Colman Jacoby and Arnie Rosen—had worked on the failed CBS pilot. They had no sitcom experience at that point, having worked mainly on variety programs such as Texaco Star Theatre and Cavalcade of Stars. According to an interview with Stephen Silverman, Carroll was shut out of the script-writing process, explaining:

I had been in for surgery—serious surgery, and when I came out, my husband said that ABC was going to do a pilot. I had two writers—Colin (sic) Jacoby and Arnie Rosen. And they wrote a pilot. This was all while I was in the hospital. No input from me, no nothing! 

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486 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 4–6.
489 “Radio-Television: Dick Linkroum Set As ‘Home’ Exec Director.”
491 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 3–11.
Her voice also went unheard on the subject of casting. As she discussed in an interview with Jane Wollman, she approached ABC to complain that Alan Carney was “deadly in the part,” but was told she “can’t dictate to the network.”492 She was even told by ABC that “I would not have to rehearse much.”493 In spite of the show bearing her name, its production had taken place almost completely without her creative voice.

There is currently no existing footage of *Take It From Me*, and so analysis of the program is limited by what can be reconstructed from summaries and reviews. *TV Guide* offers the basic premise of the show:

> Cast as a so-called average housewife, complete with a bumbling, lazy, but good-natured husband and a moppet daughter, [Carroll] opens each show with a monologue…From her monologue, the show moves each week into the story…Most of the action takes place in the family apartment and its environs, including the basement laundry room, the corner drug store and her daughter’s school. While the location is never pin-pointed, it's presumed to be Brooklyn or the Bronx.494

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492 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
493 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 4–6.
Indeed, the photograph of the show depicts the nuclear family of Carroll and Carney with Lynn Loring, playing the 'moppet daughter' decked out in braids and a prim dress:

![Production photo, "Take It From Me," saved in Carroll's personal scrapbook, 1953 (Private collection of Susan Chatzky)](image)

More of the details of this "opening monologue" and some of the dialogue with the "lazy but good-natured husband" is offered by Harriet Van Horne's column, which quotes:

> I have two wonderful children,” she [Carroll] explained at the opening,
> A girl of 8 and a boy 36.
> ‘...Be careful crossing the streets,’ Jean warns as he leaves for work,
> ‘Get an old lady to help you.’
> ‘Some day I’m gonna forget where I live,’ mutters the master of the house.
> ‘I know,’ ripostes the little woman, ‘but when?’”

There is, in the gendered bickering, a tonal similarity to Jacoby and Rosen’s previous work on

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Jackie Gleason’s show *Cavalcade of Stars*, where they are credited with "Bread," the sketch that would later become *The Honeymooners* sitcom. In "Bread," the put-upon husband Ralph Kramden (Gleason) and his wife Alice (Pert Kelton) get into a screaming match over who should buy bread. The dialogue is a slew of back-and-forth zingers like,

RALPH: I'm not going to Krause's tonight for the bread! I'm not going to Krause's last night for the bread! And I'm not going to Krause's the night before for the bread!
ALICE: Who do you think you're hurting, me? I don't eat bread!

One reviewer referenced this parallel, writing that the show “was remindful of the Honeymooners on the Gleason show.” The *Variety* review provides a more detailed summary of the 'plot' (such as it was) of the pilot episode:

Opening stanza Wednesday (4) was nothing more than a report of her day at home, but its approach was lively and lighthearted. It followed her from breakfast with her husband, his face buried in the morning newspaper of course, through a laundry-klatch in the apartment house’s community laundry room and winding up with a quiet evening at home with hubby reading the paper and daughter doing the homework.

Like its predecessor *Burns and Allen*, the sitcom incorporated brief segments in which Carroll “broke the fourth wall” by doing a short monologue directly to the camera after each scene. The *New York Times* review also mentioned these direct address segments, referencing how Carroll “tosses off asides to the camera.”

Lynn Spigel’s work on the tensions between the conventions of naturalistic theatre and

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499 Gros, “Television Review: TAKE IT FROM ME.”
500 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
vaudevillian variety shows in the early 1950s sitcoms provides a useful lens to understand and analyze the reception of *Take It From Me*. For while critics unanimously praised Carroll’s performance, eager to embrace a new addition to the pantheon of TV housewives, the sitcom itself was criticized—implicitly—for adhering more to the conventions of vaudeville than to the more popular theatrical realism. Just as with Carroll’s CBS pilot, critical response to Jean Carroll’s performance was uniformly laudatory. Having been trained by *I Love Lucy, I Married Joan, Burns and Allen*, and the rest, critics and audiences were receptive to a female-centered domestic narrative. *The New York Times* even printed a feature piece on “TV’s Top Comediennes,” listing Carroll alongside (among others) Gracie Allen, Lucille Ball, and Joan Davis.\(^{502}\) *TV Guide* declared Carroll “great, both in her monologues and in the action scenes.”\(^{503}\) Harriet Van Horne enthused, "it’s nice to have a girl of Miss Carroll’s charm and zest on the home screen."\(^{504}\) *Variety* gushed, “Miss Carroll carries the weight of the show on her shoulders. The half-hour is hers from start to finish and she shines all the way.”\(^{505}\) *The Newark Evening News* pronounced, “Jean, of course, makes the show,”\(^{506}\) And Jason Gould, of the *New York Times* lauded “She can put across a gag line with crispness and élan, and her sense of timing is extremely good.”\(^{507}\)

The overall show, however, received more mixed reviews. For some viewers, *Take It From Me* was a success, satisfactorily merging the nightclub comedy monologue genre (now known as stand-up comedy) with the domestic situation comedy. Bernie Harrison of "Scene and

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\(^{503}\) “Reviews: Program of the Week- Take It From Me.”  
\(^{504}\) Van Horne, “Jean Carroll Show Is Series of Jokes.”  
\(^{505}\) Gros, “Television Review: TAKE IT FROM ME.”  
\(^{506}\) Lindbloom, “Wednesdays Packed with Good TV Fare.”  
\(^{507}\) By JACK GOULD, “Television in Review.”
Heard" explicitly noted, "Her stanza represents a compromise between a vaudeville monologue and the family situation comedy plot." The Variety critic praised Jacoby and Rosen, who they felt “hit a paydirt format;” by setting Carroll in a sitcom “without sacrificing Miss Carroll’s stand-up patter forte.” TV Guide gave the most in-depth—and gendered—commentary on this synthesis of stand-up comedy and sitcom, writing:

> Stand-up comics of the feminine gender are few and far between in show-business. One of the best is Jean Carroll, who has developed into a unique art form her ability to stand up before an audience and whip out her gags in a monologue. The producers of her new TV show Take It From Me (ABC) have attempted to incorporate this stand-up brand of humor into a situation comedy motif and have generally succeeded. It's a good show, giving Miss Carroll plenty of opportunity to build laughs with her "asides" to the audience. ...It's an obvious attempt to capitalize on TV's over-worked intimacy, but its a fresh approach and she brings it off neatly.

With the industry savvy expected of a trade publication, TV Guide keyed into the way that Carroll’s “asides” fit into the larger trend of intimacy as a fundamental value of televised entertainment. By addressing the audience directly, Carroll re-enacted her role as a stand-up comedian addressing a live audience in a nightclub or theatre. As Spigel points out, it was precisely this ability to recreate the aura of liveness and intimacy of live performance, without the hassle of leaving one’s home, that was considered to be the selling point of television. And in spite of the fact that the columnist found it “over-worked,” they do acknowledge it as a “fresh” approach that has “generally succeeded.” Overall, there were a few critics who praised the synthesis of stand-up and sitcom, as handled by first-time sitcom-writers Colman and Jacoby. Others gave the show some more general plaudits. A colorful piece of praise from the industry

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509 Gros, “Television Review: TAKE IT FROM ME.”
510 “Reviews: Program of the Week- Take It From Me.”
column “Cue” quipped “TV needs an additional situation comedy like it needs more vice-presidents, but this one has enough laughs to make it a highly worthy entry in the domestic didoes derby.”

However, the majority of critics responded negatively, drawing attention to a perceived imbalance between Carroll and the rest of the cast, and disparaging the lack of plot. Perhaps most impassioned was Jason Gould, of The New York Times, whose scathing review “Jean Carroll, the Impressionist, gets a poor Shuffle in Shopworn Situation Comedy,” lambasted the show’s “lamentable execution.” Gould specifically objected to Rosen and Jacoby’s unsuccessful attempt to synthesize the sitcom and stand-up elements, writing:

Where ‘Take It From Me’ falls down badly is in its construction. Basically, it emerges as a nightclub 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, and already the problem of repetition is acute. The second show was practically a carbon copy of the first. Ernie Rosen and Coleman Jacoby, the writers on the program, should make a fresh start…they must conceive a strong situation that has a beginning and an end. Something must really happen to the family if dramatic interest is to be sustained…’Take It From Me’ has possibilities, but it needs a much surer theatrical hand at the helm.

Gould’s critique is textbook evidence of Lynn Spigel’s point that what critics wanted in the early 1950s domestic sitcom was a medium that leaned more heavily toward situation than comedy—and by extension, more heavily toward theatrical realism than vaudeville. Even his register, explicitly identifying Carroll’s asides as “a nightclub or vaudeville monologue,” and urging “a more surer theatrical hand” privileges ‘legitimate theatre’ over vaudeville. And his plea for “a strong situation that has a beginning and end” bears out Spigel’s simple argument, “What the

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512 By JACK GOULD, “Television in Review.”
513 By JACK GOULD.
critics wanted was a story.”

Harriet Van Horne’s column struck similar notes, critiquing the show’s deviation from the “standard formula for most situation comedies…several tons of situation to one ounce of comedy.” As if in answer to Carroll’s early-expressed desire to avoid having a “joke show,” Van Horne condemned the sitcom as “simply a series of jokes, an extended night club routine played out in the kitchen. It's strung on a plot with the tensile strength of one human hair. The day she runs out of gags, the show can close up shop.” Other critics made similar remarks classifying *Take It From Me* as a "joke" show, with Bernie Harrison of the *Washington Times Herald* ominously declaring, "she burns up a lot of material. If her writers can keep up the breakneck pace—or that's a big if—the show might make it." Likewise, a critic from *The Kansas City Star* noted, "Jean’s specialty is comedy monologues and that’s largely what takes place although there is a rather loose situation comedy format…The success of a show of that type depends on the quality of the gags or smart-cracks or jokes." The reviewer from the "Cue" column agreed, "Messrs. Rosen and Jacoby have given her a vehicle virtually free of plot." Their solution was for Carroll to take less screen time and stop directly addressing the audience, learning to “forget” the viewers when she’s on stage with other players. Of course, omitting the direct address would allow the program to fall more in the theatrical than the vaudevillian sphere. Van Horne's proposed solution to the failed attempt at integrating variety and sitcom conventions was to go the other direction, abandoning the sitcom convention altogether, pointing out:

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514 Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 146.
516 Harrison, “Scene and Heard: New Video Entries Feature Some Old Hands at Comedy.”
518 “Cue: Comedienne Jean Carroll Is Delightful in New Series.”
Considering that Miss Carroll is a soloist, no matter how many people appear with her, it might be wise to give her a format similar to that of Red Buttons. That is, three short comedy sketches designed to show off her buffoonery. The half hour is thin and tedious toward the close.\textsuperscript{519}

In proposing that Jean Carroll move toward a sketch show like CBS's "Red Buttons Show," Van Horne inadvertently raises the specter of the failed revue program, "The Jean Carroll Show" auditioned for CBS two years ago. Indeed, as a stand-up comedian and veteran vaudevillian, Carroll would easily fit into the vaudeville-inspired variety show format. Unlike so many female comedienes, she was, as Horne pointed out, a soloist, and a brilliant one. However, as Lynn Spigel demonstrated, conservative audiences of the early fifties were socially invested in representing female comedians in the less threatening domestic context.

When faced with the onslaught of criticism following the debut of Take It From Me—criticism which she had presciently anticipated in her statements against "joke shows" in 1952—Carroll kept a relatively calm public face. An interview with the Dayton Ohio News shows her joking about the massive criticism that comes with a television audience, recounting comical anecdotes about friends and relatives calling her up to "dissect the scripts" or offer "constructive criticism like "You look cross-eyed in one of the scenes," concluding,

Everybody who looks at a TV show is a critic. People go to movies and stage shows and maybe they don't like them. But they have sensible reasons. They don't just pick up on the fact that maybe the leading man needed a haircut or that the seam of one of the heroine's stockings was slightly out of line.\textsuperscript{520}

But in a far more serious vein, Carroll faced the criticism of her show with resolve and plans to address the clumsy integration of stand-up and sitcom. She discussed several of these plans with

\textsuperscript{519} Van Horne, “Jean Carroll Show Is Series of Jokes."

the media. In one interview, Edmund Leahy reports that originally, the show was supposed to be based on "funny situations" from Jean Carroll's life—

But something happened. The brains back of the production job turned the show into just another situation comedy, calling it "Take It From Me". As just another situation comedy, it was what you might expect. But changes are taking place, and the show is beginning to follow the original formula. It may yet mirror the real Jean Carroll, and when it does, well, hold on to your sides! 521

This interview does not give any specifics as to what "changes are taking place" to help the show "follow its original formula." What it does reveal is the schism between the "brains back at the production job" and “the real Jean Carroll,” as well as her willingness to address that schism in the press. In a separate interview with the Scranton Pennsylvania Tribune, Carroll shared that her "plans for the Christmas season" included "conferences, conferences, and more conferences, in an effort to smooth out the bumps in her ABC-TV show." The interview quotes her statement,

We have our problems…we're working through them though…Basically, it's a writing problem, but we'll solve it. My writers are great. They can do anything, once they know what it is we want them to do. 522

Her language hovers between blaming and praising the writers—attributing the show's struggles to "a writing problem," and implying that the writers are great when in service of someone else's objectives and vision, or "once they know what it is we want them to do" (emphasis added). What is unclear in Carroll's language is who precisely is included by this 'we.' Does it include the producers? More importantly, does it include Carroll? She then discusses her desired changes, which mainly address her character and the bickering marital dynamic:

I just came from a meeting where we talked about making some changes—not in the format, but in my character on the show. The question is am I looking to remain caustic and keep making with the poison about my husband's stinginess, fatness, and sloppiness. I've been against that from the start. It's all right in a theatre or a nightclub, where you're talking about somebody who isn't there, but when you're making cracks about somebody who's right next to you—that's murder. I don't want people to start to hate me. They'll look at me and think I'm some bitter old shrew. They'll say why doesn't she leave that poor guy alone once in awhile...If a woman spoke to her husband like that all the time in real life, she wouldn't have a husband.\textsuperscript{523}

This article reveals what I believe was Carroll’s major misstep: Carroll's proposed changes were not in the format of the show, but in the characterization. Her revamped character would be "more humble, less sarcastic" she explained "We'll set up situations where I can be funny, instead of jibing at my husband all the time." She also suggested modifying the daughter, saying, "she shouldn't be so wise. She should be naive, and think her father's a great guy." Carroll's suggestion suggest some measure of savvy--realizing that there was a limited extent to which audiences would tolerate the perceived harassment of a patriarchal figure. As Lynn Spigel pointed out, Carroll's fellow TV-housewives were redeemed for their 'unladylike' comedic antics by their overall adoration of the men in their lives:

The comedienne’s’ zany antics were always tamed by the fact that they were also depicted as loving daughters (My little Margie’s Gale Storm); charming housewives (I Love Lucy’s Lucille Ball, Burns and Allen’s Gracie Allen, My Favorite Husband’s Joan Caulfield, I Married Joan’s Joan Davis, or, in the working girl formula, devoted teachers (Our Miss Brooks’ Eve Arden) and faithful secretaries (My Friend Irma’s Marie Wilson and Private Secretaries Ann Sothern). Thus, even while the female comics mugged for the camera, donned unfeminine disguises, and generally created havoc, this was always recuperated by stories and characterizations that assured viewers of their essentially female nature\textsuperscript{524}

And so it makes sense that Carroll would seek to mitigate backlash against her wise-cracking

\textsuperscript{523} Key.
\textsuperscript{524} Spigel, Make Room for TV, 154.
housewife persona by making it clear that the quips were undergirded by a sympathetic, loving wife. However, by focusing on characterization over format, Carroll missed the larger disconnect between the show and its audience. The show—with its direct address and olio-esque structure—veered too heavily towards the vaudeville aesthetic, when what audiences really wanted was sitcoms that favored more naturalistic, linear forms of theatre.

Of course, one cannot overlook the potential exception to the rule against 'vaudevillian' direct-address in sitcoms: George Burns's famous 'asides' to the audience in "The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show," which premiered on CBS in 1950 and ran for eight successful years. In that program, Burns would periodically step away from the action of the episode to give commentary to the audience. In his review of *Take It From Me*, Roland Lindbloom of the *Newark Evening News* drew attention to this parallel, noting, "[Carroll] monologued the bridges between the three related sketches in a manner that reminded us of [how] of the wry George Burns talks directly to the viewers."525 However, George Burns's direct address monologues were a universally celebrated part of the program, with critics lauding his "direct-to-the-viewer-monologs" as evidence that he is a "master of dry wit."526

Several potential explanations exist for why direct address monologues would be an asset in one show and a deterrent in another. Perhaps the different reception had to do with the way that the convention was deployed. On "Burns and Allen," there was a material separation between the naturalistic action of the sitcom—which took place on a house and yard set, and the space in which Burns would speak directly to the viewers—which resembled a proscenium stage

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525 Lindbloom, "Wednesdays Packed with Good TV Fare."
with an ornate curtain. As Lynn Spigel noted, this material separation metaphorically sustained
the Victorian-inspired boundary between public and private space. Jean Carroll's show, based on
reviews, did no such thing. It seems that Carroll would simply turn to the camera and deliver
asides *in media res*, more starkly undermining the naturalistic convention of the fourth wall.
Perhaps gender also played a role in George Burns being able to get away with what Jean Carroll
could not. It may be that the prejudice Carroll faced as a stand-up comedian found its television
analogue in prejudice against a female character bringing stand-up to the sitcom. To whatever
extent direct address signaled an invocation of the threatening and unruly vaudeville aesthetic, it
would be distinctly more unwelcome when carried out by a housewife character, who was
supposed to be the guardian of domestic harmony. Thus, direct address—or any vaudevillian
convention—is a more transgressive act when coming from Jean Carroll than George Burns.

Ultimately, whether or not Carroll's campaign to salvage "Take It From Me" by
modifying the wife and daughter characters would have been effective was moot, because rather
than incorporating her feedback, the network stopped airing the show--only three months after it
began. Evidence suggests that the stilted vaudeville-meets-sitcom format was one of many
elements contributing to the show's cancellation, with other factors ranging from competition to
culture, to cost, to Carroll herself.

"Take It From Me" was put in a particularly competitive slot: nine pm on a Wednesday
night. Reviews with headlines like ""Wednesdays Packed With Good TV Fare,” exclaimed,
"Trying to determine what TV shows to watch on Wednesday evenings has become evermore a
problem." Even reviews supportive of "Take It From Me" cast a dim prognosis, explaining,

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527 Lindbloom, “Wednesdays Packed with Good TV Fare.”
"It’s difficult enough to pick up a following, but the competition is pretty tough…”

Interestingly, the "competition" he references takes Spigel's reflections on the tensions between naturalistic and vaudevillian aesthetic to a literal level; Jean Carroll's sitcom was actually scheduled against the Du Mont network's Television Theatre, presented by distinguished actor of the 'legitimate stage' Joseph Schildkraut.529

Another factor contributing to audience's aversion to "Take It From Me" may have been its implicit ties to Jewish culture. While there is no suggestion that Carroll and her television family were identified as explicitly Jewish, *TV Guide* did note: "Some of the situations and dialogue have a strictly New York flavor, which raises the question of how the show is accepted in the vast expanse of the USA west of the Hudson."530 And although they concluded that Carroll did in fact pass muster for universal recognizability, it is telling that *TV Guide* recognized the "New York flavor" (code for Jewishness) of the program as a potential drawback. Using this same code, Irwin Shane, executive director of New York's Television Workshop famously warned fellow producers:

> a comedy show built entirely upon Broadway humor (or frequent references to the borscht circuit, the Brooklyn Dodgers, the Palace Theatre, or even famous New York Nightclubs) will find an indifferent audience in Kokomo, Indiana, and in the hundreds of Kokomos around the country. To assure an out-of-town audience, the show’s content must be broad in its appeal.531

While overtly ethnic programs like "The Goldbergs" thematized Jewishness, and a revamped Texaco Star Theatre made ethnicity into punchlines, there may not have been a place for the presentation of Jewishness as a mere fact of life, or as Spigel put it, "as a shared cultural

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528 "On the Television Scene."
529 Lindbloom, "Wednesdays Packed with Good TV Fare."
530 "Reviews: Program of the Week- Take It From Me."
531 Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 147.
experience."\textsuperscript{532}

Yet another factor may simply have been the cost to ABC. According to \textit{Variety}, the show struggled to find a sponsor from the outset.\textsuperscript{533} They later reported that “Take It From Me” was one of the highest priced shows on ABC-TV “running about $18,000 a week, and the net[work] found the nut too heavy to carry without an immediate sponsor in sight.”\textsuperscript{534}

Based on Jean Carroll's account, the "Take It From Me”'s cessation was neither a result of criticism, competition, culture, or cost, but of her own refusal to participate in a show where her input was not valued. Carroll disputed the narrative that the network had—as one article graphically put it—“swung the axe down” on her show.\textsuperscript{535} In her interview at The Friars club, she stated, “In the write-up, they made it sound like I had been canned. I wasn’t canned. I refused to do it anymore.”\textsuperscript{536} Jane Rusoff wrote that when Carroll was told “she can’t dictate to the network,” she responded “The hell I can’t! My future in television is on the line here. It’s my show and I’m dictating my own life—and I don’t want to do this show any more.”\textsuperscript{537}

Although rumblings regarding the potential resurrection of a Jean Carroll sitcom at ABC or Kline Studios continued to run in \textit{Variety} for another year, neither of these projects ever came to fruition.\textsuperscript{538} \textit{Take It From Me} was replaced with the “government-distributed film series on the

\textsuperscript{532} Spigel, 148.
\textsuperscript{536} Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 4–6.
\textsuperscript{537} Wollman, “Funny Business.”
armed services, ‘The Big Picture.’”

Years later, Carroll would look back at "Take It From Me" with what her friend Jane Wollman Rusoff called "wistfulness," remarking "It could have been another I Love Lucy." What it was, in stark reality, was a lesson in the limits of women's power in the entertainment agency. Through the sitcom, Carroll was moved from an autonomous stand-up comedian to a subordinate performer of ‘comical housewife.’ And like so many actual housewives, Carroll’s place in the pecking order was beneath that of her male colleagues. What she seems to have gained from the experience is a renewed conviction in the importance of her own voice in selecting actors and writers. In discussions about the potential ATV sitcom, she was insistent on having a strong voice in the writing team, and working with American writers who she felt could more fully understand her style. But perhaps a larger product of Carroll’s ordeal with "Take It From Me,”—in which years of anticipation resulted in only twelve weeks of broadcasting—was a reticence to dive headfirst into the collaborations and crises of sitcom television. In light of ‘Take It From Me’ Carroll’s decision to turn away from the ATV sitcom to become a full-time caretaker can also be read as a choice to turn from subordination to autonomy.

Back to Mrs. Howe

“It’s just a question of survival. If you survive long enough you’re revered, rather like an old building. The great trick is to get over the middle period. That’s the tricky bit.”

-Katherine Hepburn

In spite of her ongoing attempts to reconcile her role as a mother with that of a

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539 Radio-Television: Jean Carroll Put On Ice Till Spring Sponsor Thaw; 18G to Sustain.”
540 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
541 Stein, “Jean Carroll in Series Swim.”
542 Ware, Letter to the World: Seven Women Who Shaped the American Century.
comedian, Carroll had been no match for an industry that was built with systemic barriers to motherhood. In a perverse irony, it was through her experience being undermined as a sitcom housewife and mother that finally convinced her, once and for all, to devote herself to being a real housewife and mother.

The language that both Carroll herself and journalists use to discuss her retirement from show business also speaks to the exclusivity between professional and domestic life. In an interview with the *Sun Sentinel*, Carroll shared that she “retired from show business because she wanted to spend more time with her husband and daughter,” framing as the either/or proposition that the industry had made it all along.

She approached full-time domestic life with the same level of dedication and vigor with which she had pursued professional life. Her role as matriarch extended beyond simply caring for her husband and daughter. According to her granddaughter:

Someone once said something about, “It’s a shame your grandmother gave up her career for a husband,” But she *didn’t* give up her career for her husband! …My grandmother also had an elderly mother she was taking care of. She had a sister who was a single mom; she helped raise that kid. I think she was just very immersed in her family. She was a full-time parent. And grandparent. And friend. And Aunt. And sister. And daughter. All at the same time… She had a big, rich, full life, and I think *that’s* what did it.⁵⁴⁴

Jean Carroll’s scrapbook documents her family with the same conscientiousness that she documented her career. Towards the end of her scrapbook, the pages hold not reviews or features on Carroll, but ephemera about her family members: an invitation to a party thrown in Buddy

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⁵⁴³ Wollman, “Funny Business.”
⁵⁴⁴ Chatzky, Grace Overbeke Interview with Susan Chatzky.
Howe’s honor, a photograph in the local paper in which her granddaughter Susan appeared, a program from a dance recital featuring her daughter Helen and granddaughter Andrea. Moving from clippings from Variety to clippings of the Howe household, the implicit message of the scrapbook pages is that family was replacing show business as Carroll’s career. And while she did have many roles in her family circle—mother, daughter, aunt, etc.—the one with the most public social demands was that of a wife.

Carroll explicitly stated this ‘marriage as career’ mentality at an interview at the Friar’s Club, as she vividly described the moment she approached Bob Leween, head of ABC, and proclaimed, “I want out of show business. I don’t want it—I’ve had enough! It’s not like I’m looking for a career. I’m not. My career is my marriage—that’s my career!” This declaration of marriage as career suggests that it demanded the same level of attention and effort as her work as a comedian. But it also speaks to the ways in which Carroll’s career and marriage had been bound from the start.

In a sense, Buddy Howe had acted as “Mr. Jean Carroll”—the managerial force behind America’s “First Lady of Comedy.” Indeed, it was at his urging that Carroll became a solo act in the first place. In the days when they were a double act, he convinced her that she was the more talented one of the two of them, and he had been holding her back as a costar, urging her to keep performing while he was drafted into military service. After he returned from the army and became a talent agent, he took her on as a client, whom he represented for over twenty years.

According to *Variety*, Howe “virtually dictated which names went into the Copacabana,” ensuring that Carroll would always have a high-profile gig when she needed one. Later in life, when Carroll felt strained by the efforts to balance comedy and caretaking, Howe continued urging her on. Carroll shared that when she wanted to retire, he said “I won’t permit it. You owe it to your public.” Of course, she also recognized his financial stake in her success. Still, Carroll firmly believed that her husband’s economic and professional interest in her career was undergirded by a passionate belief in her talent, declaring, “My husband thought I was the greatest talent that ever lived.”

Their professional relationship was a symbiotic one, for just as Howe devoted his labor and resources to representing Carroll, her talent and social capital helped to advance his career. A brief snapshot of Howe’s overall career is provided by his obituary in *Variety*. Upon his return from the army, Howe took a job as an agent handling nightclub bookings at the Chicago-based agency General Amusement Corporation [later called General Artists Corporation] (GAC). (V. 4-3-46), Howe also engaged in real estate investments with fellow booker Charlie Hogan, and *Variety* reports “the theatres in which they invested survived and prospered, and the holdings ultimately made Howe wealthy.” Although Howe started with GAC in the café department (booking talent for nightclubs), he was moved to the television department as a result of the TV boom in the 1950s, and ultimately became chairman of the board.

Starting in the 1960s, after Jean Carroll retired from show business, and began dedicating herself wholeheartedly to her career as a wife, a series of mergers between talent agencies

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548 “Personal Appearances: Buddy Howe Dead At 71; Helmed ICM, Was Dean Of N.Y. Friars.”
549 Wollman, “First Lady of Laughs.”
550 “Vaudeville: Howe Joins Cri GAC.”
551 “Personal Appearances: Buddy Howe Dead At 71; Helmed ICM, Was Dean Of N.Y. Friars.”
vaulted Howe into the very highest echelon, representing Barbra Streisand, Raquel Welch, and George Carlin. He was named President of General Artists Coordination in 1966. Two years later, in 1968, when GAC bought Creative Management Associates (CMA), he was made CMA board Chairman. And then, in 1974, CMA merged with International Famous Agency, to become ICM—International Creative Management, where Howe served as Vice Chairman until he died at age 71 in 1981. Another prestigious title held by Howe was his seventeen-year tenure as Dean of the Friar’s Club, a philanthropic and social men’s club for comedians. His granddaughter Susan Chatzky contends that Howe’s relationship to the Friar’s Club was purchased by Carroll’s professional and social capital, stating, “[it was] very much because of my grandmother and her relations with other comedians…which is kind of funny, because it was a men’s club.”

Indeed, Buddy Howe benefitted from his wife’s non-normative career, and he supported her achievements on stage and screen, unusual though they were for one of her sex. However, he also wanted Carroll’s deviation from gender norms to stop short of the domestic sphere. According to Carroll and Howe’s daughter Helen, Howe was a product of the era’s gender norms, threatened by his wife’s professional and personal independence:

My father…he was probably a fairly typical man of his time. You know, his wife was supposed to cow-tow to him, Ha, and I mean, that wasn’t happening, and so I think he was mystified by her and…always loved her but just didn’t know what to do with her because you couldn’t control her…he couldn’t control her.

Helen’s older daughter Susan confirms Carroll’s unconventionally powerful role in their family, remarking, “I grew up with a grandmother who was the major breadwinner. She made more


554 Chatzky, Grace Overbeke Interview with Susan Chatzky.

555 Tunick, Helen Tunick Interview Transcripts, 2–2.
money than he did, and she had a lot of power in the relationship, a lot of power in the house, and a lot of power over our family.™556 In this remark, Chatzky unwittingly paraphrases the dynamic that Carroll had observed in her childhood home, in which if you were the breadwinner, you made the rules. Yet while Carroll had been able to supplant her father as head of the family without misgivings, it became a different matter when her husband was involved. Carroll’s characterization of her marriage suggests both attachment and a struggle for control and power: “He was my soul mate… but he was a control freak. I couldn’t stand his constantly criticizing me.”557 The domestic power-struggle was an ongoing source of strife in their marriage, with their daughter quipping “rocky would be generous.”558 Although not a matter of public record, Tunick also disclosed that her parents were separated for six years; “from the time I was six until when I was twelve.”559 Perhaps not coincidentally, this period—roughly 1951 to 1956—was also when Carroll’s career was at its peak. Like so many professionally successful women, Carroll found that the independence and drive required in her career were at odds with the auxiliary role expected of wives in the mid-century United States.

Given the turbulence that characterized her marriage-cum-career, Carroll’s post-retirement life saw her taking her marriage-as-career with absolute seriousness. This idea of marriage as career plays into a wider historical moment of the mid-twentieth century, in which corporations began paying more attention to the role of the corporate wife. Christiane Taylor-Diehl’s article “The Worth of Wives: 1950s Corporate America ‘Discovers’ Spousal Social

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556 Chatzky, Grace Overbeke Interview with Susan Chatzky.
558 Tunick, Helen Tunick Interview Transcripts.
559 Tunick, 2–2.
Capital” argues that during this period, company officials began to formally “recognize and systematically utilize” wives of corporate employees. She quotes one official in a 1957 issue of the American Business magazine declaring:

Probably the most significant trend in American industrial life in the past decade has been the emergence of the American wife as a business partner, exerting a tremendous influence on her husband’s career. It has reached the state where many companies will not hire or promote an executive without taking a good look at his wife.

Taylor-Diehl stresses that capitalizing on the unpaid labor of wives was not a new development. It had long been the practice for wives to play prominent, if uncredited roles in their husband’s work lives. Prominent companies had even corresponded with their employees’ wives, coaching them on “how to serve as their husbands’ unpaid secretaries, hostesses, and motivators.” What was new to the era of Jean Carroll’s retirement was the formality and publicity afforded to corporate wives. Films, women’s magazines, and other mainstream media outlets began emphasizing the role of the corporate wife as an aspirational figure. These corporate wives were expected to be high-profile figures not only within their husband’s professional world, but also in the wider community. Taylor Diehl outlines this rationale of civic engagement as a networking strategy:

…Most firm officials viewed having a career after marriage as wholly unacceptable. They even believed that managerial and executive wives should avoid part-time work and seek fulfillment through civic involvement and volunteerism. Engaging in community activities enhanced their firms’ public images. More importantly, through community involvement, the women created networks with potential customers, suppliers, and even officials who had regulatory powers over their firms.

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561 Taylor-Diehl, 35.
562 Taylor-Diehl, 35.
563 Taylor-Diehl, 36.
Within the entertainment world, Carroll and Howe’s situation was slightly different, but analogous. Just as salesmen could leverage their wives’ community involvement to “create networks with potential customers,” Buddy Howe could leverage his wife’s success as a comedian to create networks with potential clients. Once these networks were established, however, Carroll’s work as a comedian became less advantageous to him, and she began to follow the more traditional mode of corporate wifedom, volunteering with civic and charitable organizations.

Recognizing Carroll’s new role as ‘Corporate Wife,’ both trade and mainstream publications covered her associations with charitable functions and benefits with a new appellation: Mrs. Buddy Howe. A notice in 1968 announced an event honoring Tay-Sachs Woman of the year “comedienne Jean Carroll (Mrs. Buddy Howe).” An article in the New York Post entitled “Humanitarian Headliner” promoted this same event, recognizing Carroll’s career only to valorize her leaving it, writing that she “retired from a prospering career as a comedienne in the 1950s, having chosen family, fresh air, and golf instead.” That same piece lauded Carroll’s new life, which “centers around her husband, Buddy Howe, president of General Artists Corporation.” Another article, saved in Carroll’s scrapbook, totally omits her unusual role as a comedian, nodding to her career only as “a prominent person in the entertainment field” before describing her work with Hadassah and Tay-Sachs and Allied Diseases in more depth.

565 Hammond, “Humanitarian Headliner.”
566 “Israel Bond Dinner Raises $175,000,” November 1971, Page 73, Jean Carroll Scrapbook. Personal Collection of Susan Chatzky.
A factor that may have contributed to changing ‘Jean Carroll: comedienne’ into ‘Jean Carroll: Mrs. Buddy Howe,’ is her longstanding heart problems. In 1968, a Broadway Chatter column wrote of “Jean Carroll, comedienne--wife of CMA Board Chairman Buddy Howe, recuperating from a coronary at their Wurtsboro (N.Y.) county manse.” A separate article suggests a linkage as it declares “Jean Carroll more or less retired from show business some years ago when she had a heart attack, and is very happily married to noted theatrical agent Buddy Howe.” This column implicitly positions Carroll’s heart attack as the incident inciting her retirement and subsequent life as a corporate wife, “happily married to [a] noted theatrical agent.” Her happy marriage became a consistent talking point in the few articles about her that were published after her retirement.

Even Carroll’s work on behalf of Tay Sachs Disease began to be publicly eclipsed by that of her husband. Indeed, Buddy Howe was the honoree of the fourteenth annual Tay Sachs & Allied Diseases Dinner Dance at the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria, organized by a celebrity committee including such luminaries as Count Basie, Mrs. Count Basie, Jack Benny, Milton Berle, Myron Cohen, Ed Sullivan, and more. Although Jean Carroll was almost surely involved, her name was present nowhere on the invitation. Instead, her presence is evident in other kinds of labor—including the check marks and question marks scribbled alongside the names in blue pen, doubtlessly tracking some element of the more clearly-billed participants.

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569 “Program—Fourteenth Annual Tay-Sachs and Allied Diseases Dinner Dance Honoring Buddy Howe.”
By 1972, Carroll’s name was so unfamiliar to *Variety* audiences that it was seldom seen without the accompanying “Mrs. Buddy Howe.”

The juxtaposition of these two names “Jean Carroll” and “Mrs. Buddy Howe” highlights the particularity of demands for female professionals—the dual need to be both Jean Carroll, comedienne, and Mrs. Buddy Howe, attentive Corporate Wife to the vice-chairman at ICM. Carroll’s colleagues Milton Berle, Henny Youngman, and of course, Buddy Howe, did not have such bifurcation demanded of them. Although *Variety* only began recognizing her dual existence with the appellation “Jean Carroll—Mrs. Buddy Howe” after her retirement, the truth is that she had been negotiating that challenging duality throughout their 45-year marriage. In sum, Carroll had experienced a variety of stressors that had come from her attempts to transgress the still-active Victorian mores that strictly separated the public from the private sphere, relegating women to the latter. Ultimately, given the systemically sexist demands of the entertainment industry, it was unsustainable for Carroll to continue her career as a comedian while also pursuing the new demands of acting as caretaker and corporate wife.

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Summary

Overall, this chapter has explored the ways that Jean Carroll’s gender informed, occasionally enhanced, and ultimately limited her career as a comedian. Each subsection of the chapter has examined different facet of sexism, which could be classified into four general categories: otherness, objectification, restrictive social norms, and exclusive social roles.

- **Otherness:** While ostensibly celebrating her unique status as a female stand-up comedian, critics actually undermined Carroll by subtly insisting on her as something “other” than a comedian, describing her in either masculinizing or marginalizing language.

- **Objectification:** As a woman, her appearance was always part of the equation relating stage presence and power. Carroll figured out a way to use that objectification equation to her advantage, transforming the power conferred by ‘prettiness’ to the power needed to make the audience laugh.

- **Restrictive Social Norms:** Although to some extent, Carroll was able to use her comedy as a space to rehearse transgression of gender norms, she was hampered by differentially-enforced censorship laws and restrictive social norms.

- **Exclusive Social Roles:** There were systemic ways in which the social roles of comedian and caretaker were mutually exclusive. Amidst the rise of the domestic sitcom, she failed as TV mother and wife in order to be a real mother and wife.

Braided together, these threads of sexism formed the velvet rope keeping Carroll from the inner circle of stand-up comedians—those men credited with pioneering the form, whose names have been repeated in industry history and academic study.
Chapter 3: Cause, not Character: Jean Carroll and Jewishness

Introduction

If the previous chapter illuminated how Jean Carroll’s career was defined by being a woman, the current chapter focuses on how it was defined by being a Jew. Jean Carroll’s story is in many ways typical for comedians of the mid-century: like her male colleagues Milton Berle, Henny Youngman, she was a Jewish American who descended from Ashkenazi European Jewish immigrants. She, like them, grew up in Brooklyn, New York amidst a recent influx of Jewish immigrants. She, like them, travelled between the more ethnic spaces of Vaudeville and the Catskills to the mainstream stage. And she, like them, she had to negotiate the complex terrain of embodying and representing Jewishness in America. But for Jean Carroll, the task of embodying and representing Jewish womanhood presented its own set of challenges.

For first-generation Jewish American children growing up in the days of the notoriously xenophobic Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, stories of anti-Semitic slurs and confrontations were common. The Johnson-Reed Act, also known as the Asian Exclusion Act and the National Origins Act, was part of a nation-producing effort that strove to “preserve the ideal of American homogeneity.”571 Demonstrating a preference for immigrants from the Western Hemisphere, the legislation completely excluded immigrants from Asia, and reduced the number of immigrants from other regions of Southern and Eastern Europe to no more than two percent of the total number of people of each nationality in the United States, based on the 1890 census.572 Although

harshest towards Asian immigrants, this legislation reflects a widespread stance in the United States that citizenry was a privilege not intended for Jews—who mainly hailed from the regions of Southern and Eastern Europe now limited by quotas. In *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Matthew Frye Jacobson identifies the impact of Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 on making the United States a “white” country, noting that it ensured that “those new arrivals who were still allowed entry, in the self-congratulatory words of the immigration commissioner, once again “looked exactly like Americans.” The passage of the Johnson-Reed Act offers a peek into the zeitgeist of the moment that Jean Carroll came of age in the United States, and emphasizes the immense pressure she faced to assimilate into the American “white” ideal.

Even the origin of Jean Carroll’s stage name is laced with anti-Jewish sentiment, conferred by the solicitous emcee of a children’s talent show who feared that if he introduced the young “Sadie Zeigman,” by her real name, the “German buns” in the audience would “kill her.” And so she took on Anglican moniker ‘Jean Carroll,’ (a stage name that was incidentally shared with a contemporaneous burlesque dancer and comedy writer). The former Zeigman embraced her new name thoroughly. After she became famous, an interviewer asking about her Eastern European background printed the coy response, “She admits that her real first name is Celine, and her last name is...ridiculous.”

In her life as Sadie (‘Sid’ for short) Zeigman, daughter of Russo-Polish Jews, Carroll was baffled, though not deterred by anti-Semitism. “It was a shock to me,” she recalled, “to find people in the outside world who could hate me because I am Jewish.” Her friend Jane

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573 *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 78.
574 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 1–19–1–20.
576 Joan Michel, “Women at Work: Contradictory Comedienne” (For and About The Family, n.d.), Page 81, Jean
Wollman Rusoff recorded one of Carroll’s more revealing stories of growing up as in the Bronx:

I went to school at P.S. 55, I had to be really strong.  
They called me a sheeny and a kike.  
One of my friends told me:  
‘That girl says she’s gonna get you.’  
‘Why? What have I done?’  
So I went looking for her.  
I said, ‘I understand that you want to get me because I’m a ‘kike.’  
Did I ever do anything to you?’  
‘No, but you’re a kike.’  
‘I would never call you nasty names. I don’t understand why you’re mad at me. But if you want to fight, okay, let’s fight.’  
She went for me and tried to hit me.  
One shot was all I had to give her, and that ended the fight. I was tough.577

Carroll was fond of such anecdotes that emphasized her ability to be “tough,” facing prejudice with sass and transgressive demonstrations of strength.

That first step, in which the threat of anti-Semitism prompted Celine “Sadie” Zeigman to become Jean Carroll, epitomizes the way in which her fellow (male) stand-up comedians, female entertainers, and so many first-generation Americans used their career to assimilate into a new homeland, while also struggling to maintain a Jewish identity. Those in the entertainment field had the added distinction of performing that assimilation in a much more public arena. Just as her being a stand-up comic in the ‘male’ style was a feminist intervention, her public experimentation with stereotypes of Jews was an assimilationist intervention.

In this chapter, I show that Carroll initially responded to xenophobic sentiment by avoiding overt demonstrations of Jewishness on the mainstream stage. Instead, her performances of Jewishness were coded. For instance, rather than use Yiddish language, she would draw on subtle Yiddish grammatical structures. Similarly, rather than simply perform the stereotypes of

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Carroll Scrapbook. Personal Collection of Susan Chatzky.  
Jewish women circulated by her Jewish male colleagues, she invoked stereotypes of Jewish women lightly, and with a critical lens. Occasionally, she included more traditionally stereotypical representations of Jewish men, to highlight women’s comparative assimilation. Over time, as Jews and American society assimilated into one another, and Jews became more accepted in American society, her portrayal of Jewishness became more overt, sometimes even leaning into dominant cultural stereotypes of Jewish women. But her most pronounced form of performing Jewishness was her engagement with Zionist and Jewish causes like the United Jewish Appeal. Thus, I argue that Carroll’s work constitutes a shift in representation of Jewishness from a character—constituted of mannerisms and dialect—to a cause.

“Oy, my vife” Jewish Humor as Dialect and Misogyny

It is key to understand the stereotypes of Jews—and Jewish women—that were circulating on and offstage at the time that Carroll was performing. The Vaudeville stage that made Carroll a star had long been a place where ethnic stereotypes were profitable comedy acts. Performance scholar Michael Rogin points out that blackface minstrelsy, the practice of covering one’s face with burnt cork and affecting a cartoonish imitation of an African-American person, had been both precursor to and mainstay of Vaudeville, serving as “the first and most popular form of mass culture in the 19th century United States.” Rogin traces the influence of blackface minstrelsy through the twentieth century, observing, “Blackface… presided over melting pot culture in the period of mass European immigration. While blackface was hardly the only distinctively American cultural form…it was a dominant practice, and it infected others.”

Theatre historian Barbara Wallace Grossman elucidates some of this spread of “infection,”

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writing of the proliferation of ethnic humor from blackface minstrelsy to other ethnic types:

During the nineteenth century, when vast numbers of immigrants flocked to the United States, the country’s population exploded as “potatoes, politics, and pogroms” created millions of new Americans...Comedians in vaudeville and burlesque were quick to transform the traits of the new Americans into readily identifiable types. Irish and German (or Dutch) comics soon became stage favorites. The ‘Jew comics’ appeared later because the great mass of Jewish immigrants did not arrive until the 1880s. By the turn of the twentieth century, there was a wide variety of ‘Jew comics,’—Grossman quoted Irving Howe finding “literally hundreds of Jewish acts listed in the weekly trade papers.” It is probable that some of these “Jewish acts” were directly performing blackface minstrelsy, since the early twentieth century also marks the period when Jewish entertainers superseded Irish as the major blackface performers.” Rogin argues that this was a strategic move on the part of Jewish performers, for blackface minstrelsy

passed immigrants into Americans by differentiating them from the black Americans through whom they spoke, who were not permitted to speak for themselves. Facing nativist pressure that would assign them to the dark side of the racial divide, immigrants Americanized themselves by crossing and recrossing the racial line.

As Americans new and old grappled with who was granted the privileges of citizenry, much of the Jewish assimilation—onstage and off—came by defining themselves as ‘not black.’ And yet the repertoire of comic tools that ‘Jew comics’ deployed drew heavily on those used by their blackface minstrel antecedents and colleagues. Two of these tools of the ‘Jew comic’ demand particular attention: dialect humor and misogyny.

580 Grossman, 30.
582 Rogin, 56.
Der Yiddisher Dialect

While blackface minstrelsy was characterized by Southern-inflected pidgin English dialect, early Jewish American comedy was characterized by an Eastern-European inflected Yiddish dialect. Joseph Dorinson provides an illustrative excerpt of dialect humor performed on Vaudeville by Jewish celebrities such as Eddie Cantor, Fanny Brice, and the duo Weber & Fields. Before he started his film career, Eddie Cantor made a splash on Vaudeville by interspersing his act with “Yiddish words and Russian phrases...anything for a laugh.”\(^{583}\) Fanny Brice had her first hit with Irving Berlin’s heavily-accented song “Sadie Salome, Go Home!” jumpstarting a series of Yiddish-inflected musical parodies throughout the first two decades of the 1900s. Joseph Weber and Lew Fields were also known for their dialect humor, as in the following bit:

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\begin{align*}
\text{FIELDS: } & \text{Vot are you doing?} \\
\text{WEVER: } & \text{Voiking in a nut factory} \\
\text{FIELDS: } & \text{Doing vot?} \\
\text{WEVER: } & \text{Nutting.} \\
\text{FIELDS: } & \text{I know, but vot voik are you doing?} \\
\text{WEVER: } & \text{Nutting, I tole you.}^{584}
\end{align*}
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The wordplay-driven misunderstanding presages the ‘Who’s On First’ sketch used by Abbott and Costello. But as Lawrence Mintz points out, the wordplay and dialect humor also functions as a “reference to problems of language acquisition, a serious matter for immigrants, who realize constantly that understanding and misunderstanding vocabulary and pronunciation can be crucially important.”\(^{585}\) Jewish comedians using dialect humor were therefore both opening themselves to mockery and expressing their frustration at a situation that made communication

\[^{583}\text{Dorinson, }\text{Kvetching and Shpritzing, }34.\
\[^{584}\text{Dorinson, }31.\
and understanding a daily struggle.

It is difficult to overstate the ubiquity of dialect humor in Jewish comedy throughout the first half of the twentieth century. By the late twenties, Gertrude Berg and her Yiddish malapropisms had captured mainstream America’s heart in The Rise of the Goldbergs.\textsuperscript{586} By the mid-forties, Myron Cohen had gained national recognition with his affectionate stories “in the patois of the garment district.”\textsuperscript{587} And by the fifties, Mickey Katz was dining out on “Yinglish” parodies of hit songs like “Duvid Crockett” (Davy Crockett) and “Haim Afen Range” (Home on the Range).\textsuperscript{588} The use of dialect humor was such a staple of Jewish comedy that it prompted a robust debate within the pages of Commentary, the prestigious journal of Jewish intellectual discourse, with comedian Sam Levenson proclaiming that while he had been “fond of dialect humor early in his own performing career” it was ultimately reinforcing negative stereotypes of Jews. Arguing forcefully against the “classic vaudeville ‘dialecticians’,” he wrote:

\begin{quote}
I was in the audience of a night club while a famous “dialectician” was regaling a predominantly Gentile audience with stories of shrewd Jewish businessmen, of fat and uncultured Jewish women in mink coats, stories of Jews who outwit Gentiles—and the audience howled. Their laughter frightened me. The entire scene recalled the Nazi beer hall where comedians with derby hats and beards told the same type of story to those who later were to become the executioners of our people. This may sound extreme, but it is my belief that any Jew who, in humor or otherwise, strengthens the misconceptions and the prejudices against his own people is neither a good Jew nor a responsible human being.
\end{quote}

…I myself stood before an audience of pretty hard-looking Westerners out in Las Vegas, Nevada. When the name Sam Levenson was announced, there was a hush. A Jewish comedian was coming on. I could have broken the ice immediately by going into dialect, but I remembered my father and I considered my child and I said

“No.” I told them stories about nice mothers, and doting grandmas, and kids with bad report cards who got hit, and daughters who were a problem because they would never get to be balabustehs. Now, I admit...I didn’t say they were Jews. I admit I consciously omitted the word Jew from the entire discourse. I was afraid that if I said they were Jews the audience’s prejudices might come into play and destroy the beautiful picture I had built up. Every story has a punch line—this one does, too. After it was all over an immense cowboy came backstage, gave me a wallop on the shoulder that almost floored me, and yelled: “Goddam, mah maw was just like that!”

Levenson’s piece eloquently reveals multiple facets of Jewish performance in post-WWII America, chief among them the ever-present specter of the Holocaust, and comedians’ heightened awareness that their representation of Jews on stage could play a significant role in shaping public perception of Jewish people. When Levenson looked at the “dialectician” drawing laughs from Jewish stereotypes, he saw not only the people before him, but also the ghost of “comedians with derby hats and beards” of the “Nazi beer halls.” Haunted by the dehumanizing potential of stereotypes (in a way that his antecedents in blackface seemingly were not), Levenson stopped performing the stereotypical characters and the dialect that invoked these stereotypes. But Levenson took an important extra step. Not only did he forgo stereotypes and dialect, he also “consciously omitted the word Jew from the entire discourse,” using subtler references to Jewishness, such as the name which outed him as “a Jewish comedian,” and the word balebusteh (the Yiddish term for matriarch). As a result of his avoiding the loaded word ‘Jew,’ Levenson believed that he was creating a “beautiful picture” of Jewish people for the audience; a picture universal enough for an “immense cowboy,”—that signal specimen of

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Americana—to find relatable. Ironically, in Levenson’s account, it is the American cowboy who is ‘othered’ by dialect, with his distinctive “mah maw” drawl. In short, Levenson’s *Commentary* manifesto of 1952 advocates Jewish comedy that not only avoids Jewish dialect-humor and stereotypes, but also avoids explicitly identifying as “Jewish” at all, opting instead for a more coded representation of Jews that emphasizes universality. This oft-quoted essay was part of a robust debate on issues of stereotypes and representation which bridged the gap between intellectual discourse and popular entertainment.

While Levenson was fortunate to have this platform to articulate his progressive and impactful ideas, not all voices were included in this discourse. I conducted a comprehensive search of *Commentary*, (called *The Contemporary Jewish Record* from 1938-1945) from its founding until the publication of Sam Levenson’s article in 1952, and found that in that fourteen year period, not even four percent of the published voices commenting in *Commentary* were female authors.591 With the exception of some notable figures such as Hannah Arendt, the voices of the premier publication addressing issues of Jewishness in America were male.

The fact that she was not included in the published discourse does not mean that Jean Carroll was not making an active intervention on issues of Jewish representation in comedy. Although she did not have the intellectual platform that Levenson enjoyed, Jean Carroll had been embodying precisely the same values of dialect-free, coded Jewish representation that Levenson articulated, years before his essay was published. At home, Carroll and her mother spoke in what one journalist called “an acid patois that is half-American, half-Yiddish,”592 but audiences heard none of that. Granted, there are a few exceptions: very early in her stand-up career, she engaged

591 Authors with discernibly female names
592 Michel, “Women at Work: Contradictory Comedienne.”
in a bit of overtly Jewish humor, doing Yiddish-inflected song parodies like “When I Began with Levine” (“Begin the Beguine”).\textsuperscript{593} Likewise, in a live show in Las Vegas, she sang the parodic “Yiddish River Shannon” (“Where the River Shannon Flows”).\textsuperscript{594} And she would certainly put on Eastern European dialects when doing a bit that involved another ‘character,’ such as the furrier in her ‘Mink Coat’ bit, or the shopkeeper in her ‘Buying a Dress’ bit, in order to differentiate them from her narrating persona. But these instances of dialect-humor are sparse and strategic. In the overwhelming majority of her many televised appearances throughout the 1950s, Carroll’s stage persona had a distinctively American accent. Critics even praised her for “enunciating like an elocution teacher.”\textsuperscript{595} (Funke, Lewis, "Lauritz Melchior Heads New Bill of Variety at Palace Theatre" Feb, 1952, Scrapbook).

\textit{Yiddish Linguistic Devices}

Eschewing overt Yiddish accents and vocabulary, Carroll instead conveyed Jewishness in a subtle, coded way, using not vocabulary, but \textit{grammatical constructions} common among speakers of Yiddish—the language of the Ashkenazic Jewish diaspora. In this way, Carroll’s use of language recalls Harold Cantor’s description of Clifford Odets’s 1937 play \textit{Awake and Sing} (1935), in which he identifies “The prepositional changes, inverted sentence structure, and use of Yiddish loan words that was the “jumble of Yiddish English syntax” of Brownsville in Brooklyn and Grand Concourse in the Bronx.”\textsuperscript{596} In the late 1960s, Leo Rosten termed these rhythmically distinctive grammatical constructions “Yiddish Linguistic Devices.”\textsuperscript{597} Rosten provides several

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\textsuperscript{593} Jerry Gaghan, "Cross Town," n.d., Page 29, Jean Carroll Scrapbook. Personal Collection of Susan Chatzky. \\
\textsuperscript{594} “Night Club Reviews: Thunderbird, Law Vegas.” \\
\textsuperscript{596} Jonathan Krasner, “The Interwar Family and American Jewish Identity in Clifford Odets’s ‘Awake and Sing!’” \textit{Jewish Social Studies} 13, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 6. \\
\textsuperscript{597} Leo Rosten, \textit{The Joys of Yiddish} (New York: Pocket Books, 2000), xvi.
\end{flushright}
types of Yiddish Linguistic Devices, with brief examples:

1. Blithe dismissal via repetition with a *sh* play on the first sound (Fat-shmat!)
2. Mordant syntax (Smart, he isn’t.)
3. Sarcasm via innocuous diction (He only tried to shoot himself!)
4. Scorn through reversed word order (Already, you’re discouraged.)
5. Contempt via affirmation (My son in law, he wants to be!)
6. Fearful curses sanctioned by nominal cancellation: (A fire should burn in his heart, God forbid!)
7. Politeness expedited by truncated verbs and eliminated prepositions (You want a cup of coffee?)
8. Derisive dismissal disguised as innocent interrogation (I should pay him for such devoted service?)
9. The use of a question to answer a question to which the answer is so self-evident that the use of the first question (by you) constitutes an affront (to me) best erased either by (a) repeating the original question or (b) retorting with a question of comparably asinine self-answeringness.

Jean Carroll’s comedy routines make ample use of nearly all of Rosten’s Yiddish Linguistic Devices. Select instances of Carroll’s deployment of Yiddish Linguistic Devices can provide a clearer picture of what they sound like, and how they manifested in her act. For example, consider Rosten’s second category: Mordant syntax, in which the complimentary adjective begins the sentence, and is then bitingly cancelled out by its negative application to the sentence’s subject. One of Carroll’s best known ‘bits’ employing this structure was a comical diatribe about her husband, which she introduced with the exclamation “I got a husband—handsome, he isn’t!”

Exemplifying Rosten’s third category of Yiddish Linguistic Devices—sarcasm via innocuous diction—Carroll appeared on *Ed Sullivan* in 1964 railing against her husband thusly: “I didn’t even get mad! I said one word: ‘choke.'” Repeating the convention, she heaps faux praise on her daughter, characterizing her as “Seventeen, very independent, lives

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alone in our house.” In both instances, the positive sentiment (“I didn’t get mad,” “Very independent, lives alone”) is immediately undercut by its seemingly innocuous modifier (“choke”; “in our house”). Rosten’s fourth type of Yiddish Linguistic Device uses reversed word order to convey scorn—placing the verb closer to the end of the sentence, as in “Already, you’re discouraged”. One of the many instances of this unconventional verb placement occurs as Jean Carroll comically kvetches about her frustrating diagnosis of anemia, “Four quarts of my blood they took!” Although this grammatical structure is actually neither common in English nor Yiddish (in which the verb must come in the second position of a sentence), it nonetheless conveys frustration in a way that reads to Rosten as distinctly ‘Yinglish’.

Rosten’s next type of Yiddish Linguistic Dialect—showing contempt through affirmation—is also a frequent instrument in Carroll’s comedy. In her June appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show in 1957, she again lays into her husband, exclaiming,

“He said listen, I’m getting fed up with this!
If you would stop buying clothes, I’d have more room for my things.
I buy clothes, Me!
I buy clothes!”

Using this Yiddish Linguistic Device, Carroll exemplifies her scorn for this statement through its repeated affirmation. Of course, this being comedy, she immediately undercuts herself by quipping, “I haven’t bought a thing since…Ray, what time you got?” Perhaps none of Rosten’s Yiddish Linguistic Devices feature more prominently in Carroll’s comedy than number seven: the eliminated preposition. Mimicking the way that Yiddish matrons would push “a piece

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600 “The Ed Sullivan Show.”
603 “The Ed Sullivan Show.”
fruit” or, as he quotes in his example, “a cup coffee,” Rosten identifies the Yiddish Linguistic Device in which “politeness is expedited by truncated verbs and eliminated prepositions.” Jean Carroll’s most enduring routine, about buying a fur coat, includes the signature moment when the furrier (played with varying levels of dialect) drops the coat on the ground, and instead of asking her persona to “Look at this coat,” he invites her to simply, “Look-a-coat!” When used by Carroll, this device does not so much signal politeness as it does simply signal ethnicity.

Jean Carroll also used Rosten’s final two categories of Yiddish Linguistic Devices to comic effect in her Ed Sullivan appearances. Exemplifying Rosten’s category of “derisive dismissal disguised as innocent interrogation” one of Carroll’s early Toast of the Town appearances features the joke:

> There was one fella, he stayed at the Royalty Plaza, he was there for six weeks. His wife came down to join him, she walked into the room, she said, “My goodness, Joey, you’re so pale, what’s the matter?” He says “Thirty dollars a day I should leave the room?”

The punch line—“Thirty dollars a day I should leave the room?” not only conveys dismissal via interrogation, it also demonstrates a convention of Yiddish-inflected English that Rosten does not include in this analytic: the increased use of the word ‘should.’ In Yiddish, one of the frequently used grammatical constructions is the “ich vill az zolstu” construction, which would be idiomatically translated as “I want you to”, but directly translated as “I want that you should.” For instance, when English-speakers would say “I want you to go to the store,” the directly-translated Yiddish structure would be “I want that you should go to the store.” The frequent use of the word “should” was typically one of the more easily spotted markers of immigrant or non-

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native English-speaking status, and therefore Carroll typically only used it in dialogue coming from other ‘characters’ in her stand-up. And finally, Rosten’s last category of Yiddish Linguistic Devices, in which a question is used to answer a question to convey indignation makes recurrent appearances in almost all of Jean Carroll’s routines. In her Mother’s Day appearance on the *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Carroll exemplifies this interrogatory style in the ‘bit’ about who will host their mother:

I turned to my oldest brother Al…I said “Al, can Mama live with you?”
He said, “What kind of question is that?”
“You have to ask me, after ALL Mama’s done for us?”
“You have to ask ME?”
…“where will I put her?”

Indeed, the phraseology that Rosten terms “Yiddish Linguistic Devices” are abundant in Jean Carroll’s comedy routines on the mainstream stage of the *The Ed Sullivan Show*. And so even though non-Jewish audience members without familiarity with Yiddish speech patterns might not pick up on Carroll’s participation in this linguistic signature, those ‘in-group’ members would be able to discern her as a ‘member of the tribe.’

Underlining Rosten’s parodic linguistic analysis of Yiddish Linguistic Devices is a more pointed assertion about the emotional significance attached to these grammatical structures. In assigning emotional qualities like “mordant,” “Blithe dismissal,” “fearful,” etc, to these speech patterns, Rosten outlines a specific “Yiddish” affect—namely, one of exasperation, frustration, scorn, and every imaginable shade of discontent. In short, he develops a grammatical code, all of which decodes Jewish voices as “kvetchy.” In this way, Rosten’s reading of the emotions behind Jewish grammar characterize Jewish people as whiny or unsatisfied.

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The content of Jean Carroll’s jokes was often complaints about her unsatisfying husband, but equally notable was the ethnically-inflected grammatical form that these jokes took. Citing the many instances in which Carroll utilized the very grammatical structures highlighted by Rosten as Yiddish Linguistic Devices demonstrates two points. First, that her turns of phrase would be legibly Jewish to in-group members of the midcentury audience. Second, that the Jewishness of her grammar was inevitably shaded by dominant cultural stereotypes of Jewish discontent.

Those Broads...

Just as key to ethnic comedy as dialect humor was humor based around misogynistic stereotypes. Again, the antecedent of this trope of ethnic humor can be located in blackface minstrelsy, which featured misogynistic characters like the disenfranchised and “desexualized” ‘Mammy’ whose nurturing capabilities are caricatured into a grotesque parody.607 As comedy scholar Lawrence Mintz put it, “These ethnic men often have problems with women,” citing the many vaudeville comedy bits that seem to attack women of one specific ethnicity, but are actually eminently transferable to others.608 For instance, jokes about a domineering Jewish mother could easily become jokes about a domineering Italian mother, and often were adapted in this way. However, Mintz also cites Christie Davis’s study “Ethnic Humor Around the World,” which found that at the turn of the century, Jewish men were found to be “victims of bullies, including Jewish women.”609 One of the clearest instances of a comedy bit drawn from misogynistic Jewish stereotypes was (Jewish comedian) Georgie Jessel’s “A Phone Call From

607 Rogin, Blackface, White Noise, 4.
609 Mintz, 4.
Mama,” which he performed on Vaudeville around 1915. An excerpt of the piece—in which Jessel’s beleaguered persona held a prop telephone to his ear and recited the monologue—reveals how the spectral ‘Mama’ dominates the conversation without saying a word:

Hello Mama. It’s George. George! Your son, from the money every week…
Say, mom. How did you like that bird I sent home for the parlor?
You cooked it! That was a fine thing to do! That was a South American bird…
he spoke four languages.
He should’ve said something? 610

Although far gentler than its later iteration made famous by Nichols and May in the 1960s, Jessel’s ‘phone conversation’ with his mother exhibits several elements of the negative ‘Jewish Mother’ stereotype. It reveals the mother’s dependence on her son as a source of “money every week,”—and her willingness to dismiss him if not for that role. The Jewish mother is thus positioned as a kind of consuming force. Not only does she consume her son’s money, she also (literally) consumes his gift of the South American bird. Her choosing to cook a bird meant to be appreciated for its linguistic virtuosity speaks to her prioritization of ‘lowbrow’ bodily needs over more ‘highbrow’ intellectual matters.

Continuing the thread of misogynistic stereotypes was Jewish comic Henny Youngman, “the king of the one-liner,”611 who, like Carroll, had a career spanning the Vaudeville years to the post-war era. A staple of Youngman’s act was his series of gags at the expense of his (presumably Jewish) wife, including:

“My wife has a black-belt in shopping”
“My wife went to the beach. She talked so much her tongue got sunburnt”
“Do you know what it means to come home at night to a woman who’ll give you a little love, a little affection, a little tenderness? It means you’re in the wrong house, that’s what it means!”
“My wife said to me,

610 Dorinson, Kvetching and Shpritzing, 36.
611 Berger, Jewish Jesters.
'For our anniversary I want to go somewhere I've never been before.'
I said, 'Try the kitchen!'”

Youngman’s jokes highlight his wife’s insistence on material consumption, speaking too much, and resisting her role as lover and cook. In this way, they paint a picture very much in line with the ongoing stereotype of Jewish women as materialistic, dominating, bottomless pits of consumption.

Riv-Ellen Prell provides sociological insight as to the root of this mid-20th century stereotype in her seminal *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish Men*, in which she uses discourse analysis to demonstrate how gendered stereotypes were the product of assimilatory tensions between Jewish men and women. Her analysis of America’s postwar period, in which newly-prosperous Jews flocked to the suburbs, outlines the stereotypical “Devouring Jewish Mother/Wife” as “a vessel into which Jews initially poured their concerns about their arrival in the middle class.” One result of the Jews’ move to the suburbs was a wider exposure to non-Jewish neighbors. To these non-Jewish neighbors, Jews “found themselves serving as icons for many of the criticisms of American life—permissiveness, indulgence, and a focus on consumption.” Jewish men then deflected such criticism onto their wives and mothers. Summing up this projection, Prell writes, “The complaints against Jewish Mother/Wives mirrored ongoing intra-ethnic stereotypes…They wanted too much…precisely as anti-Semitic attitudes suggested that Jews did.” She draws on literature from both rabbis and sociologists to show that stereotypes related to dominance came

612 Berger, 54–57.
613 Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans*, 144.
614 Prell, 162.
615 Prell, 163.
from anxiety over women’s increasing involvement in synagogues and neighborhoods. For instance, Prell contends that Herbert Gans’s 1949 study on a suburban synagogue—which he described critically as “a child-oriented community” that (he implied) “could not sustain adults”—was connected to the increasingly strong voice of women in that congregation’s leadership. For a population of Jewish men concerned with accusations of materialism, and anxious about the rise of women in community leadership, male Jewish comedians’ jokes about their wives and mothers’ relentless consumption and domination would indeed be resonant.

In sum, most Jewish comedians of the Vaudeville era and beyond drew from the blackface-minstrelsy-inflected toolkit of ‘ethnic humor,’ using two primary strategies: ‘Jewish’ dialect, and misogynistic stereotypes. Jean Carroll, however, took a different approach, replacing dialect with subtler Yiddish Linguistic Devices, and misogynistic stereotypes with a more three-dimensional persona. Next, I more deeply explore the ways that the shifting social acceptability of Jewishness manifested in Carroll’s performance, as she leaned away from and then towards overtly Jewish content. Then, I examine her intervention against the misogynistic stereotypes of Jewish women circulating on and offstage.

“An In-Between People”

Because of their placement ‘above’ the color line, Jewish performers often had the option to ‘pass,’ as white, rather than explicitly identify as a Jew and risk alienating much of the xenophobic American audience. However, for reasons ranging from comic potential to authenticity, many Jewish comedians did choose to “Jewdentify” (Bernard Timberg’s word for the act of explicitly identifying as Jewish in performance). Jean Carroll’s relative

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616 Prell, 154.
617 Bernard Timberg, “‘Why Jews Laugh at Themselves: The Case of Larry David’” (October 2006).
‘Jewdentification’ can serve as a useful index for the social acceptability of American Jews at a
given point in time.

The 1940s and 1950s in which Carroll’s stand-up career gained momentum saw an
omission of overt references to Judaism in the entertainment media that belied the seismic shifts
occurring in attitudes towards American Jews. These shifts are evident in social scientist Charles
Herbert Stember’s remarkable longitudinal study Jews in the Minds of America, in which he
conducted a series of public opinion polls on the attitudes of Americans toward Jews between
1937 and 1962. Stember’s findings showed high levels of antisemitism in the WWII years:

In 1944, 24% of the respondents in one poll regard the Jews as “a menace to
America.” And “a series of surveys carried out between 1940 and 1945 indicates
that from 31% to 48% of the public throughout the war years would have actively
supported a hypothetical anti-Semitic campaign or at least sympathized with it;
about 30% would have opposed it; and the rest would have taken no stand.618

In the years following World War II, however, Stember found a fraught relationship between
overt anti-Semitism and underlying sentiment. On one hand, “the United States’ entry into the
war placed the nation squarely on the side of Hitler’s victims, and among the avowed opponents
of anti-Semitism.” And yet on the other hand, “anti-Semitism continued to lead a vigorous life in
the unofficial minds of many Americans.”619

Stember’s research shows that in the post-war years, disavowals of anti-Semitism became
the norm. Negative stereotypes of Jews showed a sharp decline in the post-war years. His polls
reflected that the percentage of people who reported hearing Jews characterized as unfair in
business, or unscrupulous went from 30% in 1944 to 14% in 1945. Likewise, instances of Jews

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619 Stember and American Jewish Committee, 110–11.
being described as controlling business, property and finance went from 22% in 1944 to 13% in 1945. And from 1950 onward, Stember recorded “only a relatively small proportion of respondents—11-24 percent—reported anti-Semitic talk.” Stember’s polls also reported an overall shift in beliefs about the prevalence of antisemitism. A poll asking whether anti-Jewish sentiment was increasing or decreasing revealed that in 1946, 58% of respondents answered that it was increasing, and 7% answered that it was decreasing. In 1950, however, the same question prompted only 16% of respondents to say that anti-Jewish feeling was increasing, and 20% to say that it was decreasing.

Stember’s period research on the social uplift of Jews in post-war United States is supported by Karen Bodkin’s cultural sociology text How Jews Became White Folk and What That Says About Race in America (1998), in which she discusses how the GI Bill of 1944 acted as ‘White Affirmative Action’. On the surface, this legislation provided benefits to all World War II Veterans: The 1944 Serviceman’s Readjustment Act offered GIs key advantages like preferential hiring, the opportunity to afford college education and cheap home mortgages. Likewise, the Federal Housing Authority made it possible for GI’s to buy homes with a twenty percent down payment and thirty-year mortgage, making suburban home-ownership a possibility for thousands of young people who could not have otherwise afforded it. However, Brodkin points out that systematic discrimination resulted in a disproportionate number of black soldiers being dishonorably discharged and thus ineligible for GI benefits. Furthermore, suburban developers were openly discriminatory, with some even publicly refusing to sell to African Americans.

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620 Stember and American Jewish Committee, 60.
621 Stember and American Jewish Committee, 79.
Therefore, the actual result was uplift of Jewish and other ‘white’ ethnic veterans, at the expense of African Americans. Building on Bodkin’s work, Vilna Bashi Treitler’s *The Ethnic Project* demonstrates that race in America is essentially a binary structure of ‘black’ and ‘white,’ in that the way immigrant groups have historically attained ‘whiteness’ has been proving themselves ‘non-black,’ thus reinforcing the racist hierarchy. Reviewing Jewish historian and sociologist Nathan Glazer’s writings from the mid-century, Bashi Treitler points out his negative depictions of black women as incompetent single mothers, contrasted with his idyllic portraits of stable two-parent Jewish families. She also references that period’s anti-black discourse from Jewish authors Daniel Bell, Irving Kristol, and Norman Podhoretz. Overall, Bashi-Treitler concludes that the robust discourse on post-WWII Jewish identity, by predominately Jewish sociologists, created a new “ethnic” paradigm that allowed Jews to distinguish themselves from—and supersede—black people in a social hierarchy.

And yet even while Jews were granted a privileged status compared to African Americans, they remained excluded from many of the circles of their gentile counterparts. Sociologists have created a variety of terms to try to capture the liminal status of Jews in the American racial hierarchy. In the late 1920s, Robert Parks called them “Marginal Men” calling “the emancipated Jew…historically and typically the marginal man” because of his place “on the margin of two societies, who never completely interpenetrated and fused.”

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624 Daniel Bell criticizes the black middle class for their failure to address the problems affecting African Americans in “Plea for a ‘New Phase’ in Negro Leadership” in the *New York Magazine* of May, 1964; Irving Kristol expresses a similar complaint in the September, 1965 edition in his article “The Negro Today Is Like the Immigrant Yesterday,” and Norman Podhoretz expresses anxiety about black men in “My Negro Problem—And Ours”
625 Bashi Treitler, *The Ethnic Project Transforming Racial Fiction into Ethnic Factions*.
David Roediger takes a similar approach, with their concept of Jews and other immigrant groups as “in-between people,” who occupied a status “not only above African and Asian Americans, for example, but also below “white” people.” And Karen Brodkin uses both the term “Not-Quite-Whites” and “Off-Whites” to describe the Jewish space of “marginality vis-a-vis whiteness, and an experience of whiteness and belonging vis-a-vis blackness.”

Stember’s polls also spoke to Jews’ relatively-marginalized status. One of the polls in 1949 asked college students about job discrimination, and found that “only 19% maintained that a Jew would find employment in a gentile-owned firm as readily as a non-Jew with the same personality and college record.” Another poll, about Jews as neighbors, showed that in the postwar period, the thought of “Jewish masses” entering the neighborhood “provoked resistance.” And a 1945 poll about social relations with Jews showed that less than half the gentile respondents had frequent contact with Jews; most of their encounters “were of minimal intimacy: about a quarter of each were reported to have taken place “at work” and “in stores,” about one-sixth “in the neighborhood,” and none in strictly social settings.” Stember interpreted these findings with skepticism as to whether “non-Jews really are as ready for close friendships with Jewish individuals as they proclaim themselves to be,” pointing out “there is no denying that many of them still insist on ethnic segregation in precisely the institutionalized settings where intimate ties like friendship and courtship are formed—for example, in vacation resorts and country clubs.”

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630 Stember and American Jewish Committee, 96.
631 Stember and American Jewish Committee, 99–100.
social and prestige clubs revealed that as of 1960, only two of the 28 University clubs in the country had any Jews on their roll. It was also a policy of many of the United States’ most prestigious universities to implement quotas to restrict Jewish enrollment well throughout the 1950s. Yale University maintained these quotas until the early 1960s, and Northwestern University did so until 1964.

This kind of exclusion from universities, social clubs, and other staples of the American ‘executive suite’ made show business a comparably more accessible field for Jewish Americans. Lawrence Epstein wrote of this phenomenon in The Haunted Smile, noting “Jews particularly went into comedy because humor was one of the few acceptable roles available for them.” Epstein positions the entertainment industry—especially comedy— as a kind of entry point into mainstream American society, into which Jews could “smuggle” Yiddish content, as long as it was not too explicitly Jewish. And so the pioneering cohort of American stand-up comics was disproportionately populated by Jews, including Milton Berle, Alan King, Buddy Hackett, Henny Youngman, Jack E. Leonard, Joe E. Lewis, Jan Murray, Joey Bishop, Jack Carter, Shecky Greene, and of course, Jean Carroll (though Epstein neglects to mention her). Epstein even refers to comedy as an “assimilationist model, based on a subtle contract offered by the culture: Jewish comedians, more specifically male comedians, were fully accepted so long as their humor was, or seemed to be, universally applicable.” And yet he is careful to qualify the embrace of Jews

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636 Epstein, 51.
in comedy with language of stealth, always making it clear that the Jewish influence on comedy was something that Americans had “been absorbing…without realizing it.”

The condition of subtlety repeatedly asserted the need to make Jewish content implicit, resulting in mainstream comics’ reluctance to ‘Jewdentify,’ Even Jack Benny, whose parsimonious persona played on stereotypes of miserly Jews, refrained from Jewdentifying, such that Epstein notes, “it is unclear how many Gentile listeners even knew Jack Benny was Jewish.” Likewise, Milton Berle, “Mr. Television,” had to cut back on his Yiddishisms and high-affect antics, as he was deemed “too Jewish” once his show expanded out of New York. Some of Jean Carroll’s reviews also dismissed other comedians sharing the bill with her using the coded accusations of Jewishness, like being “too borscht belt” (referencing the Jewish resorts in the Catskill mountains). The fact that Carroll generally evaded such rebuke speaks to her careful assessment of how and when it was appropriate to ‘out’ herself as Jewish.

Weaving together the perspectives of critical race theory, Stember’s poll-based depiction of decreasing professed anti-Semitism; the lingering traces of Jewish exclusion from the upper echelons of American society, and the qualified embrace of Jewish comedians and performers, it becomes clear that the mid-twentieth century was a moment in which the American ethnic and racial hierarchy was in negotiation, and Jewish comedians and actors had a vested interest in performing whiteness.

An Era of Coded Representation

In his influential text *Acting Jewish*, Henry Bial ties the liminal social status of Jewish

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637 Epstein, 138.
638 Epstein, 61.
people in the mid-century to their high level of representation in the media, referring to the years between 1947 and 1955 as, “a postwar crisis on Jewish identity” for Jews in entertainment.

Elaborating on this crisis, Bial writes, “It was no longer possible to ignore one’s Jewishness in the face of the annihilation of European Jewry; nor was it possible to take comfort in the apparently secure position that Jews had established in the United States.”

To address this “double bind,” Bial asserts that they drew heavily on double coding, communicating Jewishness in ways that would be legible to in-group members, but not necessarily to ‘mainstream’ gentile Americans. Providing a general definition of double coding, Bial writes:

> These performances depended on the ability of Jewish audiences to recognize culturally specific aural and visual performance codes as indicators of Jewishness and then “fill in the blanks” …When considering the performance of Jewishness in mass culture, then, it is necessary to address the way the work speaks to at least two audiences: a Jewish audience and a general or gentile audience. This is what I mean by the term double coding.

Coded performance was a crucial strategy for Jewish performers to address their own cultural particularity without sacrificing universal appeal. In his discussion of the popular radio-show-turned-television-sitcom The Goldbergs, Bial provides a helpful example of coding:

> Most of what is specifically Jewish about The Goldbergs is encoded in performance practice: accents, rhythms of speech, and emotional affect. Yet the presence of these cultural codes allows a Jewish audience to infer the religious and cultural practices that the program itself rarely depicts.

So, a Jewish audience would pick up on the “aural and visual performance codes” in the program and understand that Molly and her family were Jewish, while a gentile audience may understand only that they are immigrants or generically ‘ethnic’ in some undetermined way.

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640 Bial, Acting Jewish Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage & Screen, 30.
641 Bial, 16.
642 Bial, 31.
The “aural and visual performance codes” that Bial notes in *The Goldbergs*—namely “accents, rhythms of speech, and emotional affect”—are key to reading Jean Carroll’s comedy of the 1940s and 1950s. Although not religiously observant, Jean Carroll’s Jewish identity was close to her heart, perhaps due to her devout mother, who hosted Friday night Shabbat dinners that Carroll attended when she was not performing. Jean Carroll’s Jewish background made it understandable that she would want to—and in some ways have to—speak from that place of cultural particularity. And so her performances in the 1950s provide exemplars of double coding in performance, for she was continually drawing from Jewish experiences without ever labeling them as such. Put another way, she exemplified the art of playing Jewish without saying Jewish.

**Carroll’s Codes: Playing Jewish without saying ‘Jewish’**

As the previous discussion of Rosten’s Yiddish Linguistic Devices demonstrates, Carroll peppered her dialect-free persona with grammatical structures that could selectively communicate Jewishness. These grammatical structures allowed her to signal in-group status to Jewish audience members and comment on Jewish-American experiences, without compromising her ability to ‘pass,’ among gentile audiences. But grammatical structures are only one of many forms of ‘codes’ that performers can deploy to signal in-group membership. Bial’s notion of codes is perhaps most useful when considering cultural stereotypes, which he noted often function as “the primary code” among assimilated American Jews.643

The relationship between codes and stereotypes gestures towards a field of social psychology known as schema theory. Social psychologist Claudia Strauss defines schemas as “packets of knowledge” stored in the memory that allow people to incorporate new information

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into the matrix of what they already know. In “What Makes Tony Run,” Strauss shows that these cognitive schemata are culturally-formed, and that they determine the way that people interpret the world around them.644 For instance, a person with a ‘restaurant’ schema will be able to undertake a detailed sequence of actions (ordering, waiting, asking for the check, paying) in a way that someone without that cultural knowledge will not. In other words, a cultural schema is the framework that allows a person to, as Bial puts it, “fill in the blanks.”

Jean Carroll, like most Jews of the American 1950s, knew the stereotypes of her people. She was familiar with the stereotypical Jewish characters like the force-feeding mother, crafty Eastern European merchant, stingy husband and pushy wife. And, more importantly, she knew that other members of her cultural in-group—Jewish Americans specifically, and immigrants more broadly—would also have the background knowledge to read those characters within the schema of Jewish stereotypes. Deploying these stereotypes of Jewish women that comics like Henny Youngman were circulating allowed her to hail Jewish audiences—and also as we will see in a later section, to challenge their familiar stereotypes. Out-group members—‘mainstream Americans’ with little to no exposure to or knowledge of Jews—would also be able to laugh at her absurd characters and jokes, even if they did not interpret them within the schema of Jewish stereotypes. Thus, Carroll could practice double coding—doing a single performance which could be interpreted in totally different ways, based on the culturally developed schema of the audience members. Carroll’s performance of stereotypical Jewish characters worked as ‘codes’—allowing her to comment on the Jewish experience without ‘Jewdentifying’ and

alienating her wider audience. However, as time went on and Jewishness became more socially acceptable, her Jewish references became increasingly overt.

1950s-1960s: From Codes to Caricatures

Given that the 1950s were a period of shifting racial hierarchy in America, Jewish comedians had a vested interest in representing Jews as mainstream, middle class, and “white.” Television networks even indirectly mandated more de-ethnicized subject matter with the National Association of Broadcasters’ Code specification, “racial or nationality types shall not be shown on television in such a manner as to ridicule the race or nationality.” While this mandate seems intended to prohibit racist humor, it also has the (perhaps unintended) effect of deterring television networks from including non-white comedians or subject-matter. Therefore, any humorous allusion that Carroll wanted to make to her experiences as a Jewish woman had to be securely cloaked in codes. One code that she employed to particular effect was the stereotype of the Jewish Mother. In his classic study of Jewish immigrants, Irving Howe characterized this character type as, “a brassy scourge, with her grating bark, or soul-destroying whine…and unfocused aggression.” Martha Ravits argues that this cartoonishly dissatisfied stereotype reveals the resentment her children felt towards her embodied reminder of their immigrant roots. Rather than embrace their mother and the cultural particularity she signified, many assimilationist Jewish children “devalued and stigmatized [her] as a regressive force.” By the 1950s, the Jewish Mother already had an extensive genealogy in performance, ranging from

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646 Antler, You Never Call! You Never Write!
Sophie Tucker’s self-sacrificing Yiddishe Mama, to Clifford Odets’s domineering Bessie, to the countless mothers satirized by Carroll’s male stand-up colleagues.

By invoking the overfeeding Jewish mother stereotype, Carroll was able to mark herself as a Jew—and trade in Jewish humor—without explicitly Jewdentifying. Signal among her characteristic traits is the Jewish Mother’s ties to food—preparing it and forcing it on those around her. This compulsive feeding provided fertile ground for Jean Carroll’s coded comedy in the 1950s. For example, in an *Ed Sullivan* appearance in 1950, Carroll uses a timely coded reference to embody the ‘Jewish Mother’ stereotype of a coercively nurturing matriarch, suggesting that the dimple in her daughter’s cheek is not actually a dimple, but an indent from her fingers constantly pinching the child’s face. To illustrate, Carroll mimes grabbing her cheek, screaming, “Eat!” “Eat!” In another appearance several years later, Carroll again draws on the stereotype of the dominating Jewish mother, this time positioning herself as the daughter. Again, the matron’s overzealous feeding habits replace any explicit affirmation of her Jewish ethnicity:

Mama is the type...she likes to cook.  
She runs around, chases people around with food.  
The minute she comes in the house, she takes over the kitchen.  
Honest!  
Unless you eat like you’re going to the chair, she’s not happy!  
…I took her to a museum once, she saw a skeleton, felt sorry for him, took him home to fatten him up.

The pause that Carroll gives after referencing her mother’s ‘type’ is an exemplar of allowing audiences to “fill in the blanks.” Her eyes shifting mischievously to the side, Carroll lets the word “type” linger, waiting for a few pregnant beats before filling in the innocuous, “she likes to cook.” This code of a force-feeding mother establishes a Jewish perspective, allowing

648 “*Toast of the Town*” (CBS, December 3, 1950), SOFA Entertainment.  
her Jewish audience members to identify her as an in-group member, and laugh at their perhaps shared experience. Similarly, other ethnic groups in which women were stereotyped in similar ways (e.g. Polish, African-American, Italian, etc.) can “fill in the blank” with their own relevant ‘type,’ all without Caroll being explicit and alienating mainstream audiences.

Likewise, when the increased incidence of Jewish women having plastic surgery to meet mainstream American norms of beauty650 prompted a stereotype of the superficial Jewish woman, Carroll took it too up for comic fodder. In her appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, Carroll complained about her “teenage shlump” daughter’s irritating need to feel unique, mimicking her whine, “I don’t want to be like the other girls” before tossing back the cutting reply, “All right, so we won’t bob your nose!”651 This arch quip on the preponderance of ‘bobbed noses’ (e.g. noses subject to cosmetic rhinoplasty) called out a trend in a way that audience members could either read as a wry commentary on Jewish assimilation, or a general disparagement of cosmetic surgery, depending on their position. Carroll’s invocation of Jewish stereotypes as codes allowed her to achieve that 1950s aspiration of speaking to a Jewish experience among an in-group audience, while also “passing” for the mainstream crowds.

However, as the conservative fifties gave way to the sixties, a positive shift began taking place regarding the social status of Jewishness—and ethnicity more broadly—in the United States. Arguing for the compatibility of Jewish and American identities, Nathan Glazer proposed an “essential American ethnic pattern” in which ethnic identities “accompanied and enhanced American identity.” Lilah Corwin Berman’s commentary points out how Glazer and his

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colleagues not only made Jewish identity compatible with American identity, but even raised it up to a kind of paradigmatic example, noting:

If sociological patterns, and not theology or biology defined Jewishness, as Glazer and Handlin, along with a number of other postwar commentators explained, then Jewishness was a manifestation of American values—the Jewish experience was the universal immigrant experience.652

Glazer did not extent this sociological embrace of compatible identities to African Americans, of whom he was unfairly critical. Yet the African American Civil Rights movement also played a dominant role in the changing attitudes towards Jewishness in the United States. Effects of victorious grassroots African American Civil Rights efforts like the Montgomery Bus Boycott of the mid-1950s and the Greensboro sit-in of 1960 rippled through the country, inspiring some Jewish people to join the movement, and many to reclaim their own cultural particularity. Matthew Frye Jacobson writes on relationship between the Civil Rights movement and “the ethnic revival of the 1960s”:

The civil rights movement had heightened whites’ consciousness of their skin privilege, rendering it not only visible but uncomfortable…The example of Black Nationalism and the emergence of multiculturalism had provided a new language for an identity that was not simply “American.” After decades of striving to conform to the Anglo-Saxon standard, descendants of earlier European immigrants quit the melting pot. Italianness, Jewishness, Greenness, and Irishness, had become badges of pride, not shame.653

Identifying the relationship between the early stirrings of Civil Rights movement and the new eagerness to claim cultural particularity, Jacobson acknowledges the impulse that may have animated the racist undertones of neoliberal sociologists like Glazer and Podhoretz. Jacobson

also connects the ethnic revival to the media, declaring, “in the realm of American popular culture, ethnic difference is the assimilated norm.” Indeed, by the mid-1960s, as the American government quietly passed the Immigration Reform bill of 1965, ending preferential quotas for Europeans, the American stage had celebrated such overtly Jewish works as an adaptation of Herman Wouk’s novel *Marjorie Morningstar* (1958) on the silver screen, and both *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1957) and *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) on Broadway.

**Jewdentification on “Sullivan”**

It is not surprising then, that the ‘ethnic revival’ of the 1960s would also be the time that Jean Carroll began to slide more and more overt displays of Jewishness into her comedy routines—even on mainstream platforms like *The Ed Sullivan Show*. She began subtly, quoting comic Dayton Allen’s unapologetically Yiddish catchphrase “Why not, Bubbe?” But on June 18, 1961, the special episode celebrating of 13 seasons of Sullivan, Carroll had what could be considered a ‘coming out’ moment on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Carroll’s Jewdentification on the thirteenth anniversary show is comically apt, given the significance of thirteen as the age when Jewish children receive a Bar/Bat Mitzvah welcoming them as an adult member of the synagogue. It also marked a turning point for the show itself, as leadership had recently shifted from long-time producer Marlo Lewis to the younger, more liberal Bob Precht. According to author Jerry Bowles, Precht was adamant about pushing the show towards a younger audience, and a more multicultural style could very well have been part of that campaign. For the thirteenth anniversary special, Precht arranged for both the usual slate of guest stars and

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654 Jacobson, 128.
newsmakers and what Variety termed, “a full-fledged special tune” performed by Jean Carroll, Mrs. Dorothy Louden, and Marion Marlowe. The stated purpose of the modified rendition of “Cryin’ All the Way to the Bank,” was to pay tribute to Sullivan’s success, in spite of his initially poor critical reception. However, its execution models Jean Carroll’s turn from tentative, coded Jewishness to full-on, almost brazen Yiddishkeit.

The musical number, which opened the show, was a study in comical contrast, playing off the classic comedy ‘rule of threes,’ with Jean Carroll as the disruptive ‘third.’ Announcer Art Hannes began the show introducing “three lovely ladies—a million dollar trio!” He then named “Mrs. Dorothy Louden, Marion Marlowe,” and, lastly, “Jean Carroll!” The three women strode onto the stage holding newspapers in front of their faces, as the band struck a brassy entrance tune. The camera first rested in wide angle on the three women, only their hips, legs, and high-heeled feet visible behind the newspapers, before zooming left to 35-year-old singer Dorothy Louden. In close-up, the camera showed her pull the newspaper away to reveal a pretty, pouting face as Louden exclaimed, “Critics are nasty old men!” Raising her newspaper, Louden remarks, “it said here in 1948” before bursting melodiously into the verse, “Ed Sullivan…He doesn’t sing/He doesn’t dance/his talents are so weak! From what we see/we guarantee/he’ll never last a week!” “Now,” she questioned the audience, “who else would say that but a nasty old man?” The camera then shifted to a close-up of Marion Marlowe, the strikingly beautiful 32-year-old chanteuse, as she proclaimed, “But by 1961, things had gotten better.” Shifting from speech to song, Marlowe continues, “It says here, “Ed Sullivan…Impossible, deplorable/ he bores us all to tears! We ought to know/we haven’t missed his show for thirteen years!” Abruptly, the camera

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moves to the then 50-year-old Jean Carroll, standing in the center, as she, without fanfare, pulls from her face a copy of the *Forverts*, written entirely the Yiddish alphabet (known as the aleph-beys, this alphabet is almost indistinguishable from the Hebrew alphabet).

“Ce Zogt Do,” she begins, not stopping to translate into English (“It says here”). Carroll paused only for the audience’s giant laugh to subside. Somewhere in the crowd, there was an audible shriek of laughter, to which Carroll responded with a smirk and a knowing raise of her eyebrows. She continued, “By Westra Goldfarb?! her voice breaking with incredulity at the gratuitous Jewishness of the critic’s name before she speak-sang against the distinctive Klezmeric strains of a violin, “Sullivan, I’ve watched your show for thirteen years. My sentiment I can sum up. I can tell it to you all in one sentence, Sullivan: Zoldu shtinken from dein kopf!” Again, Carroll did not translate the Yiddish insult into its English counterpart (“You stink from your head”), but launched into yet another Jewish-joke, remarking, “I got that from a writer in Tel Aviv!”

Within the first minute and a half, the musical number established what was to be the running joke of the bit: the melodic loveliness of Louden and Marlowe countered with the
strident ‘ethnic’ screeching of Carroll. Thus, in a bit that ostensibly mocks Sullivan, the true ‘butt’ of the joke is Jean Carroll, positioned as the comical Jewish outlier of the “million dollar trio.” However, Carroll manages to play against the stereotypical text using those knowing glances, and an almost parodic over-the-top quality. The next stanza showcased Carroll’s substantial vocal chops a bit more, as each woman sang a line about Sullivan’s acid critiques, culminating in a three-part harmony on the line, “He never got a single good review.” As the song shifted into a swinging jazz tune, the camera rested again on a wide shot of the three women from head to calf, emphasizing their individual apparel. On the left, the tall, slender Marion Marlowe was garbed in a full A-line skirt with a statement belt emphasizing her small waist. On the right, Dorothy Louden had a form-fitting gown covered in sequins. Standing in between these two willowy women in a conservative monochromatic dress, even the well-proportioned Jean Carroll looked strangely squat and heavyset by contrast. Her well-maintained looks, though remarkable for a woman of fifty, seemed matronly when bookended by women twenty years her junior. While the contrast was not stark enough to confidently interpret it as a visual joke, it is notable that Carroll, whose figure and beauty had so famously transcended stereotypes of dowdy Jewish women in the previous decade—would now be positioned in that very role, relative to the younger starlets.
The three women sang in equal measure, with the camera zooming in on each as she delivered her solo verse cataloging Sullivan’s many accomplishments. But as the song came to an end and Louden and Marlowe both delivered graceful bows, Carroll raised her hand in protest. “Wait a minute, Wait a minute!” she cried, leaning back and shaking her hands, “No no! NO! Please! No applause yet!” she went on—heavily emphasizing the Brooklyn-accented second syllable of “applause.” Embodying the stereotype of the domineering Jewish woman, Carroll began barking directions at both the audience and the other members of her trio: “No applause yet, not yet, I’ll tell you when—and don’t start bowing, we have more to this number!”

Off of the women’s prettily puzzled expressions, Carroll exclaimed, “If you’d show up to rehearsals, you’d know I have a very dramatic part to say, I’d like to say it please, if you don’t mind. Just because you’re taller than me, don’t get smart!” The acknowledgement of physical disparity in Carroll’s reference to Louden and Marlowe being “taller” again reveals that keen self-awareness of her position in the sketch, communicating that she was not simply uncritically parroting a matronly stereotype. There is a winking, exaggerated quality to her outburst, as she guilts and bosses her costars like a larger-than-life Yente Telebende.658 When Dorothy Louden

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658 Yente Telebente was a caricature of bossy Jewish women, known for loudly demanding everyone do as she says, created in a humor column in The by Jacob Adler. B. KovnerApril 6 and 2007, “Yente at the Telephone,” The
peevishly snipped, “Well, if you want to be pushy,” Carroll responded with a full-throated “I do! I do! I want to be pushy!”, nudging the other two women to face the curtain while she addressed the crowd.

“My dramatic part!” Carroll declaimed with a flourish of her arms as the klezmer violin piped up again, “Ah yes…they said it couldn’t be done.” She then broke into a deafening screech. Sticking her neck out and gesticulating wildly, she screamed, “Who the heck are THEY to say what could be done?!” The other two women gave clownish startle reactions before visibly throwing their hands up and walking offstage, shocked by their fellow woman’s shameful flouting of demure femininity. Unfazed, Carroll continued her melodramatic monologue:

Them with their cotton-picking mouths—Sure, they’re talking about Ed Sullivan, the man they don’t know! Ed Sullivan, the host of the Sullivan Show! But there’s another man. And you don’t know Sullivan the way I know him” (giving a grimace) Are you lucky! This is an unusual man! A man of integrity of character, great strength. I’d like to tell you more about him, but I’m so choked up…

At that point, as the curtain opened, Carroll announced, “Let the cast of thousands tell you about this man,” and gestured towards the ensemble who launched the show into its next segment.659

And so, in spite of her role as the comically ethnic ‘other’ in the sketch, Carroll was its central figure, both literally and figuratively. While the other two women were presented as performing ‘properly,’ they were also not given as much stage time, as many lines, or the distinction of transitioning from the opening number to the rest of the show. This centrality then, was Carroll’s reward for foregrounding her Jewishness in a way that she had not done before. And while she typically did not experiment with such an extreme embodiment of the stereotypically domineering Jewish woman as she did on that thirteenth anniversary special, her

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brief flirtation with caricature did show the potential rewards for reinscribing popular stereotypes.

Thus, while Carroll did not replicate her embodiment of a cartoonish Jewish mother, her post-1961 *Ed Sullivan* appearances did reliably reference Jewish customs or phrases. For instance, in her spot on Christmas weekend in 1964, she incorporated a bit of *halacha* into her humor, joking about her mother’s habit of scrutinizing all the chickens in the market before telling the butcher, “we’ll eat dairy.” The fact that Carroll felt comfortable telling a joke that relied on a reference to Jewish kosher law (which prohibits serving meat and dairy in the same meal) suggests that she had confidence in both the audience’s cultural knowledge required to ‘get the joke,’ and in their embrace of the cultural particularity the joke reflects. Likewise, Carroll’s monologue on the May 8, 1966 episode demonstrates the kind of explicitly Jewish references that would have raised eyebrows (and perhaps NARB lawsuits) ten years before, beginning:

> You know today, parents can hardly wait for their children to grow up, it’s a fact! Years ago, you gave a child time to grow up. Today, a kid is born, and the day the little boy is born, the father runs out and brings a present to his son in the hospital: His Bar Mitzvah suit. 

(Laughter)

“You think that’s funny?
You don’t know how funny, it’s ridiculous, the kid is Irish!”

(Laughter)

But he does come from a mixed marriage—a mother and father!

Again, Carroll’s reference to a Bar Mitzvah presupposes both that the audience will recognize this reference to a Jewish custom, and that they will tolerate the normalization of Jewishness that it implies. In fact, Carroll foregrounds this normalization, jokingly hinting that Jewish customs

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like Bar Mitzvahs have become *de rigeur* even for non-Jewish families. She then alludes to perhaps the biggest ‘problem’ facing the Jewish community in the mid-1960s: “mixed marriages.” A constant topic both on and offstage, marriage between Jews and non-Jews was perhaps most ominously catastrophized in Thomas Morgan’s article “The Vanishing American Jew,” which provided statistics forecasting the increased incidence of interfaith marriage as the harbinger to American Jewry’s disappearance. Jean Carroll’s joke about a “mixed marriage” being between “a mother and a father” turns on the fraught issue of Jewish assimilation by marriage. However ambivalent Jewish audience members may have felt about this assimilation, it does seem to have given Jean Carroll confidence to Jewdentify to the masses. In fact, this episode closes with a curiously coded reference to ethnic pride, as Carroll delivers a joke that turns on the subversion of expectations. She begins by discussing progressive education, a favorite target of her acerbic wit:

Today, educators have a new approach to everything in life—they’re realistic! You know, they say, “Concerning the facts of life, be honest with your children. Give them an honest answer when they get curious about the facts of life!” If your boy, 16 years old, walks in to you and says, ‘Daddy—Where do I come from?’ Don’t give him any evasive answer! Stand up! Square your shoulders! Look him right in the eye and say, ‘Son—you come from Brooklyn!’

The response to this joke was revealing—first, it elicited a gentle wave of laughter from the audience. Then, after a few seconds, this laughter was joined by a few scattered noises of applause, which quickly turned into a full round of applause lasting six seconds long. While it is

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impossible to confirm, a reading of this response using Bial’s idea of double coding might suggest that that first gentle wave of laughter acknowledged Carroll’s neat misdirection, pivoting “Where do I come from?” away from sex and towards geography. However, upon reflection, the audience may have grokked the deeper shift that she made in this joke, transforming “the facts of life” from reproduction to assimilation. In this new context, her exhortation to “Square your shoulders” and proclaim proudly, “Son, you come from [the famously ethnic] Brooklyn” takes on a new sense of pride in immigrant roots—the kind that may well provoke an impassioned round of applause from a 1966 audience. While it still maintains some vestigial guardedness of her more coded Jewish humor, this multi-layered joke also betokens a growing pride in ethnic origins.

“Buying a Fur Coat” Four Times:

Particularly reflective of the increasing safety (and rewards) of ‘Jewdentification’ is a close reading of the increasingly overt ethnicity in her famous “fur coat routine,” which she performed so many times on various recorded media. I will examine four iterations of the fur coat routine: the first on April 17, 1949 on Toast of the Town; the second almost ten years later on the November 30, 1958 episode of Toast of the Town, the third on her 1960 album Girl in a Hot Steam Bath, and the fourth again on the Ed Sullivan Show on December 27, 1964. Looking at four different performances of the same routine over time highlights the ways that as Jewishness shifted from a taboo to a celebrated subject, Carroll’s supporting characters shifted from a coded to a downright cartoonish representation of Jewishness.

In 1949, on the April 17 episode of the Ed Sullivan Show—then called Toast of the Town—Carroll introduced a television audience to what would become one of her most beloved
routines: buying a fur coat. In its early iterations, it modeled the Jewish-American housewife’s drive to assimilate into the middle class through consumerism. After being introduced as “a particular treat this holiday season,” Carroll sashayed onto the stage, decked out in a plumed hat and a fur coat. “Like my chapeau?” she asked coquettishly, emphasizing her French affectations and fashionable ensemble before drawing the audience’s attention to the piece de resistance with, “I gotta tell you about this coat!” The first section of the bit invokes the stereotypically materialistic, nagging wife, beginning:

You see, this year, my husband gave me this!
It was a surprise—He didn’t know I was getting it.
It’s very expensive! It cost him three ulcers.
I’ll tell you how I got the coat, you see: I nagged him!

In the next section, Carroll begins to approach a more specifically Jewish stereotype: the tribal tendencies of “middle-man minorities" to support their own networks rather than go through more established mainstream consumer venues.

He knew a fella that had a friend that knows a guy downtown in skins…(Laughter)
Now, you must be very careful with furs because it’s a blind article—
that’s what the furriers tell you.
So…through an emissary and a carrier pigeon, we set up an appointment with this fella!
And this hadda be done with the utmost in secrecy,
at 3:00 in the morning on a foggy night…(Laughter)
Now…the reason is, to protect the furrier—no one should find out he’s selling retail!
So we get there, 8:00 in the morning—there’s 14 other people sitting waiting.666

Here, Carroll parodies what would be for some audience members a recognizable phenomena of the tenuous connections that become salient networks in immigrant communities (“He knew a fella that had a friend that knows a guy”), and the lengths that community members will go

664 “Toast of the Town,” April 17, 1949, SOFA Entertainment.
665 Park, “Human Migration and the Marginal Man.”
666 “Toast of the Town,” April 17, 1949.
(“emissary, carrier pigeon, etc.”) to support one another and save money. Even without the recognizability factor, Carroll still offers humor in this passage with the absurd subterfuge of the purchase. She ties up the section with the reveal that despite the calculating consumer’s attempt to secure an exclusive deal, “14 other people” have been offered the same one.

The next beat of the piece moves from focusing on Carroll and her husband to Carroll’s interactions with the furrier, who in this first iteration is presented as a standard, if not entirely scrupulous, American salesman with no discernible dialect or body language.

We walk in the furrier says, “Well! What can I show ya?”
“ Well,” I said, “I want a coat.”
He said, “What kind?”
I said, “Well, I don’t know how to describe it exactly, but I want a coat, my friends should take one look and drop dead”
He says, “You came to the right place! More women die from coats here than anywhere else”
He disappears in an iron door, he’s gone for six months!
Comes back, I said, “You could have gone to Alaska!”
He says, “Where do you think I got the frozen ear?”
He says, “But I brought you a garment!” (takes off her fur coat)
“I brought you a fur coat” (She holds it out to display)
“This coat, the finest; the most wonderful merchandise” (Throws it to the floor)
“Lookacoat!” (Laughter)

Here, the furrier is presented without any of the ethnic markers that would later come to dominate his character. In fact, the contrast between the furrier’s otherwise vernacular speech and the Yiddish-inflected absence of prepositions in “Lookacoat” seems to be a major source of laughter. In the next beat, Carroll’s persona and the furrier continue their comical clash:

I always wondered why they threw these things on the floor.
Now I know.
That’s so when they tell you the price, you’ll have something soft to faint on!
He says, “There is a garment—you could go from here to the corner, you wouldn’t see another one like it!”
“This coat is practical, this coat will wear like iron!”
“This coat will live longer than you!”
Well, I figured by the looks of it, it already had!
He said, “A coat like this, you can sit in it, ride in it, walk in it, you can go
anyplace in it! You’ll get tired of it, you’ll bring it in, I should remodel it!
This coat—believe me—there is a coat! Feel the thickness!
Go on, feel the thickness!”
I felt it. No wonder it was thick! The furrier was inside, sewing in the lining!

In the next section, Carroll gently alludes to the stereotype of the crafty Jewish merchant, with

the furrier’s false protestations against haggling:

I said all right, it’s a beautiful coat, how much is it?
He said, “How much is it?” I’ll tell you one price, don’t waste my time.
An absolute price, rock bottom—no bargaining! I don’t want anybody
to know what I’m charging you—I don’t want my partner to find out—
I don’t even want the minks to find out!
For you...$6,000.”
I said, (shrieking) “6,000?”
He said, “Shhh!! Don’t holler!
I’m not going to let a few dollars stand in the way!
Being you were recommended...$3,000.” (Laughter)
And he says, “Believe me—I’m losing money on it!”
Well I was stuck! How can I pass up anything a man’s losing money on?

Suggesting his dissembling ways, the furrier initially claims to offer a “rock bottom” price, but
soon reveals his own prevarication by halving the price when faced with losing the sale. The

final section of the ‘buying a fur coat bit’ concludes with the merchant sneakily reversing all his

grandiose claims about the coat’s strength and versatility:

I gave him the money, I go to pick up the coat.
He says “Uh-uh! Don’t pick up the mink coat with the hands!”
This is a very very perishable garment! A coat like this,
the way you’re handling it, wouldn’t last six months!
You have to be very careful, these things fall apart!
Don’t ever let the sun hit this coat, and don’t let it ever get wet!
And a coat like this, you don’t sit in it,
you don’t ride in it, you don’t walk in it!
A coat like this you don’t even wear!”
I said, “Wait a minute! I pay you $3,000, you tell me
“I can’t sit in it, I can’t ride in it, I can’t walk in it—
what good is the coat to me?”
He says, “To you? No good!
But you’d be surprised how it dresses up a closet!”

The routine was met with resounding applause, and Sullivan seemed extremely pleased, calling Carroll back onstage for an encore bow. Compared to later versions of the buying a fur coat routine, this bit was remarkably and intentionally devoid of ethnic humor. Carroll shared that in the early years of Sullivan’s show, there were a number of officials who weighed in on how to keep the show as mainstream as possible, remembering,

On his [Ed Sullivan’s] show, you had the rabbi, the priest, the school teacher, the principal from school. And Ed. And at the dress rehearsal, they said, “Out this is out, delete, delete, delete.” And I’d say, “Why?” “Well, because the Catholics won’t like that. What about that? ‘The Jews won’t like that.”

But when she performed the routine again on The Ed Sullivan Show, nearly ten years later on November 30, 1958, however, it was substantially changed, in ways that more directly invoked Jewish stereotypes. First, the character of Carroll’s narrating persona became slightly more aggressive, and the character of the furrier acquired a faintly Eastern European accent and a penchant for Russian words.

Carroll’s persona’s increased assertiveness was clear in the bit’s new opening, as she strutted onto the Sullivan stage with a gleaming mink wrapped around her shoulders. Unlike its earlier version, in which she coquettishly modeled the coat to the audience, the 1958 version sees her unceremoniously slipping it off and throwing it on the ground as soon as she hit her mark, brushing herself off with a casual, “Well, hiya…don’t get nervous, that’s the way the furrier showed it to me!” With her cavalier handling of this expensive item, she is able to depict a kind of ambivalence regarding the ultimate status symbol for women. This ambivalence is also

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667 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts.
evident in the word choice she uses to describe the fur-clad women she describes seeing in high-class restaurants, gushing, “I never saw so many well-kept and beautifully groomed women in my whole life!” Rather than describe the women using praise like, “elegant” or “glamorous” Carroll chooses to refer to them as being ‘kept’ and groomed’ Using the register of pets, Carroll implicitly likens the fur-clad women to their animal counterparts. Then, while the Carroll of 1949 disclosed that she got the coat by “nagging” her husband, the 1958 version takes a more aggressive tact, threatening:

> There was no argument, because I said it simply.  
> I said, “Either a mink or a separation.”  
> And my husband, he’s very practical, he said,  
> “You’d look silly wearing a separation—Get the mink!”

Carroll then added a new transition section invoking the familiar stereotype of Jewish men as miserly, specifically through an aversion to buying retail:

> I had seen a beautiful mink coat on fifth avenue,  
> And I was gonna get it, but my husband found out it was retail.  
> *(Narrowed her eyes as the audience laughed knowingly)*  
> Now, he’s the kind of guy who can’t BEAR to see you get stuck retail.  
> *Purses her lips to the audience’s Laughter*

The piece then proceeded into the husband’s familiar wrangling of the immigrant network. But what is telling about this new transition is that the biggest laugh lines are the silences—those wordless moments in which Carroll looks meaningfully at the audience, asking them to “fill in the blanks.” In fact, the laugh which occurred after she pronounced the word ‘retail’ was the longest one of the entire set. Although it is impossible to ascertain, it does seem as though the audience’s laughter reveals their recognition of a stereotypically Jewish zeal for a deal.

The next major change Carroll made to lean into more ethnic humor is her pushing the furrier in the direction of the stereotypical Eastern European merchant. This shift is clearest in
her addition of the piece’s new signature line, “Feel the Pough!” (pronounced *puch*)

He said, “You don’t have to worry about that coat being on the floor—nothing will happen to it.
He said, “These skins are strong! They’re as strong as a Yale padlock!
D’you ever try cuttin’ through a Yale padlock?
He says, “Try those skins! In your Life, you never felt skins like these!”
He says, “Feel the pough!”
I said, “Feel the who?”
He said, “Don’t feel the who, feel the pough!”
I mean, when I went to college, I didn’t major in pough-feeling.
So I stood there looking stupid.
He says, “Why don’t you feel the pough?”
I said, “I’ll tell you the truth: If I knew where to find it, I’d feel it!”
He said, “My dear girl, Pough is thickness. It’s only thickness.”
…I said, “I’ll tell you the truth: I can’t stand the coat,
but I fell in love with the pough!”

Although his accent is barely perceptible in most of his lines, when ordering the persona to
“Lookacoat!” and “Feel the Pough”, the furrier’s voice takes on a distinctively Eastern European
dialect. Each time Carroll pronounces the word, accenting the guttural “ch” noise at the end of
Pough, the audience titters, perhaps as amused by the Yiddish sound of the word as by its unclear
meaning. The coding of the character as Jewish is heightened at the part where the furrier is
coming up with a price, which Carroll introduces using the new line, “Did you ever see a
wholesaler figure a price?” Carroll takes on the *physicality* of the wholesaler, putting herself
through a contorted series of chin-rubbing, cheek-squeezing, and, most prominently, no fewer
than six ‘Jewish shrugs.’ Overcome by the furrier’s devolving from language into shrugs,
Carroll’s frustrated persona demands, “Listen, before the coat goes out of style, how much do
you want?”

Again, the piece moves through the furrier’s feigned opposition to haggling, the

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669 This usage of “Jewish Shrug” comes from Rebecca Rossen’s *Dancing Jewish: Rossen, Dancing Jewish Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance*. 
persona’s shocked reply, and the furrier’s prompt backtracking. However, the newer version has a substantially reworked ending. While the 1949 version closed with the furrier stressing the delicacy of the coat, ending on the button “it dresses up a closet!” the 1958 version took out this entire section. Instead, after Carroll’s persona screamed at the price, the furrier flinched and replied, “If I don’t put the coat in a box… I could do a little better” before knocking five thousand dollars off the price.670 This edited version, which heightened the absurdity of the furrier’s haggling, became the new closer. Thus, Carroll’s major changes between 1949 and 1958 included making her persona more aggressive, heightening her husband’s hatred of retail, and giving the furrier an Eastern European patois, all of which more overtly invoke Jewish stereotypes.

By the recording of ‘Buying a Fur Coat’ is Carroll’s live album, “Girl in a Hot Steam Bath,” released in 1960, the furrier had become full-fledged dialect humor, a larger-than-life stereotype against whom Carroll’s persona could act as straight-man (or woman).671 The different media is important to note, both because Carroll is freed of some of the restrictions of the mainstream Sullivan show, and because she is performing to an audience that largely cannot see her. Thus, some of the visual codes that she used in 1958 to invoke Jewish stereotypes have to be communicated verbally here.

One of the clearest pieces of evidence of the less stringent restrictions of the record medium (as compared to network television) occurs in the ultimatum that Carroll’s persona issues to her husband. While the 1958 version threatened “Either a mink or a separation,” the more risqué 1960 version goes, “It’s mink coat or twin beds.” By alluding to ‘twin beds’, Carroll

671 Carroll, Girl in a Hot Steam Bath.
hints at the concubine-like nature of marital relations, in which women exchanged sexual and domestic favors for financial support. But the most telling modification of the routine is Carroll’s invocation of the larger-than-life stereotypical Jewish merchant through the furrier. On the album, the moment the furrier shows the merchandise he adopts the strong Eastern European dialect that often codes for ‘Jewish.’

…He takes the coat and throws it on the floor.
And when it’s on the floor he says, [in heavy ambiguously Eastern European accent] “Look-a-coat!” “Look…a…coat!”
If he holds it up, you can’t Look-a-coat?
Only on the floor you can look-a-coat?
If you want to try it on, you lay down, you creep into it.
So I [mocking his accent] “Looked-a-coat!”

The neatly layered moment in which Carroll, as her narrating persona, imitates Carroll as the furrier, highlights the way in which her persona is positioned as the ‘normal’ Americanized speaker, vis-à-vis the cartoonish man. This contrast is also clear in the next section, as the furrier’s Eastern European origins go from implied to explicit:

“This coat, you can live in it, sit in it, feel the Pough!”
…I didn’t want to feel it, because I thought ‘Pough’ was not a nice word…
But you see, I didn’t want this fellow to think that he was dealing with an absolute greenhorn…
So I stood there trying to look intelligent.
He said, “What are you standing there looking so stupid?”
I said, “I’ll tell you the truth, if I knew where to find it, I’d feel it.”
…He said, “‘Pough’ is a word used by furriers, it’s used in the trade, it’s a Russian word.
It’s just a trade expression…
it’s thickness, that’s all it is, thickness.
Now, feel the Pough.” And I was relieved!

This passages’ ‘outing’ of the furrier as, if not a Russian immigrant, at least a user or Russian expressions, along with her desire not to seem like a “greenhorn” gestures to the world of Jewish immigrants in a coded way. The dialect humor ramps up to its highest degree on the record as
the furrier begins haggling over the price of the coat.

Have you ever seen a furrier...(laughter)
in skins...(laughter)
on thirtieth street...(laughter)
doing what is quaintly known as
(in cartoonish Yiddish accent) ‘figgehrin’ a pehrice’?
He is ‘figgehrin’ a pehrice’
...He holds his hands over his eyes, like the whole thing is
giving him (in Yiddish accent) “Sush a chead-ache!”
[Next, she mumbles a faux niggun (Yiddish song)] “Daya…daya, ne…”

Knowing that on the album, audio would be all she had to convey the character of the furrier,
Carroll went in big with dialect humor and verbal descriptions of the furrier’s contortions,
describing how he “holds his hands over his eyes” like he had a headache. As the piece ends,
Carroll tweaked the closing joke so that now, the reasoning that the furrier gives for knocking
thousands of dollars from the price is that he won’t put “a string on the box.” With his heavily-
accented equivocation, the furrier character exemplifies the stereotypical shifty Jewish merchant.
One effect of creating this larger-than-life Jewish caricature is to make Carroll’s persona seem
more ‘Americanized’ by comparison. This comparison also contrasts the ‘old world,’ lower-class,
still-accented immigrant generation with the more upwardly-mobile, Americanized, second
generation. Carroll is also able to turn the tables on her male colleagues for their constant use of
Jewish female stereotypes by doing some invoking of an equally absurd male stereotype.
Furthermore, by mocking Jewish stereotypes, she shows herself “in” on the joke. She is able to
take the stereotype of the consuming Jewish Mother/Wife’s passion for shopping, and the Jewish
merchant’s heavily-accented fumbling, and use it as fodder to exhibit her wit, mimicry, and
comparative assimilation.

When Carroll performed the ‘Buying a Fur Coat’ routine for her third and final time on
the Ed Sullivan Show, it was December 27, 1964, and both Carroll’s persona and the furrier were
firmly embodying recognizably Jewish stereotypes. Carroll’s narrating persona, partially due to her older, more matronly form, was far more in line with stereotypes of pushy, dissatisfied housewives. Perhaps inspired by the growing popularity of up-and-coming female comics like Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, Carroll’s 1964 persona spat sassy one-liners that had previously not been part of the buying a coat routine. For instance, the following sequence in which Carroll’s persona first encounters the furrier took on a new edge riddled with sarcasm:

The furrier is a very intelligent fella, he says, “What do you want?”
I said, “Well, I didn’t come to get the weather report, I want a mink coat!”
He said, “What kind?”
I said, “What do I know from mink coats?
…Then he gives me a look and says, “Don’t go away!”
…I said “Don’t worry about it, if the building burns, I go with it, I guarantee ya”

Where once Carroll’s persona demurely answered the furrier’s questions, by 1964, she replies to each of the furrier’s questions with a sassy rejoinder. Later in the routine, her snappy repartee takes an explicitly Jewish bent, incorporating the aforementioned line that references halachic practices like separating dairy from meat:

…I didn’t want this furrier to think that he was dealing with someone who didn’t know anything! I know about furs!
I have a girlfriend who goes around blowing on fur coats in stores…. My mother does the same thing in the market.
She blows on all the chickens in the butcher shop before telling the butcher, ‘We’ll eat dairy.’
Anyhow, I decided I’d show him something, so I blew on the fur.
He said, “What are you blowing on, it’s not a plate of soup!”

Carroll’s overtly Jewish persona reflects a larger trend in which Jewishness—and ethnicity more broadly—became celebrated as an integral part of American identity. However, this increased Jewdentification could veer dangerously towards promoting negative stereotypes.

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This negative stereotype is, I argue, ultimately where the furrier character ends up. By 1964, Carroll’s depiction of the furrier is really a caricature; his accent would be extreme even by Myron Cohen’s standards, his voice riddled with *krechts* (the break in the voice associated with Yiddish music), and his duplicity foregrounded in both feigned hearing loss and haggling. All of the following traits are evident in the new variant of the bargaining beat:

I said, “How much do you want for this coat?”
Now, up to now, this man has had no trouble hearing me.

*(The furrier hunches over, rubbing his chin contemplatively with his pointer finger)*

Have you ever seen a wholesaler in skins ‘figgering out a peh-rice, a bargain?’
He says, “Eeehh…this coat…”?
Looking at it like he’s never seen it in his life!
Like he doesn’t know how it got there!
“This coat eh-heeeeee” *[high pitched hemming and hawing]*
He’s getting a message from the minks up here ya see!
“This coat, for you—“

*(Furrier holds one finger up in front of his face, putting it down and then up again)*

“This coat…”

*(Furrier turns over his shoulders sneakily as if afraid of being overheard)*

…“I’ll make you a price I myself shouldn’t hear…
Shhhhh! *(Giving a dramatic finger to lips gesture)*

…I said, “How much do you want for the coat?”
He says, “Aright, I’m figgering a peh-rice”

“This coat, you can have, MIT de box, MIT de lining
MIT Trowing in Every-ting!
You can have it for…(6 shrugs)…altogether!
I said, “listen, before the coat goes out of style,
How much money do you want for this coat?”
He said, “Look, don’t give me aggravation!” *(Shrug)* “I’m figgering!”

The bargaining section, once a relatively small beat in the overall routine, expanded over time to accommodate the growing Jewish merchant caricature into which the furrier developed. Carroll’s persona’s wry commentary to the audience, observing the furrier’s feigned hearing loss, astonishment at the coat, and over-wrought, hyper-accented “figgering,” peppered with Yiddish words, comes together to form a fairly unmistakable invocation of the Jewish merchant stereotype.
While Carroll’s shifting the “Buying a Fur Coat” routine from code to caricature suggests that she felt more comfortable trafficking in Jewish stereotypes in 1964 than in 1949, it also speaks to a growing normalization of these stereotypes. Carroll, at any rate, was willing to invoke this merchant stereotype, partially in order to make her persona seem more successfully Americanized by contrast. A Freudian reading might connect the furrier’s depiction as an Old-World tradesman to Carroll’s father, a Russian immigrant and baker. In order to emphasize her persona’s status as American consumer, Carroll was willing to make the Jewish tradesmen of the previous generation into a laughable caricature. What Carroll was not willing to do as egregiously however, was to replicate stereotypes of Jewish 

women in quite as caricatured a manner. As I will argue in the next section, even when her persona invoked stereotypes of Jewish women, Carroll was careful to avoid totally and uncritically playing a cartoon. Instead, she found ways to modify these stereotypes, often by transforming them into the wry voice of reason amidst a chorus of fools.

A Savvier Shopper: Revising the Stereotype(s) of the Jewish Wife and Mother

While the previous section showed ways that Jean Carroll invoked, embodied, and modified some stereotypical representations of Jews, this section shows how she revised and subverted popular stereotypes of Jewish women. One of the dominant stereotypes of women—and Jewish women in particular—in the mid-century United States was that of the materialistic, consumption-obsessed wife. Riv-Ellen Prell refers to this stereotype as the Devouring Jewish Wife and Mother, whose insatiable consumption outpaces the constant toil of her hapless husband as he struggles to make a living for his family. Prell argues that this stereotype of women’s constant and unfulfilling cycle of consumption is actually a manifestation of men’s disillusionment with the consumer economy of middle class. The Devouring Jewish wife and
mother, in all her materialistic, consumer-driven excess, was a fixture of cultural discourse in the 1950s, appearing in newspapers, magazines, sermons, and of course, Jewish male stand-up comedy. From Henry Youngman’s beleaguered exclamation that his wife had a blackbelt in shopping to Jackie Mason’s multiculturally offensive estimation, “A Jewish woman costs $50,000 a year; Italians $12,500; Puerto Ricans, maybe $1.25,” the stereotype of the Devouring Jewish women and their materialism provided male Jewish comedians with plenty of material of their own. Jean Carroll, however, revised the stereotypes of Jewish women, taking on the charge of consumption and materialism, but foregrounding her own, female, experience. As evidenced by her classic bits like “Buying a dress” or “Buying a fur coat,” many of Carroll’s bits dramatized shopping. But her comedy positioned her persona as the sympathetic voice of reason, surrounded by comparatively eccentric characters.

Some of her most sophisticated revision of gender stereotypes is on display in a series of bits she created about moving from one residence to another. While ostensibly about her personal experience with her husband, these routines tapped into the widespread trend of Jewish families of the 1950s experiencing an economic uplift into the middle class, often moving to the suburbs. This uplift was met with profound ambivalence on the part of the many Jews making that transition. While doubtlessly enjoying the privileges of wealth and “whiteness,” many Jewish people felt a fraught kind of ambivalence about leaving behind the more “authentic” Jewishness of the working class. E.J. Goldstein articulates this ambivalence in his historical scholarship on Jews of the post-war era, explaining that “whiteness sat uneasily with many central aspects of Jewish identity,” particularly because “Jews were the [immigrant] group whose self-image was most

673 Prell, Fighting to Become Americans.
674 Berger, Jewish Jesters.
thoroughly bound up with outsider status.” Matthew Frye Jacobson terms this anxiety “the assimilation blues.” Carroll captures this dynamic in miniature through her comic narratives about moving; as she breezes through anecdotes about dragging her reluctant husband through a series of residences, she consistently positions herself as the enthusiastic driver of action, and her husband as the reluctant passenger. The experience of suburbanization—seen from the male perspective as a devouring wife’s obsession with shopping, becomes re-imagined from Jean Carroll’s perspective as a progressive move, in which the wife’s embrace of Jews’ shifting status is hindered by her regressive husband’s ambivalence.

For instance, on her September 23, 1956 appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, Carroll did a bit about her move from a tenement-style apartment building to a Park Avenue co-op, where she acted out working with an interior decorator to shed her old (lower-class) possessions in favor of her new bourgeois lifestyle. In the bit, Carroll stood center stage, dressed in a low-cut, sleeveless lace gown with a pencil skirt that highlighted her slender frame. Earrings and a bracelet sparkled subtly, and she held neat white gloves in her hands. Her perfectly-arranged updo, neatly-plucked brow, and heavy but precise makeup completed the picture of a sophisticated upper-class lady. She rushed on, clasped Sullivan by the hands, smiled down at the audience as she found her mark, and began joking about her formerly dismal living conditions:

I’ve just been going through something all you women will understand, I’ve been moving from one apartment to the other. You see, before I got married, my husband promised me that I’d have a place of my own, even if it was just a hole in the wall. And that’s where I’ve been living—a hole in the wall. But really, we had to get out because it was a sublease, and the mice wanted it back.

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676 Jacobson, *Roots Too*.
I’ll tell you, you never saw such a building in your life!
They had what you’d call a “finished basement”
— you go down there, you’re finished!
All the tenants, they do their laundry down there.
It’s easy, ‘cause there’s four feet of water, see?
I don’t mind the water but Ooh! Those alligators!
But My Husband! He loves this neighborhood!
He says, “Where else could you get six rooms for thirty dollars a month?”
This. He. Likes!
I tell you something, such a neighborhood!
My husband, he likes it, he says, “It’s quiet at night!”
It is quiet—all you hear is a few screams for help.
You know—in some neighborhoods, in some buildings,
if you want heat, all you do is knock on the radiator with a wrench.
Here, you knock on the landlord’s head!
…But you know, I got lucky!
I got a lucky break, because, as I said to my husband,
“The building has been condemned, and we’ve got to move!”

Unlike the anecdotal women of other stand-up sets, Carroll enjoys full subjectivity; her voice and perspective engender the audience’s sympathetic view of her former apartment as a “hole in the wall,” rife with the dangers of floods, alligators, cold, mice, and whatever is prompting those “screams for help” in the night. Her husband’s love of the neighborhood, while perhaps connected to Jewish immigrants’ desire to maintain their roots in a working class ambiance, is here represented as a miserliness that is both unreasonable and comically foolish. Nevertheless, his stagnation means that they must remain there until the situation reaches a crisis point, prompting Carroll to refer to her building being condemned as “a lucky break.” Carroll further emphasizes her husband’s role as a force of stagnation as they battle over furnishings:

He said, ‘All right, we’ll take all our old furniture’
I said, ‘No, nothing doing!’
He said, ‘Look honey—I want you to take everything of value with us.”
So…I filled up the shopping bag and we moved.
I’ll tell you where we moved.
You know it’s hard to get an apartment to rent; we bought one!
You know those co-ops? You know co-operatives?
In case you don’t know what that is, I’ll tell you:
If you’ve got $5,000 to throw away, they cooperate. It’s a very swanky building on Park Avenue… you even have to gift-wrap your garbage or they won’t take it!

In this bit, Carroll foregrounds the tension between her husband, who wants to bring all their old furniture, and her persona, who deems only a shopping-bag’s worth of clothing to be “of value.” Her husband’s penchant for low-cost conservation, held up against her desire for new items mirrors the trend that Paula Hyman notes took place in which women assimilated more quickly than men, largely through consumer behavior. The other tension Carroll introduced is between her persona and her “swanky” new neighborhood, which demands gift-wrapped garbage and “$5,000 to cooperate.” Here, she nimbly exemplifies the off-putting experience of being confronted with largess unknown to most Jews of the pre-war period. Her incredulity at the cost of her new class is heightened as the bit continues.

I decided, ‘This one, I’m gonna do right!’
I had the whole place painted.
The guy handed me a bill, $900,
to paint the living room wall. I said, “Nine-hundred bucks for a wall?!”
He said, “Lady, I gave it two coats.”
I said, “What were they, mink?”

Her word choice of “I’m gonna do right” is telling, for it suggests a moral value in this consumption—her spending is a way to “do right” by her new environment, assimilating into her new status without marking herself and her husband as ‘Other’ with their inferior furniture and un-manicured walls. Another element of assimilation, of course, is increased interaction with non-Jewish people—the (coded) subject of her next bit:

And then of course, you can’t do anything yourself, I brought in an interior decorator. Flipped!

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678 Hyman, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History.
When the decorator saw the apartment he flipped!
“Lovely lovely, this is going to be a lovely apartment! I can just see it all, a riot of colors: Fuchsia, chartreuse, and a very subtle pink!”
Well, I really didn’t like those colors, but I didn’t want to hurt the decorator’s feelings, he was such a nice fellow.
Well...he was nice.

A rumble of laughter after her last line signified that the audience got her joke. Her characterization of the ‘interior decorator’ (later named Mr. Thorpe) is another use of stereotypes invoked as codes. As she said the word ‘Flipped’, she stretched out her arms with limp wrists and a theatrical flourish. When delivering ‘the decorator’s’ lines, she affected a somewhat cut-glass British accent. The effete mannerisms, taken together with her hesitation to refer to the decorator as a ‘fellow’ suggests that she was coding him as gay. There is a poetic significance about a Jewish woman attempting to assimilate into a non-Jewish world enlisting the help of a (implicitly) gay man who was forced to ‘assimilate’ into a heterosexual world. However, Carroll’s persona’s relentlessly practical Jewish sensibility allows her to disregard many of the cultural boundaries that the decorator respects. In one joke, Carroll’s persona, in an effort to “do everything right,” went with the decorator to get new furniture in an antique shop, and became enamored with a bed, exclaiming, “It’s me!” The decorator responded condescendingly, “No my dear, that bed is not you...George Washington slept in that bed.” Not to be intimidated by this invocation of sacred Americana, Carroll’s persona gave a perfect ‘Jewish’ shrug and quipped, “So what? I’ll change the sheets!” The irreverent practicality of the perspective, while accessible to a mainstream audience, would likely be particularly resonant with a Jewish audience, especially given her distinctive body language. The neat quip reveals the dauntless chutzpah of the Jew intent upon permeating the American mythos. Of course, assimilation highlights marital tensions, evident in the next passage, which highlights the husband-as-hindrance:
[The decorator] looked around and he said,
“Now everything you brought with you from the old apartment has got to go.
Especially that (pointing accusatorily)!
That is in very bad taste!”
I said, “Mr. Thorpe, that happens to be my husband!”
He said, (sympathetically) “Ohhh, yes dear! Well, that horrible green face does
play havoc with our color scheme, doesn’t it!”
But anyhow, you know these decorators, they have ideas.
He had a wonderful idea for a den for my husband.
No big deal, just a water trough and some straw on the floor!”

In a way, Carroll’s depiction of the decorator dismissing her husband along with her old furniture stages precisely the anxiety that gave birth to the consuming Jewish Mother/Wife stereotype. As Prell demonstrated, Jewish husbands felt growing insecurity about their ability as providers, and projected that insecurity onto their wives, presenting them as nagging, demanding, and dismissive. In this bit, Carroll uses the avatar of the ‘interior designer’ to dismiss her husband as “green” (also a slur for new immigrants), ‘in very bad taste’ and animal-like, while her persona occupies the comparatively progressive role of the assimilatory consumer. She concludes her ‘bit’ with some well-trodden stereotypes of Jewish men as misers:

My husband got into the whole spirit of the thing.
I wanted a coffee table, so he decided he would make it.
He went out and he got a big slab of marble.
But he got a real bargain!
Underneath, it said ‘Rest in Peace.’
I said ‘Honey, I don’t want that!’
He said, ‘Jeanie, be practical,
we can take this with us any place we go!”

Just as Henny Youngman and his male colleagues turn their wives’ consumption into the butt of a joke, Carroll turns her husband’s stagnation and obsessive bargain-hunting into a joke. But his rationale—“be practical!” is precisely the same sensibility that allowed her to propose changing the sheets on George Washington’s bed. This unfailing practicality is a recurrent motif in Jewish humor, best exhibited in the old joke about the woman who, upon seeing her son miraculously
washed ashore alive after being presumed dead, called up to God, “He had a hat!” This practicality, sometimes dismissed as vulgar, sometimes celebrated as virtuous, is a consistent convention of Jewish humor, and one that Carroll turns to her advantage as she modifies the devouring Jewish wife stereotype into something more sympathetic. This first ‘moving monologue’ which comically contrasts Carroll’s enthusiastic mobility with her husband’s stagnation, is an apt forum for Carroll to dramatize a larger trend in which, as Joseph Roth put it, “the assimilation of a people always begins with the women.”

Carroll’s other ‘moving routine’ about heading to the suburbs also taps into a wider sociological trend of Jewish economic uplift, foregrounding her own perspective as the sympathetic voice of reason surrounded by ridiculous interlocutors. The ‘moving to the suburbs’ routine developed alongside the real-life phenomenon of Jewish suburbanization, as the housing subsidies provided by the G.I. Bill prompted Jewish population in the suburbs to more than double, “in contrast with the total suburban population, which increased only 29 percent.”

In her appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show on April 5, 1959, Carroll began this routine with an exchange between her persona and an overly-candid girlfriend character:

I met this girlfriend of mine—well, she’s not really a friend… we know a lot about each other. She used to live in New York, but you know now she lives in the suburbs. You know, big deal! She met me on the street, she said, “Jean, I have to talk to you about your rotten kid. You know something, it’s your fault that she’s a rotten kid.” I said, “Why, what have I done, am I a rotten mother?” She said, “…You’re trying to raise this child in New York, and you know that nobody grows up in New York! Today people just don’t grow up in New York!

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681 Prell, Fighting to Become Americans, 157.
Who ever heard of raising a kid growing up in New York?”
Well, that mixed me up, because I’ve seen a lot of grown-ups in New York.
But I figured it out- they grow up in Westchester,
they run in for a few days to confuse me!682

This part of the monologue—with its references to Westchester and suburban living—is coded to
reflect the Jewish experience. By 1957, Jews accounted for almost 16% of the total population of
Westchester County.683 But more specifically, it foregrounds Carroll’s particular experience as a
woman sympathetically trying to do her best by her family amid a torrent of judgement. Creating
the character of a ‘girlfriend who’s not really a friend’, Carroll is able to critique the Jewish
middle class’s mass exodus from New York city to the suburbs, and the self-righteous horror at
the prospect of raising a child in the city. Her next passage continues to mix Jewish codes with
suburban satire:

She said, “Now listen, move to the country!”
Well, I thought she meant the Old Country!
…Well, I moved to the country, and of course you know,
everything is organizations, everything is done in groups! .
Two women meet on the street:
“Oh Agnes, I’m going to have a baby!”
“Isn’t that wonderful, so am I! Who else can we get?”
So I became active, I joined the organizations, it was wonderful.
PTA, PTA, PTA!
I spent so much time attending PTA, my kid became a delinquent!684

The persona’s reference to ‘The Old Country’ coyly alludes to Carroll’s family background as
Eastern-European immigrants. Her allusion to PTA speaks directly to the trend that Prell noticed
for Jewish women in mid-century America to become more involved in community

682 “The Ed Sullivan Show FT. Jean Carroll” (CBS, April 5, 1959), SOFA Entertainment.
(Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, UJA—Federation of New York, 1959), 17, Jewishdatabank.org.
684 “The Ed Sullivan Show FT. Jean Carroll.”
organizations, producing the shift in power that so troubled their husbands. And her jibe about being so involved with PTA that her daughter became a delinquent reveals a skeptical attitude towards this culture of organizational involvement. But equally notable, Carroll’s way of conjuring “characters” within her stand-up—in this passage, it is ‘Agnes’ and her friend championing cohort pregnancy—positions her as the contrasting voice of reason, a savvy wiseacre who both embodies suburban life and comments on its peculiarities. Carroll’s characters, be they her duplicitous furrier, her stagnant husband, or her suburbanized friends, allowed her to present herself as a (coded) Jewish woman, while shifting that persona from a stereotypical “devourer” to a more complex, sympathetic, and reasonable human being.

“My Rotten Kid”: Disrupting the Stereotype of the Smothering Jewish Mother

Some of Carroll’s most memorable routines involved her subverting the stereotype of the smothering, adoring Jewish mother. Martha Ravits characterizes the history of this well-known stereotype as “a jagged pattern of vilification and vindication,” a “call and response between male action and female reaction.” Some voices at the forefront of the American cultural zeitgeist as Jean Carroll was developing her material were male authors decrying overprotective mothers. For instance, in 1943, Jewish author David Levy published Maternal Overprotection, which accused women of making “maternity into a disease.” This move against maternal overprotection was not circumscribed to Jewish mothers—in his best-selling book Generation of Vipers (1943), Philip Wylie hysterically railed against “Momism,” accusing all mothers of using their organizational involvement to intimidate men and “nose into other people’s business” and

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685 Ravits, “The Jewish Mother,” 1.
686 Ravits, 5.
using excessive displays of sentiment and affection to foster “sickly dependencies” among her sons. Ravits notes, however, that the influence of Jewish male authors and comedians meant that general anxiety about the smothering mother “came to be labeled specifically as a "Jewish mother" in public consciousness.”

Voices like Levy, Wylie, and the many Jewish male comedians writing on the overprotective Jewish mother were countered by that of Gertrude Berg. A crucial figure in the history of Jewish female performers, Berg was one of the first women to create, write, produce, and star in a sitcom-style family program which began as a radio serial before becoming the long-running television show “The Goldbergs.” Through Molly Goldberg, the matriarch of the Goldbergs, Berg created a far more compassionate portrayal of the Jewish Mother. Indeed, Joyce Antler credits Berg with “effectively combin[ing] the Yiddishe mama’s sentimentalized saintliness with the power and energy of her real-life counterparts, [emerging] as a beloved ‘surrogate mother’ to millions of Americans.” However, while Molly Goldberg was certainly a sympathetic depiction of a Jewish mother, she did reinforce certain elements of the stereotype. For instance, solicitous Mrs. Goldberg was constantly “mixing in” (getting involved in other people’s business); many of the sitcom plots revolved around her efforts to “constructively enter into the affairs and problems of neighbors, friends, and assorted relatives.” Likewise, Antler observed that Molly Goldberg was unfailingly depicted as “supremely maternal,” writing “The camera usually shot Molly surrounded by family members, often in her dining room or kitchen, intensifying her association with domesticity; serving and preparing food for her family was

688 Ravits, “The Jewish Mother.”
689 Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!*, 105.
basic to the real Jewish mother.”690 As progressive and sympathetic as Gertrude Berg’s depiction of the Jewish mother was, it nevertheless reinforced the stereotypical elements of hyper-involvement and constant care.

Jean Carroll, however, was a new kind of Jewish mother, entirely different from both the pathologically overprotective nightmare of Momism, and also from the sweetly solicitous Molly Goldberg. As laughingly recalled by her fan and friend, author Jane Wollman Rusoff, “Jean Carroll talked about motherhood in a way that no one else did.”691 Standing in stark contrast to the adoring/smothering Jewish Mother, Carroll’s persona discussed motherhood with snark and notes of desperation, often making jabs at “her rotten kid” and the child-centric suburban culture. In short, Carroll’s comedy on the frustrations of motherhood both disrupts stereotypes of the Jewish mother, and allows her a platform to air critiques and commentary on domestic issues like trends in child-rearing, progressive education, and the growing generation-gap.

On the April 5, 1959 episode of The Ed Sullivan Show, Carroll did a selection of her most famous ‘rotten kid’ bits.692 First, Carroll invoked the doting Jewish mother stereotype, discussing a recent trip to Florida, where all the women she met bragged about their children, mimicking, “Oh, my son is a genius! He talks—he’s only thirty!” She then turned and dryly observed to the audience, “All the women have sons—doctors, lawyers, no one works!” Again, by relegating her ‘interlocutors’ to an established stereotype, Carroll accentuates the contrast to her own wry persona, opening up the idea of what Jewish mothers are like. Turning the subject to her own “rotten kid,” she joked,

690 Antler, 51.
691 Wollman Rusoff, “Notes for Jean Carroll Memorial Service.”
692 “The Ed Sullivan Show FT. Jean Carroll.” To draw from the fullest possible dialogue, I have supplemented the bits she did from this Ed Sullivan appearance with bits from the Girl in a Hot Steam Bath record.
My mother kept telling me what a wonderful thing it was to be a mother. Finally came the big day in my life, I had my baby. Oh, I was so happy! I couldn’t wait to send her to camp. But I waited until she was old enough! She needed other children, she could adjust—she was a year and a half.

Unlike the stereotype of the clinging Jewish mother, Carroll’s persona is eager to send her child away. She also departs from the stereotypical Jewish mother whose obsession with her children drove her to the ‘child-centric’ parenting literature of the 1950s. As the childcare guru Dr. Spock became a cultural phenomenon with his manifestos on “firm but gentle”693 childrearing, Jean Carroll was ready with a pointed barb:

Children are very trying! And today, you know, if you want to hit a kid, he’s a monster, you gotta run, read a book first, find out if the guy gives you permission to hit him! And if you can hit this kid, you think you can reach him? Never! (Widens her stride, extends her arms protectively) There’s a grandmother standing there! 694 “Don’t hit that boy, hit ME!” You know, you’d like to. 695

This theme of the protective grandmother surfaces again in a later Sullivan appearance, as Carroll quips, “I’m the happiest woman in the world! What do you think happened to me today? My mother went back to her own house and I hit my kid! Did you ever try to hit your kid with a grandmother running interference?”696 On one level, these jokes address the indulgence of grandparents, but seen through a more specifically Jewish lens, it contrasts generations of Jews, because while the “interfering” grandmother embodies the adoring, protective Jewish Mother,

695 “The Ed Sullivan Show FT. Jean Carroll.”
Carroll’s second-generation persona stands in sharp contrast. While magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal, Good Housekeeping,* and *Redbook* advocated self-actualization of children, Carroll unceremoniously mocked the literature of the day, exclaiming, “Today, they read in *Child Psychology,* ‘you should never frustrate a child, a child must have something it can learn to lavish love and affection on. Like a hamster.’ God forbid it should learn to love the mother or father, that’s beside the point. A hamster!” As the monologue progressed, Carroll continues to subversively reveal her deviance from prescribed child-rearing methods. For instance, women’s magazines urged mothers, “Always be in firm control of all situations involving their children. Parents should not let children manipulate them...rather, the parent should show the child who is the ‘boss.’” Carroll, however, is humorously unable to embody this loving but firm ideal as she describes her daughter’s request for a pet dog:

So, I haven’t got enough trouble raising this kid; I need a dog in the house?
But I don’t want to say no to her, ‘cause she hits.
But you know, you reach a saturation point, and you put your foot down, and I put my foot down...and she stepped on it...
…and I got her the dog!

In this joke, it is not her maternal instinct or adoring indulgence for her daughter that prompts her to grant her request for a dog; merely the self-preservation of a desperate woman avoiding her “rotten kid’s” violent tantrums. She again offers up her own self-serving impulses as comic fodder in her special Mother’s Day appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show:*

Parents haven’t got what to eat, they give the kid a car.
The answer is always the same: “I want my child to have what I never had.”
You’ve heard that, haven’t you?
Well, I’m different!
I don’t want my kid to have anything I never had!

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698 Bigner.
I just want her to return what belongs to me! 699

Here, Carroll contrasts the stereotypical image of the self-sacrificing Jewish mother (and, more broadly, self-sacrificing immigrant parents) with her own flawed but nuanced persona.

Carroll’s deviation from the stereotype of the Jewish mother also comes through in her persona’s comical disparagement of her daughter’s education. The conservative Cold War period prompted critique of the “progressive education” movement so championed by advocates like Caroline Pratt, author of *I Learn from Children* (1948) and Carlton Washburn’s *What is Progressive Education?* (1952).700 And nowhere was that critique rendered more archly than by Jean Carroll, whom one newspaper described as “taking up cudgels against such latter-day perversities as progressive education” as she jibed:

One woman, she had a son going to a ‘progressive school’
He didn’t take up penmanship, he didn’t like it—
so they gave him a course in forgery.701

Far from the adoring mothers who sit poolside in Florida and boast that their kids are talking by the age of thirty, Carroll’s persona talks with disturbing frankness about her travails in motherhood. Her complaints not only disrupt stereotypes doting, protective Jewish mothers, but also allow for timely jokes highlighting the disparity between the older Cold-War generation and the more liberal young people of the 1960s. Responding to the middle-class lifestyles of their parents, many young people in the 1960s were drawn to the “Beat Generation,” a literary movement championing values of spiritualism over materialism, and sexual liberation. These young people were called—with some disparagement from the older generation—beatniks. Ever

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timely, on July 24, 1960, Jean Carroll did almost an entire set complaining about her “beatnik” daughter:

You’ve heard me talk about my daughter, my rotten kid. I really do have a problem: she’s a beatnik. *(Off the audience’s laughter)* Oh, please, this isn’t funny! At first, I tried to fight her, but I’ve given up! I don’t mind anymore that she wears the sneakers, and the funny blue jeans, and the sloppy sweaters—but why a beard? And it’s not just their manner of dress today—who can understand them? They have kind of a hep talk—you know? …Like, everything’s a cat! I’m a cat, her father’s a cat, her grandmother’s a cat, even our dog is a cat! The only thing that isn’t a cat in our house is our cat—he’s a kook! 702

After mocking the beatnik garb and patois, Carroll moved onto a specific attack of her daughter’s suitor, whom she depicted using the stereotypical register of a beatnik as a long-haired, unemployed, parasite:

Every mother plans and dreams of the day when her daughter will bring home a nice presentable young man, who makes a nice living, to support you and your husband! *(Laugh)* But my daughter…she’s got herself a poet! A character with a pony-tail *(Laugh)* Very nice fella, but I said, “Honey, how is he going to support you?” …She said he has an income from the government. He has: he’s on unemployment insurance! *(Laugh)* She brought him home! …This poor fella! I don’t know when he ate last! We invited him home for dinner; he ate like he was going to the chair! This guy! My heart went out to him! I’ve seen people eat with their hands before—but not soup! *(Laugh)* He looked like a vacuum cleaner with teeth! We had fruit after supper—the orange peels? He ate ‘em! *(Laugh)* The almonds? He ate ‘em with the shells on! We had wax fruit—he said they were delicious! As he was leaving, he walked out, he was chewing on a big bone—I almost dropped dead—my husband’s shoe was on the other end! After he left, my daughter came up to me. She said, “Well, Mommy, what do you think? What do you think of him?”

I said, “Honey, he’s perfect! But not for you—for the daughter of a garbage collector!”

Even as Carroll gestures briefly towards the stereotypical Jewish Wife/Mother’s desire to be supported by a man, she spends most of the piece dismantling stereotypes. Mainly, she performs a neat reversal of the stereotype of the force-feeding Jewish mother. In this scenario, her persona is not trying to push food on an unwilling mouth—instead, she is actively horrified by an insatiable one. Her stereotype-breaking Jewish mother stands potently contrasted with the stereotypical Beatnik loafer, whose “pony-tail,” dependence on “unemployment insurance,” and abysmal table manners render him fit only for “the daughter of a garbage collector.” In sum, Jean Carroll’s persona may have been Jewish, and a mother, but her wry, unabashedly self-serving, skeptical perspective defied popular stereotypes of a Jewish Mother.

**Turning the Tables: Countering ‘Pushy’ Jewish Wives with ‘Passive’ Jewish Husbands**

Ultimately, Carroll’s move to contrast her more nuanced persona with a bevy of surrounding stereotypical characters is the same kind of move that her male colleagues used when they deflected society’s Jewish stereotypes onto Jewish women. As discussed earlier, the misogynistic jokes of Jewish male comics reflected a broader sociological trend of Jewish men attacking their wives and mothers as an assimilatory move. Paula Hyman articulates this phenomenon, writing:

> “Faced with the need to establish their own identities in societies in which they were both fully acculturated and yet perceived as partially Other because they were Jews, Jewish men were eager to distinguish themselves from the women of their community....The negative representations of women that they produced reflected their own ambivalence about assimilation and its limits”

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703 Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, 169.
Or, put more succinctly by Martha Ravits, “What better strategy for dealing with prejudice than to deflect it into misogyny?”\textsuperscript{704} This misogyny crystalized in part as a stereotype of Jewish women as insatiable consumers, smothering mothers, and domestically-averse wives. While the ‘Jewish Mother’ stereotype depicted matronly Jewish ‘balebostas’ force-feeding, guiltling, and smothering their children with service, this other popular stereotype paradoxically charged Jewish wives with being utterly indifferent to their responsibilities as lovers, nurtures, cooks and cleaners. In later years, this stereotype would crystallize into the dreaded type known as “Jewish American Princess.” But years before that title, the stereotype of Jewish wives as withholding in their domestic duties was well-circulated.

Rather than directly deny this accusation of domestic failure, Carroll characteristically drew on the stereotype as a source of comic material and way of invoking a coded Jewishness. For instance, in her appearance on \textit{The Ed Sullivan show} on November 30, 1958, she effused, “It was my husband’s birthday and I gave him a surprise! He’ll never get over the surprise I gave him—I made him breakfast!”\textsuperscript{705} While the joke could have been lifted directly from Henny Youngman’s digs at Jewish women’s insufficient domestic abilities, the fact that she is telling it herself suggests a kind of subversive ownership.

And for every rare occasion that Carroll invoked a stereotype of a Jewish woman, there are numerous occasions where she skewered stereotypes of Jewish men. Just as she turned the tables by making the male Jewish furrier (perhaps avatar of her father) into a cartoon of contrast, so too does she traffic in negative stereotypes of Jewish husbands of her own generation. For co-

\textsuperscript{704} Ravits, “The Jewish Mother.”
constitutive to these stereotypes of domineering, domestically-averse Jewish women was the stereotype of the passive, weak, Jewish man. This comical target was a staple of Carroll’s act, and according to testimonials of some of her most famous fans, it was a gratifying form of empowerment at men’s expense.

Like the stereotypes of Jewish women, the stereotype of the passive Jewish man comes from a tangle of historical and sociological factors. Daniel Boyarin historicizes the stereotypical depiction of Jewish men as passive in *Unheroic Conduct*, where he argues that the passive Jewish man stereotype has its origins in the unconventional masculine ideals of early modern Eastern Europe: *edelkayt*, the ideal of a “gentle, timid, and studious male.”

This ideal, Boyarin explains, emerged because “Those who stood outside or were marginalized by society provided a countertype that reflected, as in a convex mirror, the reverse of the social norm.” Therefore, rather than exist purely in the anti-Semitic imagination, this stereotype existed as an intergroup ideal. Ruth Wisse also charts the depiction of Jewish men as innocent, weak beings in her examination of the schlemiel in literature from the 1800s in Eastern Europe to the 1950s in the United States, in which she argues that this timidity was a strategic posture, writing, “his absolute defenselessness the only guaranteed defense against the brutalizing power of might.”

From a more sociological view, the professions in which Jewish men were most frequently employed in the United States were trade-based, not land-based. Stephen Steinberg points out that while European immigrant groups were often put into industrialized modern sectors, immigrants of color were put into hard land-based labor like farming and coal-mining.

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707 Boyarin, 4.
German-Jewish immigrants had a particular competitive advantage because they came from urban settings, and therefore had a skillset oriented towards industry (e.g. Reading, accounting, etc.).\textsuperscript{709} However, the scarcity of Jewish men in land-based professions also came with a sense of urbanity that registered to some as effete. And during the mid-century period when Carroll’s popularity was at its height, Riv Ellen Prell found that successful Jewish men were stereotyped as “unwilling to spend money on dates,” while working class Jewish men were stereotyped as “profoundly vulnerable” with a “fear of isolation [that] gave powerful expression to the anxieties inherent in Jews’ aspirations for the middle class.”\textsuperscript{710} These allegations of timidity, passivity, urbanity, and miserliness were made not only as Anti-Semitic slurs against Jewish men, but also invoked among Jewish circles.

Much of Carroll’s material presented the Jewish men in her life as stereotypically passive and impotent. Gesturing towards this passivity, Carroll does a bit about her brother Al, remarking, “Al is sort of a timid fella. When you ask him a question, he answers in a high voice…it’s his wife.”\textsuperscript{711} The joke attacks Al’s masculinity on two fronts—first, by suggesting that his voice is “high” or effeminate, and then by revealing that Al does not speak at all, but sits passively and is spoken for by his wife. Carroll also does a generous amount of material about a fictionalized version of her husband, whom she described as “so quiet, I’m collecting his life insurance.” Another of her husband-zingers attacks his passivity, quipping, “He’s a real do-it-yourself guy—anything I ask him, he says, “Do it yourself!”\textsuperscript{712} One of Carroll’s most popular attacks on her husband’s passivity reminisces about their honeymoon, as Carroll rhapsodizes,

We had reserved a honeymoon suite in a very nice hotel.

\textsuperscript{709}Stephen Steinberg, \textit{The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America} (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

\textsuperscript{710}Prell, \textit{Fighting to Become Americans}, 91.

\textsuperscript{711} “The Ed Sullivan Show” (CBS, January 17, 1960), SOFA Entertainment.
And after the wedding, I went up to my room, he was in his room. And I got into this negligee, beautiful, chiffon—I wanted to look as pretty as I could possibly look. And I brushed my hair and I put mules on my feet, and I thought, “Well, better get in that room tonight unless you want to annul the marriage!” And so I started back in and when I saw him, I stopped dead. He never looked more virile, more masculine in his life. Handsome! His hair was slicked down, he had a pipe in his mouth, a maroon smoking jacket on and bedroom slippers and white silk pajamas. Oh, he looked so nice, I hated to wake him!  

In this bit, Carroll emphasizes her own preparations for a sexual encounter with her bridegroom, only to find him in the utter state of passivity—asleep. Yet his slumber is decked out in the accoutrement of seduction: a “smoking jacket,” “bedroom slippers,” “white silk pajamas.” This image of the highly adorned, sexually unavailable, utterly passive man is a precise inversion of the negative stereotype of Jewish women circulating at that time—what would later be called that Jewish American Princess. As Riv-Ellen Prell characterizes her, “The JAP is personified by a passive body. She exerts energy to adorn herself, but otherwise she moves neither for labor nor for pleasure” Carroll reinforces this image of what might be called the Jewish American Prince type in a zinger aimed at her husband’s disinterest in recreational sports:

“Here’s a guy—never had any outside interests. He doesn’t bowl. He doesn’t golf. He doesn’t fish. Well, he did have an outside interest once, but I caught him and he had to stop seeing her.” Although the punchline references infidelity (potentially disrupting the stereotype of sexual passivity) the setup allows Carroll a jab at her husband’s passive lack of athleticism. Not only does Carroll draw on popular stereotypes of Jewish men as effete, weak, and passive, but she also takes the early stereotype of the proto-Jewish American Princess and shifts the target

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713 “The Ed Sullivan Show FT. Jean Carroll.”
714 Prell, Fighting to Become Americans, 184.
Likewise, Carroll takes on the other reigning stereotype of Jewish women—that of the domineering, suffocating Jewish Mama—and revises it into a critique of sons who are overly dependent on their mothers. Specifically, she casts her husband as an ultimate ‘Mama’s Boy,’ whose adoration for his mother relegates his wife to second place in his affections. This relationship dynamic is key in a joke she tried out on a Sullivan appearance in 1959: “The night before [her husband] left, he was so sad, he sat there with tears in his eyes, he was saying, ‘Honey I’m gonna miss you so! I’m gonna miss your cooking’—he was talking to his mother on the phone!” Characteristic of the period, the joke turns on misdirection; setting the expectation that husband’s beloved interlocutor was his wife before pivoting in a Freudian comic reveal that it was actually his mother. Carroll also employs ‘mama’s boy’-misdirection quipping, “Ever since the day we were married, every time he needs advice, he runs to a fortune-teller—his mother!” Looking to his mother with the faith he would a fortune-teller, Carroll’s husband again puts his mother above his wife. Perhaps the clearest instance of Carroll making her husband’s Mother-worship into comic fodder occurs in a bit about getting a present, as she asks the audience:

For a present, what do you think my husband gave me?
Great big package like that? (gestures with arms held out to her side)
He said, “Honey, it’s a surprise, I want you to have it all your life. Open it, Open it!”
Oh, he was so happy!
I was all excited too!
I open it—just in time!
Another minute, his mother would have suffocated in there!  

716 “The Ed Sullivan Show.”
The setup leads the audience to believe that a husband is giving a gesture of appreciation to his wife, with the punchline revealing that it was his way of showing that he sees his mother as the true gift, to whom he and Carroll will be dedicated all their lives. And as the Vietnam War raged, Carroll’s jokes about her husband’s bond to his mother took on a more political cast. Explaining why it was that he had not served, she quipped:

I don’t want you to misunderstand,
it isn’t that he didn’t want to do his bit for his country.
He did! He tried to enlist!
But they couldn’t take him—not the way he was, nuh-uh!
He had—uh, a thing on his arm!
He had a big thing, right here on his arm, and they couldn’t get it off.
It was his mother!719

Carroll’s husband’s lack of military service aligns with the stereotypical depiction of Jewish men as passive. Moreover, the joke positions him as so close to his mother that she becomes likened to a tumor or “thing” that not even the military could remove from his arm.

As an apt counter to the slew of mother-in-law jokes fired off by her male contemporaries, Jean Carroll wrote and performed her own arsenal in which the mother-in-law was cast as everything from a paramour, a fortune-teller, a present, and a tumor. But what is key is that however ridiculous her mother-in-law came off in these gags, the butt of the joke was her husband. And so the real effect of Carroll’s jokes was not to reinforce the stereotype of the suffocating Jewish mother, but to highlight the absurdity of the clinging Jewish son.

Jean Carroll at the Catskills

There was one place, however, where Carroll did not have to censor her more overt references to Jewishness. That was the legendary Catskills. The Catskill mountains of upstate

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New York were home to a series of resorts aimed at Jewish people which has been remembered in history as “The Borscht Belt” (due to the association between Eastern European cuisine and Jewish people). Carroll’s daughter Helen Tunick reflected that on the times she spent there during her mother’s frequent performances:

> The fabled Catskills…From my perspective? …It was the place for Jewish people to go who lived in the city. For various reasons. Families went…it was sort of a meat market for single Jewish people…and the showroom would be my mother. And they were huge showrooms. Huge…It was kind of like Vegas…There were three or four…Grossingers…Concord was the biggest.”  

Due in part to these massive showrooms and well-appointed theatres, the Catskills was also known for its repertoire of top entertainment. An advertisement in *The Jewish Advocate* promoting Jean Carroll’s appearance at Grossingers featured her name in bold letters, alongside the thrifty encouragement, “See Broadway stars you’d pay a fortune to see in town”  

Jewish newspapers frequently printed advertisements promoting Jean Carroll’s upcoming appearances at similar New England Jewish resorts, including Wentworth Hall, which boasted “lavish entertainment nightly,” and the New Jersey Sand and Surf Hotel and Cabana Club. An ad in *The Jewish Advocate* bragged, “the luminaries now under negotiation for the 1957 summer season are such stage and radio celebrities as Myron Cohen, Jackie Miles, Georgie Price, Red Buttons, Sam Levenson, Jean Carroll, Buddy Hackett and others.” And the

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720 Tunick, Helen Tunick Interview Transcripts, 2–8–2–9.
American Jewish Outlook printed a promotion for “Gladys Novack’s famed Laurels Hotel and Country Club, where many a topline comic got his first laughs…once again advertising comedy for its summer entertainment fair,” listing Jean Carroll alongside Buddy Hackett, Henny Youngman, Myron Cohen, and others. In her interview at the Friar’s Club, Carroll recalled a special affinity with Grossingers, which she deemed “THE Place” remembering that she had to come up with “a whole bunch of new stuff because I appeared there so many times.” Indeed, Carroll’s personal scrapbook suggests a friendly relationship with the Grossinger family, featuring a photograph depicting Carroll grinning alongside Mrs. Elaine Grossing Etess, who came to see Carroll headlining in London.

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726 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 2–16.
At the height of its popularity, the Catskills was recognized as an engine of show business. In 1952, *Variety* published an editorial in which Oscar Hammerstein responded to widespread anxiety about the death of Vaudeville by trumpeting the value of the Catskills:

Where are our great comedians going to come from now that we no longer have burlesque and vaudeville? This is a question you often hear and read…It’s an impressive and a frightening question—unless you take the trouble to look for an answer. You don’t have to look far—a few miles north to the Catskills and the Adirondacks, a few miles west to the Poconos. In these borscht-tinted hills, may a belly-laugh has budded and bloomed, and many of our funniest men have sharpened their jokes on summer campers. Danny Kaye, Sid Caesar, Sam Levenson, Jerry Lester, Red Buttons, Henny Youngman (Miss) Jean Carroll and Julie Oshens all owe at least a part of their development to the Mountain Time…So if two of our old meadows lie fallow, we have found fresh fields that are producing promising crops of comics—TV, radio, pictures, niteries, the ‘Borscht Circuit’—that is where our new funny men are coming from…There is
very little left of vaudeville as we know it...But the ingredients that flavored these mediums are showing up in other mediums, and so it will always be.\textsuperscript{728}

Marking a known Jewish community as the source of American comedians is a subtle way of recognizing the Jewishness that “flavored” mainstream American comedy. Positioning the Catskills as the heir to Vaudeville allows Hammerstein to reinforce the link between American comedy and Jewishness.

Indeed, this link was never more evident in Carroll’s career narrative than in her discussion of performing at Catskills. In this setting, she was able to engage in the kind of Jewdentification and dialect humor that she would not perform in more mainstream venues. One of her most popular bits to do at the Catskills was, “a whole routine about my mother…a Jewish ham.”\textsuperscript{729} The routine was a veritable smorgasbord of Jewish Mother stereotypes and dialect humor, vastly different from the material she performed on \textit{The Ed Sullivan Show}. Although it was never televised, Carroll paraphrased the routine in an interview at The Friar’s Club, reciting:

\begin{quote}
…Before [gentile friend came over for dinner] I said to my mother, “Ma, just put the food on the table, serve it. Don’t bug him. Don’t stand in back and watch every spoonful of soup go to his mouth like you do with us. And don’t tell him he has to finish…that children are starving in Europe!”

She says, “I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t say a word.”
She didn’t say a ‘vord’ for a little while.

She brought out the vegetable soup…and she’s standing in back of him and…I think she had a slingshot, because out of nowhere comes a piece of butter. It had to be a slingshot. And she throws this hunk of butter into the soup bowl.
She said, “The soup is too skinny.”\textsuperscript{730}
\end{quote}

As Carroll’s persona urges her mother to avoid pushing food and mentioning Europe, she re-

\textsuperscript{729} Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 2–15.
\textsuperscript{730} Carroll, 2–17.
enacts the widespread Jewish anxiety about performing respectability for a gentile observer—symbolized here by the dinner guest. Addressing the need to hide telling immigrant behaviors, Carroll engages in a specifically in-group conversation that could resonate with Jews and immigrants. And her mother’s insistence on hurling butter into the guest’s soup against her daughter’s wishes becomes a kind of triumphant refusal to quell her Jewish impulses. The routine differs in tempo from Carroll’s televised appearances as well. Rather than employing the same punchline-per-minute ratio as her other routines, this anecdote relies more on narrative and character than on one-liners. It derives much of its humor from her mother’s dialect and well-meaning pushiness. This pushiness, particularly around the dinner-table, puts her mother squarely in the stereotypical “Jewish Mother” territory trod by Molly Goldberg.

The material about her mother that she used in the Catskills was also more likely to reference specifically Jewish traditions, such as Shabbat dinners on Friday night. One ‘bit’ is prefaced on the obligatory nature of these dinners, and the comedic fallout when that is disrupted:

We had a ritual:
Friday night, it didn’t matter what was on your agenda.
Friday night we had dinner at Mama’s house in the Bronx.
Whether you liked it or not, that’s where you were Friday night…
My older sister Ray had a tendency…she would become overweight…
For a few weeks, Ray didn’t show up to Friday night dinner.
Now, that’s a big no-no in our family…
I said, “I don’t know what’s happened to Ray.”
My mother said, “She must be getting fetter [fatter] I know Rachel…
she’s getting fetter.”
So I got my sister on the phone and I said, “Next Friday Ray, please show up at Mama’s house. She misses you and you really should be there.
…Come Friday night, I’m there. Someone knocks at the door…
my mother goes and opens the door, and it’s my sister Ray.
And my mother…this illiterate woman, who still didn’t even speak
English properly, didn’t read an English book, looks her up and down and
says, “So the mountain came to Mohammed!”\textsuperscript{731}

Again, her mother’s Eastern European dialect (“fetter”) provides much of the story’s comedy, as does the incongruity of an “illiterate” immigrant woman mastering English idioms. This kind of ‘fish out of water’ humor is classic territory for more overtly ethnic comedy like Fanny Brice, but again, markedly different from the kind of stories that Carroll would perform on television and in more mainstream venues.

In a personal anecdote Carroll sheds some light on the different tactics she used when among a Jewish audience. Again, she begins the story with her mother, recalling:

“\begin{quote}
I once took her with me to Grossingers…
And this was war-time, I believe…
And after the show, my mother said \textit{(with Eastern European accent)}
“I’m proud from you.” I said, “You’re proud from me? What…why?
“…That there’s such trouble in the world, and you’re able to make people laugh.”\textsuperscript{732}
\end{quote}

Putting Carroll’s comedy in the context of World War II offers a potential explanation of her more pronounced Jewishness in the Catskills. There, with an in-group audience, she could draw on familiar—even stereotypical—portrayals of Jewish people without worrying that they would be used to fuel anti-Semitism. What is more, the very act of allowing Jewish people to respond to depictions of themselves with laughter at a time when most of the world was responding with vitriol took on a political cast. While propaganda machines churned out derogatory stereotypes in the service of exterminating Jews, comedians like Carroll could use other stereotypes in service of entertaining them.

Perhaps because of its connection to Jewish people and culture, the Catskills became the

\textsuperscript{731}{Carroll, 3–3–3–4.}
\textsuperscript{732}{Carroll, 2–16.}
place that Carroll felt most at home. In the early 1960s, reporter Bea Pepan reported that Carroll and her family would spend the time “between engagements” retreating to “a place in the Catskills called Rainbow’s End.”

Rainbow’s End was an apt name for the home where Carroll retired, and held family reunions for years to come. She described it as, “tranquil and serene…opulent without being ostentatious, it’s the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.”

Like its mythical namesake, it was the place of long-sought reward, whether that be a pot of gold, a gathering of “huckleberry friends,” or any other chosen metaphor to convey a place of true belonging.

Not a ‘Jewish Comedian’ (?)

While Jean Carroll may have felt most at home in the Catskills—the land of Jewish comedians—she was not always considered among their ranks. What is meant by the moniker ‘Jewish comedian?’ In one sense, it refers to a comic who is defined in large part by their Jewishness; one whose humor or persona is inseparable from their Jewish ethnicity. In another, less official sense, it refers to a small group of comics who have been canonized as such by (mostly Jewish) historians, authors, and other keepers of cultural memory. Jean Carroll does not fit either sense of this description. Critics rarely labelled her as ‘Jewish,’ which was an asset in her early years, when mainstream marketing was the goal. However, the darker side of not being labelled as a ‘Jewish comic’ is that Carroll has been ignored in scholarly and pop-cultural efforts to highlight the Jewish contributions to comedy.

The closest that mainstream publications ever came to commenting on Carroll’s ethnicity

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733 Pepan, “Jean Carroll: Nonstop Talker.”
734 Hammond, “Humanitarian Headliner.”
was in a very rare coded remark on how her humor was “very Bronx”\(^735\), or the more frequently-used ‘homey.’ The significance of the word ‘homey’ bears some explanation. It is a derivation of the Yiddish word ‘heimish,’ which has several meanings. It is typically translated to mean ‘cozy, informal, and familiar’ but among Orthodox Jews, can also be used as “an adjective for individuals, events, businesses, and institutions, indicating that they are in-group.”\(^736\) Thus, the word ‘homey’ functions as another example of double coding—gentile readers would read it as ‘cozy or domestic,’ with Jewish readers seeing the added sense of in-group membership. The term appeared frequently in her Variety notices, one of which praised her “mixture of wit and homeyness.”\(^737\) After her engagement at Chicago’s Palmer House, the critic from Variety explicitly equated the term ‘homey’ with Brooklyn—an area of high Jewish population, writing:

Femme is sophisticated looking, with a touch of class, and therefore it's a trifle disarming, though pleasantly, that she should speak with homey Brooklynese inflection on such mundane topics as the trials of housewifery. This incongruity of looks and personality is key to her showmanship, and she holds the crowd in her palm every inch of the way. \(^738\)

The incongruity that this critic references as “key to her showmanship” is also key to breaking down preconceived notions that ‘homey, Brooklynese’ (read ‘Jewish’) housewives could not also be sophisticated women with “a touch of class.” In other words, she showed that—contrary to the stereotype of the Jewish Mother/Wife as “naïve, stupid, or hopelessly out of touch”\(^739\) —being a ‘sophisticated’ woman and being a Brooklyn Jew were not mutually exclusive. Coded reception of Carroll as a Jewish comic also appeared after her appearance at the Latin Quarter in

\(^735\) “New Recordings.”
\(^738\) Les, “Night Club Reviews: Palmer House, Chi.”
\(^739\) Prell, Fighting to Become Americans, 145.
1957, as the critic suggested the cause of the audience’s underwhelming response:

In the top and ender-offer spot next to the finale is comedienne Jean Carroll. She's the leering stand-up-and-tell'em jokestress…Strictly bing-bang out of the seltzer bottle school she knows how to slay a homey crowd, but last Friday's dinner hour just didn't happen to be one of them. This consisted predominantly of high schoolers booked en-masse, and most of 'em didn't seem to be grabbing either the idiom or the occasional Yiddishisms and the manners thereof. 740

This review features both explicit references to Carroll’s “occasional Yiddishisms and manners” but also more coded references to Jewishness. For instance, he mentions not only the signal term “a homey crowd,” but also the “seltzer bottle school,” referring to the popularity of seltzer in Jewish American cuisine. And in-group members might pick up on the fact that the show taking place on “Friday’s dinner hour” would preclude religious Jews for whom Friday evening was the Sabbath. 741

Another key example of how trade publications coded their characterizations of Carroll’s Jewishness is clear in Variety’s review of her show at the Latin Quarter in November of 1950. The booker Lou Walters had assembled a variety entitled ‘Vive Les Femmes,’ which the review praised as “a potpourri of nationalities in a pattern of divertissement.” Included in the bill was and “Arabian fantasy…then the Italian Christiani troupe…Gali Gali is the Egyptian representative…There are the Viennese waltz melodies of Johann Strauss…Senor Wences is Spanish.” And he described Jean Carroll, the headliner, as “a Lindy’s delegate.” 742 Again, the critic’s reference to Jewishness is indirect. Lindy’s was a delicatessen known for being a hangout of comedians, and so the critic could simply have meant that Carroll represented the comics

741 Trau.
of Lindy’s. However, as some readers would have known, the terpsichoreally-named dining establishment was also a Jewish deli with a largely Jewish clientele. It was where Jewish Mafia boss Arnold Rothstein was wont to do business. Combined with the critic’s emphasis on the diversity of the bill and his running metaphor of the show as “a potpourri of nationalities,” those readers may have read Carroll’s ‘delegation’ as specifically Jewish. And so while Variety never technically characterized Carroll as a ‘Jewish comedian’ with a ‘Jewish demographic,’ there were subtle, coded ways in which they suggested her ‘homey’ ethnic background.

Jewish publications showed a similar reluctance to emphasize Carroll’s in-group status. They did not go out of their way to cover her career. The first time her solo act was mentioned in a Jewish publication was not until 1948, and appeared under the less-than-glorious billing “Also Jean Carroll” in an ad promoting an upcoming bill at Pittsburgh’s Earl Theatre. It was not until Carroll had achieved mainstream accolades that the Jewish presses jumped on the Jean Carroll bandwagon. Even then, their coverage of her was emphatically focused on her mass appeal. For instance, when The Jewish Exponent ran a short piece promoting her appearance at the Steel Peer in Atlantic City, they wrote not one but three testaments to her success outside the Jewish community:

Steel Pier in Atlantic City presents stars Jean Carroll and singer Russell Arms from Aug 1-Aug 7…Miss Carroll is “America's First Lady of laughs”…Miss Carroll has long been New York's favorite comedienne. She has starred in most of the nation's top theatres and nightclubs. At the pier, she'll do her sock routines concerning the mink-buying types and the race-track bit.

A few months later, The Jewish Exponent ran another article promoting Jean Carroll’s upcoming

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743 Nesteroff, The Comedians.
744 “Talented New Comedienne To Appear at Carousel.”
745 “Jean Carroll to Star In Steel Pier Show,” The Jewish Exponent (1887-1990), July 30, 1954, 893167339, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: U.S. Jewish Newspaper Collection.
appearance at the Latin Casino Show, again choosing the “First Lady of Laughs” moniker.\footnote{“COMPOSER AIDS FUHRMAN DRIVE,” The Jewish Exponent (1887-1990), December 3, 1954, 893190707, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: U.S. Jewish Newspaper Collection.} This all-American epithet ‘First Lady’ foregrounded Carroll’s successful assimilation, rather than her ‘homey’ background. Although Jewish publications showed more attentiveness to Carroll’s career after she was a mainstream success, her most robust coverage fell in one of two categories: advertisements for her appearances at Jewish resorts like those in the Catskills, or promotions for her appearances at Jewish charity events (which will be discussed later in the chapter).

As recently as 2007, critics responding to Carroll’s legacy were reluctant to position her as a ‘Jewish’ comedian. Alan Zweibel, producer of a number of comedy shows including The Garry Shandling show and Saturday Night Live, responded negatively to questions as to whether Jean Carroll was a “Jewish comedian,” opining:

I wouldn’t necessarily categorize her as a Jewish comedian.
I suspect she was Jewish, and I love her even more for that, because she’s one of the tribe. But at the same time, I don’t think she was particularly Jewish because from what I know of her body of work, while she might have touched upon it, it didn’t seem like her attitude was coming from that direction.
Totie Fields—you knew immediately was Jewish, okay?
Certain people, that was a part of what they tapped into, and what their persona was based on…
Jean Carroll, Yes, she was Jewish, but at the same time,
hers experiences were universal.\footnote{Zweibel, Stephen Meredith Silverman Interview with Alan Zweibel.}

Zweibel begins with the assertion that Jean Carroll would not fall into his category of Jewish comedians, then immediately acknowledges his “suspicion” that she was Jewish, and his resulting fondness for a fellow in-group member. This side-by-side mention of Carroll’s in-group status as “one of the tribe” but outgroup status as a “Jewish comedian” prompts Zweibel to
justify why the former would not entail the latter—namely, that Carroll was not “particularly Jewish,” in her “attitude,” the way that “Totie Fields,”—a later comedian known for her zaftig appearance and self-deprecatory jokes—was. The contrast with Totie Fields is telling: as a woman whose jokes conjure images of her flesh packed into a too-small clothes like a “Jewish waffle, with square of fat sticking out,”748 Fields made her body the object of cheerful derision in a way that Jean Carroll generally did not. Totie Fields also employed a more pronounced New York accent and matronly demeanor, aligning her more easily with a stereotypical Jewish woman than Jean Carroll’s comparably svelte, conventionally-attractive, persona. Zweibel’s characterization of Carroll as “Jewish” but “universal” suggests that while her Jewishness is pronounced enough to be legible to him—a fellow in-group member—it was not pronounced enough to be a defining trait. While this more subtle brand of Jewishness granted her “universal” appeal, it also has the rather unintended effect of excluding her from the canon of “Jewish comedians.”

Author Jane Wollman Rusoff voiced a similar sentiment dismissing Carroll’s Jewishness as “not the point.” Describing the first time that she saw Carroll on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Rusoff reflected:

I was a little girl…it was *wonderful*!  
She was funny, she was good looking, she was smart, and she was a *woman*!  
Standing there, being funny and telling jokes.  
At that time, funny women on the television landscape were doing wacky things—mugging, and making faces and being funny physically—and she wasn’t!  
She just talked, and made observations, and her monologues were hysterical!  
It was odd, it was novel, it was unique to see this in early television.  
And I know in my neighborhood, and I’m talking about the late ‘40s, early ‘50s, when we watched television, when it was brand-new…  
I lived in a Jewish neighborhood in New York, and if there was someone on

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748Merv Griffin, Inc Griffin Group, and Alpha Home Entertainment (Firm), *The Merv Griffin show. Disc 2, Disc 2*, (Narberth, PA: Alpha Home Entertainment, 2006).
screen that was Jewish, people would say, “She’s Jewish!” “He’s Jewish!”
You know...it was like, a landesman!
But when Jean came on, even though it was pretty obvious—I mean, we knew she
was Jewish—but that wasn’t the point with her.
It was a woman. And a woman being funny—and she was so confident.
And she had this fantastic charisma that was captivating!
A wonderful smile with white teeth, and her eyes sparkled.
And that was my first glimpse.749

Like Zweibel, Rusoff seems to take it for granted that for in-group audience members, it was
“pretty obvious” that Jean Carroll was Jewish, evidenced by her assurance that “we knew she
was Jewish.” However, also like Zweibel, Rusoff minimizes this recognition as not the point,
instead choosing to foreground the novelty of Carroll’s gender. But foundational to Rusoff’s
wonder-struck rhapsodies about Carroll’s “fantastic charisma,” “wonderful smile with white
teeth,” is the recognition that this “captivating” “confident” woman was a “landesman” (Yiddish
for someone from the same nation, signals an in-group member). Jean Carroll’s femininity was
inseparable from her Jewishness—indeed, her rejection of traditional representations of Jewish
women as gawky, overweight, or otherwise “funny physically” was part of what made Rusoff
and others find her so “odd,” “novel,” and “unique” as a comedian. However, in her account,
Rusoff disregards the very precondition of Jewishness that made the rest of Carroll’s feminine
persona so revolutionary.

The general tendency for critics to minimize Carroll’s Jewishness as a granted but not
grandiose element of her persona was generally to her advantage, allowing her entree into more
mainstream venues. However, it is important to note the exclusion that accompanies Carroll’s
avoiding the moniker of “Jewish comic.” The contributions that Jewish performers and artists

749 Jane Wollman Rusoff, Stephen Meredith Silverman Interview with Jane Wollman Rusoff, Transcripts, November
6, 2006, Stephen Silverman Personal Collection.
have made to American comedy is now a highly chronicled part of history, and one that often omits Carroll’s name. Collections like *Jewish Jesters: A Study in American Popular Comedy*; *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*; *Klezmering America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity* and so many others include Jewish comedians far less famous or influential than Carroll. It may be that because Jean Carroll’s persona did not align with either dominant stereotypes or with popular, conventional representations of Jewish women, her place in the canon of Jewish comedy was compromised. Although she was a Jew, and a comic, she was not, somehow, a Jewish comic.

**Cause to Champion, Not Character to Perform**

This final section examines Jean Carroll’s performance of Jewishness in the broader sense, encompassing her actions both on and offstage. Following in the tradition of dance scholar Hannah Schwadron, I engage how the “boundaries between performer and performance are blurred,” looking not only at Jean Carroll’s oft-subtle onstage signification of “Jewishness,” but also at the very overt performances outside the frame of her act. In other words, I argue that alongside her more nuanced representations of Jewishness in her act, Jean Carroll openly and unabashedly foregrounded Jewishness in her public life. Carroll was very publicly active in Zionist and Jewish groups, using her platform as a mainstream comedian for their advancement through benefit performances and charity drives. In this way, she positioned Jewishness as a cause, not a character consisting of a set of mannerisms or jokes.

Jean Carroll’s zealous engagement with social activism reflects the dominant mindset of

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751 Schwadron, *The Case of the Sexy Jewess*, 112.
Conservative rabbis in the 1950s, who—according to Lila Corwin Berman’s work, “defined Jewishness through its function”752—specifically, a function of social activism. A 1955 study of the Conservative Movement suggested,

Social utility, and not theological or ideological commitments drove the development of Conservative Judaism in the United States...Jews enacted their Jewishness not by sequestering themselves in a purely Jewish civilization, but by offering the fruits of their civilization to the rest of the world. 753

According to her granddaughter, Susan Chatzky, Jean Carroll’s Jewish identity was similarly rooted not in theological or ideological commitments, but in social engagement and activism. When asked about her grandmother’s Jewish practices, Susan Chatzky responded “She was socially active, which I think she would probably connect to her Judaism...It was important to her to support charities. I think to her (and to me) it is part of the social tradition of Jews to care about their community. I do think that’s a Jewish thing.”754 Of course being invested in one’s community is not specifically or exclusively a ‘Jewish thing;’ but it is significant that Chatzky asserts that her grandmother believed in a connection between community engagement and Jewishness. Chatzky also revealed that her grandmother was invested in an uncomplicated and idealistic vision of Israel that did not account for the nation’s complicated relationship with other Palestinian populations. Carroll’s simplified version of Israel as an idealistic seat of democracy was a privilege that allowed her to view it as interchangeable with American Jewish institutions like hospitals.

Given her belief in Israel as a national embodiment of Jewish ideals, one of Carroll’s most public expressions of Jewishness was her support of Zionist causes. Her rise to stardom as a

752 Berman, Speaking of Jews, 78.
753 Berman, 79.
754 Chatzky, Grace Overbeke Interview with Susan Chatzky.
single comedienne coincided with the establishment of the state of Israel, in 1948. Therefore, she was often asked to perform at events held to memorialize its new statehood. Carroll gave a particularly personal account of a public performance she gave at Madison Square Garden:

“The night Israel became a nation…I was appearing at the Capital Theatre, and they asked me to please come over and do something for Israel that night. It was a wonderful night…Strauss, who had just come back from Israel, is on stage talking about the battle for survival…this handful of heroic people…children fighting…and women fighting, grandmothers fighting. And then when America gave the deciding vote, the United States, that Israel was a nation… I was trying hard not to cry, like I am right now. …Madison Square Garden is packed to the rafters. …They had a priest, who sang some religious song. And the rabbi…and a choir did Hatikvah. And how you could keep from weeping, I don’t know. And that’s how I felt. Well, I’ve always felt that way about Israel anyway. And then he introduces me…I defy anybody to go out and be funny following that!

So I went out, and I said to the audience, “I’m finding it very difficult not to cry. I’ve always been proud of the Jewish people. Proud of their contribution to mankind. And because of their persecution, they are the kindest to everybody… So long before it became chic to say that you were Jewish, I was a proud Jew.” But I said, “Tonight I’m so proud to be Jewish, I’d give anything to have my old nose back again!” And there was…at first there was silence. Then there was a ground swell of laughter that started. And 20,000 people got up off their feet and …right now, I’m finding it tough not to cry. In my life, I will never know that kind of a sensation. To be able to make people laugh in the face of such horror… that they were able to wrest victory out of the horrors?755

Carroll’s celebration of Israel’s statehood is as uncomplicated as the logistical particulars of her anecdote are dubious. The official night that Israel became a state was May 14, 1948.

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755 Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 4–14.
There were a number of events memorializing its statehood, including one at Madison Square Garden, chaired by a man named Nathan Strauss. However, this Madison Square Garden event documented in Variety took place on Monday, November 15, 1948, eight months after Israel was recognized by the U.N.\textsuperscript{756} What is less dubious is the reception to Carroll’s quip about wanting her old nose back. In the scant biographic record of Carroll’s career, her quip about missing her old nose is one of her most well-remembered jokes: it appears in a joke-books,\textsuperscript{757} comedy anthologies,\textsuperscript{758} and her obituary in the New York Times.\textsuperscript{759}

Like so many resonant jokes, it played on many levels. First, it transgressed social mores by admitting to a taboo practice—getting cosmetic surgery. Secondly, it acknowledged the assimilatory role that this practice had played for Jewish Americans. Rhinoplasty had been a way of ‘passing’—disavowing one’s Jewishness as a way to claim whiteness in America. To yearn for one’s ‘old nose’ was to express what Matthew F. Jacobson called “the assimilation blues:” the ambivalence of wanting both the privileges of whiteness and a sense of connection with one’s biological and cultural roots.\textsuperscript{760} Thirdly, it neatly encapsulated the way that the establishment of Israel gave some Jews a sense of safety—even diasporic Jews now had the option to live in an officially Jewish land, making persecution in their resident countries less of a threat. The laughter in that moment could have signaled the audience’s recognition of any, all, or none of these levels of meaning.

\textsuperscript{758}Unterbrink, Funny Women.
\textsuperscript{760}Jacobson, Roots Too.
To Carroll, the audience’s laughter also signified a greater truth—laughter as a mode of empowerment—of ‘wresting victory out of horrors,’ a sentiment she also used when discussing her work in the Catskills. This act of laughter as resistance to ‘horror’ is precisely the way she positioned it in her autobiographical narrative. In the grand tradition of Sholem Aleichem and Yiddish comedy, Carroll used laughter as a way to avoid tears and overcome obstacles. Laughter was the way that she wrested financial autonomy and acceptance from a patriarchal society that had little interest in welcoming Jewish women. It was how she had escaped her father, faced down the prejudices of her colleagues, and now, flown in the face of the “horrors” of World War II. A month after the event at Madison Square Garden, Carroll appeared in another celebration of Israel outside of Boston. There, she appeared alongside Dr. Jorge Garcia Granados, chief delegate of Guatemala to the U.N., as he praised how the Jewish people, “took the situation into their own hands…with all the courage and spirit which I have so much admired.”

While it is impossible to speculate on the root of Carroll’s attachment to Israel, part of it may have been that she identified with the implausible achievements of a nation whose recognition came, as Dr. Granados put it, “against all odds.”

Whatever her reasons, she continued to be deeply attached to Israel, studying Hebrew to prepare for a visit, and participating in the United Jewish Appeal’s “Night of Stars” for the next several years. Although Carroll only saved one article from The Jewish Chronicle in her personal scrapbook, it was the one with highlighting her dedication to learn Hebrew and visit Israel. With a headline trumpeting, “America’s First Comic Takes Hebrew Seriously,” the article reads:

Fancy going to meet America’s top TV and cabaret star and finding her in the

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761 “1,000 B-B-N Zionists Attend Meeting Featuring Dr. Granados as Speaker,” Jewish Advocate (1909-1990), December 23, 1948, 908944313, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: U.S. Jewish Newspaper Collection.
762 “1,000 B-B-N Zionists Attend Meeting Featuring Dr. Granados as Speaker.”
middle of a Hebrew lesson. This was Jean Carroll, the glamorous single-act star who for the past month performed at the Savoy restaurant. She was sitting there in her suite with her teacher, Iakov Gilboa wrestling with verbs...her teacher told me she was one of his most apt pupils. She needs to learn the language, she told me, because of a burning desire to be in Israel for the Bar Mitzvah year of the state.\textsuperscript{763}

Another article from the scrapbook, released around the same period, included the sub-header that Carroll was “Keen to Learn Israeli Lingo.” In this piece, the interviewer confesses that they “interrupted Jean at just the wrong moment,” describing how their arrival forced Carroll to put away her book, which taught her how to “speak Israeli.” The same piece quotes Carroll “fervently” professing, “I’m crazy about the language...I feel I just must speak it.”\textsuperscript{764} These multiple references to Carroll’s Hebrew study suggests that at that point in her life, Carroll was making a point of emphasizing it as a proclamation of her commitment to visiting Israel.

Even more public was Carroll’s commitment to fundraising for Israel through benefit performances such as those of the United Jewish Appeal (UJA). Throughout her career, Carroll viewed it as her responsibility as a Jewish person to “lend my talent”\textsuperscript{765} to Jewish causes. In the late 1940s, the UJA’s “Night of Stars Event” was mainstream enough to be covered by both the Jewish press and trade publications, who charted its headliners with great detail. In 1948—the first year of Israel’s statehood—\textit{Variety} noted that the bill included Red Buttons, Milton Berle, Myron Cohen, Danny Kaye, Mickey Rooney, and Henny Youngman, among others.\textsuperscript{766} The next year, however, \textit{Variety} noticed the event was “marked by extreme difficulty in getting many performers to respond. Many that performed in prior years failed to come because of other

\textsuperscript{764} “With Jean It’s the Family First, Show Biz Second.”
\textsuperscript{765} Carroll, Jean Carroll Interview Transcripts, 4–16–4–17.
engagements. Others pleaded that they had worked too many free shows in the past and wanted to be excused, since they had no different routine to show at the event.” That year, the Rockettes also backed out due to union restrictions. Jean Carroll, however, remained on the bill, as did fellow Jewish comics Henny Youngman, Harry Hershfield, and Joey Adams. In 1950, Variety did not even cover the ‘Night of Stars’ event, though Jewish Advocate remarked that the bill included Jean Carroll as well as Joey Adams, Henny Youngman, Red Buttons, and others. But in 1951, the event was apparently back to mainstream prominence. For Variety wrote that the Rockettes were back on the bill, which not only featured comedy sets by Jean Carroll, Ed Sullivan, and more, but also an address in which Mayor Impelliterri declared, “What Israel stands for in the Near East is what the United States stands for here.” By sticking with the “Night of Stars” benefit even when other celebrities’ enthusiasm waned, Carroll showed a deep commitment to the United Jewish Appeal and its efforts to raise money for “European relief and Israel resettlement.”

Another way that Carroll publicly demonstrated her commitment to Jewish causes was her work with regional Jewish organizations such as the Hillel Academy in Pittsburgh, and the Jewish Memorial Hospital in Boston. It is in connection with these events that Carroll’s name most frequently made headlines in Jewish publications. Like in advertisements for Carroll’s shows at Jewish resorts, the features supporting her appearance in fundraising events shows a pronounced tendency to emphasize her success in mainstream media, particularly television. For

770 “Vaudeville: PJA ‘Night of Stars’ Pulls 1110,000 at N.Y. Garden.”
instance, The American Jewish Outlook published a piece promoting Pittsburgh’s Hillel Academy Anniversary Celebration, announcing that Carroll

worked out her radio and television schedule to enable her to come to Pittsburgh and appear at the Hillel Academy Anniversary Celebration. In New York, Walter Winchell, Earl Wilson, Dorothy Kilgallen and Ed Sullivan were among the many who hailed her as the greatest new act in show business. Her appearance at the Hillel Academy Anniversary Celebration will be her first appearance here since she was skyrocketed to theatrical fame via her amazingly successful television shows.771

A similar focus on television was evident in the Criterion’s update next month, which featured a headline “Top Flight Stars to Shine at Hillel Academy Anniversary Celebration,” featuring a picture of Carroll.772 The article itself picked up on the themes of last month’s, adding that Jean Carroll “has caused the greatest sensation on television.”773 For the Jewish press in Pittsburgh, it seems that Carroll’s television appearances carried a cultural cache and noteworthiness that it did not in New York, where the nightclub and Broadway scene were more robust. But besides writing about Carroll as “television’s newest star”774 the Midwestern publication also added a human-interest hard-scrabble story, printing: “Jean wasn’t in the business long before she found that things were going to be hard. In the spirit of true showmanship, she kept plugging along the greasepaint trails until that wonderful day when she knew that she had arrived.”775 American Jewish Outlook released a variant of the same story, repeating word-for-word the tale of Carroll “plugging along the greasepaint trails.”776 But they also chose to recognize her anomalous status

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773 “Top Flight Stars to Shine at Hillel Academy Anniversary Celebration.”
775 “Top Flight Stars to Shine at Hillel Academy Anniversary Celebration.”
776 “Hillel Academy Celebration to Feature Popular Comedienne.”
as a female, writing, “When hardened theatrical men take time out to hail a new star, that's news. And when that star happens to be a young comedienne, that's headlines.” Just as in trade publications, the choice to foreground her gender was both a celebration and a marginalization. For while she continued to be declaimed as part of the “Greatest Array of Talent,” she lost the coveted emcee spot to “the renowned George Jessel.”

The other event that brought Carroll a great deal of publicity in the Jewish press was her appearance as part of the ‘Celebrities Night’ benefit for the Jewish Memorial Hospital, held in Boston Garden. Billed as “New England’s Greatest Show” this annual event received tremendous coverage in The Jewish Advocate. In 1951, the annual event’s second year running, Carroll appeared with “Myron Cohen, Jon Pearce, Red Buttons, Billy Williams…and many other guest stars.” The picture that the Advocate ran from the event showed the chairmen of the event posing cheerfully with “Jean Carroll, one of the many stars who appeared on the benefit show.”

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779 “Display Ad 3 -- No Title,” Jewish Advocate (1909-1990), April 19, 1951, 886751178, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: U.S. Jewish Newspaper Collection.
780 “PICTORIAL PICKS,” Jewish Advocate (1909-1990), April 12, 1951, 886737219, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: U.S. Jewish Newspaper Collection.
The Advocate covered Jean Carroll’s participation in another “Celebrities Night” benefit six years later, where she appeared alongside Jackie Miles, Barry Gray, and the Winged Victory Chorus, before a crowd of 13,000 people. That year’s picture also depicted Carroll surrounded by an overwhelmingly male crowd of performers and hospital executives ( Advocate, 10-3-1957). The images of these events—in which Carroll smiles from the sidelines—attest to how conspicuous Carroll’s female body was in an arena dominated by male bodies. Although a member of the in-group in the Jewish sense, these pictures remind one that Carroll’s femaleness kept her on the margins even within Jewish groups.

782 “Photo Standalone 14 -- No Title,” Jewish Advocate (1909-1990), October 3, 1957, 889054010, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: U.S. Jewish Newspaper Collection.
In addition to the events benefiting the United Jewish Appeal, Hillel Academy, and Jewish Memorial hospital, Carroll “lent her talent” and her celebrity to many other charitable events for Jewish causes. Those that she memorialized in her scrapbook range drastically in the scale and profile of the event; a program from the Shield of David Institute for Retarded Children’s Eleventh annual Cavalcade of Stars at the famed Madison Square Garden was placed by a letter from the Ellenville United Jewish Appeal thanking her for her performance at the (less famed) Tamarack Lodge, where she “caused our people to ‘catch fire.’”

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Occasionally, the venue where she performed was her own home, as when she hosted a performance for the Hadassah Hospital, a Jewish organization raising money for a clinic to save children from blindness. Others range from an Actors’ Temple benefit headed by Rabbi Bernard Burstein to multiple events for the National Tay Sachs and Allied Diseases Association—a matter of particularly Jewish concern since, as Carroll and Variety both pointed out, the disease is “associated with Ashkenazi Jews.” Carroll was so involved with the National Tay-Sachs and Allied Diseases Association that she was named “Tay Sachs Woman of the Year” in 1964, during which she headed “a new Speakers Bureau which will bring the Tay Sachs story to many organizations in the metropolitan area.” Through this Speakers Bureau, Carroll began appearing not in her comedian, but in her activist persona.

786 “ACTORS’ TEMPLE BENEFIT.”
Even after Carroll retired from performing as a comedian, she still performed public activism as an advocate for Israel and Jewish causes. After visiting Israel in 1967, she intensified her involvement with the Sullivan and Ulster County Israel Bond Committee, winning their “State of Israel Bonds Woman of the Year” award in 1971 (depicted below).

The award recognized her efforts to raise over $175,000 for the “economic development of Israel.”

As noted in the previous chapter, Carroll’s publicity at this point in her life was grossly dismissive of her status as a pioneering comedian, but they were more forthcoming with praise about her Jewish activism. While the program for the event never explained her career

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789."Israel Bond Dinner Raises $175,000."
other than to say it was “in the entertainment field,” it celebrated her as “an outstanding community leader and ardent supporter of Israel,” writing:

Jean Carroll…by deed and example has been an inspiration to all of us who have been engaged in the task of providing Israel with this vitally needed investment capital. For her leadership in this effort, and for her many contributions to Jewish Philanthropies and civic causes, she truly merits designation as Sullivan and Ulster County’s “Woman of the Year.”

Notably, while the program and features for this dinner emphasized Jean Carroll’s work as a public activist over that of a comedian, they still used her stage name in the publicity for their event. The fact that the Sullivan & Ulster County Israel Bond Committee awarded “Jean Carroll,” and not “Mrs. Buddy Howe” or even “Celine Howe” signaled that even while they were loath to go into detail about her “rewarding career in the entertainment field,” it was precisely the celebrity garnered by this career that they were leveraging for their benefit.

In sum, Jean Carroll acted as an advocate for Jewish causes in a distinctly public way. Her fundraising efforts, benefit appearances, and public awareness work was an alternate form of performing Jewishness.

Summary

As immigration boomed and Jews became a prominent part of the nation, Lawrence Epstein noted, “It was Jewish comedians, almost exclusively male, who had helped introduce American audiences to Jewish women…and shaped audience perceptions of what those Jewish women were like” And then Sadie Zeigman became Jean Carroll and the ‘Devouring’ Jewish wives and mothers started speaking for themselves.

791 “Program from the Sullivan and Ulster County Division of State and Israel Bonds.”
792 Epstein, The Haunted Smile, 254.5/10/2019 1:50:00 PM
Internal stereotypes of Jewish people helped Carroll conduct a coded conversation about the changing significance of Jewishness among in-group audience members, without alienating her non-Jewish viewers. The marked difference between the material she did at the Catskills and what she performed on television attests to her careful calibration between her audience and her representations of Jewishness. By taking on Jewish female stereotypes herself, rather than allowing them to remain exclusively the province of her male counterparts, she was able to foreground her own perspective, making her own appealingly witty, skeptical self a contrasted alternative to the more stereotypical representations embodied by her minor characters. And like her male comedian counterparts did with their wives, Carroll positioned men of both her father’s generation and her own as objects of ridicule, mocking their foibles with stereotypical critiques of Jewish men.

By drawing on and revising the internal stereotypes of Jewish people, Jean Carroll was able to stand on one of the most mainstream stages in America and speak about the Jewish experience of bafflement in the face of economic uplift, the marital tensions prompted by assimilating into the middle class, and of course, the charge of the consuming Jewish Wife/Mother, without saying the word ‘Jewish.’ It may be that her resistance to performing traditional stereotypes of Jewish women caused her to be illegible (or disregarded) as a ‘Jewish comic,’ to a lesser extent by critics in her day, and a greater extent by those today. However, her onstage performance of Judaism is bolstered by her pronounced public performance of engagement with Zionist and Jewish causes like the United Jewish Appeal. By presenting Jewishness through involvement with Jewish organizations rather than stereotypes, Carroll made a strong statement: more superficial manifestations of Jewishness may assimilate away—her Jewishness was a cause to champion, not a character to perform.
Chapter 4: The Legacy of Jean Carroll

A Night at the Friar’s Club

The night of Monday, November 6, 2006, the legendary New York Friars Club was bustling with camera crews capturing a gathering to celebrate Jean Carroll. Organized by Stephen M. Silverman and Diane Krausz in concert with their planned documentary “Jean Carroll: I Made It Standing Up,” the event was a special tribute to the then 95-year-old comedian. Hosted by stand-up comedian and talk-show host Joy Behar, the evening featured speeches by comedians such as Lily Tomlin, Caroline Rhea, and Freddy Roman, Dean of the Friars Club (and, as Behar noted, “the only man we’re letting speak tonight”)\(^{793}\). It also featured video presentations by Ann Meara & Jerry Stiller, and Rita Rudner. The presenters sat alongside an audience of Carroll’s family, Broadway performers, New York Times journalists,

representatives from the Mayor’s office, and producers of *Saturday Night Live*, gathered together to honor—and hear from—Jean Carroll. The press release for this “historical event” described it as

a night of stories and songs,…[with] archival clips of Jean’s 1950s TV appearances and examples of how her career and comedy paved the way for future performers, especially women. Also, this being the Friar’s Club, there will be a dinner. (You shouldn’t go hungry).

While her mental acuity was sharp, Carroll’s vision was not—by the age of 95, Carroll was mostly blind, and so she could not see many of the audience’s upturned faces as she took the stage of the Friar’s Club—an association, which had been prohibited to women throughout her career, even when under her husband’s leadership. Clad in silk scarves and red lipstick, Carroll approached the microphone and launched into her still-machine-gun patter:

I’m only 95 years old.
I know, I don’t look a day over 94.
… Stephen Silverman and Diane were determined to do this documentary.
And it wasn’t easy—they had to dig me up…
But I’m listening to all of this, and I’m not very emotional (except when I talk about my mom and my beautiful daughter Helen).
I had no idea that I was so good!
You think I’m joking, I’m not joking.
I had no idea that I would make the impact that I obviously made.

And indeed, her impact that night was “obvious.” Had the footage from the busy camera crews been used in the proposed documentary, it would have shown generations of comedians gathered together to attest to Jean Carroll’s legacy and enduring influence. However, the

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economic tumult of 2008 resulted in the documentary losing its funding, and the project never came to fruition. The hours of interviews with Carroll and her family, friends, and fans instead went to the storage unit of Silverman’s apartment building. The collapse of the documentary was a major blow to the visibility of Carroll’s influence, rendering it not only less “obvious,” but barely even evident in the extant media archive.

Another blow to her legacy was struck by SOFA entertainment, a corporation which purchased the rights to “over 1,000 hours of original Ed Sullivan programming as well as approximately 100 hours of “new” programming created in the form of television specials, home-video programs and cable shows” in 1990. Under the ownership of SOFA entertainment, Carroll’s most well-maintained performance archive of approximately thirty appearances was rendered inaccessible to viewers without specifically seeking it out. Even those (such as Silverman and myself) who did specifically contact officials at SOFA entertainment requesting access to clips of Jean Carroll were charged the considerable fee of $50 per clip, with a policy prohibiting customers from viewing more than five clips [this policy was specially waived for this study]. Although SOFA entertainment did release DVD collections like “The Best of the Ed Sullivan Show All Star Comedy Collection Vol. 1,” the curators of these collections did not include Jean Carroll, in spite of the frequency and popularity of her appearances. The overwhelming result of SOFA entertainment’s ownership of the copyright to footage of The Ed Sullivan Show is that much of the footage from Carroll’s most well-known television appearances is unable to circulate. Rather than introducing a new generation of viewers to Jean

Carroll, this archive is held in a peculiar commercial hostage.

Given that so much of Jean Carroll’s performance archive has been sequestered away in storage units and behind fee walls, it is not surprising that she has no formal archive, and has been generally omitted from scholarship. However, I am able to build on the work of historians of the 1960’s and 70’s, who, as editors Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry put it, “questioned methods of archival collection that appeared to leave out the less powerful,” bringing a “host of new and unconventional sources to the fore.” I employ a mixed-methods strategy combining historical research with ethnographic modes of participant observation to argue that although Carroll has been largely removed from the published narrative of American comedy, her lasting influence on stand-up is prominently evident in the “alternate archive” of performances by contemporary female stand-up comedians. Specifically, I study contemporary Jewish female stand-up comedians, analyzing how the strategies that they use to respond to negative stereotypes of Jewish women compare to those that Jean Carroll used, in order to understand how those stereotypes and responses have changed over the years. Not all of her proteges acknowledge or even realize the impact that she had on their careers. Nonetheless, I contend that studying Jean Carroll’s stand-up career—and specifically her performance of Jewishness and femininity over time—illuminates enduring and significant insights about women in/and stand-up comedy.

“The Mother of Us All”: Phyllis Diller, Joy Behar, Rita Rudner, Anne Meara, and Lily Tomlin on their debt to Jean Carroll

798 Chaudhuri, Katz, and Perry, Contesting Archives, xiii.
It is difficult to overstate the extent to which Jean Carroll paved the way for other women in stand-up comedy. When a journalist interviewing Carroll suggested that the growth of female stand-up comedians was a part of her legacy, she responded, “I’m pleased about that, because I know lots [of women] with delicious senses of humor. And if stand-up is what they want to do, by all means, they should do it.” And indeed, they did. What began as Jean Carroll’s simple quest to overtake her father and earn her family’s living wound up paving the way for Phyllis Diller, Joy Behar, Lily Tomlin, and generations of female comedy professionals who saw her and dared to ‘stand-up’ for themselves.

The women who followed in Carroll’s career path show varying degrees of acknowledgement—or even awareness—of Carroll’s work. Phyllis Diller—who became famous as a stand-up in the late 50’s and 60’s—is often miscredited as the first woman stand-up comedian, an attribution that she seems to encourage. Diller operated on the belief that, “To be a female comic, you can’t be a beauty. You mustn’t be a beauty.” And so she dressed in wildly eccentric costumes that obscured her figure, and spit out a rapid succession of one-liners berating her own hideousness. Diller’s conviction that a female comedian “can’t be a beauty” is odd, given that she was familiar with Jean Carroll, whom she described as “sophisticated and attractive.” However, rather than positioning herself as Carroll’s protege, Diller seems intent on minimizing Carroll’s career to highlight own achievements as unique. In her autobiography, Diller writes:

Jean Carroll…specialized in witty one-liners about her husband and her home life. Carroll actually made several appearances on the Ed Sullivan show, yet neither

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799 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
800 Nachman, Seriously Funny, 232.
she nor any of the other women broke through on the scale that I did during the late fifties and early sixties – Jean didn’t travel to build a mass audience, and [Belle] Barth and [Rusty] Warren were far too X-rated for television. So, for the first ten years, I had it all to myself. 802

Diller’s words on Jean Carroll are a strange mixture of acknowledgment and dismissal. While praising Jean Carroll’s “witty one-liners,” Diller also minimizes Carroll’s nearly thirty appearances on The Ed Sullivan Show to the misleading “several.” She also incorrectly asserts that “Jean didn’t travel to build a mass audience,” and therefore could not “break through on the scale that [Diller] did” when Carroll actually travelled extensively, with a following nearly as robust in England as it was in the United States. What Diller does accurately capture is the sense that the uniqueness of her own career is a matter of “scale.” Building on the precedent for female comedians set by Jean Carroll (and musical comics like Rusty Warren and Belle Barth, who followed her) Diller was able to achieve a level of recognition and success unavailable to her predecessors.

More eager to credit Jean Carroll as pioneer of the field is Joy Behar, an Italian-American stand-up comedian and writer who gained celebrity in the late 1980s. As both a comedian and a talk-show host, Behar’s persona was outspoken, opinionated, confident, and poised. Starting in 1997, Behar became one of the original panelists on the popular women’s daytime talk show “The View,” where she referenced Jean Carroll as an influence a number of times. When hosting the tribute to Carroll at the Friar’s Club, Behar introduced her as “The Mother of us all,” reflecting on her formative childhood experience watching Carroll on television:

I remember being home at night as a kid, and seeing Jean on television—there she was, this beautiful, thin, good-looking woman who was very funny. She was Jewish, which made me think I was Jewish (I wasn’t, I was Italian, but she looked like my relatives except better dressed and thinner).

802 Diller and Buskin, 131.
In a certain way, I think all women comedians owe you a debt… I didn’t have any other role models to look at—she was it! Later, there was Joan, and Phyllis…but Jean looked like a normal person! And to be a normal person, wearing a regular suit, being funny the way she was simply spectacular and almost revolutionary. There was nobody else like that!

Behar’s words speak to several elements of Carroll’s legacy. First, she reflects how Carroll made Jewishness familiar and accessible to other white-ethnic populations. Behar saw a version of her own Italian relatives in Carroll, joking that this identification felt so strong that “she made me think I was Jewish.” Second, she highlights Carroll’s “revolutionary” embodiment of both comedy and beauty, going out of her way to mention Carroll’s svelte frame and “regular suit,” in contrast to the later Phyllis Diller’s fright wigs and outlandish costumes, or Joan Rivers’s hyper-coiffed trendiness. Finally, and most broadly, she asserts Carroll’s pioneering status as a female stand-up comic, exclaiming, “I didn’t have any other role models to look at—she was it!” and concluding that “all women comedians owe you a debt.” Speaking to that debt, comedians like Anne Meara and Rita Rudner made video testaments which they sent into the Friar’s Club event, thanking Carroll for paving the way. Rudner’s message included a particularly succinct summary of Carroll’s revolutionary reversal of the gender dynamic in which men were the joke tellers, and women the object of the joke: “You were the first one to realize that men were just as funny as women!”

But the most influential figure advocating for Jean Carroll’s legacy is stand-up comedian and solo performer Lily Tomlin, whose countless testimonials citing Carroll as an influence and inspiration constitute the majority of Carroll’s contemporary media presence. The few YouTube

803 Silverman, “Print Intros.”
clips of Jean Carroll that exist online are littered with comments like, “Found her after hearing Lily Tomlin say how she learned so much from her” and “Lily Tomlin mentioned her in an interview, and I'm glad to have found this video of one of her performances.” In addition to praising Imogene Coca’s character-work and Lucille Ball’s physical comedy, Tomlin has sung Carroll’s praises as a sophisticated and subversive comic across public forums: print media, television, museums, and finally, in person. In *The Windy City Times*, Tomlin painted a picture of her young self discovering Jean Carroll on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, remarking,

She was really kind of subversive and wonderful…she was supposed to be sort of this middle-class housewife from Scarsdale and she always had a cocktail dress and a mink stole on…and she did all these jokes. I would just lift them right off of her act and do them. I would try on my mother’s slip like an evening dress and do jokes on the back porch…I was mad for her.

In addition to giving the young Tomlin an arsenal of jokes, Carroll also gave her a rare model of a woman who was both feminine and [professionally] funny. In *The New York Times*, Tomlin was quoted observing, “Other women doing comedy were scatterbrained, fat, or homely…Jean was very attractive. She was in control but not aggressive.” And so when, beginning Tomlin began her career as a performer and faced oppositional statements like, “How can you do comedy? You have to lose your femininity,” or “You’ve got to be fat or ugly or you’ve got to make fun of yourself as a female,” she was un-phased, explaining, “I didn’t think any of that was true.”

Tomlin also made a number of television appearances where she consistently made a

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805 Justine Sutton, “Re: (Jean Carroll (Stand-up Comedy) [Video File],” Youtube.com, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pjv0mZGBWws&lc=UgjCRx-WgUD1pXgCoAE.C.7-H0Z7-QVFx8f4RmKzDaRv.
806 Claudia C, “Re: “Jean Carroll (Stand-up Comedy)” [Video File],” Youtube.com, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pjv0mZGBWws&list=PL3ncI5UPgVlfHFaNPMILQJNjeVFaFC-index=5.
point of promoting Carroll’s work. She mentioned Carroll in her acceptance speech when awarded with the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor (2003). And in a 1995 special on ABC entitled “What Makes You Laugh?” in which comedy stars discussed their inspirations and influences, Tomlin used her segment to laud Jean Carroll as “the only woman I’d ever seen standing up and telling jokes, just like the men did.” Tomlin also made sure to highlight Carroll’s work in museum settings. A 1990 review of a special exhibit at Manhattan’s Museum of Broadcasting called “Comedians Choice: Acts and Influences” mentioned that “at Lily Tomlin’s behest,” the collection included two routines by Jean Carroll, effusing: …Ms. Carroll seems a real pioneer there on the museum’s big screen, telling her husband-and-children jokes with a voice combining Mae West and Cyndi Lauper. The reviewer characterizes Carroll as “a revelation of [a] now almost-forgotten performer” whose discovery would be “most rewarding to casual museum goers,” exemplifying how Tomlin’s acknowledgment served as a conduit between Carroll’s work and a contemporary audience. A few years after this exhibition, Carroll received mention (albeit briefly) in The Museum of Television and Radio’s exhibition on the war between the sexes in comedy of the fifties and sixties. And at the Museum of Television and Radio’s event “An Evening with Lily Tomlin”—Tomlin not only praised Jean Carroll as “so ahead of her time” but even did her own imitation of Carroll’s “bright delivery!”

However, Tomlin’s most insightful words on the true depth of Carroll’s influence and

legacy took place at their first meeting—the November evening of Carroll’s tribute. There, Tomlin gave a speech suggesting that in Carroll’s work, she had caught her first glimpse of female empowerment:

And your manner was so confident and assertive, and these were all traits that I admired… even though at the time, I didn’t know that I did—I wasn’t able to articulate that kind of thing to myself. Your material was smart, witty, and content-ful… flat-out funny, but you would slip little things in.

You were like a new type of person to me: A woman—charming, strong, very attractive, standing up there, talking directly to the audience about her life, which you never saw a woman doing. I mean, in my time, it was just like, breathtaking! You were like a precursor to the feminist movement… although I couldn’t possibly have articulated that at the time…. You cut such a path for women in comedy, whether they know it or not…

The fact that Lily Tomlin, a major figure of feminist and queer performance, credits Jean Carroll

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with introducing her to “a new type of person,” who served as a “precursor to the feminist movement,” is a matter of no small significance. It attests to the empowering elements of representation. Tomlin and her mother saw themselves in Carroll; they felt she was “targeting our lives.” Perhaps this feeling helped Tomlin to envision herself not only in the role of comedian, but also in the role as a woman both “attractive” and “strong.” Carroll’s public performance of a new kind of confident funny-woman helped to shape the field of comedy not only by inspiring Tomlin (and all those inspired by her) but by making room for a kind of figure that Tomlin could aspire to become. And in this sense, Carroll did indeed “cut a path for women in comedy, whether they know it or not.”

**Dirty Mouths, Dirty Martinis**

Indeed, many of the women traveling that path do not know its origins. By the year 2016, there were countless women pursuing stand-up comedy, many of whom had never heard of Jean Carroll, or, for that matter, of Jackie Mabley, or Fanny Brice, or Totie Fields. However, in Jean Carroll’s name, ten millennial comedians were gathered together by Carroll’s grand-daughter Susan Chatzky, both as a fundraising benefit for Planned Parenthood Hudson Peconic and an embodied testament to Carroll’s legacy. The event,

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815 Silverman.
“Dirty Mouths, Dirty Martinis Comedy Night” took place on January 11th, 2016, what would have been Carroll’s hundred and fifth birthday), at Irvington Town Hall Theatre in upstate New York. On the cover of the program, under an image of a smiling woman’s lips, was large text proclaiming, “This event is held in honor of comedian Jean Carroll.”

I attended the event as a participant-observer, having been in touch with Susan Chatzky, writing a brief bio of Jean Carroll for the event, and exchanging emails with a number of the comedians. The evening began with Chatzky introducing and recognizing her grandmother by screening one of her early appearances on The Ed Sullivan Show. Following the video were performances by ten female comedians—eight stand-up comics and one musical-comedy duo, all of whom performed with a feminist edge more explicit anything Jean Carroll had exhibited. For instance, comedian Jena Friedman went directly after President-Elect Donald Trump, joking that it was unfair for people to compare him to Adolf Hitler—“after all, Hitler served in his country’s military and hired female directors.” Another comic went after the Republican party by likening them to ‘the uncle who says there is no money to go to Disneyworld, until you find out that he went without you.’ In spite of their more political material, many of the comedians felt a strong kinship to Carroll.

One of the comedians, Cathy Ladman, specifically references one of the most enduring elements of Carroll’s legacy—the sense of authenticity of her persona. Ladman explained that “although our material and personae are different, the approach is the same,” elaborating “She was truly a monologist. She wasn’t playing a character...she told stories and jokes that seemed

817 Rose Cohen, Regina Decicco, Teresa DeGaetano, Wanjiko Eke, Jena Friedman, Marcia Belsky & Isabel Martin (Free the Mind), Charlotte Gilbert, Corey Kahaney and Cathy Ladman
very grounded in life. And that’s pretty much what I do.” Indeed, Ladman’s reference on material “grounded in life” invokes Carroll’s tendency to blur the boundary between public and private personae in a way that has become customary for stand-up comedians. For instance, an interview that Carroll gave with *The London-American* asserts, “she gets all her material from real life experiences.” In an interview with *The Evening Standard*, Carroll details the process by which she can “simply embellish” her own real life to turn it into stand-up material:

> There were two boys and three girls in our family, which led me to tell the joke that when my father married my mother he promised her the world and damn near did [give it to her], because she had 13 children.” “We have a backward collie which inspired the joke, ”My dog walks on water. He can't swim." "My daughter brought home a wounded pigeon once and kept it under her bed for a whole week before we discovered where the smell was coming from. I expect to get a story out of that incident sometime.

Based on the examples she provides, Carroll’s process of turning true anecdotes into jokes is merely a matter of heightening her lived experiences. In other words, Jean Carroll’s public persona is an authentic—if embellished—version of herself. For Cathy Ladman, this carefully crafted sense of authenticity resonated and made her see Jean Carroll as “a trailblazer.” For Regina DeCicco, another one of the comedians who performed at “Dirty Mouths, Dirty Martinis,” it was Carroll’s rapid-fire rhythm and cheerful persona that resonated. DeCicco explained, “We are both upbeat, and use speed as a tool…and when I say upbeat, I mean that regardless of what she’s talking about, she remains positive. That choice definitely helps her misdirection, which she is a queen of.”

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820 Grieg, “Talkative Miss Carroll Has a $50,000 Problem.”
In a broader sense, the very fact of their performances as stand-up comedians was a part of Jean Carroll’s legacy of women asserting their place at the microphone. The benefit came out of Susan Chatzky’s sense of social responsibility, particularly through fundraising—a value that she connected directly to her grandmother’s legacy. And this element of Carroll’s legacy intertwined with her legacy as a pioneer of women in comedy, resisting representation by men by standing up and representing themselves. “Dirty Mouths, Dirty Martinis” was a night of resisting another version of men representing women—as national policymakers. The event resisted an administration that threatened women’s autonomy over their own bodies, resisted the gloomy torpor that was plaguing the country in the months following November of 2016, and resisted silent subservience in favor of women of various shapes and colors standing up and speaking out.

The Jewish Mother of Us All: Ethnographically Exploring the Contemporary Relevance of Jean Carroll’s Strategies for Responding to Stereotypes of Jewish Women

While Jean Carroll’s revolutionary presence as a woman pioneer of stand-up comedy inspired other women to follow—and expand—her path, her influence is particularly visible in the performances of Jewish female stand-up comedians. Jean Carroll’s strategy of embodying and revising the stereotypes of the consuming Jewish wife and mother illuminates the work of major contemporary Jewish comedians like Joan Rivers, Elayne Boosler, Sandra Bernhard, and early and mid-career comedians like Cory Kahaney and Cathy Ladman. For, as Sander Gilman noted, while the Jewish response to stereotypes may take a variety of forms—internalizing or projecting; capitulating or resisting—there is “the need to respond, either directly or

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822 Chatzky, Grace Overbeke Interview with Susan Chatzky.
subliminally.” So too, while today’s contemporary Jewish female stand-up comedians respond to stereotypes in ways that both adhere to and depart from the strategies used by Jean Carroll, they are nonetheless still using stand-up comedy as a forum to showcase that response.

In order to systematically chart similarities and differences between the way that Jean Carroll performed Jewishness, femininity, and the intersections therein, and the way that these identities continue to be performed by contemporary Jewish female stand-up comedians, I have used research methods inflected by ethnography. The first among these methods was participant observation, attending performances and taking field notes on contemporary Jewish female stand-up comedians. My methodology for analyzing comedians’ performances used linguistic analysis of the text to identify moments in which the comedian invokes or references elements of Jewish stereotypes. For instance, I noted all Yiddish vocabulary or sentence structure, references to Jewish customs or rituals, and performance of a Brooklyn or Eastern European dialect. In addition to keeping my own observational field notes, I spoke to audience members before and after performances, and noted their interactions with the comedian during the show itself.

To gather data on the reception of my case study comedians from a wide array of audience members, I used an online survey, distributed through SurveyMonkey. I posted it

824 Initially, this ethnographic study was a broader exploration of the ways that contemporary Jewish female stand-up comedians respond to stereotypes of Jewish women. It was not specifically looking for similarities or differences from Jean Carroll.
825 These performances included Corey Kahaney in The J.A.P. Show: Jewish American Princesses of Comedy at The Actors Temple (New York, NY) in October, 2007; Amy Schumer at The Chicago Theatre (Chicago, IL) on March 13, 2015; Judy Gold at the LPAC Benefit “Levity and Justice for All” at Town Hall (New York, NY), on June 16, 2016; Sarah Silverman at the A.V. Club Comedy Festival at Civic Opera House (Chicago, IL) on June 5, 2015; Elyane Boosler at the Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center (New York, NY) on May 14, 2016; and Sandra Bernhard at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts (Skokie, IL) on March 10, 2016.
throughout social media, on fan-sites, on my own Facebook page, and through leaders in the Jewish community. The survey had three major subject areas. First, it gauged whether participants were familiar with the kind of stereotypes about Jewish women that were circulating throughout Jean Carroll’s career, asking participants to describe stereotypes they had heard about Jews, then women, then Jewish women. The survey then discussed specific comedians, asking first for overall familiarity, and then for a more in-depth description of how they had encountered their work (live or through recorded media), three adjectives they would use to describe the comedian, specific memories of jokes and overall impressions. The questions were logically sequenced such that if participants answered that they had prior knowledge that the comedian was Jewish, they were asked how they knew. If they did not have prior knowledge, they were asked whether learning that the comedian was Jewish changed the way they thought about her comedy. These questions were designed to gauge how salient the comedian’s Jewishness was to the audience member taking the survey. And finally, they were directly asked to describe any responses to cultural stereotypes they recognized in the comedian’s work. The survey ended with basic demographic information, as well as questions about the degree to which the respondent interacted with Jewish people in their life growing up and today, to gauge in-group membership.  

A third mode of data collection was follow-up phone interviews conducted with approximately ten percent of the online survey participants. Anyone who expressed interest on their online survey was contacted for a semi-structured interview lasting 20-40 minutes. During that time, I asked questions from three major subject areas: 1) Who they are, what they look for

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in a stand-up comedian 2) What kind of Jewish stereotypes they had heard of, and how they remember encountering them 3) How a given comedian impacts their views (if at all) on Jews, women, and Jewish women. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and interview participants were given a $10 gift card to Starbucks as a token of gratitude for their time. Altogether, I heard from several hundred audience members of contemporary Jewish female stand-up comedians: 397 of whom completed online surveys and 35 of whom participated in more in-depth phone interviews. In this document, all names of the interview subjects have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Major Findings

One major finding of this process concerned the ongoing circulation of stereotypes of Jewish women. For better or worse, the results showed that the negative stereotypes that Jean Carroll had responded to in her career were remarkably durable; contemporary audience members are still overwhelmingly familiar with stereotypical notions of Jewish women as consuming and controlling. For instance, when asked whether they had ever heard stereotypes about Jewish women, 292 of 397 survey participants answered that they had. When asked to describe those stereotypes, the most frequently used words, as depicted by the word cloud below, were “Overbearing,” “Mothers,” “Shop” and “Spoiled.”

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This account of the stereotypical Jewish woman reveals that although popular perceptions of Jews have changed over time, the stereotypes of Jewish women that Jean Carroll contended with are still in circulation.

Other major findings concerned Jewish female stand-up comics Joan Rivers, Sandra Bernhard, and Elayne Boosler. Studying Joan Rivers (who had passed away before I could see her at a live performance, requiring me to rely more heavily on her robustly archived work), shows how these superficially similar comedians are actually a study in contrast. Although their conversational tone, narrative style, and the challenges they faced were comparable, they made drastically different choices and had drastically different opportunities: While Jean Carroll put pressure on norms of feminine beauty, Joan Rivers enforced them. While Jean Carroll used mainly coded signals of Jewishness, Joan Rivers declared her Jewishness in nearly every show she did. While Jean Carroll softened and humanized the stereotypes as she took them on, Joan Rivers performed them with cartoonish exaggeration. And while Jean Carroll attempted to be both a mother and a comedienne by incorporating her daughter into her career, Joan Rivers actually succeeded. Studying Elayne Boosler and Sandra Bernhard illuminates a peculiar trend in which ethnicity seems to become more salient with age, as their venues went from mainstream to more niche Jewish communities. And looking at more contemporary performances of Jewish female stand-up comedians reveals that contemporary practitioners look
to Jean Carroll with all inspiration and esteem that the academy does not.

**Joan Rivers**

“I can see where Joan Rivers got her style...” - Youtube Comment

Of the contemporary Jewish female stand-up comedians discussed in this study, Joan Rivers (born Joan Molinsky) is perhaps the most well-known. Although she passed away before I was able to see her perform live, she had an active career of onstage stand-up appearances from the mid-1960s until her death in 2014, at the age of eighty-one. Additionally, she had a successful television career, becoming a mogul of the home-shopping network, a reality television star, and the first woman to have her own late-night talk show. Drawing from recordings of her onstage stand-up performances, critical reviews and scholarship of her work, and the responses of survey and interview participants who identified themselves as her audience members, I have concluded that Rivers’s comedy directly employs Carroll’s pioneering strategy of radical self-disclosure—an innovation for which Rivers is often wrongfully credited. However, within this conversational tone and frame of feigned authenticity, Rivers deployed markedly different strategies in her comedy. Rivers responds to many of the same circumstances as Jean Carroll, in terms of limited gender roles, unfair standards of beauty, and stereotypes of Jewish women as demanding and consumer-driven. However, while Carroll’s comedy could be self-deprecating, it seemed to come from a place of assertiveness, while Rivers’s comedy was rooted in insecurity and defensiveness. There was a self-loathing to her jokes—particularly her

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829 Not Your Grandma, “Re: Jean Carroll (Stand-up Comedy),” Youtube.Com, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIv0mZG8Wws&lc=Ugjc62V0Sw713gCoAEC.
later work—that suggested a capitulation to the social strictures surrounding her.

The most obvious element of Jean Carroll’s influence on Joan Rivers is the shift in style from stand-up comedy as a series of punchlines to a more narrative, story-based form with an intimate, confessional tone of ‘girl talk.’ Although Jean Carroll had been doing this for years before Rivers approached the mic, critics like The New York Times’s Charles L. Mee Jr. have wrongly marked Rivers as the first woman to use the form, lauding:

The style is conversational, suited to television ‘talk’ programs. It may take the form of Bill Cosby’s colloquial stories or Woody Allen’s self-analysis or Mort Sahl’s intellectual nervosities. But it is not Jack Benny. Benny may be a tightwad onstage and a philanthropist off. Not so with the new comedians. They write their own jokes and are expected to live them offstage as well as on.830

However, the conflation of person and persona had emerged long before Cosby, Allen, or Sahl. In fact, Jean Carroll was one of Jack Benny’s colleagues—not his protégés—when she exemplified this more conversational tone, as well as the need to maintain a sense of ‘authenticity’ between her onstage and off-stage personae.831 It was not uncommon for Carroll’s audience to be so persuaded by her authentically conversational tone that they believed her onstage persona to be far more authentic than it actually was, irritating her daughter Helen. When fans would approach with comments like “She must be a riot at home” Helen—who was a child at the time—would respond with “stock one-liners” like “She says hysterical things like ‘Clean your room’ and ‘Do your homework.’” But the assumption of authenticity bothered

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830 Kohen, We Killed, 31.
831 Incidentally, Joan Rivers’s persona, as seemingly authentic as it was, was in many ways just as manufactured as Jean Carroll’s, if not more. In Susan Horowitz’s book Queens of Comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the New Generation of Funny Women (1997), Rivers is quoted commenting on her stage presence by saying, “Even I wouldn’t have her for dinner!”(88) The distance between an ostensibly authentic voice and a manufactured comic persona is another parallel between Carroll and Rivers—though it is now endemic to the genre.
Tunick on a deeper level as well, as she exclaimed, “They would think ‘wasn’t it wonderful, just living with this clown all the time…we spent all our days laughing. It’s a fantasy!” Fans inability to distinguish between Carroll’s persona and her person neatly illustrate this expectation that comics would “live their jokes offstage as well as on.”

Due in part to the omission of Jean Carroll, writers of comedy history like Yael Kohen have wrongly named Joan Rivers “the first woman to join the new confessional wave,” naming her “fresh, new, breakthrough talk style” as a major innovation. Likewise, Anna Fields’s history of women’s comedy *The Girl in The Show* inaccurately credits Rivers with the revolutionary move “away from the punch-line based comedy” in favor of “longer stories.” Had these authors been exposed to Jean Carroll’s work, they would have seen her style of confidante comedy as a clear antecedent to what they deemed Rivers’s innovation. In the words of a YouTube viewer commenting on footage of Jean Carroll on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, “I can see where Joan Rivers got her style…”

But rather than take the (decidedly un-feminist) tactic of dismissing Joan Rivers in order to highlight Jean Carroll, I will instead use the “Yes, And” approach. Yes, Joan Rivers’s alleged innovation of comedy as personal disclosure was actually a sign of Jean Carroll’s influence. Yes, Joan Rivers responded to many of the same issues that Jean Carroll had discussed onstage. And Rivers made that tone and those issues her own, imbuing them with a distinctively sharp, “flamboyantly self-hating,” often shocking, and aggressively unapologetic point of view.

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832 Tunick, Helen Tunick Interview Transcripts, 6.
834 Not Your Grandma, “Re: Jean Carroll (Stand-up Comedy).”
Like Jean Carroll’s work, Joan Rivers’s early stand-up responds to the painfully limiting roles circumscribed by social expectations of women. However, her comedy tends to focus more on the desperation with which she and her family attempt to adhere to those social norms. For instance, in an appearance on The Ed Sullivan Show in 1967, Rivers performs her now iconic routine “The Last Girl in Larchmont,” in which the butt of the joke is her marriage-obsessed mother:

“My mother had two of us at home that weren’t, as the expression goes, ‘moving’ …(Don’t Ask!)
And I’m from a little town called Larchmont where if you’re not married, if you’re a girl, and if you’re over 21, you’re better off dead!
It’s that simple, you know?
And I was the Last Girl in Larchmont!
Do you know how that feels?
Sitting around my mother’s house-21, 22, 24…
Having a good time! Living, eating candy bars, enjoying myself, but Single!
And the neighbors would come over, they’d say to my mother, “How’s Joan?
Still not married?” (Heh heh heh!)
And my mother would say “If she were alive!”
You know how that hurts? When you’re sitting right there?
When I was 21, my mother said, “Only a doctor for you!”
When I was 22 she said, “All right, a lawyer…CPA”
When I was 24 she said, “We’ll grab a dentist.”
26, she said, “Anything!”
If he could make it to the door, he was mine, you know?
“What do you mean you don’t like him?! He’s intelligent; he found the bell himself, what do you want?”
Anybody that came to my house was it!
“Oh Joan, there’s the most attractive young man down here… with a mask and a gun!”
Anything that showed up!836

Rivers’s conversational tone, rife with parenthetical phrases of direct address to the audience like, “Don’t ask!” and “Do you know how that feels?” recapitulates Jean Carroll. Furthermore,

Rivers begins with a similar approach to her critique of restrictive gender norms for women; attacking the limiting expectations themselves even as she acknowledged own failure to live up to them. Just as Carroll foregrounded her own perspective in contrast with that of the caricatured voices like the pushy salesgirl or the scheming furrier, Rivers humanizes herself largely in contrast to the caricatured portrayal of her mother, who would rather feign her daughter’s death than acknowledge her singlehood. This cartoonishly desperate mother character anchors one of Rivers’s most memorable jokes, insisting that her mother put a sign outside their house reading “Last girl before freeway!” While the marriage-mongering mother figure is the butt of the joke, Rivers depicts herself as the more empathetic subject, whose attempt at “living, eating candy bars, enjoying myself,” is repeatedly thwarted by her mother’s (and society’s) horror at an unmarried woman.

By joking about—and thus highlighting—the pressure for women to marry before the all-to-early time when they lost their desirability, Rivers was tapping into a pressure felt by many of her fans at the time. One of the interview subjects, Jill, affirmed, “I don’t know if it’s just [in] a Jewish household, but if the daughter wasn’t married—in my generation—when you were out of college, then she was done! She was an old maid spinster!” On a similar note, a female survey participant old enough to remember “seeing [Rivers] on The Ed Sullivan Show oh so many years ago” said that she related to Rivers’s commentary, “If a girl isn’t married by the time she’s 30, she’s an old maid…a man at ninety years old, he’s not married, he’s a catch!” In this sense, Joan Rivers picked up where Jean Carroll left off, humanizing the stereotypical marriage-minded

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838 Grace Overbeke, Interview with J Jill Skell, March 26, 2017.
839 Overbeke, “Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics.” Respondent 371, Q#16
Jewish girl by granting first-person access to her perspective and contrasting it with a satirically-rendered peanut gallery of surrounding characters.

However, in her later stand-up, and throughout the majority of her career, Joan Rivers moved away from Carroll’s model of styling herself a comparatively normal persona surrounded by caricatures. As her career went on (and on, and on) Rivers became increasingly a caricature herself. This shift is clear in another major subject that Rivers inherited from Carroll: the demand for women to look like Barbie dolls. Rivers famously credited her ‘deficiency’ in appearance with her development of sense of humor, declaring, “there is not one female comic who was beautiful as a little girl.”

Initially, Joan Rivers took the internalization of these aesthetic norms to an extreme; viewing herself as a “schlep…who made me so ashamed I struggled to hide her like a retarded sister, shut away in an upstairs bedroom.” Eventually though, instead of hiding her shame, she exposed it through joke after joke—lambasting her face and body as a caricature of the grotesque. In a survey question on their favorite Joan Rivers jokes, her fans recount a litany of these self-deprecating barbs. One recalls her quip, “When I was born, the doctor looked at the afterbirth and said, ‘Twins!’” Another recalls Rivers doing an elaborate pantomime of “getting ready for a play, and she took out a razor…then she pretended to shave her boobs.” Scholars such as Roberta Mock have also highlighted Rivers’s tendency towards “jokes rooted in self loathing,” illustrating how she “harshly emphasized the ‘defectiveness’ of her own body for comic effect” with lines like “On our wedding night, my husband said: “Can I help you with the buttons?” I was naked at the time” or “Three stagehands saw me naked. One threw up and the

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841 Bennets, *Last Girl before Freeway*, 51.
842 Grace Overbeke, Interview with Gerald Mont, Audio Recording, March 18, 2017.
other turned gay.”\textsuperscript{844} A final example comes from journalist Debra Nussbaum-Cohen, who illustrates her claim that “the heart” of Rivers’s act was “self-deprecating jokes about being unattractive” using Rivers’s one-liner, “I have flabby thighs, but fortunately my stomach covers them.”\textsuperscript{845}

What makes Rivers’s jokes on her own beauty deficiency harsher than anything Carroll performed, is the sense that she genuinely believed, in the words of her biographer, “that women were meant to get love through the one irreplaceable asset she lacked, and she never got over the unfairness of being sentenced to a life deprived of the power of physical beauty.”\textsuperscript{846} Nor did she ever get over efforts to attain that power. Even while castigating her own appearance, Nussbaum-Cohen observes, “she was always slim and stylishly attired,”\textsuperscript{847} making her invective seem all the more harsh. Rivers was well-known for her habits of extreme dieting and, later in life, frequent cosmetic surgery procedures in an effort to approach the beauty she felt had been denied her. Perhaps the most reflective piece of Rivers’s work is her screenplay for “an autobiographical fantasy/movie The Girl Most Likely To…, in which a fat, ugly girl becomes thin and beautiful and kills every boy who ever slighted her.”\textsuperscript{848} In this film, the rage that animates Rivers’s derision of her face and body, and the power that it denied her, is given full, nightmarish expression.

Because of that rage, there is a dark logic to Rivers’s next step—one that departs drastically from anything Carroll ever did—when she turned that rage onto other women for their

\textsuperscript{846} Bennets, \textit{Last Girl before Freeway}, 52.
\textsuperscript{847} Cohen, “Joan Rivers’ Comedy Era Is Over -- Younger Jewish Women Comics Have Better Attitudes About Looks and Sex.”
\textsuperscript{848} Mock, “Really Jewish?,” 104.
own aesthetic shortcomings. Notably, Rivers even turned her tongue against Carroll. In one of the few acknowledgments that Rivers ever gave that she was familiar with her predecessor, it was to dismiss her as “a major schlep.” But this disparagement was mild compared to that which she routinely dished out to other celebrities. Audience members responding to questions about Rivers’s most memorable jokes replied with barbs like, “Elizabeth Taylor is so fat, her blood type is Ragu, and the orgy of body-shaming that was the show “Fashion Police.” Media journalist Emily Nussbaum offers a particularly insightful analysis of Rivers’s “powerful alloy of girl talk and woman hate,” writing:

From the nineteen-sixties on, Rivers had been the purveyor of a harsh Realpolitik, one based on her experience: looks mattered. If you got cut off from access to men and money—and from men as the route to money—you were dead in the water. … If Rivers’s act wasn’t explicitly feminist, it was radical in its own way: she was like a person trapped in a prison, shouting escape routes from her cell.

Nussbaum’s observation illuminates the ways that Joan Rivers had seen the same unrealistic standards of beauty that Jean Carroll’s comedy had jabbed against. However, internalized, obsessed over, and enforced by Rivers, these standards took on a sense of ironclad inevitability. This distinction reflects what comedy scholar Suzanne Lavin describes as the difference between “female humor,” which is written or performed by women but accepts the status quo, and “feminist humor,” which works against it. Taking a decidedly female (rather than feminist) stance, Rivers exemplifies this fatalistic stance in her 2009 book *Men Are Stupid...and They Like...*

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Big Boobs, writing, “It’s the way things are, accept it or go live under a rock.” Not wanting to resign herself to a career “under a rock,” Rivers took her insecurity and rage at a sexist system that disproportionately valued women’s beauty, and used it to become one of that system’s most successful enforcers.

Another way in which Rivers’s career departed significantly from Jean Carroll’s is the way that she incorporated her Jewishness into her act. This departure is largely a product of cultural changes between the periods in which Carroll and Rivers developed their personae. By the time Joan Rivers career took off in the mid-1960s, the cultural climate was considerably more receptive to Jews, who by this point were regarded generally as ‘white’ ethnics. And so while the strategies that Carroll used to speak to her experience as a Jewish woman were often more coded, like Yiddish Linguistic Devices or implicit references to stereotypes of Jewish women, the ones used by Joan Rivers were far more overt.

Joan Rivers’s frequent references to herself as a Jewish woman were a point of pride among her Jewish following throughout her career. In the mid-1970s, about ten years after Rivers had become famous, a Jewish newspaper released a feature with her picture and the proud headline, “Best Thing to be is Jewish, says actress Joan Rivers.” In this article, Rivers reveals a Jewish identity that is quite similar to Carroll’s, in the sense that it is rooted in the pride of a survivor: “The best thing is to be Jewish. We are the brightest, because we are the survivors. We have to be the smartest, because we have a whole heritage of pulling ourselves through. We’re

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855 Brodkin, How Did Jews Become White Folks and What Does That Say about Race in America?
856 “Best Thing to Be Is Jewish, Says Actress Joan Rivers,” The Sentinel, July 8, 1975, Historical Jewish Press of the NLI & TAU.
going to make it.” Just as Jean Carroll’s passionate proclamations about Israel triumphing against the odds seemed a thinly-veiled metaphor for her own career, Rivers’s declaration, “We’re going to make it,” seems to be both a statement on the endurance of the Jewish people, and a vow of her own professional ambition. The Jewish Women’s Archive documentary Making Trouble rallied round Rivers as a cultural representative, praising her because “she never downplayed her Jewishness, even though her [Jewish] agent often warned her that she was “too Jewish” or “too New York” for much of the country.”

Like Jean Carroll’s, Joan Rivers’s embodiment of Jewishness was largely unrelated to religious beliefs or references to practices. Rather, both comedienes performed Jewishness through a kind of high-affect, Brooklyn-accented persona, and constant references (whether implicit, as with Carroll, or explicit, as with Rivers) to stereotypes of Jewish women. In her analysis of Jewish comedy in Joan Rivers’s work, Susan Horowitz contends that this more superficial depiction of Jewishness was an effort to become widely accessible: “Like many others [in the twentieth-century American comedy industry], Joan Rivers’ on stage persona is an Americanized chicken soup made of traditional Jewish ingredients – canned for mass consumption.”

However, where Jean Carroll was coded, Joan Rivers was candid—even cartoonish—in her performance of Jewishness. Decrying unflattering apparel with Yiddish terms like “schmatte” and making what one of her audience members called a “fake Jewish spit sound when she talked about stuff she didn’t like,” Rivers’s Brooklyn-Jewish background not

858 Mock, “Really Jewish?”
only “ghosts her vocal accent and rhythm,” but also explicitly manifests in her content.

Many of her jokes employed a two-part structure—the first part being a matter-of-fact identification of herself as Jewish, the second part being a punchline with a comical result of this identification. For instance, “I’m Jewish. If God had wanted me to exercise, he would have put diamonds on the floor.” Or “I had a Jewish delivery. That means they knock you out with the first pain, then wake you up when the hairdresser shows.” By prefacing these punchlines with her pointed identification as Jewish, Rivers advanced a very particular (if facetious) vision of Jewishness—one that adheres closely to the cultural stereotype that Riv-Ellen Prell calls the ‘Consuming’ Jewish wife and mother.

Indeed, I tend to agree with Emily Nussbaum’s argument that the primary way that Joan Rivers responded to negative stereotypes of Jewish women was to inhabit them, “raging at society from inside the stereotype” by taking “that sexist bogeywoman and [making] it her own.” While Jean Carroll’s intimate ‘everywoman’ delivery humanized these stereotypes, Joan Rivers spent the majority of her career embodying their more cartoonish elements. In one audience member’s estimation, “I got the sense that her humor was based in [stereotypes]…as if she was aware of the stereotype, and playing it to her best advantage,” while another agreed, “she played up to it.” This gleeful embodiment of stereotypes is particularly evident in Rivers’s 1983 album “What Becomes a Semi-Legend Most,” in which she takes on the stereotype that, starting in the 1960s, was known as ‘Jewish American Princess.’ Janice Booker

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861 Mock, “Really Jewish?”
865 Grace Overbeke, Interview with Melinda Manning, September 21, 2016.
866 Overbeke, Interview with Dara Collins.

> “You’re married, lemme see your ring, how’d you do? Oh, not bad! You’re not Jewish?”
> (At the audience member’s reply)
> “What?? You’re a Jew, and you took that shitty ring? (Amidst applause and screams of laughter) “It’s piece of shit in four prongs!”
> “Is your mother alive?” (Amidst the audience’s waves of laughter) “Then there’s no excuse!”

The implications—which seem to resonate hilariously with her audience based on the volume and length of their audible response—are that a Jewish woman—and particularly a Jewish woman with her mother overseeing her marriage—demands materially (rather than symbolically) valuable symbols of marriage. Within seconds after the audience’s huge laugh, Rivers continues in this materialistic vein, crowing, “Jews get orgasms in department stores! Just the words ‘Charge it, Charge it, they all start to shake!’” before she is all but drowned out by laughter.

A common recollection among Rivers’s audience members was her tendency to tell jokes about another pillar of the Jewish American Princess stereotype: sexual apathy after marriage. A number of audience members quoted variations of their favorite Joan Rivers joke, “How do you cure a Jewish nymphomaniac? Marry her!” Grace Overbeke, Interview with Rachel Baum, September 19, 2016. Another quoted Rivers working along a similar theme of Jewish women’s shopping drive replacing their sex drive:

> There’s a guy at a bar and he wants to buy a woman a drink. He asks the bartender if he’s got any Spanish fly to slip in her drink…the bartender says, I’m all out of Spanish fly, but I’ve got some Jewish fly.

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He says okay, put that in her drink. The woman gets the drink. She comes over to the guy and she says, “Hi big boy. Want to go shopping?”

The stereotypical Jewish American Princess’s distaste for sex extends to other wifely duties, such as housework. Naturally, Rivers had a well-stocked arsenal of jokes capitalizing on this subject. Audience members supplied a number of examples, ranging from the sexual pragmatism of “A Jewish woman never does housework; a husband never comes home because "Oh my god, the floors are gorgeous. I must have you now, you hot witch!" to the materialistic piety of “If God wanted us to bend over, he would have put diamonds on the floor.” One audience member recounted seeing Joan Rivers live, shortly after her daughter Melissa was born, as Rivers joked about wrapping her daughter’s knees in cloths so that the baby dusted the floor as she crawled around. Rather than soften the charges of the Jewish woman’s lazy avarice, as Jean Carroll did, Joan Rivers embraced it in all its monstrosity, using it as fodder for a persona that supplied her with decades of material.

But perhaps the deepest, and certainly the most poignant, parallel between Jean Carroll’s and Joan Rivers’s career is their shared attempt to be a ‘Jewish mother’ not only in performance, but in life. That is, both tried to be comedians and caretakers by using the ‘Jewish mother’ stereotype to their advantage, and bringing their daughters into their act. Both Carroll’s daughter Helen and Rivers’s daughter Melissa were only children born to mothers who had waited to achieve professional success before becoming mothers. Jean Carroll was thirty-three when she gave birth to Helen in 1944; Rivers was thirty-five when she gave birth to her daughter Melissa.

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870 Grace Overbeke, Interview with Jenny Brandon, November 9, 2016.
871 Overbeke, Interview with Sara Ende.
872 Epstein
873 Overbeke, Interview with Jill Skell.
in 1968. And both Helen (whom Carroll called ‘Robin’) and Melissa (whom Rivers called ‘Missy’) became focal points of their mothers’ respective acts. Carroll amused 1960’s audiences with complaints about her ‘beatnik daughter’ and the progressive schools of the day, exclaiming,

They're places where the kids learn nothing, but you get to know the teacher real well! They let the children develop at their own pace…eliminate any unpleasant subjects. You know the subjects my kid has ended up with? Swimming and lunch! 874

Twenty years later, Rivers delivered a parallel routine, wailing to her audience about her daughter’s woeful experience of high-school in the eighties:

My daughter Melissa goes to Beverly Hills High School
Roman Polanski is the guidance counselor!
Can we talk about Beverly Hills High School?
Every other kid is pregnant, the school mascot is a dead rabbit! 875

It was not merely as subject matter that Carroll and Rivers tried to involve their daughters in their act. Both Helen and Melissa often accompanied their mothers to their performances, occasionally making a PR-friendly cameo appearance. For instance, Jean Carroll’s appearance on The Gary Moore Show on Tuesday, January 3, 1961, in which she did a stand-up set promoting her album Girl in a Hot Steam Bath, was followed by Moore calling her back as part

Figure 33 Screen shot of Jean Carroll and Helen Howe on The Gary Moore Show, 1961 (Paley Center archive)

874 “After Dark.”
of a commercial for Polaroid Electric Eye Camera. As the spokesperson concluded his pitch with the request, “Jean, may I take your picture?” Carroll sashayed onstage effusing, “Oh, I’d love it, but look, I’ve been talking to you about my Beatnik daughter so much—do you mind if I bring her on, show what a lovely girl she is?” The spokesperson agreed, “Oh, sure, come on, we’d love to meet her,” and Carroll reached her arm backstage, beckoning Helen, who entered in a fitted suit with a peplum waist, her hair pulled neatly back. As the camera flashed, Carroll put one hand protectively around Helen’s shoulders, the other at her waist, and Helen leaned her head against her mother’s.876 Helen’s lady-like presence and well-coiffed appearance reassured the audience that the jokes about Carroll’s “rotten kid” were in fun.

Similarly, after bemoaning the fate of her daughter and her degenerate surroundings at Beverly Hills High on “The Tonight Show,” Joan Rivers told host Johnny Carson that her daughter was in the audience, asking if it would be all right for Melissa to say hello. As Carson nodded, the camera panned to show Melissa, clad in a neat red sweater with her hair curled, demurely rising with a smile and wave.877 It may have been that these rather forced cameos were the product of Carroll and Rivers trying to integrate their identities as comedian and mother. The gawky sweetness of these motherly displays both added to the manufactured authenticity of Carroll’s and Rivers’s personas, and reassured the audience that underneath the joke-riddled kvetching was a lovely daughter and a loving relationship.

Ultimately, Joan Rivers was able to incorporate her daughter into her career in a way that Jean Carroll was not. Although Jean Carroll had tried to get Helen cast in the role of her teenage

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877 ENTERTAINMENT BUFF, Joan Rivers & Johnny Carson on a “Tonight Show” Retrospective, 1984.”
daughter in a new series for the British network ATV, the project did not come to fruition.878 Joan Rivers, on the other hand, was able to negotiate a series of collaborations with her daughter. For a crucial difference between Carroll and Rivers is that Rivers was not only a performer, but also a producer. Her first production company, PGHM (Please God Help Me) productions, created after the death of her husband, produced *The Joan Rivers Show* in syndication and a USA Network talk show *Joan Rivers’ Gossip! Gossip Gossip!* 879 Her second production company JMAM (Joan Mine All Mine) Productions managed her retail business of clothes and jewelry, and was initially co-owned with a number of partners through the QVC Network, before she “wrestled the company back from a bunch of investors.”880 This affiliation with QVC was an important source of both income and exposure, giving her power that she could—and did—use to incorporate her daughter into her career. Biographer Leslie Bennetts attested to Rivers using her leverage in this way, writing:

> Throughout the entertainment industry, people who wanted to work with Joan learned that she would pull every possible string to make Melissa part of the package—just as she had in refusing to go on *The Celebrity Apprentice* until the show agreed to take Melissa as well.881

The strategy worked, and Joan and Melissa Rivers were frequent collaborators, co-hosting red carpet events for E! Network and the TV Guide Channel and even costarring in a WEtv reality show based on their relationship, “Joan & Melissa: Joan Knows Best.”882

878 Stein, “Jean Carroll in Series Swim.”
881 Bennets, 321.
In sum, while Carroll used the stereotype of what Riv-Ellen Prell calls “The Consuming Jewish Wife/Mother” as comic fodder to be humanized through centering her female perspective and contrasting it with comparatively outlandish characters, Rivers herself embodied—and reveled in—the stereotype. In doing so, she became internationally famous, highly-studied, and cemented in the narrative of stand-up comedy. And indeed, as Roberta Mock argues, Rivers’s very presence at the microphone—and her well-publicized career—exemplifies how female Jewish comedians can “typify themselves (to excess) from another's point of view, transforming themselves from the object of a gaze to subjects.” Moreover, her success gave her the leverage she needed to take on high-powered positions like producer, which enabled her to, among other things, hire and spend more time with her daughter. So, while Carroll was more progressive onstage, with her more humanizing treatment of Jewish woman stereotypes, Rivers was actually able to make more progress in the field, using the success of her stereotypical performances as leverage to gain lasting repute and administrative power.

**Jean Carroll, Elayne Boosler, Sandra Bernhard, and The Ethnic Turn**

Jean Carroll’s metamorphosis from coded Jewishness to more overt ethnic ‘shtick’ in the post 1960s coincided with her metamorphosis from young woman to more matronly figure. It is difficult to know how much of the shift was due to the increased tolerance of American Jews, and how much of it was due to her own changing body and self-image. However, it is revealing that a similar shift took place with contemporary stand-up comedians Elayne Boosler and Sandra Bernhard. In their younger years, these comedians were hailed for, respectively, their political wit and their sexual candor, with ethnicity being less of a defining factor. However, the

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883 Mock, “Really Jewish?”
performances I witnessed them give as women in their sixties and seventies leaned decidedly towards Jewish ‘shtick.’ This pattern suggests to me that a youthful female Jewish body is still ‘assimilable’ in a way that the older Jewish female body is not.

Elayne Boosler

“Politics, Peace…I’m so fat!” - Elayne Boosler, 2016

History is nothing if not repetitive, and by the 1970s, comedy had found a new “true gender pioneer” in Elayne Boosler, whom comedy historian Richard Zoglin hails as “a strong, independent female point of view who did jokes without putting down her sex or playing into men’s stereotypes.” While Zoglin correctly points out that “she never matched the success of many of the men—like Richard Lewis, Jay Leno, and Andy Kaufman—who started out with her at the New York Improv in the early ’70s,” she nonetheless has enjoyed remarkable success. Her first hour-long special, “Party of One” was an entirely self-financed project, because cable networks did not believe that an hourlong special by a woman would sell. As her official bio records, “The success of that show…is widely credited for blowing open the gates of TV for female stand-up comedians.” Boosler wrote and starred in six more of her own one-hour cable stand-up comedy specials, on top of touring both nationally and internationally. In addition to appearing at the London Palladium and at a Command Performance for the Queen of England, Boosler also performed her topical political humor at prestigious American venues, including the White House Press Correspondent’s Dinner for President Clinton in 1993 and before the

884 Zoglin, Comedy at the Edge, 181.
885 Zoglin, 181.
President and Congress at A Festival at Ford’s Theatre. 887 Booster’s colleague Richard Lewis called her “the Jackie Robinson of my generation,” elaborating, “she was the strongest female working. She broke the mold for most female comics.”888

Despite her accolades as a female pioneer, Boosler echoes Jean Carroll in resisting the mantle of ‘female comic.’ Throughout her career, Boosler refused to play all-female venues like Mitzi Shore’s “Belly Room,” and had a policy of opting out of interviews for news stories on “comediennes.”889 Unwittingly paraphrasing Jean Carroll’s declaration, “I didn’t say, ‘My God, I have to go out there and do battle against the male species,’”890 Boosler insisted, “I never bravely set about to change things.” 891 Resisting the ‘feminist’ moniker, both Carroll and Boosler made a claim for credibility in mainstream—not marginal—comedy. For Boosler, her goal was to use the platform of stand-up comic as “a town crier, delivering the news about life and growing up.”892 And indeed, she is the first in the lineage of Jewish female comedians to take on the role of cultural commentator with such political emphasis and acumen.

As I have previously argued, this topical comedy and wider sociopolitical perspective was a product of a post-second-wave feminist movement period in which women felt empowered enough to raise their voice on civic and political matters.893 Boosler’s early work exemplifies this relatively newfound ability. My own readings of Boosler’s early one-hour cable stand-up comedy specials, combined with input from surveys and interviews with her audience

887 “Bio.”
889 Berger.
890 Wollman, “Funny Business.”
892 Holden.
members, speak to a pronounced political focus to her comedy. Although Boosler identifies as Jewish in a manner more explicit than Jean Carroll did in her early work, her references to Jewish customs, family members, or stereotypes are far less pronounced than her riffs on current events and gendered double-standards.

Elayne Boosler’s response to stereotypes of Jewish women in her early work was a kind of tacit acknowledgment of their existence and the anxiety they inspired in a young woman aspiring to restrictive norms of femininity. Without ever explicitly discussing Jewishness, she foregrounds these anxieties in the opening of her 1990 comedy special “Broadway Baby.” As a striking, tall woman with Nordic good looks takes centerstage, a young curly-haired girl playing ‘Young Elayne’ sits downstage, staring at her longingly. Over the loudspeaker, Boosler’s voice intones, “You’ll never grow up to be that—Blonde hair, straight legs.”

“What’s going to be me?” Asks the curly-haired girl.

“Me!” responds Boosler, as the blonde woman exits to reveal the comedian, her curly hair large and voluminous, and a fitted pantsuit showing off her curvy figure as she strode onstage.894 For one of Boosler’s long-time fans, that curly hair signified an act of resistance—an insistence on making space for a Jewish aesthetic: “It was amazing to see that, nobody did that! That was brave.”895 But her hair was an unspoken insistence on Jewish beauty—embodied, not articulated. Later in the special, Boosler hinted more strongly at the restrictive, WASPY norms of female beauty demanded by media, as she bemoaned women’s “bathroom cabinets full of broken dreams,” crying in desperation, “I’ll buy this cream, I’ll be taller! I’ll buy this cream, I’ll

894 Steve Gerbson, Elayne Boosler: Broadway Baby (Comedy Dynamics, 1987).
895 Overbeke, Interview with Ruby Branch.
be gentile!" While the use of the term ‘gentile’ somewhat clearly identifies Boosler as a non-gentile (Jewish) woman, even this joke is relatively subtle in its Jewishness. Another one of Boosler’s fans, a Christian woman nearing middle-age at the time she watched this, remembers seeing that moment and thinking “Yeah, I understand that. I want a cream. I want it to transform my life, whatever that is.”

In her early live appearances, Boosler took an equally subtle approach to stereotypes of Jewish women as domestically-averse princesses or overprotective Mamas. While Joan Rivers would precede her one-liners with the declaration “I’m Jewish,” reifying stereotypes by gleefully attributing the ridiculed behavior to her Jewishness, Elayne Boosler left any connection unspoken. For instance, an audience member who used to watch Boosler perform at the downtown New York club Pace, in the 1970s, cited Boosler’s jokes ridiculing her own poor housekeeping:

My mother always bragged ‘You could eat off my floor!’
Well, you can eat off my floor too!
There are thousands of things down there.
Look, another m&m!

Fans also recalled Boosler alluding to the overprotective nature of Jewish mothers with an extended riff about her mother’s fondness for plastic slipcovers on every surface, often concluding with “In my family, you were considered a risk-taker if you took a shower without a safety mat.” Reflecting on this bit, Jewish fan Ellie Galston effusively expressed its resonance by exclaiming, “I mean…right?” However, Galston was clear that she appreciated the coded

896 Gerbson, Broadway Baby.
897 Overbeke, Interview with Jenny Brandon.
898 Grace Overbeke, Interview with June Rider, November 11, 2016.
899 Grace Overbeke, Interview with Ellie Galston, November 15, 2016.
nature of Boosler’s references. Commenting on Boosler’s invocation of Jewishness in her early comedy, she asserted:

I knew she was being very Jewish, but I don’t know that often in a one-hour and-a-half set she’ll say the word Jew. Maybe never! Which, I like! I don’t need to hear it. My kids think I’m kind of nuts because I still do have that thing of: I’m happy I’m Jewish, but I’m not going to like bandy it about, out in the world.  

Galston, a contemporary of Boosler’s in age, marks herself as part of a larger group of people whose identification as Jews nonetheless does not entail their willingness to “bandy it about out in the world.” Boosler also, in her early comedy, seems to be a part of that group. While she did not avoid Jewishness in her early comedy—Jewish-American anxieties and stereotypes frequently informed her subject matter and perspective—she did not lean heavily on ethnic humor. Like Carroll, Boosler began her stand-up careers by playing Jewish without [often] saying Jewish.

What Elayne Boosler did say—with trenchant wit—were her thoughts on current sociopolitical issues. A male critic from the New York Times summarized her material as addressing “the absurdities of sex, politics, and advertising,” exemplifying this topical humor with Boosler’s critique of network television stations’ policy against airing commercials for condoms:

“Don’t you think it’s awful that networks won’t advertise condoms because of pressure from religious groups? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we found out that you can only get AIDS by giving money to television preachers?”

The joke moves concisely from calling out the religious undertones of network television policy

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900 Overbeke.
901 Holden, “Laugh Bargains for a Summer Night.”
to condemning the complicity that religious groups and advertising executives share in the AIDS epidemic, for willfully obscuring a product that could potentially mitigate the crisis. Boosler continued to joke through her political views in a bit that New York Times critic Ellen Hopkins praised as one of the only “PMS routines that isn’t anti-woman”: a bit about a female president whose “raging hormones” make her “a masterful power-broker, capable of bullying a terrorist into giving up his demands.” As Hopkins quotes, “Taking hostages on a day when I’m retaining water? This is going to go very badly for you,” she demonstrates how Boosler turns the misogynist belief that women’s’ hormones make them unfit for leadership on its head, making the hormonally driven emotion into an irresistible negotiating force. Viewing her job as a stand-up comedian through the lens of “town crier,” Boosler used her comedy as a way to cry out her views on the sociopolitical policies surrounding her.

The perspective that Boosler’s political jokes evinced mingled a keen sense of religious and conservative hypocrisy with an unwillingness to alienate her audiences with too firm an ideological stance. For, as she explains regarding her trenchant wit, “I talk about policies, the actions, the things that affect us as people in our everyday lives, instead of attacking the person” so as not to “leave anyone out” [emphasis added]. For instance, when taking on the Vatican, Boosler focused on their new policy, quipping:

The Vatican came down with a new ruling.  
They said no surrogate mothers.  
Good thing they didn’t make this rule before Jesus was born!

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903 Hopkins.
904 Hopkins.
906 Gerbson, Broadway Baby.
Her joke identifies the hypocrisy of denying surrogacy in a religion founded on a story of Jesus Christ as the child of God borne of the body of Mary, but it is not an *ad hominem* attack on the Pope. Similarly, in one of her later jokes during George W. Bush’s administration, Boosler went after his abstinence-only policy in sexual education: “He says he believes Sex Ed causes promiscuity, if you have the knowledge you’ll use it. I disagree! I took algebra, I never do math.” Again, Boosler makes her disagreement plain, but derives the comedy of the joke from an incongruous analogy, rather than Bush’s character, so as not to alienate his supporters. In an online survey, one of her audience members specifically commented on Boosler’s deft navigation of her audience’s politics, remarking, “I like Boosler’s political humor…she doesn’t seem to pick on people.”907 Her efforts not to “pick on” people or leave anyone out are particularly evident in her discussion of the Iran Contra affair, as she works the crowd from both sides, asking

> Been watching the hearings?  
> The Contra hearings?  
> Thank goodness they made it public so that we can all understand what happened now!  
> How many people think Olli North is a hero?  
> How many people think he’s just one nurse away from being Richard Speck?  
> …I know my dog has opinions about Iran.  
> I know he thinks Reagan’s a liar!908

By beginning the discussion with an acknowledgment of the obscurity of the Iran-Contra affair, Boosler puts the audience at ease before asking them to identify where they fall in their support of the former National Security Council member Oliver North. And while her comparison

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907 Overbeke, “Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics,” 2, Question 29.  
908 Gerbson, *Broadway Baby*. 
between North and Richard Speck (rapist and murderer of eight student nurses), 909 is certainly a personal attack, it is phrased in the form of a question to the audience about their beliefs, not a reflection of Boosler’s own. Likewise, her assertion “Reagan’s a liar” is whimsically posited as her dog’s belief, not her own. Just as her Jewishness was acknowledged but often subtle in her work, so too were her Leftist political leanings. They were never disavowed, but always policy-based and occasionally understated, so as to maintain an ideologically broad fan base.

Many of her fans noted and appreciated Boosler’s political bent, seeing it as the defining element of her comedy. Fifteen percent—a distinct plurality—of the survey participants who responded to questions about subjects they remember Elayne Boosler discussing specifically mentioned her discussions of current events. One participant described her as “always on the cutting edge of current topics,” 910 while another praised her, “strong statements which were very much directed at social issues with a very leftward slant.” 911 There was also a pronounced trend of audience members remarking that Boosler raised their own awareness of current sociopolitical issues. The word “thought-provoking” 912 appeared repeatedly, often alongside assertions like, “She is not only hilarious, but really smart and makes you think about important stuff,” 913 or “She seems politically aware and uses humor to get us to notice what’s going on around us.” 914 This sentiment echoes Boosler’s own concept of stand-up comedian as a kind of “town crier,” a social actor prompting the citizenry (in this case, her audience) to engage with the broader current events in their society.

911 Overbeke, Respondent 180, Q#29.
912 Overbeke, Respondent 319, Q#29.
913 Overbeke, Respondent 236, Q#29-30.
914 Overbeke, Respondent 321, Q#29.
Particularly among her female fans, interviews with Boosler’s audience members reflected a relief that at last, they had a female stand-up comedian discussing current events. One of the female audience members spoke insightfully on how Boosler’s own confidence as a sociopolitical agent suggested expanded possibilities for her own path:

I’m not dissembling housewife jokes. Roseanne Bar was all housewife jokes at the beginning. She did her domestic Goddess bit. That stuff is great, but at a certain point I get sick and tired of hearing about it. I’m thinking okay, so my choices in life are, you know, be a housewife or a stand-up comedian and make fun of housewives! …So it’s good to see someone like Elayne Boosler come out. She was so clever and so smart and I loved her. Her talk about stuff that is global, what the men talk about: politics and issues like that…I’ll never forget her jokes about being the first woman president. It was hysterical. I’ll never forget that.915

While not “dissing” housewife jokes, the interview subject does express how they limited her view of the possibilities available to her as a woman (“my choices in life are…be a housewife or a stand-up comedian and make fun of housewives.”) The reason, then, that Boosler is so memorable to the subject with her discussion of female presidents and matters beyond the household, is not only that it is “hysterical,” but also because it expands her sense of women participating in a public, not domestic, realm. It showed her that “politics and issues like that” were not simply matters that “men talk about.”

Another interview subject gave a similar account of Boosler’s political commentary as a welcome change. Also a middle-aged woman, this subject enthused about Boosler because

I like comedians who talk about something other than boys and relationships and sex. You have a life outside of those things. Please, let’s talk about them, because men are capable of talking about things other than relationships and sex, and more often do. This is one of the reasons I love Elayne Boosler… She was one of the first women observational comics.916

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915 Grace Overbeke, Interview with Mallory Calling, November 12, 2016.
916 Grace Overbeke, Interview with Allison Canberg, November 10, 2016.
Like the previous subject, this speaker looks to male comedians’ unapologetic participation in the public sphere as an impetus for women to do the same, praising Boosler for telling stories that were “observational” and “weren’t about men.” By offering her own commentary on sociopolitical events, Boosler proved that women were just as “capable of taking about things other than relationships and sex” as men. Echoing this sentiment, a younger female audience member praised Boosler’s comedy for being “more about society and less about self.” While acknowledging that Boosler did include personal material, the interview subject emphasized that her comedy is “more societally involved…it includes not just personal stuff, but also some criticisms of the culture at large and political things.”

Beyond simply engaging with social and political events that had not been conventional content for women comedians before her, Boosler also embodied a different kind of persona—one more in line with Jean Carroll’s cool breeziness than Joan Rivers’s or Phyllis Diller’s manic cantankerousness. For instance, Boosler’s mode of cultivating breezy, casual intimacy with her audience by sharing their laughter was a tactic Carroll had often used. A reviewer in London noted that Carroll’s choice to “sell her nimble lines of innuendo chit chat as if she’s killing herself too” gives the impression that her routine “breezes” along (Scrapbook London Palladium 1953). Even when jabbing her poor housekeeping abilities or her inability to master algebra, Boosler maintained a delivery of self-assurance and confidence. In Yael Kohen’s oral history of stand-up comedy, Elizabeth Wolynski asserted that Boosler’s “confident, sexy stand-up defied precedent.” Likewise, after praising her for being “opinionated on current events,” one of

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917 Grace Overbeke, Interview with Fifi Chernberg, November 12, 2016.
918 Kohen, We Killed.
Boosler’s fans noted that these opinions were bolstered by a demeanor both “very confident,” and “unapologetic,” concluding, “you knew right away when she started speaking that she was a force to be reckoned with.”

Given the sociopolitical emphasis in both Elayne Boosler’s content and reception, I was surprised that my own experience participating in her live audience showed her focusing less on political humor and more on what might be termed “ethnic shtick.” On May 14, 2016, I travelled to the Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center, a presenting house in the West Hamptons of New York. Even in the “off-season,” the town had marks of affluence. The theatre had just undergone a 2.8 million dollar renovation, and the playbill was filled with advertisements for luxury items like Porsche sports cars and wedding gowns from Kleinfeld bridal shop. Boosler acknowledged these signs of wealth through a political lens in almost the first moments of her show, commenting:

I know a lovely gentleman, I was hanging out with…
And the lovely man said, “We came to see you, but you know…”
We’re Republicans out here.”
I said, “If I had a 10 million dollar beach house, I would be a Republican!”

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921 “Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center Playbill” (Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center, 2016 2015).
Of course!
Screw the Democrats, look at my home,
I’ll fly the flag!
That’s why those flags are always flying here—
God Bless America!

This back-handed affirmation—insinuating that Republican patriotism is contingent on material assets—was met with a round of laughter, perhaps motivating her to continue in this political vein with some cautious mockery of then-presidential candidate Donald Trump:

You have to admit… he’s a little light on specifics, you know…

(Laughter)
He is!
You know, you might vote for him, and hopefully it will work out, if that’s the way it goes…but he’s a little light.
What’s the plan?

(Affecting a ‘Donald Trump’ voice)
“I’ll see, I’ll go, I’ll see what’s happening, what’s the problem!”

…Do you realize if he had a Jewish accent, he’d be Jackie Mason?

(In an imitation of Jackie Mason’s voice and mannerisms)
“What’s your immigration plan?”

“They’ll have to go! They’ll go, then they’ll come back. Go, come back, go come back! Pbbth! They gotta leave! We’ll see! They go this way—Pbbth! That way—Pbbth!”

(Returning to her normal voice, amidst loud laughter)
You’re never going to be able to see Trump again without hearing Jackie Mason’s voice!922

After hailing her audience as potential supporters of Donald Trump, she then likened him to Jackie Mason, the rabbi-turned-comedian whose voice Time Magazine described as "the Yiddish locutions of an immigrant who just completed a course in English. By mail."923 The adoption of this dialect accomplished two things for Boosler: First, it got a laugh for the incongruity of WASP-y Donald Trump speaking with a “Jewish accent.” Second, it allowed her to calibrate

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922 Boosler, Elayne Boosler at the Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center.
923 Eli Lederhendler and Gabriel N. Finder, A Club of Their Own: Jewish Humorists and the Contemporary World (Oxford University Press, 2016), 25.
how much this particular audience will respond to *Yiddishkeit*. The lengthy wave of laughter that arose as soon as she started her Jackie Mason impersonation seemed to indicate the crowd’s receptivity to broad humor built on Jewish stereotypes and practices. And so in that moment, Boosler seemed to make a decision. She took a moment, exhaled, and then announced,

So we’ll talk all about the world, and politics, but first, …I’m so fat! Oy! And I’m not just fat, I’m *hungry*. See, hungry and fat! Yes, politics, peace…I’m so fat! …I had to buy a minimizer bra! I’m Jewish, I don’t minimize *anything*.\(^{924}\)

Here, she makes a seemingly self-aware shift from her customary political material to a more stereotypical depiction of Jewish Mama—zaftig and kvetching. Her abrupt transition from “the world and politics” to “I’m so fat” makes comedy from the solipsism of her privileging her weight over worldlier matters. And her line “I’m Jewish; I don’t minimize anything,” uses Joan Rivers’s tried-and-true formula of combining a quick identification of Jewishness with a comical declaration as a way of attributing the latter to the former. The underlying message here is clear: given our political differences, I will make comedy out of our shared willingness to laugh at stereotypical foibles of women (and specifically Jewish women). Much of the material for the show dwells on these foibles, sometimes making jokes at the expense of Boosler herself, other times making jokes at the expense of a society where women seem invisible after they have joined “the 50/50 club—where you’ve aged fifty years and gained fifty pounds.”\(^{925}\)

The majority of the bits that Boosler performs that night rely on the stereotype of Jewish people as brash, haggling Brooklynnites—upwardly mobile but rooted firmly in lower-middle

\(^{924}\) Boosler, *Elayne Boosler at the Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center*.  
\(^{925}\) Boosler.
class. For instance, she begins a bit about the television program “Downton Abbey” remarking,

…Somehow, in Edwardian England, they found one Jew!
His name was Murray, and he was the lawyer.
What are the odds?
The whole tenor of the show changed. Every time he was on:
(Affecting a cut-glass British accent)
“Lord Grantham—how do we know that Matthew’s will has validity?”
“Good point! I say, I think I’ll just call MURRAY in the morning”
(when she says ‘MURRAY’ her voice goes from Britain to Brooklyn)

Just as they did when hearing Jackie Mason’s voice emanating from ‘Donald Trump,’ the
audience bursts out laughing at the incongruity of a stereotypical Jewish voice amidst the refined
upper-class setting.

There is something ironic about depicting Jews as a folksy contrast to the aristocracy,
given the Hamptons audience. For, while they may be largely Jewish, they are also economically
probably more like Lord Grantham than Murray. And yet the crowd seemed to adore being hailed
as lower-class Brooklynnites. At one point a middle-aged man in the audience called out that he
too grew up in Brooklyn, and Boosler took moment to compare notes on public schools and
restaurant discounts. Throughout the evening, I noted an increase in her Yiddish words and
phrases “de-shvitzified” “shtup” and “mishpocha” being just a few.926 It seemed that this
audience, who had been hailed as wealthy Republicans, was eager to reconnect with their roots
in mid-1960s Jewish Brooklyn. Following Hannah Schwadron, I speculate that this nostalgia
comes from a desire to disavow the privileges of whiteness and retain some sense of ethnic
otherness.927

Boosler continued to lean into jokes about Jewish people that played off stereotypes of

926 Boosler.
927 Schwadron, The Case of the Sexy Jewess.
Jews as frugal. Riffing on thrift, Boosler quips, “We all have our miracles in our religions. I mean Christians have the loaves and the fishes! …But the Jews have it beat! One teabag, 27 years!” She does another bit about her frustration that an “Everything” bagel sounds like a better deal than it is, crying, “Everything?! You should slice into that, there should be a turkey, and a pair of pants, and a chicken!” Continuing on this theme, she launched into a lengthy bit about her mother’s failed attempt to haggle over the price of a mezuah—a small prayer scroll put in a case and posted on a doorframe blessing the entryway in a Jewish home. Affecting a thick Brooklyn accent and pursing her lips, Boosler begins the bit with an exchange between her mother and a shopkeeper:

“How much?”
“Ten dollars”
“How much?”
“Lady, they’re all ten dollars.”
“…Okay!”
An hour goes by. She picks out a mezuah for me, she puts it on the counter, puts down the ten dollars.
The guy says, “And eh, eighty five dollars for the prayer”
“Whaat?”
“Well, it has to be blessed by a rabbi.”
“Was he in a Mercedes? …Forget it!”
My father says, “Buy her the thing!”
“No!”
“Buy her the thing”
“No! we’ll have lunch!”
“No!”
Fighting, eating, fighting!
Finally, they finish, the desert comes, they have the fortune cookies.
She opens the cookie, she takes out the fortune, she says, “Charlie, look at the size of this piece of paper.”
(Laughter)
I have the only mezuah in the world that says, “You will be very lucky in business. Lucky number 6, 11, 18…”

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928 Boosler, Elayne Boosler at the Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center.
The joke relies rather heavily on culturally-specific knowledge—not only knowing what a mezuzah is, and that the prayer scroll is sold separately from the case, but also a finely-tuned knowledge of Jewish stereotypes. For instance, the reference to “fighting, eating, fighting,” invokes long-held stereotypes of Jewish people’s social practices revolving around argument and food. The lunch venue, and the appropriation of a fortune cookie as a mezuzah filler plays with the stereotype of Jewish people’s patronage Chinese restaurants.\textsuperscript{929} And of course, the shopkeeper plays with the stereotype of the ‘crafty Jewish merchant,’ that was used so frequently in portrayals of Jews,\textsuperscript{930} including Jean Carroll’s work. Acknowledging the swerve into Yiddishkeit, Boosler followed the anecdote with a sheepish “I’m sorry for our non-Jewish friends. It’s…a little insidey, I guess.” However, she continues with her comedy of Jewishness, going into a bit about how if Native Americans do not like being used as mascots for sports teams, she volunteers the Jews, crying, “We would love to be the Atlanta Bravermans! …We’d love to be the Chicago White Sox with Sandals!”\textsuperscript{931}

Eventually, Boosler did move away from jokes that were quite so “insidey,” crying, “We’re leaving out the Gentiles! We have to include the Gentiles!” She edged back towards the political, discussing her concerns with the far-right political group known as the “Tea Party.” But even this discussion does not lose the emphasis on Jewishness. Boosler sets up her joke by quoting a Tea Party member’s declaration, “America’s a Christian country, and we’ve got to get totally back to that!” before objecting:

“I thought, Whaat?
Tell that to my Little Jewish Father,

\textsuperscript{930} Nathans, \textit{Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans}.
\textsuperscript{931} Boosler, \textit{Elayne Boosler at the Westhampton Beach Performing Arts Center}.
who spent the 1940s crawling through Europe on his belly!
Oh, he wasn’t in the war, he just had a horrible travel agent.”

This punchline received perhaps the biggest laugh of the night. For even while the joke poked a hole in her “Little Jewish Father’s” military heroics, it also invoked the actual heroics of the Second World war, and its legacy of Jewish people suffering deeply and overcoming persecution. If Boosler’s audience of privileged Jews yearned nostalgically for a time when they too could feel like heroic underdogs, Boosler’s reference to World War Two delivered just that.

In a recent interview, a journalist asked Elayne Boosler how her comedy had changed as she aged, and she replied, “My particular comedy has always reflected where I am in life, and what is going on around us. So it grows and changes with where my fans and I find ourselves on the day of the show.” It seems that where Elayne Boosler found herself on the day of that particular show was amongst a group of people who were less interested in hearing her political views than they were in bonding with her over a shared repertoire of Jewish practices and stereotypes. It is difficult know to what extent her audience’s preference for Yiddishkeit over sociopolitical content is a related to her age. But it may be that there is another effect of joining what Boosler calls the 50/50 Club: the audience’s increased eagerness to view you within your ethnic stereotype.

Sandra Bernhard

“Maybe she has changed over the years...I mean, she’s literally talking about, like, bagels”

- Audience Member Terry Fishman

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932 Boosler.
933 Boedeker, “Comedy Is Society’s Safety Valve: An Interview with Elayne Boosler.”
934 Grace Overbeke, Interview with Terry Fishman, Audio Recording, March 19, 2016.
At first glance, Sandra Bernhard seems an odd place to look to see Jean Carrolls’ legacy. After all, Carroll was a pioneer of stand-up comedy, and while Bernhard’s work is often categorized as performance art, or cabaret performance. Moreover, while Jean Carroll rarely ‘worked blue,’ Sandra Bernhard is best known for her frank, boundary-pushing discussions of sex. However, there is a key transition of Carroll’s career that seems to be repeating itself in that of Sandra Bernhard. Namely, the marked pivot in Jean Carroll’s career in the mid-sixties, in which a combination of cultural factors and personal transformation resulted in her shift from a coded to a more explicit performance of Jewishness. Examining critical reviews, scholarship, audience surveys, interviews, and web survey data, it seems that Sandra Bernhard too is experiencing a shift in the level of emphasis that both she and her audiences place on her Jewishness.

By her own account, Sandra Bernhard was inspired to go into comedy by Lily Tomlin, Jean Carroll’s protege and advocate. Bernhard named both Tomlin and Bette Midler as artists from which “I drew a lot.” Although she does not elaborate on Tomlin’s influence, some clarity comes from Lisa Merrill’s observation that the polyvocal, decentered quality of Lily Tomlin’s one-woman shows is a feminist elaboration of the traditional stand-up form. While Bernhard does not typically play various characters the way that Tomlin does, she does synthesize elements of stand-up comedy with a more experimental, decentered form. Bernhard’s first successful one-woman-show, I’m Your Woman was made into a mainstream album in 1985. In 1990, her next one-woman show Without You I’m Nothing, was made into a nationally-released

935 Kohen, We Killed, 138.
film. After playing the first openly gay character on network television in the show *Roseanne*, Bernhard returned to her signature solo-performance *I'm Still Here...Damn It!* (1998). She has released 14 albums, many of which are culminations of one-woman shows, and in 2015, debuted yet another touring one-woman show *Feel the Bernhard*.  

Both audience members and scholars characterize Bernhard’s work mainly in terms of its shock value. Audience member Gillean Givings was one of many to use the word “outrageous,” remarking, “you just never knew what she was going to say next, what she was going to do next.” Deeming Bernhard a “modern-day Tallulah Bankhead, *The New York Times* critic Stephen Holden gave a vividly detailed example of her unpredictable behavior when performing in a Washington club:

> She tells a stage-side patron: "I like you, Dick. See, I like you. I feel good about you. I think you're neat. . . . I'd like . . ."
> She abruptly changes tone. '
> ' . . . I'd like to hurt you, Dick.
> I don't know what it is. I'd like to smack your (expletive) face off, Dick.
> Like to give you a hair transplant tonight, Dick."
> She switches her tone again.
> "No, I like you. I do. I feel very open with all of you tonight. I feel vulnerable. I want to share things. I want to show you things. I want to show you my breasts. And yet I'm frightened. . . ."

Stand-up comedian (and long-time Bernhard fan) Claudia Lonow gives a similar example of one of Bernhard’s “outrageous” exchanges with an audience member at the New-York based club, The Improv:

> …it was a really small crowd and she started to focus in on one guy at the front, and then she started singing to this guy! She’s talking about how when somebody is touching your nipples, at first you really like it but then it gets so irritating you

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938 Grace Overbeke, Interview with Gillean Givings, November 12, 2016.
939 Berger, “The New Comediennes.”
just want to sandblast them off!”

These detailed recollections of Bernhard’s sexual behavior typifies audience response to Bernhard’s work, which emphasized the theme of her sexual explicitness, particularly regarding her own queer sexuality. When asked to identify the themes that stood out in their memory of Bernhard’s performances, survey participants identifying as Bernhard’s audience members overwhelmingly referenced her discussions of sex, exhibited in the word cloud below:

Q58 Please briefly describe memorable topics or issues Sandra Bernhard talked about.

Sexuality  Honestly  Politics  Child  Issues  Bisexuality
Women  Specific  Remember  Mind  Sex
Relationship with Madonna  Recall  Celebrity
Roseanne  Homosexuality  Think  Topics  Lesbian Life

The frequency of the word ‘Sex,’ coupled with the appearance of “Sex,” “Sexuality,” “Bisexuality,” “Homosexuality” and “Lesbian” attests to the fact that this theme loomed large in the audience takeaway from Bernhard’s work. The majority of narrative responses to a question about memorable subjects in Bernhard’s routine were also along the lines of “Kinky sex,” “being lesbian,” and the pointed, “sex with men, sex with women, sex sex sex.” For many of the audience members, the significance of her sexual candor was the way that being

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940 Kohen, We Killed, 138.
941 Overbeke, “Audience Response to Jewish Women Stand-up Comics,” Q#58.
942 Overbeke, Respondent 337, Q#58.
943 Overbeke, Respondent 159, Q#58.
944 Overbeke, Respondent 226, Q#58.
“openly gay,”\(^{945}\) “pushed some envelopes about sexual orientation pretty early for mainstream.”\(^{946}\) One audience member expressed admiration, declaring, “No one did comedy like she did…unapologetically herself and an out lesbian.”\(^{947}\) It is worth clarifying that responses classifying Bernhard as a “lesbian,” are inaccurate, as Bernhard herself rejects labels and is upfront about her attractions to both women and men.\(^{948}\) The key point is that whether Bernhard’s audience perceived her as a proud lesbian—or a proud bisexual woman—or as an overtly sexual woman, there was a consensus that sex and sexuality was an emphasis of her work and persona. Put simply, in the words of one audience member, “she exudes sex.”\(^{949}\)

With sexuality being Bernhard’s defining characteristic in her audience’s eyes, her Jewishness was a less significant trait. In spite of the fact that Bernhard frequently discussed her Jewish background onstage, used Yiddish vocabulary, and even included a segment in *Without You, I’m Nothing* where she sings “Hinei Ma Tov,” (a Hebrew song for Jewish schoolchildren) audience members rarely mentioned Jewishness in discussions of Bernhard. Bernhard’s audiences recognize sexuality as her defining characteristic even despite Bernhard’s published statements to the contrary. For instance, in one interview, Bernhard declared, “I feel more concerned about being a Jew than I do about equating myself with being gay.”\(^{950}\) In another, she elaborated, “If I am going to defend any minority part of myself, it is going to be Judaism. It’s something that has formed my personality much more than my sexuality has.”\(^{951}\)

\(^{945}\) Overbeke, Respondent 368, Q#57.  
\(^{946}\) Overbeke, Respondent 241, Q#57.  
\(^{947}\) Overbeke, Respondent 92, Q#57.  
\(^{949}\) Overbeke, “Audience Response to Jewish Women Stand-up Comics,” Respondent 253, Q#57.  
\(^{951}\) Pellegrini, 59.
But however formative Bernhard views her Jewishness, for audiences, it was less significant, and often treated as incidental. Many of the (approximately 150) audience members who participated in a survey, either online or in the lobby of Bernhard’s performance of *Feel the Bernhard* at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in Skokie, IL spoke directly to this sense. One interview subject who had seen several of Bernhard’s cabaret shows in the 1980s reflected, “She seems to talk about sex and she seems to talk about her celebrity friends…I don’t recall her ever saying anything significant about being Jewish, and I don’t think of her in that context at all.”\(^{952}\) Another subject, when asked whether she recalled anything ‘Jewish’ about Bernhard’s work, answered with emphatic negativity, stating, “I would venture to say that the vast majority of people don’t know that she’s Jewish.” \(^{953}\) However, it seems less like audience members do not know Bernhard is Jewish, but that they know, but disavow its importance.

This acknowledgment/dismissal is exemplified by responses to a question directly asking “Would you identify Sandra Bernhard as a Jewish woman?” For instance, one woman replied,

> I do know that she happens to be Jewish, but that would not be the first thing or word I would use to describe her. It’s just not something I would think of immediately about her.\(^{954}\)

This sense that Bernhard’s Jewishness is evident but not defining is a recurrent sentiment. Participants commented that Jewishness is “not in the top five characteristics,”\(^{955}\) or “not the first thing that comes to mind, but I am aware of it,”\(^{956}\) These statements, and the many others adhering to this theme, treat her Jewishness as evident, but incidental, rather than a defining

\(^{952}\) Overbeke, Interview with Allison Canberg.
\(^{953}\) Grace Overbeke, Interview with Vivian, August 12, 2016.
\(^{954}\) Sharon Gulliver, “Pre-Show Survey,” March 10, 2016.
\(^{955}\) Sam Miller, “Pre-Show Survey,” March 10, 2016.
\(^{956}\) Finn Whittler, “Pre-Show Survey,” March 10, 2016.
element of Bernhard’s persona.

Given how little emphasis Bernhard’s fans put on her Jewish identity, “Feel the Bernhard” contained a surprisingly large amount of Jewish content. Sitting in the audience at the March 10 performance at Skokie’s North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, I was struck by the frequent use of Yiddish language and references to fairly arcane Jewish religious customs. Beginning a rant about Donald Trump, Bernhard leans heavily on Yiddish invective, crying:

Donald Putz! A Lemputz! He’s a shmendrick!
He’s a schmeckel, he’s a vahn!
And you know Ivanka is married to an Orthodox Jew!
A Yidlach by choice!
I have seen them at Shabbat dinner at Ron Perlman’s house!
I’ve seen them at NYU Chabad! And she stands there as her father spews hate!
It’s a disgusting thing, what she’s doing to our people.  

In addition to the copious Yiddish sprinkled throughout the rant, Bernhard takes a moment to hail her audience as “our people,” nodding to the large Jewish population in Skokie. Perhaps in an effort to connect with the presumed Jewish audience, she continued in a direction referencing

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957 Grace Overbeke, “Field Notes on Sandra Bernhard in ‘Feel the Bernhard,’” Field Notes, March 10, 2016, North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, Skokie, IL.

958 Skokie’s large Jewish population was the subject of a great deal of publicity in the 1970s, when a group of Neo-Nazis was represented by the ACLU defending their attempt to march there. Ron Grossman, “‘Swastika War’: When the Neo-Nazis Fought in Court to March in Skokie,” chicagotribune.com, accessed February 2, 2019, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/commentary/ct-neo-nazi-skokie-march-flashback-perspec-0312-20170310-story.html.
Jewish customs, practices, and people. Jabbing at the hypocritical avarice of the Jewish Kabbalah movement (which gained publicity through its connection with celebrities such as Bernhard and Madonna) she quipped,

I remember once I came in and said “I have a spiritual crisis!”
Ruthie—the teacher at the Kabbalah Center—said,
“You must think. Think of the biggest number you can…
and write it down on a check.”

Continuing with the Yiddishkeit, she began a comical rant about Orthodox Jewish women on the New York subway who wear both a sheitl (wig) and a hat, quipping, “A sheitl with a hat over it? How much protection do you need between you and Ha’Shem?” The line got a surprisingly big laugh, given that it relied on not only the audience knowing that sheitl means wig, and Ha’Shem means God, but also knowing the Jewish custom of covering one’s head as a show of pious modesty, and the subtle competition that can take place in Orthodox circles over who can be the most tsnious (modestly pious). Bernhard’s facility with these terms attests to her own in-group status, which also allows her to make jokes that would seem offensive coming from a non-Jewish person. She continued in this vein, bemoaning the experience of preparing for her Bat Mitzvah, where she had to connect with a new teacher each week (“Raizeleh, Chanaleh”), because her teachers kept getting married off. Again, by describing her experience studying for her Bat Mitzvah, a Jewish coming-of-age ceremony, she invoked her own Jewish identity before mocking its obsession with marriage. The ninety-minute show, which incorporated a few musical numbers, also meandered through riffs in support of presidential candidate Hilary Clinton, a rapid-fire series of one-liners [“Wrapkin: When you wear a wrap dress, but by the end of the night, it’s a napkin,”] discussion of bagels, tales of her birthday celebrations in Morocco, and

959 Overbeke, “Field Notes on Sandra Bernhard in ‘Feel the Bernhard.’”
fulsome praise of her wife and daughter. However, the most frequently discussed subject was Bernhard’s comical frustrations with the behavior of other Jews, calling them “a shonde” (shame) and getting ever-larger laughs by repeatedly referring to Senator Bernie-Sanders as “Stremel-head.”\textsuperscript{960} By the end of the show, I was struck by an overwhelming sense of incongruity between the way that I as an audience member—versus my interview subjects and survey participants—viewed the salience of Jewishness in Bernhard’s performance. Particularly given the ninety minutes that she was currently touring, how could audience members walk away from one of Bernhard’s performances seeing her Jewishness as incidental?

Responses to “Feel the Bernhard” felt that it suggested a “softening” of the “outrageous” Ms. Bernhard. A female audience member interviewed after seeing the show reflected on her perceived shift, commenting:

“I think back in her day, back in the ’80s…she was raunchy and dirty and provocative…where now it’s…it’s not so raunchy, and maybe she has changed over the years…I mean, she’s literally talking about, like, bagels. She’s talking about bagels or good ones and what she could find in New York. She can make it entertaining."\textsuperscript{961}

A number of male critics connected Bernhard’s “softening” to her status as an older woman and mother. The New York Times review of the premiere remarked on its “surprising lack of political humor,” concluding that “Ms. Bernhard, who has a college-age daughter, has mellowed.”\textsuperscript{962} Another male critic expressed a parallel view, expressing surprise that the expected incendiary “jabs” had given way to “jokes about giving makeovers to Hassidic women on the

\textsuperscript{960} Overbeke. A stremel is a hat frequently worn by Orthodox Jewish men—it sometimes has fur on it, and Bernhard commented that Sanders’s hair looked like the fur on a stremel.

\textsuperscript{961} Overbeke, Interview with Terry Fishman.

“subway,” and speculating “perhaps raising a teenage daughter with her longtime partner has softened that edge.” The professional critics’ line of critique—attributing Bernhard’s turn from provocation to motherhood—reveals a lingering inability to abide the coexistence of ‘comedian’ and ‘caretaker’ in one person.

Another perspective is offered by female Jewish Studies and media scholars who point out that for young female Jewish performers, their sexuality often overpowers ethnicity. In her discussion of the female schlemiel in contemporary Jewish film, Ruth D. Johnstone finds a pattern in which “sexual neuroses and inner conflicts move to center stage…taking precedence over differences of class, religion, or ethnicity.” Johnstone’s observation is based, it seems worth noting, exclusively on female schlemiels who are young, white, and conventionally attractive. And so the reception to Bernhard’s early work as sexual first, Jewish second (or third, or fourth) fits well within this pattern. Hannah Schwadron’s analysis of gender, and Jewish-joke work in U.S. Pop culture points to the oscillation between “ethnic difference and race privilege” that characterizes ‘Sexy Jewesses’ like Sandra Bernhard. As Schwadron points out when observing Bernhard’s work from the 1980s and 1990s, “her long, lean white body could play with any number of feminine personages.” And so perhaps the mainstream sex appeal embodied in her “long lean white” body gave her access to a wider repertoire of feminine personages, whereas the more maternal body she inhabited thirty years later was more readily circumscribed by a Jewish lens.

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965 Schwadron, The Case of the Sexy Jewess, 82.
Assimilation with an Expiration Date?

In sum, both Elayne Boosler and Sandra Bernhard went from being incidentally Jewish to emphatically Jewish, at around the time they went from being younger women to older women. It may be the case that Boosler and Bernhard experienced on a more minor level the same kind of cultural shift that Jean Carroll did—in which society became more tolerant of overt demonstrations of Jewishness over time. However, the relative assimilation of Jewish people in the 1980s and 1990s, when Bernhard and Boosler were at their height, suggests that it was not merely fear of anti-Semitism that held them back from leaning into overtly Jewish humor. Rather, it seems that for most of their careers, they took advantage of the freedoms that youth, whiteness, and gender afforded them to be viewed as ‘non-ethnic’—or at least only incidentally so. Then, at the same time that their bodies became less ‘universally assimilable,’ their venues and engagements shifted to more specifically Jewish venues. Bookings were most likely to take place in heavily Jewish communities such as Skokie, or West Hampton, where audiences were more interested in seeing familiar depictions of Jewish women than avant-garde experiments in political or sexual humor. It suggests that in addition to the cultural shift that accompanied Jean Carroll’s move from coded to more overt Jewishness, there was another factor at play: the more restricted audiences available to a less assimilable, older Jewish female performer.

The J.A.P. Show

Absent though she is from mainstream narratives, Jean Carroll has consistently become a reference point for contemporary performers looking for models of Jewish female stand-up comedians. One of these performers is Cory Kahaney, who began her career as a stand-up comic
in the late 1990s. Shortly after becoming a Grand Finalist on the 2003 NBC program *Last Comic Standing*, Kahaney began exploring her comedy roots, focusing mainly on women stand-up comedians. After some research, she discovered a rich lineage of predominantly Jewish women. Kahaney found Jean Carroll’s work resonating with her on a particularly deep level, recounting an emotional moment at the Museum of Television and Radio when she was watching Carroll’s first television appearance in 1949:

There’s a moment...when she gets her first laugh, and I see her swallow. 
...I literally started crying because I know exactly how she felt. 
The first time I did television, there’s this moment when you realize it’s working, 
and they’re laughing and you take this big swallow and you realize, 
OK, I’m going to be alright.’ I saw that in her and I just felt so close to her.

In this little gesture, this swallow, Kahaney saw her own experience of fear and affirmation. And, on a larger scale, in Carroll’s work, she saw the seeds of her own sense of what it means to be a Jewish female stand-up female comedian.

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967 Kramer.
In 2005, Kahaney decided to stage her lineage by developing an off-Broadway production entitled, “The J.A.P. Show: Jewish American Princesses of Comedy.” The piece required two years of development before premiering at the Actors Temple Theatre in April, 2007. It featured different stand-up routines, alternating between archival footage of Jean Carroll and other historical Jewish female stand-up comedians (including Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, Betty Walker and Totie Fields), and live performance by contemporary Jewish female stand-up comedians (including Kahaney, as well as Cathy Ladman, Jessica Kirson, Jackie Hoffman, Sherry Davey, and Julie Goldman). The show’s title—with its unapologetic reclamation of the pejorative acronym J.A.P.—mirrors Jean Carroll’s own strategy of responding to negative stereotypes of Jewish women by invoking them and then humanizing them. Like Carroll, Kahaney foregrounded the actual voices of Jewish women that the stereotype sought to replace.

Ironically, the spotlight shone on Jean Carroll through Kahaney’s production of The J.A.P. show was generally dismissed by critics because the contemporary comics leaned too heavily into the kind of overtly Jewish content that Jean Carroll usually eschewed. “No one’s pretending The J.A.P. Show” doesn’t have a target audience,” the Variety critic sneered before

identifying himself as a “Gentile patron” and opining that the “jokes about Shavuot or life on the Upper West Side” were “aggressively court[ing] the Jewish crowd.”969 And the reviewer from the New York Times critiqued the contemporary comedians’ material on “the relationship between Hitler and Eva Braun” and “the dating habits of Jews,” as “obvious” and “lacking in novelty,” declaring, “Sometimes the fault is in the stars.”970 Partially by honoring Jean Carroll, Kahaney and the acolytes of The J.A.P. Show deviated from Carroll’s own insistent mainstream comedy.

Summary

As the lone woman in the pioneering cohort of comics creating a new form called ‘stand-up,’ Carroll made a significant contribution to the field of American comedy, and like so many contributions made by women, it has been largely obscured in the historiographical literature. However, her influence is evident in the lineage of American stand-up comedy, and in particular, in the following elements:

Authenticity/Intimacy: As a pioneer of modern stand-up comedy, Carroll set the stage for later comics like Cathy Ladman, or legends like Richard Pryor and Tig Notaro, who took personal disclosure to new heights. Unlike predecessors like Jackie Mabley or Groucho Marx, Carroll (and several of her male contemporaries) emphasized the true-to-life honesty in their comic personae and material. On a related but distinct note, Carroll innovated a breezy, conversational tone of ‘confidante comedy’ which likened stand-up as ‘girl-talk,’ that mirrored the intimacy of a

laundromat or steam bath. The combination of personal subject matter and intimate tone have combined to make stand-up comedy uniquely suited to more confessional modes of performance. **Confident Women:** Although Carroll made use of self-deprecation, she did so sparingly and never with the same misogynistic venom as her male contemporaries or female descendants like Phyllis Diller or Joan Rivers. As Carroll put it, “I never try to hold anyone up to ridicule and certainly not myself. I respect my audience and I want them to respect me.” The idea that in order for women to break into stand-up comedy, they must internalize misogyny is a flawed notion that comes from ignoring Jean Carroll’s career. The outspoken confidence that characterized Elayne Boosler (at her peak), or contemporary assertive comics like Wanda Sykes and Hannah Gadsby is not so much an unprecedented phenomenon as it is a hearkening back to pre-Joan Rivers comedienne.

**Comic response to Stereotypes:** The need to respond to stereotypes is not specific to Jewish women—every performing body is what Marvin Carlson might call ‘ghosted’ by expectations. For Jean Carroll—and for many contemporary Jewish female comedians—those stereotypes took the form of the domineering Jewish Mother and the materialistic, lazy Jewish American Princess. Carroll invoked stereotypes of the Consuming Jewish Woman in a coded way, while also humanizing and destabilizing them, a technique that also has been utilized by her Jewish female descendants like Elayne Boosler. Outside a Jewish context, this kind of subtle stereotype deconstruction is evident in the work of queer comedians like Ellen DeGeneres and Eddie Izzard. Conversely, other comedians take a more explicit approach to addressing stereotypes, sometimes even leaning into them for comic effect. Joan Rivers and Cory Kahaney, for instance, lean into

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971 Carroll, “Female of the Species.”
negative stereotypes of Jewish women with ‘J.A.P. jokes’ and in-group humor. Likewise, comedian Tyler Perry has been critiqued for occasionally leaning into negative African American stereotypes in his work. Both approaches have proven successful, and a productive direction for future research could investigate the impact of the various approaches on audience attitudes towards the identity group that the comic represents.

Ethnicity and Age? Connected to the element of comedians responding to ethnic stereotypes is the idea of audience response and ethnic salience. The curious pattern in which ingenue stand-up comics move from coded to explicit Jewishness in performance raises the question: Does a woman’s Jewishness become more ‘recognizable,’ with age, in a way that limits her mainstream appeal? Is there any truth in John Mulaney’s quip that at a certain age, even people who are neither Jewish nor female seem like old Jewish women? And does the increased salience of ethnicity extend to other ethnic groups? Will Margaret Cho move to more specifically Asian venues as she grows older? Again, further research could be productive in fleshing out this apparent trend in which a young woman is viewed as more ‘universal’ than her older counterpart. This future research could find a productive application of Heather Nathans’s concept of “moments of rupture,” or “instances where an artists’ Jewish heritage seemingly did not matter to their audience until suddenly, for some reason, triggered by a political or personal event, it did.” Equipped with this concept, a future area of research could question whether age constitutes a ‘moment of rupture’ for Jewish female comedians.

The signal elements of Jean Carroll’s legacy—authenticity and intimacy, confident

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973 Nathans, Hideous Characters and Beautiful Pagans.112.
women, responses to stereotypes, and the increased salience of ethnicity—extend the genealogies within which Carroll can be placed. For while she certainly belongs in the lineage of Jewish female comedians like Fanny Brice, Sophie Tucker, Joan Rivers, Elayne Boosler, Sandra Bernhard, Sarah Silverman, Amy Schumer (the list could go on), there are also ways in which is part of the lineage of Richard Pryor, Lenny Bruce, Negin Farsad, and so many other stand-up comedians who are neither Jewish nor female.
Conclusion: The “Real” Mrs. Maisel?

Carroll’s material—riffs on the discontents of marriage, shopping mishaps and parenting foibles—is not considered ‘edgy’ by contemporary standards, particularly in contrast to the more overtly political work by later generations of stand-up comedians. As the popular understanding of stand-up evolved to what Boosler called the “town crier” model, the political import of Carroll’s work became less legible. Carroll’s material came from situations that were recognizable to her audiences, prompting them to accept her content—and her—as ‘real.’ Jean Carroll staged a relatable facet of her reality—her perspective and experiences as a mother and wife. But her total reality encompassed her robust career; nightly performances, constant travel, and rigorous writing sessions, none of which became the subject of her comedy. Her reality also encompassed an ethnic dimension that was mostly coded onstage. The reality that Carroll’s audiences were prepared to recognize as ‘authentic’ and ‘universal’ was actually extremely narrow: that of upwardly-mobile white (or not-quite-white) heterosexual woman, financially dependent on her husband. And so Carroll mainly stayed within those parameters, in spite of the fact that it was hardly an accurate representation of her life.

Critics describing Carroll’s positive reception frequently attributed it to her jokes’ universal familiarity. A trade magazine commended her for achieving “universality of material”, with “personal identification so immediate that its commercial appeal is genuine.” The domestic travails of Carroll’s jokes were deemed equally relatable abroad; a London-American reporter explained that the reason “why so many of her gags hit home” is that she draws on

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974 Holden, “Laugh Bargains for a Summer Night.”
975 Smith, “Caught Again.”
“commonplace” experiences. Of course, what Carroll and her critics deem “commonplace” experiences reveal their own biases regarding gender norms, motherhood, and other social roles. For instance, as she advocates writing jokes about “situations which everyone can recognize” her primary example is raising children. In a similar vein, a review of Carroll’s performance at Chicago’s Palmer House Empire Room implicitly prescribes what ought to be ‘familiar’ for the women in the audience:

Miss Carroll’s comedy is found in events close to everyday living. She tells about buying a dress—or, rather, merely shopping—and she has a few verbal notations about love, PTA meetings, a day at the race track, the movies and dogs. Everything she relates is true-to-life, in conversational tone, and extremely hilarious. When the ladies in the audience laugh “out-loud”, you may be sure that Miss Carroll has given familiar occurrences a real sugar-coating of commentary.

The critic’s sanguine praise of Carroll’s experiences with shopping, PTA, dogs, and other staples of 1950s suburban American existence as “true to life” and “familiar” to the “ladies in the audience” clearly delineate Carroll’s imagined audience as white (or white-ethnic) middle-class, heterosexual women occupying traditional gender roles. This limited repertoire is a double-edged sword when it comes to legacy, however, for the same material that was ‘relatable’ in the mid-century is now dated, and conservative enough to be an outlier in the popular narratives of stand-up comedy as a subversive and progressive genre.

Carroll’s onstage engagement with her Jewish identity was far more complex, and always in conversation with changing attitudes towards American Jews, and American Jewish women. Carroll frequently used negative stereotypes of Jewish women not only as comic fodder, but also

976 Martin, “Mayfair Merry-Go-Round.”
977 Boyle, “Feminine Comic Tells Her Woes.”
as codes to subtly evince and comment on American Jewish culture, and as straw [wo]men to tear down with her humanizing intimacy and rapid-fire wit.

In sum, Carroll’s jokes—purportedly drawn from her ‘real life’—offered up a vision of idyllic (if frustrated) American suburban life. In accepting it as ‘authentic’ and ‘universal’ her audience asserted their own participation in this vision. The complicated interplay of truth and artifice involved in Carroll’s portrayal of a breezy suburban housewife illuminates the way Carroll embodied the complex, illusory authenticity of contemporary stand-up comic, years before it was a recognized phenomenon.

“The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel”

In an unexpected way, Jean Carroll ultimately did make her way into the mainstream millennial media. For beyond functioning as a role model for actual practitioners of stand-up comedy, Jean Carroll also became a reference point for The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel, a period comedy released in 2017, depicting a fictionalized Jewish woman breaking barriers as a female stand-up comedian in the 1950s. Created by Amy Sherman-Palladino and Dan Palladino, and released by Amazon Studios, “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” was released to remarkable critical acclaim. The actress playing the titular role, Rachel Brosnahan, was especially lauded, receiving the 2017 and 2018 Golden Globe Awards for Best Actress in a Musical or Comedy, the 2017 Critics’ Choice Television Award for Best Actress in a Comedy Series, and a 2018 Emmy Award for Best Actress in a Comedy. And yet it is unclear whether the successful series has done more to resurrect Jean Carroll’s memory, or obscure it.

It was a well-publicized fact that Jean Carroll served Brosnahan as both an inspiration and a reference as she prepared for the role of Miriam Maisel. According to a profile in *The New York Times*, Brosnahan “studied the routines of the pioneering comic Jean Carroll,” whom she described as “this beautiful, graceful woman who wore pearls and gorgeous dresses and sang a little.”

To some extent, attribution of this kind revitalized interest in Jean Carroll. Comments from people viewing one of Jean Carroll’s few YouTube videos began explaining, “I came here after seeing an interview with Rachel Brosnahan, who plays Mrs. Maisel, talk about Jean Carroll [sic] being an influence!” A spate of articles promoting “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel” appeared in the mainstream press referencing Jean Carroll. A piece in *Vulture Magazine* noted Jean Carroll’s roots as a Vaudeville duo in “What the Marvelous Mrs. Maisel Gets Right About Early Stand-up Comedy,”

The feminist ‘zine *Bustle* published a feature pondering “Who is Midge Maisel Based On? Amazon’s ‘Marvelous Mrs. Maisel’ Draws Inspiration from Comedy Elite,’ which linked to a video of one of Carroll’s earliest routines.

In coordination with their feature on *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, *New York Times* released a profile on “The (Elegant, Brazen, Brainy) Pioneering Women of Comedy” crediting Carroll as a bridge between “the

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982 Sutton, “Re: (Jean Carroll (Stand-up Comedy) [Video File].” Likewise, a user called Fotofeary6 noted, “The actress on the new Amazon show Marvelous Mrs. Maisel (created by the Palladino’s who did Gilmore Girls, about a housewife turn stand up in the 50s) said Jean Carroll and Joan Rivers were some of her inspirations for the part. Such a good show too! Fotofeary6, “Re: (Jean Carroll (Stand-up Comedy) [Video File],” Youtube.com, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pjv0mZG8Wws&lc=UgjCRx-WgUD1pXgCoAEc.7-H0Z7-QVFx8_awjxaYd6w.


music hall comediennes of the past and the female stand-ups of the present.” And in the Jewish press, *The Forward* published my own article summarizing major findings on Jean Carroll under the title, “Meet The Real Mrs. Maisel: Jean Carroll.”

However, as my article in *The Forward* noted, the overlap between Miriam Maisel’s story and Jean Carroll’s history also had a curiously obscuring effect. For, as the show’s creators made clear, it was not intended to reflect the *actual* history of pioneering Jewish female comedians—either individuals or composites. At least one of the show’s writers was not even not aware of the historical antecedents to their show’s protagonist. When I spoke to Noah Gardenswartz, stand-up comic and writer for *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, he said my email about Jean Carroll was the first that he had heard of her. The show’s real historical connection was to creator Amy Sherman Palladino’s father Don, to whom the show is dedicated. Don Sherman, though not one of the biggest names in stand-up history, nonetheless was a very successful stand-up comedian of the 1950s and ‘60s, and Sherman-Palladino “used to listen to him and his friends trading jokes in the backyard, absorbing the rhythms and tones as they tried to make one another laugh.” In an interview with comedy scholar Kliph Nesteroff, Don Sherman sounds like an encyclopedia of early stand-up references, riffing on Laff Records, Henny Youngman, Jack E. Leonard, Jackie Mason, and Flip Wilson. It seems natural that growing up with him as a father, Amy Sherman-Palladino would be captivated by that moment

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987 Noah Gardenswartz, Phone Conversation, Telephone, January 15, 2018.
988 Soloski, “Did You Hear the One About the Housewife Who Walks Into a Comedy Club?”
in history when stand-up was just finding its feet. However, in this fictionalized tribute to her father’s era, Palladino also retells the master narrative of male stand-up pioneers that enforces Jean Carroll’s erasure.

The true concern for the show is not so much the erasure of Jean Carroll, but the fact that the narrative it creates is so much less interesting than the actual story of the first Jewish female stand-up comedian. If the axiom that “The truth is stranger than fiction” needed any further proof, it need look no further than the depiction of Miriam Maisel, held up against the story of Jean Carroll:

Miriam Maisel is a well-heeled, Seven-Sisters educated young lady whose young life was financed by her parents and whose adult life was financed by her in-laws. Jean Carroll was an immigrant whose, at the age of twelve, kicked her abusive, alcoholic father out of the house and became the family’s primary breadwinner. Miriam Maisel was the would-be victim of a husband whose dedication to stand-up comedy relegated her to the role of note-taker, booker-briber, and doting audience-member. Jean Carroll’s husband openly admitted that she was the more talented of the two, even dropping out of their duet because he realized that he would be more successful managing than performing. Miriam Maisel—in the kind of alternate reality only possible on television—blithely drops her kids off to go do a club gig. Jean Carroll ultimately left show business and sacrificed her legacy because the industry forced a choice between caretaking and comedy. Miriam Maisel’s ethnicity as a Jewish woman is foregrounded through Shabbat dinners, synagogue services, frequent references to Jewish holidays, practices, and customs, and even jokes about concentration camps. Jean Carroll’s Jewishness was communicated mainly through codes like Yiddish Linguistic Structures and invocations of negative stereotypes of Jewish women. Miriam Maisel was inspired (and later mentored) by Lenny Bruce, patron saint of stand-
up. Jean Carroll had been doing stand-up comedy before Lenny Bruce could speak.

Jean Carroll’s story is sometimes triumphant, sometimes sad, and utterly unexpected. Which makes for complex history but would be great television. Moreover, the issues at the core of Jean Carroll’s life and career are still at the core of women’s lives at this moment: her determination not to be financially dependent on a man. Her need to downplay her ethnicity to “pass” in the mainstream media. The choice she had to face between her career and her family.

Every time characters on the show express shock at a “girl comic” or a “pretty comic” in the person of Miriam Maisel—who faces none of those conflicts—an important story with resonant and enduring issues gets overlooked. For some audience members, the attendant publicity surrounding the show will give Jean Carroll a level of mainstream exposure that she has not enjoyed since her heyday in the midcentury. However, for many audiences, this marvelous fiction may further eclipse the fact of Jean Carroll, the forgotten pioneer and actual foremother of stand-up comedy.
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Appendix 1: Survey

TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

Welcome to My Survey: Consent Page

Investigator: Grace Overbeke, Primary Investigator Lilah D. Shapiro
Supported By: This research is supported by Northwestern University

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to take part in this research study because you have expressed an interest in standup comedy.

Why is this research being done?
The goal of the study is to analyze performance by Jewish female standup comedians, stereotypes, and audience perception.

How many people will be studied?
We expect about 500 people in the entire study nationally

What happens if I say “Yes, I want to be in this research”?
If you consent to being part of this research, I will invite you to fill out this online survey. Expect the survey to take approximately twenty minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, you may opt into a separate part of the study: a follow-up phone conversation taking no more than forty minutes. If you choose to participate in the follow-up conversation, I will email you to set up an appointment within the week.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?
You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you.

What happens if I say “Yes”, but I change my mind later?
You can leave the research at any time and it will not be held against you. To withdraw from the study, you can get in touch with me at GraceOverbeke2018@u.northwestern.edu. Should you withdraw, any personal information will be deleted.

What happens to the information collected for the research?
Efforts will be made to limit the use and disclosure of your personal information, including research study and medical records, to people who have a need to review this information. We cannot promise complete secrecy. Organizations that may inspect and copy your information include the IRB and other representatives of this institution.

What else do I need to know?
If you agree to take part in this research study, we will give you the option of entering your email address into a raffle to win a gift card for $100 to Amazon.com. Participants in optional follow-up phone conversations will receive $10 gift cards to Starbucks.com.

Who can I talk to?
If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to Grace Overbeke at 216-410-6844 or GraceOverbeke2018@u.northwestern.edu

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board ("IRB"). You may talk to them at (312) 503-9338 or irb@northwestern.edu if:
· Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
· You cannot reach the research team.
· You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
· You have questions about your rights as a research participant.
· You want to get information or provide input about this research.

* 1. Do you agree to the above terms? By clicking 'Yes', you consent that you are willing to answer the questions in this survey.
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

* 2. Your information is protected by the SurveyMonkey Privacy policy, detailed here: https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/policy/privacy-policy/
   Do you consent to your personal data being processed as described above?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No

* 3. Are you 18 years of age or older?
   ○ Yes
   ○ No
# TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

## Overall Familiarity

First, I will ask you about your familiarity with Jewish stereotypes.

4. Have you ever heard of any stereotypes about Jews?
   - Yes
   - No

5. What are those stereotypes?

6. Have you ever heard of any stereotypes about women?
   - Yes
   - No

7. What are those stereotypes?

8. Have you ever heard of any stereotypes about Jewish women?
   - Yes
   - No

9. What are those stereotypes?
10. Are you familiar with the comedy from these comedians? Check all that apply.

☐ Joan Rivers
☐ Elayne Boosler
☐ Judy Gold
☐ Sandra Bernhard
☐ Sarah Silverman

Next, I’ll ask more details about the comedians with whose work you are familiar.
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

Are you familiar with Joan Rivers?

11. Are you familiar with the comedian Joan Rivers?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

Joan Rivers—Familiarity

12. Please list all the ways in which you have been exposed to Joan Rivers’s work. Check all that apply (e.g. youtube clips, comedy specials, live performance, interviews, etc.)

- Live Performance
- Televised Comedy Special
- Netflix Comedy Special
- Youtube Clip
- Special Television Appearance (e.g. talk show)
- Film
- Other (please specify)

13. If you have seen Joan Rivers live, please describe as many of the circumstances as you can remember:

   Location
   (City/State/Country):

   Venue Type(s):
   (If you don’t remember the name of the venue, just put whether it was a club, theater, etc.)

   Approximate year(s):

   How old were you at the time of the performance(s)?

   With whom did you see the performance?

   Other information you think would be useful for me to know:
14. If you have seen Joan Rivers perform live, why did you want to see her in person (rather than on TV, film, etc.)?

15. What are three adjectives you would use to describe Joan Rivers? (Try to use specific, descriptive adjectives, not evaluative ones like "awesome" or "terrible")

16. Please describe why you picked those three adjectives.

17. Please briefly describe memorable topics or issues Joan Rivers talked about.

18. Please briefly describe specific jokes or "bits" from Joan Rivers that stand out in your memory.

19. Before taking this survey, were you aware that Joan Rivers was Jewish?
   - Yes
   - No
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

"Yes, I knew that Joan Rivers was Jewish"

20. If you did know that Joan Rivers was Jewish before taking this survey, how did you know?
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

No, I didn't know that Joan Rivers was Jewish before taking this survey

21. Does learning that Joan Rivers is Jewish change the way in which you think about her comedy?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Please explain your answer


TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

Joan Rivers and Stereotypes

22. Did you notice any of the stereotypes of Jews, women, or Jewish women in Joan Rivers's performance?

☐ Yes

☐ No

23. If you answered 'Yes' to the previous question, what stereotypes did you see in Joan Rivers's performance?

☐

24. How much do you agree with the statement: "Joan Rivers challenged stereotypical views about Jewish women"

☐ Strongly Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither Agree Nor Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please expand on your answer in 2-3 short sentences

☐
25. Are you familiar with the comedian Elayne Boosler?

☐ Yes

☐ No
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

Elayne Boosler--Familiarity

26. Please list all the ways in which you have been exposed to Elayne Boosler's work. Check all that apply. (eg youtube clips, comedy specials, live performance, interviews, etc.)

- [ ] Live Performance
- [ ] Televised Comedy Special
- [ ] Netflix Comedy Special
- [ ] Youtube Clip
- [ ] Special Television Appearance (e.g. talk show)
- [ ] Film
- [ ] Other (please specify) 

27. If you have seen Elayne Boosler live, please describe as many of the circumstances as you can remember:

Location (City/State/Country): 

Venue Type(s): (If you don't remember the name of the venue, just put whether it was a club, theater, etc.) 

Approximate year(s): 

How old were you at the time of the performance(s)? 

With whom did you see the performance? 

Other information you think would be useful for me to know: 
28. If you have seen Elayne Boosler perform live, why did you want to see her in person (rather than on TV, film, etc.)?

29. What are three adjectives you would use to describe Elayne Boosler? (Try to use specific, descriptive adjectives, not evaluative ones like "awesome" or "terrible")

30. Please describe why you picked those three adjectives.

31. Please briefly describe memorable topics or issues Elayne Boosler talked about.

32. Please briefly describe specific jokes or "bits" from Elayne Boosler that stand out in your memory.

33. Before taking this survey, were you aware that Elayne Boosler was Jewish?
   - Yes
   - No
"Yes, I knew that Elayne Boosler was Jewish"

34. If you did know that Elayne Boosler was Jewish before taking this survey, how did you know?
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

"No, I didn't know that Elayne Boosler was Jewish before taking this survey"

35. Does learning that Elayne Boosler is Jewish change the way in which you think about her comedy?

- Yes
- No

Please explain your answer
36. Did you notice any of the stereotypes of Jews, women, or Jewish women in Elayne Boosler's performance?
   - Yes
   - No

37. If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, what stereotypes did you see in Elayne Boosler's performance?

38. How much do you agree with the statement:
   "Elayne Boosler challenged stereotypical views about Jewish women"
   - Strongly Agree
   - Agree
   - Neither Agree Nor Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Strongly Disagree

Please expand on your answer in 2-3 short sentences.
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

Are you Familiar with Judy Gold?

39. Are you familiar with the comedian Judy Gold?
   - Yes
   - No
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

Judy Gold--Familiarity

40. Please list all the ways in which you have been exposed to Judy Gold's work. Check all that apply (e.g. youtube clips, comedy specials, live performance, interviews, etc.)

☐ Live Performance
☐ Televised Comedy Special
☐ Netflix Comedy Special
☐ Youtube Clip
☐ Special Television Appearance (e.g. talk show)
☐ Film
☐ Other (please specify)

41. If you have seen Judy Gold live, please describe as many of the circumstances as you can remember:

Location
(City/State/Country):

Venue Type(s):
(if you don't remember the name of the venue, just put whether it was a club, theater, etc.)

Approximate year(s):

How old were you at the time of the performance(s)?

With whom did you see the performance?

Other information you think would be useful for me to know:
42. If you have seen Judy Gold perform live, why did you want to see her in person (rather than on TV, film, etc.)?


43. What are three adjectives you would use to describe Judy Gold? (Try to use specific, descriptive adjectives, not evaluative ones like "awesome" or "terrible")


44. Please describe why you picked those three adjectives.


45. Please briefly describe memorable topics or issues Judy Gold talked about.


46. Please briefly describe specific jokes or 'bits' from Judy Gold that stand out in your memory.


47. Before taking this survey, were you aware that Judy Gold was Jewish?

☐ Yes
☐ No
"Yes, I knew that Judy Gold was Jewish"

48. If you did know that Judy Gold was Jewish before taking this survey, how did you know?
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

"No, I didn’t know that Judy Gold was Jewish before taking this survey"

49. Does learning that Judy Gold is Jewish change the way in which you think about her comedy?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Please explain your answer
50. Did you notice any of the stereotypes of Jews, women, or Jewish women in Judy Gold's performance?
- Yes
- No

51. If you answered 'Yes' to the previous question, what stereotypes did you see in Judy Gold's performance?

52. How much do you agree with the statement:
"Judy Gold challenged stereotypical views about Jewish women"
- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree Nor Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Please expand on your answer in 2-3 short sentences
53. Are you familiar with the comedian Sandra Bernhard?

☐ Yes
☐ No
54. Please list all the ways in which you have been exposed to Sandra Bernhard's work. Check all that apply (e.g. youtube clips, comedy specials, live performance, interviews, etc.):

- [ ] Live Performance
- [ ] Televised Comedy Special
- [ ] Netflix Comedy Special
- [ ] Youtube Clip
- [ ] Special Television Appearance (e.g. talk show)
- [ ] Film
- [ ] Other (please specify)

55. If you have seen Sandra Bernhard live, please describe as many of the circumstances as you can remember:

- Location (City/State/Country):
- Venue Type(s):
  - (If you don't remember the name of the venue, just put whether it was a club, theater, etc.)
- Approximate year(s):
- How old were you at the time of the performance(s)?
- With whom did you see the performance?
- Other information you think would be useful for me to know:
56. If you have seen Sandra Bernhard perform live, why did you want to see her in person (rather than on TV, film, etc.)?

57. What are three adjectives you would use to describe Sandra Bernhard? (Try to use specific, descriptive adjectives, not evaluative ones like "awesome" or "terrible")

58. Please describe why you picked those three adjectives.

59. Please briefly describe memorable topics or issues Sandra Bernhard talked about.

60. Please briefly describe specific jokes or "bits" from Sandra Bernhard that stand out in your memory.

61. Before taking this survey, were you aware that Sandra Bernhard was Jewish?

   - Yes
   - No
"Yes, I knew that Sandra Bernhard was Jewish"

62. If you did know that Sandra Bernhard was Jewish before taking this survey, how did you know?
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

"No, I didn't know that Sandra Bernhard was Jewish before taking this survey"

63. Does learning that Sandra Bernhard is Jewish change the way in which you think about her comedy?

☐ Yes
☐ No

Please explain your answer
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

Sandra Bernhard and Stereotypes

64. Did you notice any of the stereotypes of Jews, women, or Jewish women in Sandra Bernhard's performance?

☐ Yes

☐ No

65. If you answered 'Yes' to the previous question, what stereotypes did you see in Sandra Bernhard's performance?


66. How much do you agree with the statement: “Sandra Bernhard challenged stereotypical views about Jewish women”

☐ Strongly Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neither Agree Nor Disagree

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

Please expand on your answer in 2-3 short sentences


Are you familiar with Sarah Silverman?

67. Are you familiar with the comedian Sarah Silverman?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

Sarah Silverman—Familiarity

68. Please list all the ways in which you have been exposed to Sarah Silverman's work. Check all that apply (e.g. YouTube clips, comedy specials, live performance, interviews, etc.):

- [ ] Live Performance
- [ ] Televised Comedy Special
- [ ] Netflix Comedy Special
- [ ] YouTube Clip
- [ ] Special Television Appearance (e.g. talk show)
- [ ] Film
- [ ] Other (please specify)

69. If you have seen Sarah Silverman live, please describe as many of the circumstances as you can remember:

Location (City/State/Country):

Venue Type(s):
(If you don't remember the name of the venue, just put whether it was a club, theater, etc.)

Approximate year(s):

How old were you at the time of the performance(s)?

With whom did you see the performance?

Other information you think would be useful for me to know:
70. If you have seen Sarah Silverman perform live, why did you want to see her in person (rather than on TV, film, etc.)?

71. What are three adjectives you would use to describe Sarah Silverman? (Try to use specific, descriptive adjectives, not evaluative ones like "awesome" or "terrible")

72. Please describe why you picked those three adjectives.

73. Please briefly describe memorable topics or issues Sarah Silverman talked about.

74. Please briefly describe specific jokes or "bits" from Sarah Silverman that stand out in your memory.

75. Before taking this survey, were you aware that Sarah Silverman was Jewish?

☐ Yes
☐ No
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

"Yes, I knew that Sarah Silverman was Jewish"

76. If you did know that Sarah Silverman was Jewish before taking this survey, how did you know?
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

“No, I didn’t know that Sarah Silverman was Jewish before taking this survey”

77. Does learning that Sarah Silverman is Jewish change the way in which you think about her comedy?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Please explain your answer
78. Did you notice any of the stereotypes of Jews, women, or Jewish women in Sarah Silverman’s performance?

☐ Yes
☐ No

79. If you answered ‘Yes’ to the previous question, what stereotypes did you see in Sarah Silverman’s performance?


80. How much do you agree with the statement: “Sarah Silverman challenged stereotypical views about Jewish women”

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
☐ Neither Agree Nor Disagree
☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree

Please expand on your answer in 2-3 short sentences
### TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

#### Other Comedians

81. Are there any other Jewish female standup comedians you are familiar with?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

82. Who?

[ ]
TEST Audience Response to Jewish Women Standup Comics

Personal Information

In this page, I will ask for some personal information so that I can look for demographic patterns in audience response:

83. Do you identify as Jewish?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No
   - [ ] It's complicated

If you answered "Yes" or "It's complicated" please elaborate.

84. If not, how do you identify?

85. Where did you grow up?

86. Were you exposed to Jewish people in the place you grew up?
   - [ ] Yes
   - [ ] No

Other (please specify)
87. Where do you live now?

88. Are you exposed to Jewish people in the place you live now?
   - Yes
   - No
   - Other (please specify)

89. What is your age?
   - 18-25
   - 26-35
   - 30-49
   - 50-60
   - 61-75
   - Other (please specify)

90. How do you identify in terms of race?
   - Caucasian
   - African American
   - Native American
   - Hispanic or Latino
   - Asian/Pacific Islander
   - Mixed Race
   - Prefer not to Answer
   - Other (please specify)
91. How do you identify in terms of gender?
○ Female
○ Female to Male Transgender
○ Male
○ Male to Female Transgender
○ Not Sure
○ Other

92. How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation?
○ Homosexual
○ Heterosexual
○ Bisexual
○ Asexual
○ Prefer not to Say
○ Other

93. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
○ High School
○ Some College
○ Undergraduate Degree
○ Graduate Degree
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94. If you would like your email address to be entered into a raffle to win a $100 gift card to Amazon.com, please enter it below. Your email address will be stored separately from your survey responses.

   

95. If you would like to be contacted to do a follow-up phone or in-person interview lasting 20-40 minutes, please provide your email address below. As a token of gratitude for your time, all follow-up interview participants will receive a $10 e-card to Starbucks. Your email address will be stored separately from your survey responses.

   

Thank you for participating!