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Can we talk? A discussion of gender politics in the late-night comedy career of Joan Rivers

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CAN WE TALK? A DISCUSSION OF GENDER POLITICS IN THE LATE-NIGHT COMEDY CAREER OF JOAN RIVERS

by

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Funny women are obligated to be self-deprecating, relatable, and small. They’re allowed to exist as long as they cede authority.

—Louis Virtel, Twitter, September 14, 2015

Ambitious women are framed as taking things from men. The mistake is in assuming those things belonged solely to men to begin with.

—Cameron Esposito, Twitter, April 7, 2016

Women might begin to reweave the web of visual power that already binds them by taking the unruly woman as a model – woman as rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public, bodily spectacle.

—Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman*, 12
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Most importantly to my family: my grandparents Millie, Leo, and Bernie who are all inspirations in life and longevity; my brother Michael, a fellow graduate student who never fails to raise my spirits and give me new music to write to (sorry that I have taken over your Spotify account); my father Paul for his meditative wisdom and helping me to weather the inevitable mid-semester breakdown; but especially my mother Randy for providing me with constant love and support (and food), being willing to drop everything if her daughter needed her no matter how small the crisis, painstakingly reading all of my drafts, and making me laugh more than any comedian ever could.
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SOPHIE SUMMERGRAD

ABSTRACT

Television has often been considered a safe haven for female performers, especially comedians. But in fact, women have often been marginalized – narratively and institutionally – within the medium of television. While there has been a promising increase in the number of creative and professional opportunities afforded to women in TV, there is one arena in which women have historically been, and continue to be, excluded: late-night comedy. As the first female late-night talk show host, Joan Rivers is central to the history of broadcast television and American comedy. While some (but not much) work has centered on Rivers’ impact as a comedian, little of this research has contextualized her career through the industrial frameworks of late-night broadcasting.

From starting out as a standup comedian, to becoming Johnny Carson’s permanent guest host in the 1980s, to acrimoniously splitting with Carson and NBC for the opportunity to host her own late-night program, Rivers creatively performed her gender in order to differentiate herself as the singular female host in late night. From a feminist media studies perspective coupled with a historical analysis of Rivers’ professional trajectory in late-night comedy, this thesis will uncover the systemic, personal, and gender-specific factors that contributed to Rivers’ initial success, yet ultimate exile from late night.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EBSCOhost .................................................. EBSCO Information Systems

NBC ................................................................. National Broadcasting Company
INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this thesis came unexpectedly. My interest in Joan Rivers did not stem from academic research, but rather from a disheartening afternoon spent at the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles. I have been a fan of comedy since I was a young child. Spending the summer of 2015 living in Los Angeles – which hosts some of the best live comedy offerings in the world – only deepened my passion. A few weeks before I was set to return to the East Coast, I heard about a rotating comedy exhibition at the famed music museum – a tribute to the late Joan Rivers appropriately called, “Joan Rivers: Can We Talk?” As a self-professed comedy nerd, I had to check it out.

After arriving at the museum, I purchased a day pass and was directed to the inner lobby where I was told I would find instructions on how to navigate the exhibits. Just inside, I learned that self-guided visitors were meant to start on the top floor of the museum and weave through each exhibition on the way back down again. Wanting to make sure I would not miss the comedy display, I asked for a map of the museum and also received postcards detailing each rotating exhibit. The other special displays at the time included: “All Eyez on Me: The Writings of Tupac Shakur,” “Ravi Shankar: A Life in Music,” “The Taylor Swift Experience” (which occupied an entire floor including the primary theatre), and “Legends of Motown: Celebrating The Supremes.” Looking at the papers and pamphlets, my confusion set in.

The Joan Rivers exhibit was not listed anywhere on the map. I looked to my stack of postcards hoping to find some details and realized that I had not been given one for “Can We Talk?” I asked a concierge if he knew which floor her exhibit was on and he
said he was not sure, but that I would certainly pass it if I ventured through the museum as instructed. This was on July 26, 2015. At this point, the exhibit had already been open for seven weeks.

The mysterious lack of promotion for and readily available information about the Joan Rivers exhibit intrigued and baffled me. I could understand why the permanent exhibits might not be explicitly advertised or promoted (although they were included on the map). But for a temporary tribute, it seemed suspicious that the Rivers display was the only one left out. Of course, a comedy display at a music museum is unusual, but Rivers had been nominated twice and had posthumously won a Grammy for best spoken word album earlier that year (which her daughter, Melissa Rivers, tearfully accepted on her behalf). Perhaps the lack of promotion for her exhibit could simply be attributed to the clashing thematic qualities between her display and the museum’s musical ethos. At that time, I did not (and still do not) assume or presume any intentionality on the part of the museum to leave her out. However, this experience reminded me of the “In Memoriam” tributes from the 2015 Academy Awards and Grammy Awards following Rivers’ death in September of 2014: Rivers was omitted from both. I began to wonder: did this kind of superficial inclusion – where she is included but not championed or made entirely visible – extend to other arenas in Rivers’ life?

For many people, the details of Rivers’ long and complicated career have remained somewhat elusive and largely unknown to the general public. To millennials – my contemporaries – Rivers is probably best remembered as an awards show red carpet host, an insult comic, and a woman who very publically and physically seemed to resist
aging at any cost through obvious (some might say “freakish”) plastic surgery. However, within this group, she is rarely known or highlighted for being the first female late-night talk show host. Her central role in late-night television – first as a frequent standup comedian, then as the permanent guest host for Johnny Carson’s *Tonight* show, and finally as the first woman to host her own late night program – has often been diminished, not only in pop culture history but also in rigorous academic study.

Rivers’ early late-night television career seems to be almost totally excluded from analytical discourse. While there is little scholarship on the particulars of late-night television to begin with, her unique history as a once lauded host and then a veritable late-night pariah is a compelling case study which furthers the understanding of the politics of being a woman, no less a funny woman, working in the most notorious male bastion of television.

Although Rivers’ career has not been given a thorough academic analysis, her name and star text have been invoked elsewhere in scholarship. In a cursory search through databases and library resources, Rivers’ most famous catchphrase (and the namesake of this research project) – “Can we talk?” – is often invoked in texts that have no bearing on an examination of comedy or of Rivers herself. Not surprisingly, this phrase showed up in papers on studies of linguistics and behavioral communication. Although a small handful of works examine in particular the social subtext and cultural codes embedded within this famous catchphrase, many authors across disciplines use it as a familiar pop culture reference without any analysis of Rivers herself. Rivers’ apparent marginalization in scholarly discourse reflects the belief that she is most compelling only
in a superficial sense – and I use the word “superficial” with specific intention. It seems as though her catchphrases and face-lifts are more gripping than a deep analysis of her singular star text or the gendered politics of her career.

My goal in this paper is to fill a gap in the research on the first twenty years of Rivers’ career and the politics surrounding her fate in late night. Charting Rivers’ years in late night offers insight into the negotiated roles that women must navigate to achieve success in professions often reserved for men. After a thorough investigation of how Rivers constructed her unique comic persona, I will examine how she was initially able to break into this all-male television stronghold by becoming the female complement and contrast to Johnny Carson. I will also analyze the ways in which Rivers began to veer away from being a supportive female counterpart, and how these personal and professional moves ultimately led to her rejection and exile from the realm of late-night TV.

In chapter one, I will explore how Rivers combined her overt femininity with biting self-deprecation to remove the inherent threat posed by a female comic. This cultivation of her comic persona became a balancing act of contradictions and by mitigating these, she was able to disarm Johnny Carson, the gate-keeper of late-night comedy, who was historically not receptive to aggressive female comedians.

Chapter two will examine how Rivers transformed the standardized tropes of late-night hosting using a conversational and intimate style characterized by personal disclosure and an interest in gossip – traditionally feminized modes of communication. I will detail the ways in which this style contributed to her becoming Johnny Carson’s
permanent guest host, and how her contrast to him helped boost the program’s ratings.

The third chapter will chart Rivers’ exit from NBC in order to become the first woman to host her own late-night talk show for Fox. I will probe the reasons why Rivers’ star identity did not dovetail with NBC’s corporate self-image but was exploited by Fox to help define its own distinct network brand. This chapter concludes with an in-depth examination of the political machinations and personal battles that led to the cancellation of The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers less than a year after it debuted. Central to this analysis of Rivers’ career is an examination throughout of the consequences she faced for fitting – or failing to fit – gender expectations.

Due to the dearth of scholarship on Rivers and the late-night comedy genre itself, the following literature review will outline the theoretical frameworks through which we can understand the operation of Rivers’ late-night career. While television has often been considered the most welcoming medium for female performers and comedians, women have often had a rich yet complicated relationship to this platform. Weaving together feminist humor and media studies, celebrity studies, television theory and TV industry studies, this chapter will provide context to explain why Rivers was a unique television performer.
LITERATURE REVIEW: UNDERSTANDING THE FEMALE TELEVISION COMEDIAN – A CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

In 2007, journalist Christopher Hitchens wrote a divisive article in *Vanity Fair*, provocatively titled, “Why Women Aren’t Funny.” Armed with a biting wit and even sharper words, Hitchens proclaimed that, en masse, women are not as funny as men. He declared that men have *had* to learn how to be funny in order to impress women, because they have little else with which to appeal to the opposite sex. He continued, saying, “Women have no corresponding need to appeal to men in this way. They already appeal to men, if you catch my drift.”¹ With this statement, Hitchens reduces women to little more than mammary glands and sexual mannequins. Throughout the essay, he demeans professional female comedians even further, lamenting that they are often “hefty or dykey or Jewish, or some combo of the three,”² to him, a less than favorable blend. This stale but inflammatory argument incurred the ire of many, from feminist media critics to contemporary comedians like Tina Fey.

But Hitchens’ casual yet incendiary sexism reflects an unfortunately common attitude towards women – both within comedy and outside of it – that suggests they would be better served by just standing still and looking pretty. There is no need for women to open their mouths and taint their female purity with jokes or biting satire or, heaven forbid, humorous recognition of their own subjugation. While this chapter will not explore the question of whether or not women are funny (that argument lost its freshness even before it began), it will seek to analyze how, when, and about what women have been allowed to be funny in public spaces that are governed by a male-
dominant culture. Specifically, this introductory chapter will examine how the feminized medium of television – both as a haven and a ghetto for female creatives and comics – functions as a primary location for women to express their humor, and in turn claim their power, publically.

Subversion in the Female Comic Performance

Historically, women have had a long and complex relationship with performing comedy. While private joking amongst friends or laughter at the latest gossip have been prevalent and pervasive modes of expression for generations (the Jewish “Yenta” type comes to mind), “women’s use of humor [has] tended to be confined to the private sphere and therefore remained invisible.” Kathleen Rowe, feminist media critic and author of *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, argues that women’s burden of invisibility can be traced back to the socialization process, where young girls learn early on not to “make a spectacle of themselves.” In receiving this warning, girls learn that their silence is preferred over their voice, their inaction over their action, their invisibility over their visibility. More intensely, Rowe argues throughout her work that the mere act of women performing humor or other genres of laughter signifies a resistance to socialized invisibility and institutional, cultural, and discursive subjugation and disenfranchisement.

Feminist media critics have often equated silence with disenfranchisement and conversely, voice with power. Speaking to the perceived dynamics of power, one of Hitchens’ most problematic assertions claimed that, “the explanation for the superior
funniness of men is much the same as for the inferior funniness of women. Men have to pretend, to themselves as well as to women, that they are not the servants and supplicants. Women, cunning minxes that they are, have to affect not to be the potentates.” Hitchens’ assertion that men use humor to skewer and cope with their own “powerlessness” ignores the realities of the power differential in patriarchal societies – especially ones that value women’s silence over women’s speech. Feminist comedy scholar Frances Gray contends that at its core, “most feminist activity has been centrally concerned with silence, and with its breaking.” She goes further and calls for using the female comedy performance as a springboard to enact real change – the kind of action that could perhaps both address Hitchens’ and others’ problematic conceptions of who holds the power in male-dominated societies, as well as begin to compel a real impact on the second-class status of women.

By making noise and putting forward a comic presence, female comedians challenge the traditional conception of women as objects to be looked at rather than as subjects to engage with. Women performing comedy is a distinctly feminist act in its inherent violation of expected female behavior: women enter a public space – perhaps a theatre or a comedy club – and make jokes. Rowe draws a link between this kind of visibility and power and claims that through public performance, the female comic may be able to “affect the terms on which she is seen.” While it might not seem overtly transgressive, the mere act of making one’s voice and body seen and heard in public, especially in the context of comedy – a distinctly male-dominated arena – is profoundly subversive and is an important step in gaining power. Comedy is often gendered not only
in the public’s conception of who is allowed to perform what, but also in the language and typology that are used to describe it. According to Eleanor Patterson, “the aggressive and antagonist cultural work of ‘dominating’ or ‘killing’ an audience […] masculinizes the act of executing comedy.” Even further, feminist humor scholar Joanne Gilbert claims that “because they represent a group marginalized by the dominant (male) culture, female comics rhetorically construct and perform their marginality” in the very act of getting up on stage. While not all female comics may take up arms in the feminist fight for equality (and some have even rejected the idea that they themselves could ever be feminists), many of these scholars would argue that simply performing comedy in public is a transgressive and transformative stance on the expectations of silence for women.

Medium Specificity in TV Stardom

Television provides a unique space for female comics to attain high and wide degrees of visibility because of the nature of broadcasting. There is a compelling dichotomy embedded within the structural foundation of the TV medium in which it functions as a part of both the public and private spheres. Television publically transmits messages and provides a cultural forum, a “politically productive” site “where public opinion can be formed.” And yet, these messages are received in the home, the principal location of the private sphere. In addition, TV’s designation as a mass medium, in contrast to film’s high culture status, positions television as a more female vehicle. Elana Levine and Michael Z. Newman, television scholars who have examined the process of legitimating TV, claim that from its inception until recent years, “television’s cultural
significance revolved around its status as a commercial medium experienced collectively, mostly in domestic spaces.”¹⁴ They argue that TV’s designations as “mass,” “commercial,” and “domestic” not only delegitimated it to some degree, but also engendered assumptions about the primary gender identity of audiences: female.¹⁵ As a domestic, leisure-based (read: passive) form of mass entertainment with a large female audience, television itself became branded as feminine/female.

As such, early TV would seem to have had the potential to become a haven for female performers to become household names and propel them to stardom. But in fact, the medium became limiting in both genre and daypart (defined as a distinct part of the television schedule i.e. daytime, primetime, etc.). In order to understand the distinctiveness of female comedy stars on TV, we must first look to the particulars of TV stardom that developed out of the medium’s structural and aesthetic characteristics. Stardom, as both a social phenomenon and commercial imperative, has been intricately linked to the particulars of different media. A film star who graces the big screen perhaps once or twice a year (if they have consistent work) is often a very different type of performer and signals a different cultural meaning than a YouTube star who uploads weekly videos. Classic TV performers, who appear in our homes in predictable weekly time slots, fall somewhere in between. Although it is a rich and complex area of study, scholarship on television fame has been the often-ignored little sibling of the formal examination of film stardom. Critics James Bennett and Su Holmes contend that in-depth analyses of TV stardom have been leapfrogged over in favor of the catch-all “celebrity studies” that now assess the fame phenomenon across many different kinds of media.¹⁶
Bennett & Holmes lament that, unfortunately, “the real complexities of TV fame have fallen through the analytical cracks.” Early work by scholars like John Langer provides a comparison between TV fame and film fame, which helps to reveal more about the medium specificity of stardom.

Langer’s work and much of the current analyses of TV stars seem to be in reaction to Richard Dyer’s comprehensive text on the phenomenon of film fame, aptly titled *Stars*. In his discussion, Dyer asserts that film stars must be both ordinary and extraordinary, simultaneously making their public persona available to audiences while concealing their authentic selves. Inaccessibility, he argued, is central to the viability of film stars who trade on mystery and myth to increase their commercial capital: if the only way to access a star in the interest of decoding his or her real persona is to see films in which he or she appears, then tickets will sell out at the box office (and producers will reap the rewards). But the inaccessibility that Dyer emphasizes does not apply to television performers who appear on our screens and in our homes week after week or even day after day. Television stars operate in a medium of near-complete accessibility. But what is unique about television is also what is unique about TV stars.

Opposing Dyer’s defining features of film stars, critics like Langer and Bennett argue that TV stars represent pinnacles of ordinariness and accessibility rather than myth and mystery. Langer explicitly uses Dyer’s notions to (somewhat problematically) argue the anti-stardom of television; definitionally, Langer claims that film performers are “stars” while television performers can, at best, only be considered “personalities.” These assignments of types and signifiers illustrate that different kinds of stars reflect the
different media in which they appear. In his 1981 essay, “Television’s Personality System,” Langer breaks down the differences he perceives between the film star machine and the television personality system:

Whereas the star system operates from the realms of the spectacular, the inaccessible, the imaginary, presenting the cinematic universe as ‘larger than life’, the personality system is cultivated almost exclusively as ‘part of life’; whereas the star system has always had the ability to place distance between itself and its audiences through its insistence on ‘the exceptional’, the personality system works directly to construct and foreground intimacy and immediacy; whereas contact with stars is unrelentingly sporadic and uncertain, contact with television personalities has regularity and predictability; whereas stars are always playing ‘parts’ emphasizing their identity as ‘stars’ as much – perhaps even more than – the characters they play, television personalities ‘play’ themselves, whereas stars emanate as idealizations or archetypal expressions, to be contemplated, revered, desired and even blatantly imitated, stubbornly standing outside the realms of the familiar and the routinized, personalities are distinguished for their representativeness, their typicality, their ‘will to ordinariness’, to be accepted, normalized, experienced as familiar.

Although Langer’s assertions are problematically value-based, often regarding film over television as a more artistic presentational mode and placing film stars in higher esteem than TV “personalities,” these divisions may also be able to serve a value-free analysis of both media. To paraphrase Langer’s position, stars and personalities can be understood as a series of binary oppositions: otherworldly versus grounded, distant versus close, rare versus ubiquitous, fictional versus real, and archetypal versus familiar. With little effort, these differences can be transplanted onto differences in medium: big screen versus small screen, public exhibition versus private exhibition, limited release versus regularly scheduled programming, narrative versus reality, and representational character versus personal performer. Today, however, some of these seemingly strict demarcations between film and TV are being broken down by new paradigms and technological shifts,
allowing multifaceted performers to float more easily between the two. But historically, the most popular and most enduring television stars have proven to be the ones who have used the properties of this intimate, domestic, familiar, routinized medium to complement and enhance their own creative endeavors.

In the coming pages, I will examine how female comics uniquely fit into this idealized type of TV performer precisely because of the medium’s feminized features of intimacy and domesticity, but were in turn also restricted by structural components of the medium. Still, overall, comedians both male and female have been some of the most successful television personalities. Susan Murray, a television scholar who has extensively examined the origins of early broadcast stardom, argues that comedians have been the most popular and most enduring TV stars because they had the distinct ability “to represent what the industry believed were its primary aesthetic properties – immediacy, intimacy, and spontaneity.”

Here, Murray reiterates some of the most crucial elements of Langer’s claims: television is always available and immediately accessed, it is physically present and important within the home, and it is, or at least appears to be, live.

**Television’s Earliest Stars: Comedians**

In order to best showcase these characteristics, early TV programmers imported stars from vaudeville and radio who had already become skilled in managing grueling performance schedules, had perfected the art of improvisation in live theatre, and had become deft at connecting with audiences in a direct and intimate way. These “vaudeo”
stars (Murray’s term to describe former vaudevillians who found new life on television) were uniquely primed to help create and define early TV because of their ability to embrace the unpredictability of a fledgling new medium. Stars like Bob Hope, Eddie Cantor, and Jack Benny were able to combine their visual and physical stage past from vaudeville with recent broadcast experience in radio to emerge as some of television’s earliest and brightest acts. These comics thrived as hosts of variety shows and comedy revues; they shined in genres that called for performers to be comfortable with direct address and the improvisational nature of television hosting. Direct address and spontaneous actions have more than just aesthetic and formal uses on TV – they have a distinct impact on the viewer-performer relationship. These modes of presentation engender a perceived closeness and intimacy with the stars on screen that could not exist in film. When these performers speak to the camera, it feels like they are talking just to “you and me.” This intimacy also breeds familiarity and audience allegiance, creating a distinctly familiar, perhaps even familial, bond between television comedians and their viewers.

Furthermore, comedians feel familiar because of their often-intertwined public and private personas. Patterson claims that “comedy stardom is idiosyncratic” because of the conflation between the real person and the characters they play. Comedians feel less like aspirational ideals and more like real people we know – our fathers, our mothers, our friends. They speak to us, they connect with us, and they seem authentic. When comics address the television audience, it feels less like a declarative act and more like a conversation with a familiar friend. Programmers as well as audiences believed female
comedians could fit naturally on television because this intimate and conversational mode of presentation was transmitted directly into the home, the woman’s domain. When female comics enter this feminized mode of entertainment, they can potentially seem non-threatening because TV, though distinctly public in its broadcast capabilities, is also part of the private sphere. TV thus provides a distinctive way for female comedy performers to gain visibility not only because of its broad reach, but also because television appears to replicate the privacy of the home and domestic sphere where women’s humor had been thriving, though decidedly contained, for so long. It was and is safe to laugh at a woman’s jokes from the privacy of your own living room.

Complicated Opportunities for Female Comics on Television

Although television had the potential to become a breeding ground for female comics to become bona-fide stars, their relationship to broadcasting has not always been without problems. According to Murray, female comedians were somewhat rare commodities in early TV because they were “thought to be generally unappealing if they embodied […] brash vaudeo characteristics or acted as a program’s prime host or announcer” which were unfortunately the main sources of work for TV comics. Most women appearing on television in early broadcasting were sidekicks and often paired with male comics because “producers and network heads were reluctant to place a single female comic at the center of a program.”

So where do we see the female comedy performer thriving as the primary force early on? We can readily look to Lucille Ball, arguably the most well-known star of this
early era, who sparked the “dominance of the domestic feminine”\textsuperscript{31} in TV comedy. Domestic sitcoms provided an ideal platform for comics because, just like television itself, these programs appeared to reproduce the experience of the middle-class suburban home. Ball increased the visibility of the female comedian tenfold, but “by performing within a domestic context (either textual or extratextual), a female comedian’s transgressive qualities could be tempered or contained.”\textsuperscript{32} The threat of the female comic “making a spectacle” of herself becomes non-threatening when placed within the context of her primary domain and hemmed in by a “knowing” and tolerant husband or partner. So, while it seems like television could be a great public location to increase the power of the female voice, this subtle containment nevertheless hints at the way that broadcasting has actually worked to both support and subordinate female performers.

Michelle Hilmes, exploring the impact of the female voice on radio, argued that women in broadcasting were historically subordinated in three primary ways: (1) \textit{institutionally}, women were restricted to children’s, women’s, and educational areas of broadcasting; (2) \textit{definitionally}, the use of the term ‘women’s programming’ “created and enforced” ghettoization of women into daytime; (3) and \textit{discursively}, women’s voices were “literally contained and controlled.”\textsuperscript{33} These conditions did not change much in the transition to TV, and sometimes even today, it feels like women are still marginalized along these lines.

The television schedule, one of the medium’s most unique characteristics, is primarily split along gender divisions and expectations about who is home when: women are home during the day, women and children in the afternoons, and men return at the
dinner hour just in time for primetime and late-night programming. Cultural studies scholar Nick Browne notes that not only is the schedule gendered based on assumptions of who will be home at what times, but these gendered suppositions in part “produce and render ‘natural’ the logic of and rhythm of the social order” – in this case, the typical workday. Women working in the home were provided with shows directly relating to their day-to-day issues: shows about homemaking tips and tricks, cooking demonstrations, and guidelines for simultaneously managing household duties and family concerns. Advertisements during these programs also targeted the consumerist side of female domesticity: plugs for soap, cleaning products, and ways to make daily tasks easier filled the interstitial space in programs that were implicitly encoding consumerist messages about how to run the home. While female presenters were initially the sole hosts of these shows, by the time the major networks began assertively programming daytime fare, male hosts became pervasive and important authoritative voices in these female genres. With women’s programming often placed in a daytime ghetto, and jobs for female performers in this realm being superseded for male hosts, it was even more difficult (though not wholly impossible) for female talent to be the primary voices in the male-driven segments of the schedule. Just as Murray argued that domestic contexts provided a way to “contain and temper” potential transgressions, the schedule also worked to restrict the female performer.

But what about the women who do not fit so neatly into programs centered in domestic settings? As mentioned before, Lucille Ball was a trailblazing force for female comedians who clearly operated within a domestic paradigm. But there were two women
in early to mid-TV history who became mega-stars in primetime programs that were divorced from the usual home-centered vision. From 1967–1978, Carol Burnett hosted her own variety program, *The Carol Burnett Show*, becoming that genre’s first female superstar who was clearly different from the rest of the male-centric pack. A few years later in 1970, Mary Tyler Moore debuted her own groundbreaking sitcom. Years before, she had been introduced to American audiences as Rob Petrie’s wife Laura on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1960–1966). However, within her own vehicle, she made a name for both herself and for workplace comedy with the history-making *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–1977). While these women broke new ground in primetime and increased the visibility of female comics, these hours were already starting to become increasingly diverse and potentially fertile ground for even more female voices.

Despite all of this change and evolution, there is still one area of television that has historically been – and has managed to remain – almost entirely male-dominated: the realm of late-night comedy. This daypart, though incredibly popular and an important cultural site, has not received extensive scholastic analysis. Although the talk show genre has been interrogated at length, these analyses often focus exclusively on daytime talk programs or daytime personalities at the expense of an examination of late-night comedy as a distinctive subgenre of TV talk. The most popular accounts of late-night talk shows come not from an academic source but rather from *New York Times* journalist Bill Carter’s oral histories about the dramatic late-night “wars” in which various male comedians vie for the role of host at the *Tonight* show. His first book, *The Late Shift: Leno, Letterman, and the Network Battle for the Night*, meticulously details the messy
network politics surrounding Jay Leno and David Letterman’s fight to become Johnny Carson’s *Tonight* show heir. His second book, *The War for Late Night: When Leno Went Early and Television Went Crazy*, examines the Leno/Conan O’Brien *Tonight* show battle in 2010, with two men duking it out for the 11:30pm slot. While these texts have provided the most comprehensive information about the backdoor deals and personal politics rooted in late-night television, they both leave out the story of Joan Rivers.

One of the most prominent and caustic late-night talk show hosts, Rivers’ unique position amongst these male hosts has received neither adequate academic analysis nor public attention in popular texts. One of the few sources that examines late night from an academic viewpoint is also one of the only texts that investigates Rivers. In *Television Talk: A History of the TV Talk Show*, scholar Bernard Timberg provides an overview of the talk show genre, with an attention to its myriad subgenres including late-night talk. While most discourse on the subject remains sparse, Timberg is able to traverse genres and dayparts with a certain amount of depth, managing to provide a brief, yet compelling account of Joan Rivers’ successes and failures as a late-night host. Focusing primarily on her scandalized move from NBC to Fox for her own late-night talk program, Timberg recounts her “flamboyant brand of talk” and considers this to be the most acute reason for the failure of her show.

While Timberg’s assessment is partially correct, his three-page summary of Rivers’ late-night career can neither adequately account for the reasons behind her professional rise nor for those surrounding her fall. Perhaps the most comprehensive texts on Rivers herself may be her own memoirs (of which there are multiple iterations).
Although these texts fail to objectively critique the “Rivers” persona, they do offer unique insight into the comedian during times of stability and times of uncertainty. Her first two memoirs—Enter Talking and Still Talking, written before and after she left late night—were critical to my research in order to contextualize Joan Rivers as a complicated amalgam of unique qualities. Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work, the 2010 documentary centered on her later life and career, also became a crucial source that provided insight into Rivers’ reflective feelings and memories about her time in late night. In order to explain the relationship between Rivers’ comic persona and her tumultuous late-night career, most of my research has centered on fusing disparate popular texts, oral histories, and primary sources. Through an in-depth examination of Joan Rivers as the one-time lone woman in late-night comedy until recently, I will examine the ways in which a female performer in a male domain must carefully negotiate her own image to attain visibility.

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5 Ibid., 5.
8 Rowe, The Unruly Woman, 63.
9 Ibid., 11.


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CHAPTER ONE: FEMININE AND FUNNY – EXPLORING JOAN RIVERS AS STANDUP COMEDIAN

In early 1960s New York, a young 20-something year old woman is onstage at yet another dingy comedy club, the kind of place where “when you pass the hat, the hat doesn’t come back.” Outfitted in a conservative black dress accessorized with a demure string of pearls and a coiffed blonde bouffant wig, the amateur comic garners rousing laughs throughout her set. She closes with a bang: “This business, it’s all about casting couches. So I just want you to know – my name is Joan Rivers and I put out.” The visual contrast was striking – a nicely dressed, sweet-looking girl joking about casual sex in public.

Figure 1: Joan Rivers performing standup comedy in 1965
Joan Rivers’ onstage and offstage personae are rife with similar contradictions. She was the chubby girl who dreamed of becoming a glamorous movie star, and then late in life became the famously aging doyenne chasing youth through multiple experiments with plastic surgery. She was the comedian who spoke the unspoken, talking nakedly about sex while at the same time claiming to possess no sex appeal. The Hollywood insider who always felt outside the process, Rivers lived her life and made her living as an amalgamation of all these contradictions.

Before she became a television personality, late-night comedy host, and celebrity insult comic, Joan Rivers cut her teeth as a stand-up comedian. As a performer, Rivers developed her comic persona defined by the kinds of contrasts detailed above in an attempt to reconcile the most fundamental contradiction plaguing her identity: she was both a woman and a comedian, feminine yet funny, in a time when many people believed “femininity and humor were not supposed to go together.”

Rivers’ ability to balance being the stereotypic threatening female comic and the sweet feminine girl with a dirty mouth made her palatable to American audiences. Her intimate, conversational, and feminized mode of performance reflected the nature of the television medium. And this style also appealed to audiences and, most importantly, Johnny Carson, the most powerful host in late-night television. Through an examination of her early comic style, both defined and influenced by the overlaps and divergences in her onstage and offstage personae, this chapter will investigate why Rivers’ idiosyncratic blend of qualities made her uniquely primed to gain entrée into the male-dominated genre of late-night comedy.
“Can We Talk?”

There inevitably comes a point in most Joan Rivers performances where she stops in her tracks, turns toward the audience, and with an authoritative flick of the wrist, delivers her most famous catchphrase: “Can we talk?” Her defining totem, this phrase is much more than battle cry or mantra. With this simple question, Rivers upends the traditional transaction of stand-up comedy. Her style is not defined by the construct, “comedian tells joke – audience laughs.” Rather, she invites those watching her into a mutual exchange, a shared experience, a conversation.

Although Rivers has made a career trading on jokes – in a scene from her 2010 documentary Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work, the camera scans her carefully curated card catalogue filled with thousands of jokes, ranging from “cooking” to “no self worth” – her style hinges much closer to that of a storyteller’s. Her routines are peppered with autobiographical vignettes told using a stream-of-consciousness delivery and everyday colloquialisms. In her first comedy album, Joan Rivers Presents Mr. Phyllis and Other Stories, she tells a four-minute anecdote about her car breaking down on the West Side Highway while driving to a comedy club. The worst casualty of the night? Her perfectly-set wig gets run over. “I want you to get the picture,” she says in closing. “It’s 11:30 at night, it’s raining out, I’m walking down the West Side Parkway, against the traffic, with a dead wig in my arms – it isn’t pretty folks! Nobody stops. They’re New Yorkers, they’ve seen it, y’know?” The punch line of her joke does not “punch” in the traditional sense. Her joke lands, but it’s not declarative in an aggressive way. With her “y’know?” tacked on at the end, Rivers is checking in with her audience to see if they identify with
her story, something many of us do in casual conversation.

Her jokes are filled with “Y’know’s” and “Do you know what I’m talking about’s” and of course, “Can we talk’s,” which often made them challenging to transcribe in the research process. These asides inject a casual, conversational, and improvisational quality into her carefully planned sets. According to humor scholars Gerard Matte and Ian McFadyen, there is also a “sense of urgency” in her performances; her raspy voice and the rapid staccato of her words feel emotionally charged rather than scripted. In Rivers’ case, the conversational translates to the authentic and the intimate. But in Matte & McFadyen’s analysis, these interpolations and questions that serve as natural conversational flow also perform the function of recasting “the audience from a passive recipient in the interaction to an active participant whose opinion matters.” While Rivers does not expect a vocal answer (beyond a laugh, of course), these “check-ins” allow her to directly address the audience members. Even further, the discursive interactional element in the format of Rivers’ routines makes audience members feel like they are part of a two-way exchange. Rivers’ conversational, improvisational, and intimate style resembles and reinforces the “intimacy, immediacy, and spontaneity” of television, the medium’s defining aesthetic features, according to Susan Murray’s argument outlined in the previous section.

Beyond just creating intimacy, Matte & McFadyen argue that by using “check-ins,” Rivers transforms the comic performance even further, making “what is ostensibly a public interaction seem like a private one.” Some have called her a “kitchen-table comic,” the kind of performer who feels less like she is putting on show and more like
she is sitting around a kitchen table exchanging gossip. This behavior is often coded as private, domestic, and female. As discussed in the previous section, performing comedy is often thought to be an inherently male practice (words of aggression like “killing” – which describes a successful performance – only reinforce this idea) and therefore one that takes place in the public sphere. But through her distinctly conversational style – in tandem with her female identity – Rivers repositions her comedy within the private, female sphere. Like the female comics of early television, Rivers succeeded by performing within a domestically coded framework, tempering what could be considered a hostile intrusion into a male domain. But Rivers also differentiated herself from the pack of domesticated female comedy performers by using her position within the domestic sphere to skewer and transform it.

“If God wanted woman to cook, he’d have given her aluminum hands”

By taking comedy from a public to private experience – transforming what is constructed as masculine into something feminine – Rivers creates a uniquely negotiated feminine persona. Although she had been working in comedy both as a writer and performer since the late 1950s, Rivers only rose to critical and popular prominence during an era of tension between the conservative 1950s and the radically stimulated 1970s. While at the time, the 1960s seem to represent the height of cultural tension in the United States, television in the mid-60s seemed to be stuck in neutral. Rivers positioned herself in opposition to the squeaky-clean narrative characterizations of housewives on TV during this complicated era.
According to Douglas Kellner, media culture can often represent “a contested terrain, reproducing on the cultural level the fundamental conflicts within society.” He argues that, oftentimes, opposing cultural artifacts emerge simultaneously in reaction to tensions and fissures within the larger culture. Though Kellner was referring to filmic and televisual texts as his models for cultural artifacts, characters or characterizations could just as easily fit into this framework. In the mid-1960s, cultural tensions abounded. This was the height of the Civil Rights Movement and the early beginnings of the sexual revolution that exploded in the 1970s. There was a clash between those who held close the values of conservatism and the nuclear family, which were made popular in the 1950s, and those who sought increased independence, personal complexity, and social justice. One way that this tension manifested itself was through a juxtaposition between different types of female comic performers on TV: the domestic goddess (housewife) versus the domestic failure (Joan Rivers).

Scholarship on the particulars of 1960s television is sparse, in part because programming during this decade is often considered “kitsch” or “wasteland” fare by academics. In the 1964–1965 television season, the highest-rated program was the long-running western show *Bonanza* (1959–1973), flanked by other frontier shows such as *Rawhide* (1959–1965) and *Gunsmoke* (1955–1975). In comedy, domestic sitcoms reigned supreme and ranged from the homebound happenings of *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–1966) to the escapist qualities of *Bewitched* (1964–1972). However different these programs may have seemed, both comedies provided portrayals of women as domestic goddesses, able to figuratively (or literally in the latter case) perform magic to
keep their houses running. These depictions of domestic achievers reinforced the image of the perfect wife and mother as an essential archetype. According to Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin in *The Revolution Wasn’t Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, TV during the late 1950s and early 1960s “developed a highly codified series of narrative conventions to represent [an] emerging suburban ideal […] designed to showcase the white suburban housewife as the ultimate symbol of material success and domestic bliss.”\[^{16}\] And although these characters were “exiled from the workplace and public life, they were liberated within the home,” through satisfying household work and access to consumer goods.\[^{17}\] Domestic literacy was tantamount to womanhood during this era of programming. Rivers presented herself not as a domestic goddess, but as a domestic failure.

While the Donna Reeds and Samantha Stevens-types were dutiful wives and mothers, Rivers was the opposite. Though she got married soon after her big television break, much of her humor emphasized the failed expectations of marriage. “When you’re courting, you know, you lie a lot. Like, I lied. I said I could cook. And he lied,” referring to her husband, Edgar Rosenberg, “He said he couldn’t care less. You wouldn’t believe the moments of truth we’ve had in the kitchen. But you know what I think? I think if God had wanted woman to cook, he’d have given her aluminum hands.”\[^{18}\] This kind of resistance to expected gender roles mirrored Rivers’ unusual independence for the time; she was a woman performing onstage alone in a man’s field. She has made many jokes about cooking and her failure to perform wifely duties, but perhaps none links her disdain for domesticity with her trademark vulgarity more clearly than this: “Why should a
woman cook, so her husband can say, ‘My wife makes a delicious cake,’ to some hooker?” What is evident in these jokes is that while she was making fun of domesticity and the women who clung to it, she was also making fun of herself, signaling what is arguably the defining hallmark of her style: self-deprecation.

“The Last Girl in Larchmont”

Self-deprecation came naturally to Joan Rivers. Incredibly insecure as a child, Rivers would joke that her parents put her in plays early on to distract her from her adolescent weight gain. “I was a very fat child,” she has said. “But like, when you say fat, like, I was my own buddy at camp.” Her shots at herself did not end there: “I began to retreat into myself. And my parents tried to cheer me up, y’know? They’d go for a ride and they’d take me with them in the U-Haul-It.” This style not only emerged naturally from her background but it also allowed Rivers to enter a television landscape that elevated domesticity and conservativism, by making herself the fool for not fitting in. Yet there is another more crucial reason that may explain why Rivers adopted a self-deprecating style: self-deprecation can appear to remove the inherent threat posed by a woman entering a male domain.

Many feminist media critics like Kathleen Rowe argue that female comics who perform self-deprecation actually “occupy the ‘male’ position” in stand-up by making women (themselves) the targets of humor. Oftentimes these critics claim that self-deprecation “merely reinforces stereotypes, reinscribing patriarchy in the process.” While some critics may forgive female comics for using this kind of humor as a way of
gaining access to this male profession, this reasoning ignores the potential complexity of using self-deprecation for something more subversive than just making oneself seem nonthreatening. While self-deprecation may seem like an explicit self-takedown, implicitly it can serve as a “subversive critique of social norms and cultural representation.” Rivers was able to use self-deprecation to make herself seem non-threatening despite her sometimes outlandish routines while also delivering sharp social commentary.

In addition to making fun of herself as a domestic failure and a former fat girl (who never really let go of the accompanying emotional weight), Rivers adopted the role of the sexual loser. She presented herself as the perma-single girl, the one who was always a little too chubby to be beautiful, too loud to be graceful, and seemingly unworthy of love and affection. She coined herself, “the last girl in Larchmont,” referring to the small Westchester, NY enclave in which she spent her teen and adult years. While this may seem like a clear portrayal of Rivers using her own failings in service of humor, a performance on The Ed Sullivan Show in which she claims “the whole society is not for single girls” reveals the complex ways in which Rivers is able to implicitly critique the different gender expectations for men and women by making fun of herself.

A man, he’s single, he’s so lucky. A boy on a date – all he has to be is clean and able to pick up the check – he’s a winner. You know that. A man could call up anybody in the whole world, do you know that? ‘Hello, I saw your name on the locker room, I thought I’d give you a quick call.’ Just kills me. A girl can’t call. A girl, you have to wait for the phone to ring, right? And when you finally go on the date, the girl has to be well-dressed, the face has to look nice, the hair has to be in shape. The girl has to be the one that’s bright, and pretty, intelligent – a good sport – ‘Howard Johnson’s again. Hooray, Hooray,’ Just kills me. A girl, you’re 30 years
old, you’re not married - you’re an old maid. A man, he’s 90 years old, he’s not married - he’s a catch. It’s a whole different thing. Isn’t that so? [Thunderous audience response] Yes, yes, yes. It kills me […]

I know what I’m speaking about cause my mother had two of us at home that weren’t, as the expression goes, moving. And I’m from a little town called Larchmont where if you’re not married, you’re a girl, and you’re over 21, you’re better off dead, it’s that simple. 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. […]

When I was 21, my mother said ‘Only a doctor for you.’ When I was 22 she said, ‘Alright, a lawyer, CPA.’ 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.28

Rivers points out the trouble for being an unmarried (and therefore, undomesticated) woman during the early 1960s: once you become older than desirable marriage age, you become an old maid, a has-been, and passed over for younger girls, referencing the high value our society places on youth. She also brings to the fore the ways in which men are allowed to age and remain romantically viable – as long as they have the money to pay for dinner. But rather than commit her joke to pure social critique, Rivers redirects halfway through and deflects the target onto herself, reframing the joke to be about her own embarrassing romantic failures instead of bogus social expectations.

Women’s literature scholar Nancy Walker, author of A Very Serious Thing: Women’s Humor and American Culture, contends that self-deprecation – especially the type that Rivers uses in this instance – could be considered “ingratiating rather than aggressive: it acknowledges the opinion of the dominant culture – appears to confirm it – and allows the speaker or the writer to participate in the humorous process without
alienating members of the majority.”²⁹ Rivers is able to do this seamlessly. She appears to participate in the dominant culture by shaming herself for not being romantically successful and fitting into the status quo. At the same time she is subversively skewering the dominant ideologies that produce and reinforce the status quo without alienating those who cleave to such norms.

Self-deprecation can be interpreted in many different ways. In his groundbreaking essay, “Encoding/Decoding,” cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall argues that there are three ways that audiences decode cultural messages. A dominant reading means audiences read cultural texts in accordance with the dominant social ideology. A negotiated reading means that audiences acknowledge and privilege the legitimacy of the dominant code but include other viewpoints in their readings. Those who perform an oppositional reading decode the dominant code but then push back against it and ultimately oppose it.³⁰ In effect, every audience member could have a different reading, and there could be any number of different decoded meanings based on viewers’ diverse and individual socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.³¹ Since self-deprecation operates on multiple levels – explicit and implicit ones – viewers indeed may decode these messages in different ways. By using this mode of performance, Rivers appears safe because she seems to default to the dominant code by making herself the fool for not fitting in, rather than overtly critiquing society’s unrealistic standards for women.

But Rivers’ star text and onstage persona as the sexual loser, the fat girl, and a feminine failure is complicated by the fact that she fits into specific standards of beauty and was often considered quite attractive when she was launching her career. Although
her looks complicate the matter, part of Rivers’ comic success derives humor from this irony. Comedy critic Sharon Lockyer argues that the humor “lies in the incongruity and exaggerated differences between Rivers’ actual appearance and her self-perception.”

A New York Times profile on the budding comic described her as “a trim, 105-pound blonde, with wide, bright eyes and pretty features,” a far cry from the time “when a woman comedian had to make herself ugly, cross her eyes, or fall down in order to get laughs.” She was funny and feminine. New York Times critic Robert Alden went even further, claiming that, “women comedians […] come to their profession with a certain handicap. Traditionally, women are supposed to be beautiful, seductive, gentle and fair – not funny.” But he praised Rivers as “an unusually bright girl who is overcoming the handicap of a woman comic, looks pretty and blonde and bright and yet manages to make people laugh.”

So why was Rivers praised for being both pretty and funny while other women had to reject their femininity in favor of comic success?

While she was feminine, she was not beautiful. She fit into a certain beauty standard that made her seem palatable for television producers and audiences, but she was not an Amazonian-goddess or supermodel level threat. She also intentionally dressed in conservative, yet chic, clothing – always a “basic black [dress] and a single strand of pearls” to “be less of a threat,” as she has said. This plain (yet attractive) image provides a contrast to the crassness of her jokes that focused on the taboo. Rivers certainly pushes the bounds of edginess. She once joked about abortions when the practice was still illegal and performers were prohibited from saying the word on TV: “I have a friend who’s had 14 ‘appendectomies,’ if you know what I’m saying.”
simple femininity both softens her vulgarity and provides another layer of ironic contrast, adding dimension to her performances that could not exist for female stand-ups who purposefully try to look weird or bizarre – in that time, Phyllis Diller’s spiked hair comes to mind. Interestingly, among today’s female comics who push the edge, many of them like Chelsea Handler and Sarah Silverman have similarly used beauty and style to mitigate their limit-pushing routines.

“Carson played me like a harp”

But perhaps even more so than her own appearance, Rivers was able to temper her edginess through her contrast to her de facto comedy counterpart, Johnny Carson. As his frequent Tonight show guest, Rivers’ stand-up routine moved from the comedy stage to the couch. The two stars had opposing styles and images. He was the Midwestern boy, she was the urban New York girl; he was buttoned-up and proper, she was gossipy and flirty. Her ability to ping and play off of Carson was not only crucial in defining her late night persona as his comic paramour, but it was also crucial to her acceptance as a presence in late-night comedy.

Critical to her success, Carson gave Rivers someone to talk to. The conversational style she had cultivated in her stand-up performances translated seamlessly to the late night interview format. She compared them to the duos of George Burns and Gracie Allen and Mike Nichols and Elaine May, alluding to Carson’s ability to always anticipate where she was going. 40 Rivers had found a comic partner in Carson with whom she could mimic these popular male-female comedy teams. But because Rivers and Carson were
not exclusive partners, she could also perform as a solo standup (fairly uncommon for women in the early 1960s), using the tacit endorsement of her connection with Carson to legitimate her appearances as a standalone comedian. The most successful woman performing standup on TV at the time was Phyllis Diller, whose heights of self-deprecation were only surpassed by the peaks of her spiked hair. She would make frequent appearances on late-night and variety programs but failed to generate the kind of dynamic chemistry with Carson or any other male host like the kind that Rivers had achieved. Totie Fields, who exuded a “larger-than-life, self-deprecating style,” was similarly non-threatening, but she was also not classically attractive, even once described as “roly-poly.” While these women used attacks on themselves to disarm audiences and booking agents, they also lacked the necessary femininity needed to align themselves with a male performer like Johnny Carson. Rivers was able to fuse two performative modes – the self-deprecating single girl and one half of a male-female duo – to infiltrate late night.

In their double act, she always considered herself the comic and Carson the straight man, the “brilliant reactor” as she called him. She would say something wild and he would respond in kind, or he would set her up for a joke and she would deliver the punch line. All late-night comedy appearances are “loosely scripted – like a rigged Ping-Pong match,” Rivers said. For her Tonight show guest spots, Rivers would work out her interview with a segment producer, telling them the questions Carson should ask so that she could answer with a specific joke. Rivers gave him enormous credit for always knowing “when to cut in with a question, when to stay out, when to make the face, when
to be sincere, when to lean toward his guests and be *entre nous*, when to look at the audience and give the joke an extra twist […] when a joke is big enough to sit back in his chair and laugh out loud.” Of their comic chemistry and timing, Rivers said, “Carson played me like a harp.” In a conversation talking about a supermodel’s lack of intelligence, Carson asked, “Don’t you think men really like intelligence more [than looks] when it comes right down to it?” With a semi-crude gesture, Rivers replied, “No man has ever put his hand up a woman’s skirt looking for a library card.” Carson had to turn his chair around from laughing too hard.

Part of their comic chemistry also rests in their pseudo-romantic chemistry. Rivers’ sexual vulgarity was not just a trademark of her personal performance style; when coupled with Carson’s blushing reactions, it transformed into a flirtation between a man and a woman who appear to be in some kind of committed relationship (albeit, a professional one). He often comments on her appearance, and part of their interviews are devoted to discussing what she is wearing – in one appearance he becomes mystified by her provocative “hello sailor” wedge heels. In that same interview, they reminisce about the day when Rivers found out she was pregnant with her almost-five-year-old daughter Melissa. She reminds Carson that she told him over the phone that she was pregnant, “If you remember…” and he laughs nervously and says, “Those are the calls that age you quickly.” This exchange insinuates a sexual relationship between the comic partners, and plays into their natural chemistry as a de facto couple. These onscreen dynamics easily made Rivers seem like the flirtatious hanger-on with Carson as the sexy aspirational husband, especially in comparison to real-life husband Edgar Rosenberg who
was often the target of her comedy.

This unique dynamic with Carson, coupled with Rivers’ persona as a self-deprecating, yet cute and sweet female comic, is part of the reason why she was granted entrée into the hallowed (male) halls of late-night comedy. Carson notoriously had problems with “assertive” female comics and did not like booking them on his show. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, Carson said, “I think it’s much tougher for women […] you don’t see many of them around. And the ones that try, sometimes, are a little aggressive for my taste. I’ll take it from a guy, but from a woman, sometimes, it just doesn’t fit too well.” Carson was clearly the gatekeeper of late-night comedy, and Rivers’ manager Roy Silver claimed that “the best break for young talent […] is a guest shot on NBC’s ‘Tonight.’” But perhaps the reason that Carson did not see many female comics “around” was because he and his staff were receptive to so few.

The case of comedian Elayne Boosler sheds light on the narrow type female comics had to fit into to be approved by the king of late night. Her career began to take off in the 1970s, almost a decade after Rivers broke on Carson’s show. While the women of ten years earlier almost universally performed self-deprecation, Merrill Markoe, the original head writer for *Late Night with David Letterman*, said that Boosler’s jokes “had a certain ego and pride of ownership to them.” Her “ownership” and apparent “ego and pride” in her jokes – and thus in her comic capital – did not appeal to Carson and she was often denied access to his program. A lesser-known comic contemporary of Boosler’s named Emily Levine said that the crucial problem Boosler faced was that “she wasn’t feminine enough,” something Rivers had successfully managed to be. This is perhaps
what stalled Diller as well – while she was self-deprecating, she could not balance it with an overt femininity or standard attractiveness.

While female comics were rare fixtures in late-night television, they were just as rare in daytime. Although the daytime hours provided the most visibility for women, comedy was absent from this daypart. On the other hand, melodrama was increasingly popular. According to Rowe, “for many women, the social contradictions of gender have been played out most compellingly in artistic forms centered on their victimization and tears rather than on their resistance and laughter: the domestic novel, the Gothic novel, the women’s weepy film, the television soap opera, the made-for-TV movie.” The soap opera especially is a crucial site for both female performers and female audiences, but it is nestled away in daytime programming. Rowe claims that melodrama, the guiding principle of the soap opera, “depicts strategies of purity, while comedy, with its exaggerations, hyperbole, and assault on the rational, depicts those of danger.” In other words, melodrama in many ways reinscribes traditional gender expectations, not only of purity but also of silent suffering. Although daytime programming provided a creative outlet for many women (though rarely comedians), it also ghettoized them into a much less visible part of the schedule than either primetime or late night.

But Rivers was not confined to daytime and was not even regulated within the domestic sitcom like Lucille Ball and others were. Using a feminized mode of intimate and conversational comedy, Rivers managed to penetrate late night and inject it with a fresh female voice. As one of Carson’s most frequent guests, she experienced a level of success and visibility in that genre that no other woman had before. Joan Rivers, with her
just edgy-enough humor, feminine demeanor, flirtatious and ingratiating banter, and disarming self-deprecation, was able to infiltrate a television daypart fundamentally resistant to female voices. The following chapter will investigate how her signature style not only provided entrée into late night but also made her an invaluable, yet complicated, asset to the Tonight show and NBC.

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57 Rowe, The Unruly Woman, 4.
58 Ibid., 5.
CHAPTER TWO: PERFORMING GENDER: JOAN RIVERS AS PERMANENT TONIGHT SHOW GUEST HOST

Ed McMahon’s voice comes booming over the Tonight show introduction: instead of the usual “HEEEEEERE’S Johnny,” McMahon delivers “HEEEEEERE’S JOAN RIVERS!” Already, the audience knows that this show will be different. Joan is standing in for Johnny as his permanent guest host, and unlike Carson’s usual relaxed and consistent stage presence, Rivers’ appearances engender a thrill and an anxiety about the unexpected. Rivers emerges from behind the curtain with her arms outstretched, hyperbolically clapping for the audience, almost thanking them for letting her enter Carson’s domain for the night. To rousing applause, Rivers launches into her opening monologue, the topic of which seems to be her daughter Melissa’s 15th birthday that evening. Looking for an audience member to back up her claims about the hardships in raising a 15-year-old, Rivers zeroes in on a woman sitting in the front row. “Are you married? Do you have kids?” she pointedly asks.¹ The woman responds that in fact, she has six children. Rivers is aghast: “One by one or a litter?” She begins improvising with her new audience ally, asking her more and more personal questions – did she go to the hospital for all six births or just lay down some newspaper with the last four? She finds out that the woman’s name is Mary – “Mary?” she asks, then points to herself, “Joan.” It’s as if two strangers are meeting at a cocktail party.

She goes on to talk about teaching her daughter “the facts of life,” and her monologue is filled with ironic jokes about how hard it is for a woman with no sex appeal – like herself – to have this milestone talk. In the end, she turns back to Mary. For being
such a good sport and playing along with Rivers’ probing questions, the host offers Mary a flower arrangement from the *Tonight* show desk. When she grabs the flowers, she also picks up Carson’s signature cigarette box. A producer from off screen yells, “You can’t give *that* away.” Seeming to capitulate, Rivers just hands Mary the flowers, but when the producer turns away, she tosses her the box (which promptly gets reclaimed by this same manager). To make up for it, Rivers invites Mary backstage after the show, promising her an even better cigarette box from the dressing room. In one final gesture, to take her gifting to the extreme, Rivers takes off her shoes and hands them to Mary, who is hysterically laughing with an armful of gifts.

This vignette, although unique and never replicated, demonstrates Rivers’ intimate relationship with the *Tonight* show audience. The audience members became active participants in her hosting duties; Rivers often either directly referred to them or allowed them to contribute to improvised moments in her scripted monologues. Even more than emphasizing the host-audience interaction, this story illustrates Rivers as a giver and positions her squarely within a feminine mode of presentational hosting. While she gives an audience member the flowers from her desk and the shoes off her feet, she also uses her position as host to amplify her comedic style of self-disclosure. This process, in which Rivers reveals intimate details of her life, makes her both dangerous and vulnerable and distinguishes her from the *Tonight* show standard: Johnny Carson. Most crucially, her self-disclosure is clearly coded as female. When she walks out onto the *Tonight* show dais clapping wildly for the audience, the emphasis of her set lies in the property of mutual exchange. Both she and the audience are clapping for one another,
implying a reciprocal relationship between these two positions that takes on an intimately female trope. The audience knows her, she feels familiar both as a consistent (though intermittent) presence, and as a woman who at times divulges a little too much personal information.

Although television stars generally thrive in a mode of familiarity, Rivers did not appear often enough as a late-night personality to make audiences, networks, and advertisers comfortable with her sustained presence. At the same time, her forthcoming approach to biographical comedy almost made her seem too familiar; audiences found it difficult to uncover which jokes were exaggerated for the sake of performance and which drew upon the realities of her private life. Exploiting this assumed familiarity and name-recognition, NBC enlisted Rivers to become Johnny Carson’s full-time guest host. NBC wanted Rivers to boost falling ratings and salvage their most profitable property. I argue that although this familiarity and personal style made her NBC’s leading choice to act as a buttress for Carson during his vacation weeks, Rivers’ style was also the reason she was ultimately relegated to the role of supporting player rather than principal performer in this male-centric late-night time slot.

A Gendered Schedule: The Men of Late Night

While daytime has historically been reserved for providing content that targets female audiences as well as offering the greatest opportunity for female performers to attain visibility (most of the time)\(^2\), primetime and late-night television have skewed male both in content and in featured talent. According to cultural studies scholar Nick Browne,
the gendering of the television schedule is not merely a stylistic choice, but rather extends from the presumed logic of the classical workday, in which men left for work in the morning and returned in the early evening, while mothers and wives performed their work from the home. Scheduling often aligns itself with the notion of which consumers will be watching when. Since television is tied to the home, the TV schedule is also tied to the logic of when audiences are most likely to partake in leisure time within this space. Even further, he claims that scheduling is a crucial element in both programming and content creation, saying that in many ways the schedule “determines format and reception […] of a particular television program, and conditions its relation to the audience.” The late-night talk show provides a unique glimpse into the assumptions of who will be watching when and the expectations for content shown at a later (and therefore “edgier”) time of day.

Just recently, late-night talk shows have garnered a certain amount of press and criticism for their lack of diversity in hosts, who are the names, faces and brands of particular late-night properties. As of 2016, across the three major networks the late-night talk show hosts are all white men: Jimmy Fallon and Seth Meyers represent NBC, ABC broadcasts Jimmy Kimmel’s show, and CBS’s recent talk show shakeups resulted in Stephen Colbert and James Corden taking over already-existing programs. Cable television has bridged some gaps in diversity with the hiring of two black hosts – Trevor Noah of The Daily Show, and Larry Wilmore of The Nightly Show (both on Comedy Central) – though women are still grossly underrepresented.

After Rivers, only two women have managed to carve out a niche for themselves
in late-night comedy. From 2007–2014, comedian Chelsea Handler hosted a program called *Chelsea Lately* on the E! Network. Her show somewhat altered the standard late-night format: instead of delivering an opening monologue, Handler would assemble a panel of comedians to remark on entertainment news. Her acerbic, often vulgar, jokes made her seem like a spiritual heir to Rivers. But her placement on a network directed towards female viewers signaled her niche quality and increased popularity amongst women more so than men. In January of 2016, Samantha Bee, a former correspondent for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, began hosting her own show called *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* on TBS. This satirical news show skewers current events in a similar manner to its predecessor, except in this case, Bee has eschewed the news desk and in-studio interviews in favor of longer investigative segments often related to the social and political challenges facing women. Bee’s show has been well-received amongst critics and was just renewed through the end of 2016. Her foray into political commentary marks an important step forward for female exposure in late night and yet, she has been excluded from some recent conversations about the current state of late-night culture.

In 2015, *Vanity Fair* magazine published a large spread about the “titans” of late night. In a photograph, ten late-night hosts were pictured, all of whom were men.
The photo assumed a *Mad Men*-esque motif: each host wore an expertly-tailored suit, and most of them clutched retro low-ball glasses filled with what appeared to be whiskey. Although the article acknowledges that women are “conspicuously missing” and hopes that change is soon to come, this aesthetic connection to a time when women in the workforce were rare and unusual lends credibility to the idea that while it may seem like an oversight that women are missing, late-night audiences are safe and in fine hands with this cadre of men. Further, while the late-night landscape is beginning to change (most notably with Chelsea Handler and Samantha Bee), this lack of diversity seems bound up in both the historical origins of late-night comedy and in expectations about who is supposed to deliver the satirical commentary synonymous with late-night talk shows.
In response to the *Vanity Fair* photograph, Bee took to Twitter and posted a photo-shopped version imagining her as a centaur-like creature aggressively shooting laser beams out of her eyes. She simply captioned the photo, “BETTER.”

![Samantha Bee’s photo-shopped (some might say improved) *Vanity Fair* cover](image)

**Figure 3:** Samantha Bee’s photo-shopped (some might say improved) *Vanity Fair* cover

It is clear that in the sixty years that late-night television talk shows have existed, not much has changed with regard to the inclusion of women. In order to understand Rivers’
unique position as a rare female voice in late-night television, it is crucial to examine the institutional origins of the genre.

**The Origins of Late-Night Television**

In its most basic form, late-night television was originally developed as an experimental way to subsidize other TV content. As a burgeoning television broadcaster, NBC initially shaped the production, distribution, and advertising structure on the radio standard. Much of radio was based on a single-sponsor model; one company, product, or brand would sponsor an entire time slot, and often name the program after itself. Pat Weaver, an NBC executive who held the positions of vice president in charge of television programming, NBC president, and chair of NBC from 1949–1956 is often considered the architect of the TV network’s early success. After becoming president of the network, Weaver wanted to transform advertising in this nascent commercial broadcast industry. Rather than perpetuate the practice of corporate sponsors working with ad agencies to create and produce programming (and therefore own an entire broadcast time slot), Weaver wanted NBC to produce its own content. Most dramatically, he wanted to completely overhaul advertising and implement multiple-sponsorship. Different sponsors would pay for thirty- or sixty-second ad spots in an effort to seize control away from advertisers and place it back in the hands of the network. While his reshaped vision of television advertising gave NBC the freedom to experiment with new kinds of programs that did not need to rely on a sole sponsor-overseer, he needed to create inexpensive yet profitable programs within which he could test this updated
The television talk show proved to be one solution because it was an “efficient and effective commodity” that was “relatively cheap to produce,” and “extremely profitable when successful.” With static sets and relatively little production value compared to narrative programs, talk shows provided the platform Weaver needed. Beyond the monetary motivations, talk shows also helped Weaver realize his vision for bookends to the television day. In 1952, he created the *Today* show, which was originally developed as a magazine-format talk show meant to open the day with a topical presentation of the news as well as human-interest pieces. Two years later, Weaver created the *Tonight* show, a daily bookend that would serve as a satirical program designed to skewer the news at the close of the day’s broadcast with a light, humorous lean.

The *Tonight* show was a very successful creation. Today it is widely recognized as Johnny Carson’s primary star vehicle, but originally, it went through a variety of iterations. Although Carson may have “institutionalized” the *Tonight* show and the late-night talk show genre, many of the conventions and stylistic attributes of the show originated under the stewardships of his two predecessors. Steve Allen, a trained improviser, hosted the show from its inception in 1954 until 1957. His comic background laid the groundwork for his ability to perform well in live or seemingly live situations, so his broadcasts relied on comedy bits, sketches, and improvised moments. Jack Paar, who took over for Allen from 1957–1962, placed more emphasis on the “talk” portion of the show and ushered in the rise of the celebrity guest. Taking these cues
from his *Tonight* show forefathers, Carson fused Allen’s commitment to comedy and Paar’s focus on interviews to canonize what has become the standard format in late-night comedy.

Taking over for Paar in 1962, Carson implemented many of today’s lasting late-night talk show traditions. He began his shows with a five to ten-minute monologue, incorporated sketches, skits, or other characters throughout the program (a device borrowed from Allen), invited guests who were either entertainers or intellectuals, hosted musical guests who would perform on the show, and provided an important platform for promising, unknown stand-up comedians.16 But most importantly, Carson used the program to raise the profile of late-night TV and develop a highly sophisticated and satirical mode of topical humor.

Carson elevated the *Tonight* show by featuring both satire and comic performance, which in many ways has come to define the NBC comedy brand. As noted by Jeffrey Miller, “NBC’s true legacy with satire […] lies not in primetime but in late night.”17 But satire, as a mode of “sophisticated comedy”18 is often closely associated with an authoritative male voice. If satire is a type of humor used to mock “the verities of culture and society,”19 then women who have to work within the bounds of a patriarchal society are disadvantaged in their attempts to openly skewer it. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Rivers’ and other female comics’ self-deprecating jokes may have covertly functioned as subversive satire. However, their work often operated on the personal level, rather than the topical or societal one. Thanks to Carson and the *Tonight* show, late-night talk evolved early on as a male-dominated space, with a pervasive male-
oriented comic style that distanced itself from the personal.

Despite widespread literature on daytime talk shows and the issue-oriented talk that exploded in the 1990s, little research parses the particulars of late-night television as a distinct subgenre. In part, this may be due to the virtual stronghold that Carson and the *Tonight* show held on this time slot and formula for almost 30 years. In an attempt to delineate some historical sensibility, television scholar Jason Mittell contends that on a generic level, the late-night talk show is an offshoot of the broader talk show genre, which includes innumerable subgenres. With a slightly more in-depth perspective, Bernard Timberg, in his historical, cultural, and stylistic exploration of the television talk show, identifies four principal tenets that he argues drive all talk shows, which is worth discussing further in some detail.

First, Timberg demonstrates that a host or hosts usually serve as talk show anchors. While the host is the ostensible “star” of the show, Timberg argues that, “from a production standpoint, the host frequently acts as managing editor,” and further, “from a marketing standpoint, the host is the label, the trademark, that sells the product.” Late-night talk shows cling to this idea of host-as-brand, most notably in their labeling. For example, while the “Tonight” part of the *Tonight* show belongs to NBC, each iteration has been named after its current host, as in, The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson. When a name is attached, the network is able to quickly convey to audiences detailed information about the type of show they should expect and the particular voice that will guide them.

Secondly, Timberg argues that a talk show should feel live, like a conversation
happening at the present moment, despite being taped or rerun. Though conversations are taped in the middle of the afternoon for late-night programs, they must take on an edgy tone that audiences have come to expect in the 11:30pm time slot. These conversations must still invite the audience into the action as it appears to be happening and simultaneously make them feel included in on the joke.

Third, Timberg asserts that television talk is a commodity in a competitive landscape. In his view, “a commodity as valuable as a talk show hosted by a major star must be carefully managed. It must fit the commercial imperatives and time limits of syndicators, packagers, and network programmers. Though it can be entertaining, even outrageous, it must never seriously alienate advertisers or viewers.” Although late-night comedy airs past bedtime hours, and presumably children are sleeping, the show and the host still need to adhere to standards of conduct and self-censorship in order to maintain commercial viability for both the host and the network. These programs must balance being “edgy” enough for the expectations of this kind of time slot and being tasteful enough to attract and keep audiences and advertisers alike.

Timberg’s fourth tenet is much like his second, which contends that talk programs should feature conversations that not only seem live but also spontaneous. Though often outlined prior to air, interviews between the host and his or her guest should appear improvised and spontaneous, in order to inject a sense of “what’s he or she going to say next” into the viewing experience. This is especially potent in the late-night format, in which guests often come prepared with personal stories or vignettes that may be slightly more risqué or otherwise considered inappropriate for more mainstream interview
settings.

While most talk shows share these defining principles, not all are held to the same standard in public opinion. According to an informal study Mittell conducted about the correlation between taste and talk shows, he found that while most participants considered talk shows “trash” TV (putting programs like *The Jerry Springer Show* and even *The Oprah Winfrey Show* into this category), late-night programs such as *The Late Show with David Letterman* seemed to qualify as “quality” TV.26 Even among those participants who do not personally watch talk shows, most respondents asserted that these quality programs demanded quality audiences – identified as educated and upper-middle class – in return.27 These findings lend credibility to the notion of late night as a high-culture and sophisticated daypart in a medium historically considered, as previously noted, delegitimated and feminized. Carson’s authoritative male voice in late night was crucial to both its designation as quality and to the *Tonight* show’s time-slot dominance.

Feminist media scholar Bonnie Dow acutely synthesizes the scholarly work that attributes the creation and interpretation of textual meaning to generic identification.28 Quoting Jane Feuer, Dow posits the power of genre to “control the audience’s reaction by providing an interpretive context.”29 Even more potent than contextual significance, Dow argues that the most salient facet of genre in meaning-making is the use of comparison and, “prior experience with similar forms [that] guides interpretation of the forms one encounters.”30 With an understanding of recognizable generic conventions, audiences are able to decode deviations in those conventions and read a text in relation to their genre-based expectations. If one convention of late-night television is its constructed and
naturalized masculinization, both in style and in featured personalities, then showcasing a female voice in this domain would serve as a fundamental deviation from form. When Joan Rivers began stepping in for Johnny Carson on the *Tonight* show, the discord between the appearance of a woman in the male-coded space of late-night television provided both a gendered contrast and a generic contrast.

**The Female Sensibility Enters the Male Bastion**

In terms of scheduling, performance style, and the stable of talent, late night was and remains aligned with a white, heterosexual male sensibility. But in 1983, NBC uncharacteristically turned to a female voice. Enlisting *Tonight* show mainstay Joan Rivers to become Johnny Carson’s permanent guest host, the network hoped she could reinvigorate a program increasingly losing freshness and edge. Part of what made her an attractive substitute for Carson was her perceived contrast to him. She solidified her persona as a risqué, edgy, over-sharing and seemingly uncontrollable force, distinct from the perma-cool air of Johnny Carson. Rivers’ ability to deviate from the standard format and formula that Carson had forged in late night allowed her to successfully penetrate this genre. First, through a comparative analysis of these hosts’ clashing styles, and then later through a historical examination of the conditions that prompted NBC to promote Rivers, the impact of this performer’s feminized inflection becomes clear.

After Carson’s 1962 debut, *Variety* declared that while “his opening wasn’t especially auspicious […] the best part of the evening was an air of graciousness.”<sup>31</sup> This was true of his style from the outset through his final show: Carson was reliably polite
and gracious. Part of the key to both his initial popularity and enduring longevity was that “he was affable, accessible, charming and amusing, not just a very funny comedian but the kind of guy you would gladly welcome into your home.”\(^\text{32}\) Though Rivers often seemed grateful for the opportunity to host America’s premiere late-night talk show, politeness and decorum were not part of her performance vernacular.

In a piece comparing Carson’s hosting style with Rivers’, critic Michael Pollan articulated the gulf between these two personalities: “Where [Carson] is scrupulously polite, [Rivers] is bitchy; where he is low-key, she is overheated; where he is Midwest, Waspy and proper, she is urban, ethnic and gossipy. Carson conducts interviews as if he were at the country club; Rivers does hers at the kitchen table.”\(^\text{33}\) Although Pollan clearly values Carson’s propriety over Rivers’ lack of decorum, it is precisely this difference that characterizes why she was NBC’s clear choice as the Carson stand-in. Timberg notes that their differences most acutely represent “a gender battle, a battle of comedy icons of masculinity and femininity.”\(^\text{34}\) While Rivers’ contrasts with Carson make her an appealing choice to fill in as his substitute, her femaleness and less formal style also position her as lowbrow compared to his highbrow persona. One of the clearest examples of their diverging styles is an examination of Carson’s topical tone in contrast to Rivers’ mode of personal self-disclosure.

The difference in the hosts’ tones is evident in their monologue styles. Timberg characterized Carson’s physical presence as, “formal, reserved, buttoned-down, vertical,” comparing this straightforwardness to the steadiness in the late-night TV visual aesthetic.\(^\text{35}\) He would often shy away from risqué or overtly personal (or personally
political) topics,\textsuperscript{36} and learned how to operate within the boundaries of network television without forfeiting any snark or edge. Carson often used his monologues to poke fun at political figures and government failings, taking down people like President Nixon and satirizing the cultural obsession with presidential elections.\textsuperscript{37} Though he took aim at public figures, his political humor and topical jokes “were sliced and diced so neatly, so unmaliciously, with so much alacrity, that even the stuffiest conservative Republicans found themselves almost smiling at Mr. Carson’s Nixon-Agnew jokes and uptight doctrinaire liberal Democrats savored his pokes at Lyndon B. Johnson and the Kennedys.”\textsuperscript{38} Through his use of topical humor, Carson was able to find common ground with his audiences. Clearly mocking the Geraldo Rivera-Al Capone empty bank vault debacle that had been recently broadcast, Carson quipped, “Last night, Geraldo Rivera [pauses as he begins to laugh, audience chuckles trickle in] broke into the head of a Valley girl and found nothing.”\textsuperscript{39} He pauses and laughs along with the audience because thanks to the cultural touchstone of Rivera’s recent blunder, both he and the studio/home audiences know where this joke is going to go. He levels with viewers and is “directly in contact with the sensibilities of his audience.”\textsuperscript{40} But by design, his audiences were not always distinctly aware of his private sensibilities.

Though his jokes often relied on the popular or the political to provide common links, he rarely divulged information about his personal life or his social/political leanings. According to his \textit{New York Times} obituary, writers Richard Severo and Bill Carter asserted that throughout his life Carson closely guarded the details of his personal experiences and in the end, remained “something of a mystery man” to the audiences
who trusted him and laughed with him. It is in this performative tradition that Rivers most clearly deviates from Carson’s signature style. When she provided hosting support for Carson, her appearances were characterized by extreme examples of personal disclosure.

Over the years, Carson had many Tonight show substitutes. From Bill Cosby to Garry Shandling, David Letterman to Jay Leno, the show featured a variety of different temporary captains under the stewardship of Carson. While Rivers was not the first person or even the first woman to substitute for Carson as guest host of the Tonight show (that distinction belongs to Rivers’ comedic predecessor Phyllis Diller), Rivers first appeared as a guest host on January 26, 1970 and became the first woman to host the show for an entire week in 1971. Between 1970 and 1983, when she was named his permanent guest host, Rivers guest-hosted the program dozens of times, often spiking ratings among audiences who tuned in to see what she was going to reveal about herself and which celebrities would become the latest target of her acerbic takedowns.

In many ways, Rivers transplanted the stand-up style and performative persona explored in the previous section onto the job of guest-hosting the Tonight show. Although I have described the masculinization of late-night comedy and talk shows, television on a broad scale is a feminized medium. In their discussion of the process of legitimating television, scholars Elana Levine and Michael Newman recall how “the television set was constructed as a feminized and domestic appliance, not unlike the refrigerators and washing machines also being marketed to homemakers in the post-war years of the medium’s consumer debut.” In its ability to physically penetrate the domestic space,
television thrives on intimate presentational modes that match its homebound location. Importantly, Rivers deviated from Carson’s institutionalized style in a distinctly female way – by creating intimacy through self-disclosure and mutual exchange. Her monologues followed a self-deprecating tone, flush with intimately personal details. For example, she would often joke about her marriage and her sex life, saying,

I don’t know about you but rain makes me feel very sexy [makes a grotesque and twisted face]. And I’m lying in bed this morning with my husband and I said to him, ‘The rain is just making me feel to do something urging, like wild and impulsive. The first thing I want to do this morning is something I’ve never done to you before.’ He said, ‘Make breakfast?’

Although there is no way of knowing if this conversation really happened between Rivers and her husband, she uses what could be personal details about her life to make audiences laugh. In the same way that Carson uses politics and topical stories to provide archetypes that all audiences can easily understand, Rivers uses herself as the same kind of touchstone. The conversational, improvisational, self-deprecating, and personally intimate stand-up style she developed over many years became her signature as guest host. But in this arena, she also shifted the target of her jokes from herself to unsuspecting celebrities.

In her attempts at topicality, Rivers redirected focus not towards politics but towards figures of pop culture. Pollan’s characterization of Rivers as “gossipy” is most clearly evident when she rails against major stars. According to Rowe, women often provide commentary in “soft news” formats – tabloids, gossip magazines, lifestyle networks like E! – while “hard news covers events clearly in the public sphere.” Rivers chose objects of ridicule that were in the public sphere, but were prominent figures in
entertainment rather than politics or matters of citizen affairs. Her most famous target became Elizabeth Taylor. The once-glamorous movie star who became notorious for her many marriages and the paparazzi swarm that followed her, Taylor began gaining weight later in her life and Rivers exploited this fall from superstardom grace. “You know when it’s time to diet?” Rivers joked during a Tonight show hosting appearance. “When you stand behind Elizabeth Taylor and they can still see your thighs.” Beyond topical, these jokes are mean-spirited. Though she cultivated a non-threateningly vulgar stand-up persona, this development made her seem, as Pollan noted, “bitchy.” Although bitchiness may garner ratings, Rivers became considered a low-brow comic – displaying a feminized “manic vulgarity” in contrast with Carson’s masculinized propriety.

_Tropes of Disclosure in Rivers’ Interview Style_

Rivers’ interview style is also notable for the way it evokes a “kitchen-table” feeling. Though Pollan devalued her domestically-oriented style in favor of Carson’s “country-club” conversations, there is a way in which her intimate and personal mode of communication promotes trust between the host and guest. We can look to social exchange theory to help explain the politics of social relationships and how these function within the context of Rivers’ hosting duties. According to psychological theorists Kari Trexler Ellingson and John P. Galassi, self-disclosure and personal revelation often have a powerful impact on social exchanges. They argue that in any given conversation, when one person discloses something (especially something incredibly personal or “high risk”), the other person might feel “obligated” to self-
disclose in return. Despite inspiring potential feelings of obligation, these theorists claim that self-disclosure can actually foster trust and comfort between people sharing, and that revealing personal truths becomes easier when someone else has already done it first.

As an exemplar of high-risk self-disclosure (or at least seemingly true self-disclosure), Rivers often expects the same kind of candor from her interviewees. In a Tonight show interview with Cher, Rivers gets personal. The interview begins with Cher commenting on how Rivers’ breasts look in her dress, co-opting the host’s catchphrase to say, “Can we talk about your [motions to her breasts].” Rivers says, “It’s all pushed up,” fusing self-deprecation with frank talk of her female body. From the outset, Rivers frames this interview as a place where they can both feel comfortable sharing details and making fun of themselves. They talk about Cher selling her house and other everyday annoyances, and it feels like two girlfriends catching up over lunch. Then Rivers begins probing: “Are you dating someone in New York?” Cher reveals she does not want to discuss specifics, but Rivers ignores her and interrupts, “I heard you’re dating a 23-year-old guy and I’m just dying. Yes or no?” Still playing coy, Cher responds, “Yes and no.” After a huge laugh from the audience, Cher concedes that she is, in fact, dating a 23-year-old and allows the audience into this intimate conversation.

In the next segment, rather than move on to topics related more closely to Cher’s work or the film she is there to promote, Rivers asks Cher about her children, a topic of conversation that most celebrities do not entertain. If, as Richard Dyer argues, movie stars like Cher, who had been recently nominated for a Golden Globe in Come Back to
the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean, are meant to maintain some unknowability and unfamiliarity, then revealing details about one’s children would be in direct opposition to this imperative. But Rivers’ self-disclosure clearly encourages this “familiar” and familial disclosure from her guests in return. Cher acknowledges that she has two children from two different men, and that her son, Elijah, rarely sees his father Greg Allman, a musician and celebrity in his own right. Rivers interjects with her own judgment, and calls it “disgusting” for a father to not see his son. Rather than balk at Rivers’ personal intrusion, Cher laughs along with her, and seems to agree with the host’s assessment of her son’s complicated custodial arrangement.

It has been noted that most late-night talk show appearances are loosely-scripted; guests usually come prepared with vignettes that reveal carefully selected aspects of their private lives. But celebrities rarely want to share such “high risk” and intimate details of their personal stories. However, Rivers’ own high-risk disclosures would often inspire her guests to reveal truths that might otherwise have remained hidden. While this could have been seen as a potential positive force in transforming the nature of celebrity interviews, and could be one part of the explanation for Rivers’ high ratings as guest host, she was often critically belittled for this feminized mode of communicating while Carson was praised for his more masculine reserve.

Despite this visibility as Carson’s guest and frequent stand in, there has been relatively little scholarly research examining Rivers’ position in late-night TV. Most of the academic work that references her focuses on celebrities and the culture of plastic surgery or the process of aging in Hollywood especially for women. It is also notable that
feminist media scholars often do not study Rivers’ late-night visibility because many consider her to operate within the anti-feminist modes of self-deprecation and “catty” attacks on other women. Interestingly, in Rowe’s examination of the “unruly woman” – a figure who is loud, addresses taboo subjects, often references the female body and its processes, etc. – Rivers is unexplored and in many ways written off as just a self-deprecating comic who inhabits the male perspective in stand-up. But Rowe’s dismissal of Rivers ignores the comic’s complex negotiation of the daypart. Rivers inhabited the masculinized space of late night and imbued her appearances with a distinctly feminized style of communication and performance. In many ways, Rivers actually used her femininity to subversively infiltrate a domain often hostile towards female comics (thanks in large part to Carson’s distaste for women comedians).

According to humor and stand-up scholar Lawrence Mintz, Rivers falls into a category of performers who purposefully break taboos and deviate from solidified formats. He claims that in opposition to more straightforward comedy, “the pleasure the audience derives from this sanctioned deviance may be related to the ritual violation of taboos, inversion of ritual, and public iconoclasm frequently encountered in cultural traditions.” Rivers’ penchant for violating and inverting expectations of the genre not only made her an interesting performer to watch, but also made her a ratings success. Rivers consistently drew better ratings than any other Tonight show guest host, and even beat Carson’s numbers. In 1983, Carson was averaging a 6.5 Nielsen rating while Rivers would draw up to a 6.9. Her ability to attract audiences and provide an unexpected detour from a show losing its freshness, as well as her perceived non-threat as
a self-deprecating comic, made her a compelling candidate for Carson’s permanent guest host.

**Becoming Tonight’s Permanent Guest Host**

In 1983, after making dozens of appearances as both a guest and guest host on Carson’s *Tonight* show since 1965, Rivers was offered a new and prestigious position: Johnny’s permanent guest host. As a substitute, Rivers would not only provide relief for Carson in his hosting duties but also present a compelling stylistic contrast to the show’s central figure. But the introduction of Rivers in this role also followed a particularly difficult time for the preeminent *Tonight* show host and a network that had begun struggling to find programming successes and good ratings.

Prior to the announcement of Rivers’ new position, Carson’s relationship with NBC had become contentious because of his decreased appearances on the show. In 1978, he had brokered a new contract with NBC that ensured him more time off and a salary raise. According to reports, he would work twelve four-day weeks (Mondays would be covered by a guest host), twenty-five three-day weeks where he would broadcast Wednesday through Friday, with Monday featuring a guest host and a “Best of Carson” rerun airing on Tuesday, and fifteen weeks of proper vacation. In addition, his salary was increased to a figure between $2.5 million and $3 million, up from $1.5 million in previous years. But in the next year, NBC was facing problems with other areas of programming. Losing in ratings to the CBS sitcom lineup, Fred Silverman, then-president of NBC, wanted Carson to appear more often than had been negotiated in his
contract because *Tonight* was NBC’s most profitable program at the time, responsible for “17 percent, or $23 million of the pretax profits of the National Broadcast Company.”58

After Silverman began publically calling for Carson to increase his number of broadcasts per year, Carson responded by declaring that he would leave the show in 1979. As a result, the network “capitulated abjectly” and not only increased his salary to $5 million a year, but also offered him development commitments with new properties for his independent production company.59

At the same time that Carson and NBC were battling, other late night programs were entering the fray. ABC began airing *Nightline with Ted Koppel* in the early 1980s, which captured 19 percent of the audience in 1981.60 While *Nightline* aired in the late-night time slot, its serious and journalistic tone starkly contrasted to the late-night comedy/talk format. Other competing late-night talk show personalities like Joey Bishop in the 1960s on ABC and Dick Cavett on ABC and CBS in the 1970s acted as the principal challengers to Carson’s time-slot dominance, though neither ever surpassed him. Perhaps the biggest supposed threat in the early 1980s came from the announcement of a new late-night talk show called *Thicke of the Night*, hosted by Alan Thicke, a then-daytime talk show host in Canada.61 The show was set to premiere in September of 1983 on independent stations and was produced by Fred Silverman, the former NBC exec who had clashed with Carson a few years earlier. Concurrently, a growing field of increasingly fragmented late-night challengers posed a particularly large threat to NBC during a year when network programs in the late-night time slot were dropping across the three major broadcasters: *Tonight* had captured 24 percent of the audience in 1981 but
fell to 22 percent in 1983, CBS primetime series reruns (which the network would
counter program opposite Carson) dropped from 21 to 20 percent over the same time, and
Nightline suffered a five-point loss dropping to 14 percent from 19 percent two years
prior.\textsuperscript{62} While NBC executives attributed the loss of audience numbers across networks to
“the appearance of R-rated movies on cable channels at that hour,” they also began to
search for ways to reinvigorate a genre that was losing freshness and facing
unprecedented competition while its principal star was fighting to save his vacation time.

Enter Rivers. As Carson’s most frequent substitute and a ratings success – she
attracted 25 percent of the audience in the early months of 1983 when regular episodes
only attracted 22 percent\textsuperscript{63} -- Rivers seemed to make logical business sense for this new
promotion. Rivers had the benefit of being both foreign and familiar: audiences knew her
from her myriad appearances over the last 20 years, but her edginess and intensity also
served as a provocative divergence from Carson’s even-keeled mode of hosting. But
Rivers also seemed to be a safe choice, a performer who could generate buzz but pose no
real threat to the king of late night. In an episode of PBS’ Pioneers of Television entitled
“Funny Ladies,” both the program and Rivers acknowledge one major reason Rivers was
a safe stand-in. According to the voiceover narration, “Rivers felt she was no threat to
Johnny. She believed NBC would never allow Carson to be replaced by a woman.”\textsuperscript{64}
Rivers’ actual testimony itself only enhanced this notion: “He knew from the beginning
they would never give it to a woman. Very smart of him.”\textsuperscript{65} While her lower-class status
as a female comic and her overtly feminized performance and hosting style allowed her
to come in and support Carson and the network, these factors ultimately may have
prevented her from serving as an independent and central voice in late night.

In many ways, her deviations also “othered” her. While the process of othering or the condition of being othered is often considered negative, it can also attribute to the idea of novelty--something other as something new. The impact of Rivers’ perceived novelty can be measured in her spiked ratings: one explanation is that her numbers were higher than Carson’s because she was an othered, intermittent, and therefore novel, host. But the nature of novelty dictates that it eventually wears off (or can only be sustained in certain conditions like Rivers’ monthly special appearances). Once Rivers’ novelty was no longer novel but expected and entrenched, her vulgarity and perceived “bitchiness” became untenable for long-running nightly broadcasts.

In the upcoming chapter, I will examine the circumstances behind Rivers’ acrimonious split with Carson and NBC along with her failed attempt to anchor a new late-night talk show for the nascent Fox network. In many ways, Rivers’ otherness and deviations from the generic format canonized by Carson, NBC, and the Tonight show made her an attractive candidate for a new network trying to compete in the late-night time slot. But her persona as the once-sweet, now “bitchy” gossip, along with the evolving and complicated narrative surrounding her time as an NBC mainstay might have damaged her image too profoundly to succeed without the endorsement from Carson or the established NBC brand.

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CHAPTER THREE: BATTLES AND BETRAYALS – CHARTING RIVERS’
SCANDALIZED MOVE FROM NBC TO FOX

*Enter Talking*, Joan Rivers’ first memoir, features a sentimental dedication page:

“To Edgar, who made this book happen, and to Johnny Carson, who made it all happen.”

During what became Rivers’ final appearance on the *Tonight* show in April of 1986, the comedian asked Carson to read this dedication aloud. It was a touching moment between Carson and Rivers, and reminded the audience that he was instrumental in her success. But interestingly, the dedication also defies certain relational expectations. In a dedication page, authors typically thank their families last for being their most important and fundamental support system. But here, Rivers subverts that expectation by saving her most effusive praise for Carson, her professional partner/mentor, rather than for Edgar, her romantic partner. By placing these two men in juxtaposition with one another, Rivers implies that while Edgar is her husband, Carson is her “work-husband.” These are her most enduring relationships, and when Carson reads the dedication aloud, it not only signals their closeness but also evokes a sense of nostalgia.

This nostalgic quality of her final appearance also had a visual component. In this segment, Rivers wore the same basic black dress, demure strand of pearls, and blonde bouffant wig that she had on during her first performance on Carson in 1965.
Figure 4: Rivers’ first *Tonight* show appearance in 1965

Figure 5: Rivers’ final *Tonight* show appearance in 1986
In the moment, this seems like a sweet gesture, one that links the past to the present. But in hindsight, this mode of dress, and the entire interview, takes on a new meaning.

Unbeknownst to Carson, Rivers was deep into negotiations with the Fox Broadcasting Company about starring in her own late-night program. When the news of her move broke a few weeks after this sweet exchange, the entire dynamic of their professional relationship changed, and Rivers’ public persona suffered greatly. Her image took a beating for two primary reasons: one, because she had set herself up as Carson’s “work-wife” figure, and two, because she was female. Because she manufactured this performative wife-husband dynamic between herself and Carson, her professional defection was viewed as a personal betrayal. She was the cheating wife rather than the supportive partner. On the systemic and institutional level, she was also the victim of sexism in the entertainment business. As a woman, Rivers had career aspirations that were unusual and unprecedented in late-night comedy. Her male contemporaries who had left Carson for their own ventures both in late night and in primetime – Bill Cosby, David Letterman, David Brenner – were not exposed to the same backlash that she faced as a woman.

In the interest of examining these star persona shifts, it is also crucial to uncover the industrial and personal factors that influenced Rivers to leave the safety of NBC for an up-and-coming Fox network. Through an examination of network branding and the creation of a fourth network, I will explain the ways in which Rivers became influential at Fox and how the network used and manipulated her as a brand in order to define their own identity. Additionally, I explore how her acrimonious split from Carson not only
damaged her star image but also deflected attention from her show as a stand-alone venture while the narrative in the press became about her competition with her former boss. Finally, I will analyze the way Fox executives used Rivers’ persona to generate interest in their new venture but ultimately doomed the show by forcing her to tone down the very persona in which they had initially invested.

**Breaking from NBC, Finding New Beginnings at Fox**

Understanding Joan Rivers’ central role in the creation and promotion of the Fox television network requires excavation of the industrial history surrounding the rise of the Fox Broadcasting Company. In the mid-1980s, Barry Diller, then-president of the 20th Century Fox film studio, and newspaper magnate Rupert Murdoch, the owner of News Corporation, began brainstorming ways to pool their companies’ resources. Their goal was to create the fourth broadcast network. Until Fox, no competitors had succeeded in infiltrating the NBC, CBS, ABC oligopoly. The DuMont Television Network came the closest in the 1950s but failed because it could not acquire enough affiliates. A few years before the creation of Fox, Metromedia was able to get some commitments from affiliated stations, but its plan at that time for a movie-based network failed to tap into an underserved programming niche.

In an analysis of Fox’s attempt at penetrating the network stronghold, telecommunications scholars Laurie Thomas and Barry Litman point to a few key barriers that prevented these and other entities from successfully achieving that goal. First, an FCC “station allotment plan” installed in 1952 permitted the presence of only
three VHF (very high frequency) commercial television stations in the top 100 TV markets. This meant that there was a “structural barrier” preventing companies from accessing VHF stations, which were the highest quality and therefore the most desirable channels of broadcasting. Although the allotment plan remained in effect, Reagan deregulation in the 1980s led to an “increase in multiple station ownership,” which “meant a greater network base of owned-and-operated stations would be possible for assured clearance.” With an increased opportunity for potential affiliated stations, some of the structural barriers preventing a fourth network began to erode.

In addition, Thomas & Litman argue that it was challenging for most contenders to compete with the three major networks because those entities were already holdings within vertically integrated conglomerates. A viable contender needed the “financial commitment, access to a sufficient supply of desirable programming, and a comparable share of affiliates as well as owned-and-operated stations” to compete with the established networks. From a structural point of view, Jason Mittell claims that “Fox was able to compete only because of its horizontal and vertical integration, as its parent company, News Corporation, owned numerous broadcast stations, a film studio with a major television production wing, and numerous newspapers and magazines used to promote the new network.” But it is possible that the other condition that made the Fox Broadcasting Company a viable competitor was its relationship with Joan Rivers. Beyond overcoming complex industrial limitations and conditions, Thomas & Litman argue that a successful fourth network must differentiate itself from the other three by catering to an underserved programming niche that can also potentially “capture a significant market
share.” As the “First Lady of late-night comedy,” Rivers’ image was inextricably tied to a specific genre and niche, one with a young, urban, upwardly mobile audience that Fox hoped to capture.

The stirrings of a Fox-Rivers partnership began when Edgar Rosenberg, Rivers’ husband and business manager, heard that Diller and Murdoch were trying to start a fourth network. He encouraged the family lawyer, Peter Dekom, to reach out to Diller with a covert message in which he allegedly said: “We’ve heard you’re starting a new network […] I have a client that might interest you. She isn’t available right now, but she might be available soon.” Why, two years into her guest hosting position on the Tonight show, would Rivers be itching to leave? In 1985, precipitating events forced Rivers to question her relationship with NBC and the Tonight show, ultimately driving her to risk leaving her “home” network for the opportunity to sign with Fox.

In many ways, deconstructing the events surrounding Rivers’ break from NBC will be difficult because most recollections from the time are founded in rumors or hearsay. While it may be somewhat challenging to decode the “truth” about what happened, this challenge highlights the nature of confusion and misunderstanding that characterized Rivers’ final year at NBC. According to Rivers, in 1985, her close friend and NBC vice president of special services, Jay Michelis, showed her a confidential NBC memo that had begun floating around. She alleged that the memo listed ten possible hosts who could replace Carson in the event of his retirement. Even though she had been working as Carson’s permanent substitute for two years, Rivers’ name was not included on the list. Brandon Tartikoff, then-president of NBC Entertainment, assured reporters
and shareholders that no such list existed and “reiterated that ‘if there were any such list, Joan Rivers would be at the top.’” Despite these conflicting accounts and a lack of evidence for the alleged memo (Rivers was never able to produce a copy), Rivers felt betrayed and cast aside by the network that had consistently provided her with career opportunities. This was the first incident in a series of suspicious events that alerted Rivers to the precariousness of her standing at NBC.

In addition to the alleged memo, Rivers battled with NBC executives and Tonight show producers over her contract for the 1986–1987 season. Normally, her contract as a guest host would mirror Carson’s: if he was offered a 1-year deal, she got a 1-year deal, and if he got two years, so did she. For the 1986–1987 season, Carson signed a 2-year extension on his contract while Rivers was only offered one year on hers. Though perhaps not an overt move on NBC’s part to diminish Rivers’ role there, this perceived slight signaled to Rivers that NBC did not view her as a long-term presence. In an effort to remain part of the NBC family, Rivers told network management that she would agree to the 1-year contract as long as they drew up an overall deal between her and the network. Regardless of her future at the Tonight show, Rivers wanted security and the ability to perform in NBC specials, variety programs, or cross-promotional opportunities. NBC refused to provide her with an overall deal, indicating to Rivers that she was neither viewed as an important part of the Tonight show nor part of the NBC inner sanctum. It was clear that Rivers’ performative capital had been valuable for spiking ratings, but because her brand did not dovetail with NBC’s, she was rejected as an “NBC personality.”
Stars and Networks: A Profound Relationship

In order to understand the reasons why NBC resisted a permanent relationship with Rivers while Fox explicitly linked itself to the star, it is important to explore the often-intertwined relationship between a network and its performers. There is often a reciprocal flow of identity between networks and their stables of talent. In her historical and analytical account of early TV stardom, Susan Murray claims that “television used its stars to define itself.” Without an established mode of programming, early broadcast networks relied on the identities of their most popular stars to dictate what their brand would become. In TV broadcasting, as in most other industries, networks develop easily recognizable brands to provide anticipatory information about what viewers can expect from a particular provider.

Although broadcast networks have relatively distinct brands, the industrial realities of broadcasting require a mass audience and a consideration for a potentially diverse viewership. Despite the attention to the mass sensibility, in many ways, creating recognizable brands can help mitigate some, but not all, expectations. If there is a new show premiering on a specific network, viewers may be able to make educated guesses about the nature of that program. Conversely, viewers may be surprised if a program does not adhere to their network-specific assumptions. From a marketing standpoint, this kind of branding helps desired audiences more easily find certain programs and allows advertisers to target specific consumers. A network can cultivate a cohesive identity by specializing in specific genres, working with particular show creators, writers, or producers, and aligning themselves with stars who gel with the network’s corporate and
Carson’s relationship to NBC provides an interesting case study in the reciprocity of identity. Although NBC had broadcasted for over a decade before Carson took over the *Tonight* show, his persona – smart, satirical, poised yet playful – came to define the NBC brand rooted in “quality” programming and culturally relevant comedic discourse. Communications scholar Gillian Dyer explains how this transfer of identity works in advertising. She writes: “The meaning of one thing is transferred or made interchangeable with another quality, whose value attaches itself to a product.” If Carson is the thing, and his quality is the traits that comprise his persona, then in this exchange, Carson’s persona could be transferred onto the product that is *Tonight* show or its home network’s late-night image. The two entities almost became synonymous with each other because of this ideological transference. According to media scholar Jeffrey Miller, the continued legacy of NBC’s late-night identity truly rests in the network’s relationship to satire. He claims that following in this tradition, “*Saturday Night Live* and *SCTV Network 90* both built on the freedom of *The Tonight Show*” and Carson’s persona was central to popularizing these patterns in NBC programming and show development.

As I outlined in the last chapter, Joan Rivers’ persona was in direct contrast to Carson’s. If Carson and NBC are interchangeable based on Dyer’s framework of identity transference, then Rivers stands in opposition to the core tenets of NBC. When the network’s brand and its flagship program became routinized and boring, NBC exploited the Rivers persona to boost slipping ratings. Although she proved effective in this role,
the network did not seem intent on making her a featured personality because of the discord between her image and the traditional NBC identity.

While NBC did not want to draw an association between the network and Rivers for fear of an identity transfer, the entities that would become the Fox Broadcasting Company coveted the Joan Rivers brand for precisely that reason. Rivers’ central role in the creation of the Fox network has often been simplified in scholarly analyses of the origins of the fourth network. While her significance has been included in oral histories and recollections, it is notable that researchers have chosen to explore other elements in the development of a fourth network at the expense of an examination of the network’s first star and first original program. But Rivers’ significance in the creation of Fox cannot be overstated: she simultaneously imprinted a distinctive brand onto the Fox Broadcasting Company, provided the network with an entrée into an inexpensive, creative, and underserved programming niche, and lent establishment credibility to this untested broadcaster through her link to NBC.

By the mid-1980s, Rivers had solidified her comic brand defined by youthful, frenetic energy, urban brashness, and a willingness to vocalize the taboo and offend unwitting targets. Lacking an identity, Fox wanted to transplant the qualities of Rivers’ star text back onto the network itself. Embodying a certain brashness and edginess fit into the Fox ethos; using these qualities, it could differentiate itself from the older and more established broadcasters. Mittell claims that Fox used satirical programs like The Tracey Ullman Show, In Living Color and The Simpsons “to craft a brand identity of a network unafraid to challenge conventions through satire and social commentary, an identity that
proved to be the most popular among the young and urban audiences its advertisers most desired.” But this assessment of the origins of the Fox brand ignores both Rivers’ impact as a distinctly identified star and the importance of *The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers*, the first program developed at Fox.

In addition to the intricacies of her star persona, Rivers’ late-night credibility made her invaluable to Fox. Diller had struggled with a way to successfully infiltrate a television arena that was already saturated with programming and becoming increasingly fragmented with the rise of cable and satellite TV. Diller believed that if he could lure Rivers away from NBC, he could use her position as an established late-night host – the second-most visible one on TV at the time and the only performer to draw higher ratings than Carson – to reasonably compete with NBC’s dominance in that time slot.

This facet of Rivers’ star capital was more layered than just “late-night talk show host” – she was also an NBC star, an established network persona, and a Carson protégé. Before courting Rivers, Fox had already drawn links between itself and NBC in its hiring practices. In 1985, Fox poached two programming developers from the National Broadcasting Company. Garth Ancier had been a supervisor in comedy development for NBC during the fruitful years in which programs like *Cheers* (1982–1993), *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992) and *The Golden Girls* (1985–1992) premiered. Though only in his twenties, Ancier was on the fast track to become one of just nine or ten presidents of NBC programming outlets within a few years. Convinced by Scott Sassa, another young executive who had just begun working at Fox, Ancier left NBC to become the founding president of entertainment at Fox. Kevin Wendle, another young NBC programmer and
the network’s director of drama development, also left to become Ancier’s second-in-command.30 These hiring patterns both served to reinforce the youthful direction of the Fox brand and also coded the network as a fresher, more forward version of NBC. Although poaching Ancier and Wendle delivered an internal hit to NBC, poaching Rivers would become public spectacle.

Rivers’ alliance with Fox extended beyond the bounds of late-night programming and comparisons to NBC: her endorsement could give the network “instant credibility and, for the first time, a real public profile.”31 Understanding the intricacies of Rivers’ star text, Diller believed that a Rivers defection would be seen as a veritable coup, and “stealing [her] away from NBC would have great drama and tremendous marquee value.”32 While luring away programmers may have damaged the NBC reputation within the insulated entertainment industry, Rivers’ public poaching would provide dramatic fodder that could generate interest in a new network trying to compete with her former employers.

While Rivers has maintained that she had no interest in competing with NBC or Carson and was only trying to develop her own voice in late night, Fox was clearly invested in the potential head-to-head showdown between the late night titans. After Rivers signed a 3-year, $15 million agreement with Fox for her own late-night talk show, the last decision that remained was planning when and how to announce these new ventures. Fox and Rivers agreed that they would go public with news of the network and its flagship (and only) original program in May 1986 and begin broadcasting the following October. Diller wanted Rivers to announce her new show when she was
scheduled to appear as a guest on the *Tonight* show but Rivers adamantly refused. His eagerness for Rivers to announce this scandalizing news on the network and program that started her career not only points to his view of Rivers as political pawn in the quest network-ship but also his desire for a network rivalry. They eventually settled on a public press conference for May 6, 1986. While Scott Sassa, the press conference coordinator, wanted to make the Rivers announcement casually without much fanfare, Diller argued that the star of Fox’s only original program should be the centerpiece. It was decided that Rivers would join Barry Diller and the newly appointed president of the Fox Broadcasting Company, Jamie Kellner, to make the first public announcement.

![Figure 6: Kellner, left, Rivers, center, and Diller, right, at the announcement of the Fox Broadcasting Company](image)

With Rivers seated between the President/COO and CEO of the Fox Broadcasting Company, the network announced its plan to begin programming, starting with *The Late*
Show Starring Joan Rivers.\textsuperscript{36} With no concrete plans for other programs, the executives said the network would most likely “launch regularly scheduled primetime service early next March.”\textsuperscript{37} That would leave a six-month window from Rivers’ October debut to the premiere of original primetime offerings in which The Late Show would be the only Fox original airing on the network’s stations and affiliates. As the only program and the only star on Fox, Rivers became central to the public presentation of the network. Of the eponymous star, Diller said, “Joan Rivers has brought a real sense of adventure and audacity to television […] this spirit embodies the approach we will continue to take in achieving our goals for this network.”\textsuperscript{38} Here he creates a direct association between the Rivers brand and the network’s “approach” and ultimate “goals,” positioning Rivers as the most visible identifier of the Fox brand.

The Rivers name did more than shore up generalized interest in Fox; she brought in affiliates. Years later, Garth Ancier reportedly said: “I consider Rivers to be very critical to the setting up of that network […] It was: you can get the Joan Rivers late night show if you become a Fox affiliate. So we were able to sign affiliates much more easily at Fox […] because we had a big hook, which was this big show that everyone thought, ‘Oh, that’s a pre-established hit.’\textsuperscript{39} Her quality as a “pre-sold property” hinged on Rivers’ history as an NBC success, and Fox exploited her star recognition to establish the structural foundation of the network. After the announcement, stations in markets that David Johnson, the Fox VP of Marketing, had not even approached yet “were calling and asking how they could become affiliated.”\textsuperscript{40} By August of 1986, Fox had made agreements with 79 affiliated stations with representatives in almost every major
television market, giving the network “potential coverage of 80 percent of the nation.”

Although Fox could not reasonably achieve the same kind of coverage as the major networks, Rivers’ cachet gave them the best chance in broadcasting history to feasibly compete.

Despite these positive and profitable outcomes that followed the Rivers/Fox announcement, the narrative that dominated the media in the months before *The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers* premiered took on a far less-congratulatory tone. Rivers’ split from NBC and Carson was portrayed as a betrayal rather than a logical career ascension, a clearly gendered assessment of this kind of professional behavior. While large institutional moves were critical to the metamorphosis of Rivers’ career, it is crucial to examine what happened on the personal level to understand how Rivers’ star text changed.

**Dueling Hosts: Rivers versus Carson**

Although the announcement of Rivers’ late-night talk show was secretly scheduled for May 6\textsuperscript{th}, rumors of her defection began circulating in Hollywood a few weeks prior. According to oral histories, Brandon Tartikoff, the then-president of NBC, had heard that Fox was planning to challenge NBC’s late-night dominance and confronted his former colleague Garth Ancier.\textsuperscript{42} Without getting overt confirmation, Tartikoff guessed that Rivers was defecting to Fox and told Carson the news before Rivers had the chance to tell him herself.\textsuperscript{43} This initiated a feud between Carson and his protégé that would last the rest of their lives. In a battle of he-said, she-said, there are
conflicting accounts of what really happened. While I am not interested in uncovering the truth, since it will not overtly affect an analysis and the “truth” of it may be impossible to know, it is important to dissect what people thought happened and how these perceptions did irreparable damage to Rivers’ star image and her career.

In *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, the documentary on Rivers’ life and career, the comedian asserts that after she made the deal with Fox, the first person she called was Johnny Carson. According to NBC histories, Rivers called Carson only after she found out that Tartikoff had leaked the news. The timeline here is incredibly murky and it is unclear who signed what when and who called whom when. But the one element that most recollections of this exchange agree on is that when Rivers called Carson to explain, he hung up on her and never spoke to her again.

Carson had a history of being a loyalist in his personal and professional life. He expected his staff to be devoted to him, but he would cut them out of his work and his life if he perceived that they had turned away from him. In his memoir, *Fred de Cordova, a one-time producer for Carson’s Tonight show*, included a photo Carson had given to him when he first joined the show. It was a headshot of Carson himself with the names of his four previous producers crossed out and Fred’s drawn in, “notifying the new producer of the host’s well-known penchant for firing producers at turning points in his career.”
Figure 7: Carson’s warning to Fred de Cordova⁴⁶
Carson’s ability to hold a grudge was well-known and well-documented, but perhaps none were ever as public as his feud with Rivers.

Although never a real-life couple, Rivers and Carson sometimes masqueraded as comic paramours. When they appeared together, their flirtatious and familiar energy coded their relationship as something beyond professional, and her role as his substitute positioned her as a “First Lady” figure, the traditional image of a supportive wife. Rivers leaving Carson, and his abject dismissal of her or her apology, framed her defection as a personal betrayal despite the pair’s ambivalent off-screen relationship. Because they publically seemed like a powerful duo, her departure stung all the more. After Rivers became an insult comic, a performer who was now considered by some to be bitchy and gossipy, it was not inconceivable that audiences would consider her actions to be bitchy as well.

The “late-night wars” – famously between Jay Leno and David Letterman in 1992 and later Jay Leno and Conan O’Brien in 2010 – were major news stories and inspired articles, think pieces, books, and even narrativized filmic incarnations. Bill Carter, television writer for the New York Times, turned these wars into detailed books. But Rivers’ falling out with Carson has never been considered a “war” in the way that these clashes among men often were. The “war” phrasing suggests a battle between men, each with a reasonable claim to fight for. Rivers’ head-to-head showdown with Carson was never a war: she was Judas, not Patton. In Carter’s The Late Shift: Leno, Letterman, and the Network Battle for the Night, Rivers is only briefly mentioned. Carter credits her for reinvigorating Carson’s competitive spirit after she had “committed the ultimate affront
to the man who had given her the opportunity to shine on television.” But her “affront”
did not warrant further inspection or dissection. She had committed a betrayal, nothing
more complex. Their split was not dissected or analyzed in high-profile books or HBO
movies, and this battle did not play out in back rooms or in secret meetings; it became
very public tabloid fodder.

Since the two hosts were not speaking, this personal battle played out in the
media. Carson used his platform to broadcast about the split. According to New York
Times critic John J. O’Connor who frequently covered the late-night landscape, “on one
recent show, after getting an even louder ovation than usual as he greeted the studio
audience, he said, ‘I know – you came here just to tell me that you’re starting your own
talk show.’” O’Connor points out that Rivers’ name was left out of this jab, and says
that “it is clear that Miss Rivers will be mentioned as seldom as possible from now on.”
Although he would not reference her by name, Carson would invoke memories of Rivers
to garner laughs and undermine her even before her own show premiered. In Still
Talking, the follow up to her first memoir written after her relationship with Carson fell
apart, Rivers felt that Carson had wanted to appear to take the high road, but was
intentionally smearing her in the press.

Johnny himself maintained the dignified silence of an abused innocent, except to
say to the Associated Press, ‘I think she was less than smart and didn’t show
much style.’ But Carson’s hired mouths were out in force, assuming a moral tone
as though I had committed some kind of sin. They wheeled out the usual
‘unnamed source’ who said that if I had given him the news first, Johnny would
have ‘dropped by her show as a guest.”
By refusing to address Rivers directly, Carson positioned himself as the victim of her behavior, and did not acknowledge the aspirational mode in which Rivers was clearly operating.

In the press, the subtext (or sometimes plain text) of Rivers’ betrayal was her lack of gratitude. O’Connor wrote that fans of Carson might title the current late-night shakeup scenario as “Ingratitude,” especially since Carson’s henchmen were claiming she was “ungrateful.” Jim Mahoney, a Carson representative, told USA Today, “He put her on the show. It was probably the biggest break she ever got in her life. You don’t treat people that way.” Without ever using the word, Mahoney’s central thesis was that Rivers somehow owed Carson, and by leaving in the way she did, she seemed ungrateful for everything he had done for her. Rivers analytically explained why she thought the press and public turned on her: “I had publically bucked Johnny Carson, something nobody had ever done. There are certain men in Hollywood who are sacred. George Burns is one. You cannot say anything negative about Bob Hope. I had stepped on the American flag, and when you do that, the old-boy system will kill you.” But the matter was not just that she had publically offended him, it was that she did it as a woman. Reflecting on how she was being portrayed in the press, Rivers said, “I wonder if they would have talked that way if I were a man.” We do not have to wonder. We can compare Rivers’ treatment to David Brenner’s, another former Carson guest host who announced his own late-night talk show a week after news of The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers went public.
Many former *Tonight* show hosts have gone on to star in or host their own programs. Bill Cosby, who had often guest-hosted since the 1960s, stopped appearing on Carson when he became a huge sitcom star, while David Letterman guest-hosted fifty-one times in the year before he got his own late-night talk show to follow Carson’s. David Brenner, one of Carson’s other most frequent *Tonight* show guest hosts, also announced that he was going to host his own late-night talk show through syndication called *Nightlife with David Brenner*. While he was similarly a Carson disciple flying the coop, Brenner’s exit was categorically different from Rivers’. First, he was not Carson’s permanent guest host at the time, though he had been a prolific substitute. In a sense, he was not “leaving” but rather, moving forward in his career. Second, he was set to appear in syndication, meaning that in some markets, he might not compete with Carson directly. Third, and perhaps the most obvious distinction, is that David Brenner was a man. While Brenner and Rivers were often simultaneously referenced in the press because of their concurrent late-night bids, the vitriol and judgment was saved for Rivers. The “son” was branching out on his own; the “wife” (or even daughter figure) was selling herself to another network.

In the *New York Times*, John J. O’Connor compared the two competitors’ styles. Of Rivers, he wrote that she was a “more clamorous personality” who “got her ‘big break’ on the Carson show 23 years ago and, seemingly, she hasn’t shut her mouth since.” He goes on to call her “loud” and “insistently vulgar.” Rowe explained that unruly women have often been criticized for being loud or speaking too much. These
behaviors, she says, indicate a “failure to control the mouth” resulting in excessive “garrulousness.”58 This idea that Rivers’ malignant loudness is linked to a lack of control indicates a carelessness, the kind that had been assigned to her most critically after her separation from Carson. Her loudness was not threatening as a support to his show, but was dangerous in competition with it. Brenner, on the other hand, is described as “amiably low-keyed,” “the nice guy,” and “an urban version of Johnny Carson.”59 While O’Connor seems to scoff at how Rivers spent her 23 years on the show, the critic praises Brenner for “very sincerely” thanking Johnny Carson during his 71st hosting appearance.60 She is loud; he is nice. Though Rivers and Brenner are both profiled in this piece, the former is clearly criticized for her personality and her ingratitude while the latter attracts tacit approval.

Years later, Rivers wrote in the *Hollywood Reporter* that she could not understand why Carson was angry with her but not Brenner. “I think he really felt because I was a woman that I was just his. That I wouldn’t leave him […] he didn’t like that as a woman, I went up against him.”61 While her explanation diminishes the impact of her leaving mid-contract, she addresses a fundamental condition of their feud – Rivers was a woman, one who had positioned herself as a domestic partner to Carson. As a pseudo-spouse abandoning their other half, Rivers appeared to be stabbing Carson in the back, in a way that neither Brenner, nor any other man, would have appeared to do. The reasons why Rivers was villainized while Brenner did not suffer the same consequences points to constructed and socially embedded expectations about gendered professional aspirations. The idea that she “wouldn’t leave him” because she was a woman indicates that women
are not as professionally motivated or competitive as men because of feudalistic and feminized loyalty. In public defiance of professional expectations, Rivers became considered a “traitor.”

The producer of Brenner’s show argued that the central problem plaguing Rivers’ program was not her gender, but her head-to-head time slot competition with Carson. He remarked, “I think it’s a bold venture […] I just don’t think it will work.” In his usage, “bold” somehow becomes audacious instead of courageous. At the time, Jamie Kellner deemphasized the rivalry between Rivers and Carson. Although the former colleagues would overlap from 11:30pm–midnight, Kellner maintained that by beginning at 11, “the Fox program is intended to compete with local newscasts,” not NBC late-night TV. Despite this claim, Brenner’s producer was correct in assuming that the rivalry between Rivers and Carson remained central in garnering cultural interest in her program. Fox purposefully wanted a fight during that time slot. Contrast this to the network’s planned primetime schedule for March 1987: the network planned to premiere these shows during weeks when other networks would be airing reruns, thus increasing potential ratings. For late night, Fox wanted to exploit the rivalry by airing the first show during a week when Carson, not one of his new substitutes, would be at the helm of the Tonight show, regardless of the potentially destructive impact this could have on Rivers and the Fox brand.
The Swift Beginning and End of *The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers*

By the time *The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers* premiered on October 9, 1986, irreparable damage had been done to Rivers’ public image. While the show pulled in decent ratings – she had a 7.9 rating/19 share compared with Carson’s 8.7 rating/25 share on her first night – the show faced mixed reviews, most of them negative about the host. Fox touted the ratings success as a win for both the show and the network, but downplayed the negative reviews that called attention to Rivers’ apparent unease. Variety called her “overwhelmingly nervous” to the point where they felt she was “incapable of delivering a monolog, and left the program almost totally devoid of her distinctive brand of humor, which was sorely missed.” John J. O’Connor, the *New York Times* critic who had previously bashed Rivers after she left NBC wrote that the “standing, screaming” ovations from the audience may have made this show “the first hour in the history of television that begged for a stiff tranquilizer.” In a comparative assessment of the late-night offerings, Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* wrote: “Johnny Carson’s show looks fresher after 24 years on the air than the Joan Rivers show does after two nights on the air.” Though not overtly, these evaluations point to the magnitude of expectations and the pressure that surrounded Rivers and the show. Her apparent nervousness reflects the ways in which she knew she was being viewed in comparison with Carson, and also as the sole voice of the Fox network.

Rivers’ longtime manager Billy Sammeth said, “As she drove off the NBC lot, she lost her confidence.” The place that had been her safe haven and her home was now out of reach. Before *The Late Show*, Rivers had resisted the notion of headlining. During
the 1970s and 1980s, she often performed in Vegas, but was never given top billing on her shows. According to a Variety review of her Vegas act, “For many years, even after many believed that she had earned her headliner stripes, Rivers avoided the top line on the marquees. She operated on the theory that by eschewing the top spot, she could not be held responsible for the business done in the nitery – that was the headliner’s responsibility.” Although this analysis is in reference to her stage performances, it provides a prescient glimpse into her struggle at hosting her own show, under her own name.

The pressure began mounting, and Rivers and her team entered into constant battles with the network. Before the show even aired, Diller and Rivers disagreed about whether to air the show live or tape it in the afternoon and broadcast on delay. Diller wanted the show to air live to capitalize on Rivers’ onstage unpredictability and differentiate this program from the other pre-taped late-night talk shows. Rivers wanted to tape the episodes beforehand in order to be able to edit out gaffes and also take the pressure off her and her guests who may not have felt comfortable participating in a live interview. Rivers lost this argument, and the show was billed as a live event for East Coast audiences, and would air by tape-delay for Pacific and Mountain time zones.

Beyond the debates about how the show would be broadcast, the interview components were also scrutinized. Rivers wanted to book four guests a night, like Carson’s show had, but the network would only agree to three interviews per show for logistical reasons. Although it was never an official position or measure taken at the Carson show, he allegedly put out the word that anyone who appeared on Rivers’ show
would not be welcome again on the *Tonight* show. This backdoor blacklisting severely limited the pool of potentially available guests or high-profile celebrities who would agree to appear on *The Late Show*. Another component of this blacklisting affected young comedic talent – the kind that Rivers had been explicitly excited to book but who felt that they still needed Carson to get mainstream exposure. In addition, Fox felt that the show had to be careful in booking certain guests because of Rivers’ brash demeanor. Although Rivers’ “sharp tongue and fearless questioning, especially about very personal matters such as sex and marriage, combined with a truly quick, rapier wit, was what had made her famous […] it was intimidating to many celebrities.” Fox wanted her to temper “what had made her famous” in order to placate celebrities who might be nervous engaging with a notorious improviser in a live setting.

This tempering extended into other areas of the show as well. Executives began restricting what Rivers could and could not say on air. She was instructed to not make jokes at the expense of Fox executives because they feared that it would make the new network seem weak. According to Sammeth, the people at Fox also “did not want her to be dirty. They said, ‘Why can’t she be classier?’” Rivers contended that the people at Fox “were scared about everything. Every argument was, ‘You can’t do this. You shouldn’t do that. Why did you say that?’ They began to try to censor the jokes.” Rivers felt that Fox had invested in her as a full package, and then were upset when she was performing as “purchased.” Of the people at Fox, Rivers said, “They knew what they bought. But they tried to change me immediately.” Rivers positions herself as a commodity, bought and sold for others’ purposes. This highlights the conceit that a
performer is a “property,” just like the programs that he or she represents. Fox heavily invested in the Rivers image to promote the network. When they initially began working together, Rivers had been endorsed by a powerful network and its most respected star. After her acrimonious break with NBC and Carson, Rivers was in effect no longer the same “property;” she had been transformed by a public controversy that Fox had once encouraged for promotional purposes. While she lost a certain degree of cachet and respect, her performative persona – edgy, brash, unafraid to speak – had remained mostly intact. But by the time the show began broadcasting, Fox also wanted her to pivot toward becoming a different type of performer, one who could reliably deliver the edginess that made her exciting and the authority that made late-night comedy a satirical power.

Garth Ancier blamed the problems surrounding The Late Show on Rivers’ inability to reframe her persona into something tame enough for daily broadcasting. Ancier explains his reasoning for the host’s difficulties:

We did try as best we could to tone Joan down to more of a comfortable host, more acceptable five nights a week, as opposed to a persona on once a month. Brandon [Tartikoff, of NBC] said to me when we first announced Joan was coming to Fox, ‘She’s your problem now.’ Not in a mean way. He said, ‘You have to understand, she prepped the entire month for a week. And I think you’re going to have a problem. It’s going to be hard to make it work every week. It’s hard for her or anyone to prepare that much material.’

It is interesting that Tartikoff felt this way considering that Letterman, another Carson disciple, was entrusted with a nightly program and expected to produce reliably high-quality content night after night even though he was often considered too weird and quirky for mass audiences. Letterman’s quirkiness was appropriate for nightly consumption (granted, at a later timeslot), but Rivers needed to be tamed, her words and
behaviors controlled, in order to appear digestible for audiences at 11pm. These clashes between Rivers and Fox management transformed the tenor of her show and degraded the impact of her star image. A toned-down Joan Rivers was not the Joan Rivers that audiences expected, wanted, or tuned into.

Ratings for The Late Show steadily declined. According to Variety, between October 1986 and late January 1987, The Late Show was “the only latenight show conspicuously losing viewers.” While almost every late-night show had dipped in ratings over the same 17-week period, Rivers’ show experienced the most significant drop from 4.4 to 2.1 Nielsen score. Fox blamed personal, behind-the-scenes issues for the show’s severe drop in viewership. Edgar Rosenberg was not only Rivers’ husband and business manager – he also became the executive producer of her show, despite vocal protests from Fox executives. According to Rivers, “Edgar did not like Rupert Murdoch and Barry Diller, and from the day we walked in, there were fights about everything. About whether we should have a Coke machine or Pepsi machine, M&M’s or Hershey Kisses.” Fox became wary of the spouses working together because of the complex interplay between the personal and the professional. Throughout production, “Fox was distressed that Rosenberg […] played such a major role. They blamed him for problems in working out details with Rivers. They seemed to feel that if he had not been there, everything would have gone smoothly […] Rosenberg’s major affront to Fox seemed to be that he put his wife’s interests ahead of every other consideration.” They assumed that the interests of the network would naturally take a back seat to whatever was best for Rivers because of the assumptions about where allegiances lie in spousal relationships.
This put Rivers in a unique position – her professional life was problematically linked to her personal relationship. Another spouse-like figure – this time her real spouse – was creating problems for Rivers’ work and career. The end of *The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers* ultimately came down to the conflict between personal loyalties and individual aspirations. Rivers recalls the dissolution of her relationship with Fox in May of 1987, less than a year after the show first premiered: “Finally they called me in on a Thursday night and they said, ‘You’ve gotta fire Edgar.’ I couldn’t do it.” The indication was that Rivers would keep her show if she fired her executive producer. For any other star, this could have been an easy decision because producers are replaceable (as Carson often demonstrated). But firing a spouse or a loved one is an almost impossible task. This time, faced with the decision whether or not to leave her partner, Rivers chose loyalty to her spouse, and she was removed from *The Late Show*, which continued on with guest hosts in her absence.

**Can Women Have it All?**

Despite the industrial components that clearly impacted Rivers’ career during this brief period, personal, familial, and relational conflicts ultimately did the most damage to her star image and her work. Much critical and scholarly work has addressed the question: “Can women have it all?” By “all” these authors mean simultaneous mastery of career, marriage, and children in a delicate balance in which no aspect suffers. Studies debunking the discourse surrounding the “myth of having it all” have found that the more successful a man is, the more likely he is to have children, while the opposite holds true
for their professional female counterparts. Think pieces and articles in professional publications contribute to popular discourses. An article from consulting firm Bain & Company’s website asserts that part of “what stops women from reaching the top” (also the title of the article) can be attributed to different professional styles: there is a female emphasis on collaboration and male focus on personal promotion. According to the same piece, survey respondents reportedly felt that beyond maintaining differing approaches to professional engagement, a sense of “competing priorities” held women back: family commitments and work obligations were tough to manage, and many felt that “women choose a more balanced lifestyle over career progression.”

For many years, Rivers seemed to have it all. Just as her career took off, she met and married Edgar, and a few years later they welcomed a daughter, Melissa. But ultimately, she could not cultivate the visage of a professional/personal/romantic partnership with Carson and then unceremoniously leave him in the interest of furthering her career.

When Rivers dedicated her book to Edgar and Carson, she thanked the latter for making it “all” happen. While family was important to Rivers, “all” referred to her career, and perhaps the balance she was able to strike between the two while working as Carson’s guest host. But when she chose to leave the Tonight show for an individual venture, the perception was that she was choosing career only, eschewing the important relationships that allowed her to achieve the status of household name. In a New York Times opinion piece, Delia Ephron (novelist, screenwriter, and sister of the late Nora Ephron) wrote about the mathematical problem facing the idea of “having it all.” “There is a statistical theory, degrees of freedom,” she wrote, “that proves that every single
choice you make narrows your choices (the choices you might make in the future), rendering having it all impossible. Rivers’ choice may have opened up one door at Fox, but it transformed her star text – she could not be a Carson acolyte and a Carson competitor at the same time.

The “having it all” discourse becomes startlingly relevant in Rivers’ case. Rivers was literally forced to choose between her family and her career, an ultimatum that functionally dissolved the myth that it was possible to balance the personal and the professional, especially within the same setting. This interplay between the intimate and the public had become Rivers’ forte in the context of performance. She was always revealing too much, publically talking about private matters, and constantly using her domestic life as fodder for jokes. While her stage routine thrived on infusing her private life into her work, she could not sustain this delicate balance in the real world. By making herself into the star that everyone knew too much about, Rivers opened herself up to unfortunate overlaps between her real life and her work, and it was this battle that delivered the fatal blow to her late-night career.

The “domestic failure” persona that Rivers developed early on in her career was conflated into this real scenario. In this instance, she was not a domestic failure because she could not attend to her husband, or could not take care of her child, but because she could not do those things and manage to keep her job. Returning to Ephron’s statistical notion of choice, I would argue that for women, choice also becomes sacrifice, usually in a domestically inflected way for which men are not often accountable. While the failure of Rivers’ Fox show had many origins, she ultimately had to sacrifice her career for her
family. Though not entirely unique to the female experience, Rivers’ position as a woman in a male field gendered this sacrifice in a specific, and ultimately, career-altering way.

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6 Ibid., 141.
7 Ibid., 143.
8 Ibid., 144.
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12 Thomas and Litman, “Fox Broadcasting Company,” 142.
15 Block, Outfoxed, 144.
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26 Mittell, Television and American Culture, 294–295.
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31 Ibid., 152.
32 Ibid., 115.
33 Ibid., 147.
34 Ibid., 150.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
40 Block, *Outfoxed*, 152.
42 Block, *Outfoxed*, 149.
43 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
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50 Rivers and Meryman, *Still Talking*, 189
51 O’Connor, “Rivals.”
52 Rivers and Meryman, *Still Talking*, 189
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56 O’Connor, “Rivals.”
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63 “Rivers show opens to weak review, Fox unfazed,” *Broadcasting* October 20, 1986, 33.
64 Associated Press, “79 Stations.”
68 “Rivers show opens to weak review, Fox unfazed,” 33.
69 Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work.
70 “Joan Rivers Accepts Headliner Status After Years of Ducking Title,” Variety, August 10, 1983, 1–78.
71 “Fox announces Rivers show, other programming plans,” 48.
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74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 176.
76 Ibid., 177.
77 Ibid., 178.
78 Ibid., 177.
79 Ibid., 177–178.
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83 Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work.
84 Block, Outfoxed, 173.
85 Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work.
88 Ibid.
CONCLUSION

Reflecting on this examination of the gender and network politics concerning Joan Rivers’ early television career, I decided to revisit Christopher Hitchens. When I was rereading his controversial piece, I found myself taken aback when I came across the following line “[...] it could be that in some way men do not want women to be funny. They want them as an audience, not as rivals.” I had to take a moment to regain my composure. Was I really agreeing (for the most part) with something that the author of an editorial called “Why Women Aren’t Funny” had said about women and humor? Though I was thankfully brought back down to earth when Hitchens launched into a diatribe about how the biological imperative of reproduction contributes to women’s humorlessness, this line stuck with me. In positing that men appear to be more comfortable with women “as an audience” rather than “as rivals” in comedy and in life, Hitchens could have easily been discussing the phases of Joan Rivers’ career explored in this thesis. While the comedian certainly disproved Hitchens’ central thesis, her experience in late-night television all but confirms the author’s moment of clarity. In the narrative of her professional story, Rivers was supposed to support and bolster her mentor Johnny Carson, never become his rival.

The underlying significance of Rivers’ gender is central to uncovering the personal and professional politics that influenced each permutation of her late-night career. While at one point performing within the framework of her female identity was Rivers’ greatest asset, it was also fundamental in her most stunning failure. In her standup and interview appearances and in her role as Carson’s permanent guest host, Rivers
appeared to successfully play into conventional gender constructs while also implicitly subverting them. When seated next to Johnny Carson, Rivers’ self-deprecating humor and flirtatious affect made her seem non-threatening to the male host and identified her as his submissive female counterpart. When she was promoted to permanent guest host (the highest form of endorsement), Rivers used an intimate and feminized interview style based on gossip and self-disclosure to communicate with her guests. For so long she remained on the periphery in supporting roles. By operating in feminized positions within a masculinized genre, Rivers was able to diminish the threat normally associated with female comics to her professional advantage. But when she left to assume the leading position in her own show – and became Carson’s most adversarial rival – Rivers was punished for behaving counter to accepted norms for female professionals.

The case of Joan Rivers in late-night television is complex and troubling, but not wholly unsurprising. While the specifics of comedy and television politics may be unique to Rivers’ story, women in diverse fields face similar roadblocks when they try to enter historically male professions. If these women exhibit traditional female behaviors in the workplace they may be seen as too vulnerable or emotional or even unable to perform their role to the fullest. If women take on attributes classically associated with masculinity such as self-promotion or emotional detachment, they may be considered cold and calculating. Rivers’ case study illuminates how so many women struggle to navigate gender expectations in the workplace. And further, women too often have to choose between their work and their families, a dilemma few men face. Professional women have often been punished for trying to have it all: Rivers suffered the same fate.
But Rivers’ late-night career is also closely linked to the operation of commercial broadcast television. The comedian’s relationships with NBC and Fox are complicated and significantly related to why Rivers was allowed to attain a modicum of visibility in this daypart but was also prevented from becoming a permanent presence. The politics of broadcast, which dictate that networks must cater to a mass appeal, can be creatively restrictive. Although late night is considered a somewhat niche part of the schedule, networks are still concerned with attracting and keeping audiences after 11:00 p.m. While Rivers’ edgy, unruly, taboo-breaking style was used and manipulated by each network to different ends, her persona was ultimately considered too risky and too niche for regular network appearance.

Beyond the larger network politics, Rivers’ rivalry with Johnny Carson enmeshed her in a very public scandal. Bashed in the media and written off by many of Carson’s fans, Rivers became a different kind of star after she left NBC for Fox. In the face of scandal, some stars can neither reclaim their untarnished image nor move forward successfully. Others, however, may be able to adapt to changing expectations and resurrect their careers. The scandal at the center of Rivers’ tenure in late night not only rewrote her star text (and thus common conceptions about her), but also negatively affected her ability to perform within late night, her professional home for over twenty years.

When Rivers’ late night and network television career all but ended in 1987, she was forced to reinvent herself. After this professional setback, she also suffered traumatic personal loss. In August of that same year, after mounting guilt and shame following the
cancellation of *The Late Show*, Rivers’ husband Edgar committed suicide. For years, Rivers struggled to rebuild her family and pull herself out of the financial debt Edgar left behind. She had to find a way to get her career back on track. In 1989, she launched *The Joan Rivers Show*, a syndicated daytime program that fused the issue-based content often found in daytime talk with the celebrity interviews she had become known for in late night. The show ran from 1989 to 1993, with Rivers winning the Daytime Emmy award for Outstanding Talk Show Host in 1990. After her daytime show ended, Rivers and her daughter Melissa began hosting red carpet pre-shows for the Golden Globes and the Academy Awards on the E! Network in 1994, later moving to the TV Guide Network. For many years afterwards, she sold her own jewelry lines on QVC, hosted *Fashion Police* for E! from 2010–2014, and even starred in her own reality show called *Joan & Melissa: Joan Knows Best* (2011–2014), which aired on the WE channel.

A compelling pattern links each of these post-late night opportunities. All are in genres or on platforms that specifically target women: daytime talk, award-show red carpets, TV shopping, women’s entertainment networks. Future study should examine why Rivers thrived in these feminized genres and dayparts, especially ones divorced from traditional network television. Were these the only types of roles available to her? Did she feel more secure and welcomed in places reserved for women? How did Rivers perform her gender in these more welcoming fields, and how did these performances compare to her style in late night? Why is it that Rivers became best known and most accepted in these capacities, while her pivotal role in late-night television has been diminished?
While scholarly work has not analyzed Rivers’ career, some popular criticism has begun to seriously examine the complexities of Rivers’ star text. Following Rivers’ death in 2014, obituaries were peppered with powerful thoughts about her life and her lasting legacy. And many were unflinchingly celebratory. One piece stands out in particular.

Emily Nussbaum, *The New Yorker*’s television critic, wrote a detailed essay called “Last Girl in Larchmont” in which she grapples with her own complicated feelings about Rivers and explores the star’s incubation in a sexist era and a sexist industry. Nussbaum writes that when she “first noticed Joan Rivers, she looked like the enemy.” Nussbaum could not endorse the way Rivers would insult or fat shame other women, but in hindsight, she says she had rejected Rivers because she “didn’t understand much about the forces that shaped her.” Nussbaum captures many elements of Rivers’ complicated place in history, distilling some of these ideas about sexism and power into this notion: “If Rivers’ 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.”

Contextualizing the forces of gender politics, sexism, and television industry are crucial to a nuanced understanding of Rivers’ legacy and persona. While Nussbaum’s piece emerges as a singularly nuanced essay, perhaps more will begin to appear as time passes. Then the public will be able to engage more critically with Rivers’ complicated star text.

Rivers’ position in the broadcast history of late-night TV permeates the study of not only comedy but also feminist media studies and the frameworks of the broadcast television industry. But rather than inspiring scholastic exploration across these disciplines, Joan Rivers’ experience as a female host in the male bastion of late night has
instead become a cautionary tale. After Rivers’ departure in 1987, it would be twenty years until another woman, Chelsea Handler, would host her own late-night talk show. And still, almost thirty years after The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers aired its final broadcast, no woman has hosted a late-night program on network television. Chelsea Handler and Samantha Bee, the two women who have taken on Rivers’ late-night mantle, both appear on basic cable channels. Their relegation to non-broadcast networks underscores where women are allowed to be funny on TV. And perhaps it also reflects important developments in the progressive attitudes of more niche platforms while broadcast networks seem stuck in the past. Although the conversation about the lack of diversity in late night has hit a zenith in the cultural zeitgeist, scholarship on the subject is lagging far behind.

Additional research is necessary to compare Rivers’ style to those of Handler and Bee. How do these women address their female identity? Handler’s focus on celebrity gossip and entertainment news is one way her E! program was distinctly feminized. Handler has said that her new Netflix “late-night” show simply titled Chelsea (episodes will be released Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday nights for immediate streaming), will cover “real topics” and told audiences to “expect much more than pop culture,” seemingly rejecting a feminized tone. Once her show premieres, it will be fascinating to examine the ways in which she uses the streaming platform to transform the standard late-night format and incorporate discussions of her gender.

Samantha Bee, who hosts the incisive comedy news show Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, transgresses the expectations of her gender through satirical performance.
Women do not often perform satire, much less political satire, but Bee’s incubation as a correspondent for *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* has made her a trustworthy source for “fake” news. But as the only woman in late night at the time of writing this thesis, she is often forced into a conversation centered squarely on her gender. The cold open of her first episode referenced these questions directly. Sitting at a mock press conference, reporters bombard Bee with questions like “Is it hard breaking into the boys’ club?” and “What’s it like being a woman in late night?” and eventually ask “How can I watch your show as a man?,” “What’s it like to be a female woman?,” “What did you have to do differently to make this show a reality…as a woman?” Her answer: “You know what it took? Hard work, a great team, and maybe just a little bit of magic.” Cut to Bee surrounded by a coven of possessed women participating in what appears to be an occult ritual.

In both this segment and in the months leading up to her premiere, Bee gets bogged down amidst questions that are only concerned with her gender. While she addresses her unique status in late night during the opening minutes of the show, her satirical response seems to move on from the central question quickly. Her frustration is understandable but I wonder, as she begins to gain more critical appreciation and mass recognition, does she have a responsibility to answer these questions and/or to at least think critically about how things have been different for her in late night? Perhaps the onus of this task could also be placed on media scholars seeking to understand the idiosyncrasies of the late-night genre. But while the “women in late night question” is still worthy of examination, the show manages to highlight and elucidate problems facing
women in the home, in education, in professional settings, and in politics – issues that are not often discussed at such length anywhere else in the news, real or fake.

But, again, the question remains: why have so few women been able to break into late night? While executives and programmers have not publically attributed the lack of women in this daypart to Joan Rivers’ failure, it would be worth investigating further what role the debacle surrounding *The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers* may have played in this troubling and persisting legacy. Are TV executives hesitant to hire another woman because Rivers was unable to succeed? Are women considered too risky to program in this time slot? It is worth further study to examine what impact the problems plaguing *The Late Show starring Joan Rivers* and Rivers’ persona itself had on the current dearth of female late-night hosts, if any.

The analysis outlined in this thesis only begins to scratch the surface of the trajectory of Rivers’ career. Her pivotal role in late-night television should not be overlooked in future explorations of the genre, especially as the conversation about the lack of diversity in late-night hosts comes to a head. And crucially, Joan Rivers’ specific star text and myriad reinventions after leaving late night deserve more intense analysis and investigation – not only to understand more about this performer in particular, but also to uncover how, when, and about what women have been permitted to be funny on television.

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“Joan Rivers Accepts Headliner Status After Years of Ducking Title.” *Variety*, August 10, 1983.


_____. “TV View; A Strong Late-Night Contender Weighs In.” *New York Times*, September 18, 1983.


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“Rivers show opens to weak review, Fox unfazed.” *Broadcasting* October 20, 1986.


CURRICULUM VITAE

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EDUCATION

Master of Fine Arts in Film and Television Studies
Boston University, May 2016

Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, Minor: Art History with concentration in Film Studies
University of Rochester, 2013

THESIS

Can We Talk? A Discussion of Gender Politics In The Late-Night Comedy Career Of Joan Rivers
This thesis explores the systemic, personal, and gender-specific factors that contributed to the evolving chapters of comedian Joan Rivers’ late-night comedy career. Thesis readers: Professor Deborah L. Jaramillo, Professor John Hall

HONORS AND AFFILIATIONS

Merit Scholarship, Boston University, 2014–2016
Graduated Cum Laude, University of Rochester, 2013
Psy Chi National Honor Society in Psychology, inducted 2013
Meliora Scholarship, University of Rochester, 2009–2013

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

RESEARCH

Graduate Research Assistant, Department of Film and Television, Boston
University, Boston, MA
September 2015–May 2016
• Perform research duties for Television Studies Professor Deborah Jaramillo
  including source acquisition and file organization

TEACHING

Teaching Assistant, Department of Film and Television, Boston University, Boston, MA
September 2014–May 2015
• Facilitated weekly discussions sections for up to 20 undergraduate students to
  supplement lectures
• Researched modern filmmaker and actor filmography in order to generate
  distinctive and updated lesson plans
• Held office hours to answer student questions and perform grading duties

INTERNSHIPS

Clips and Clearances Research Intern, CONAN, Burbank, CA
June 2015–August 2015
• Performed video research for scheduled celebrity guest appearances; employed unique
  and offbeat research strategies to comb the internet for humorous or unusual/rare
  interviews and video clips to aid producers in planning upcoming guest interview
  segments
• Created comprehensive files for each guest with pertinent video clips and
  relevant information; took detailed notes on included interviews/clips and
  prior late night and daytime television appearances
• Collaborated with the Clips Research team to search the internet and in-house
  database for clips to be used in comedy segments

Theatre Manager, Visiting Artist Assistant, The Boston Jewish Film Festival, Boston, MA
November 2013–November 2014
• Managed participating theatre venues in the Boston area; supervised and
  coordinated with existing venue staff and volunteers
• Communicated closely with visiting artists to finalize flight arrangements,
  visa applications, and hotel reservations

Programming Intern, The Boston Jewish Film Festival, Boston, MA
May 2013–December 2013
• Collaborated with Artistic Director and programming office to pre-screen films for selection, research films and filmmakers
• Procured print source information for digital and physical prints, generated contracts for media acquisition and distribution rights

GRADUATE COURSEWORK

FILM AND TELEVISION STUDIES

Feminist Television Studies—Dr. Deborah L. Jaramillo
American Independent Film—Dr. Ray Carney
NBC: Anatomy of a Network—Dr. Deborah L. Jaramillo
Writing Film Criticism—John Hall, M.S.
Gender and Horror—Dr. John Bernstein
International Masterworks—Dr. Ray Carney
Classical Hollywood Romantic Comedies and Melodramas—Dr. Charles Warren
Movie Stars and Stardom: A Cultural History—Ty Burr
TV Theory and Criticism—Dr. Deborah L. Jaramillo
American Masterworks—Dr. Roy Grundmann
The Documentary—Dr. Charles Warren
Beyond Netflix: Alternative Television Distribution—Austin Morris