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Funny Women: Political Transgressions and Celebrity Autobiography.

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In 2007, the late Christopher Hitchens wrote an article for *Vanity Fair* entitled 'Why Women Aren't Funny' where he claimed that women had no need to be funny, as women are usually attractive, so men already find them appealing. He suggested that the male ego is threatened by funny women: 'They want them as an audience, not as rivals'.[1] Although Hitchens lists some funny women in the article (ranging from Dorothy Parker to Ellen DeGeneres) he is uncompromising in reviving this age-old debate. The essay is deliberately provocative, and produced a predictable outcry in defence of female comedians. The idea that women are not funny is clearly ridiculous. The multitudes of talented women who have won numerous awards and public accolades for their comedic writing and performances offer distinct evidence to the contrary. Women like Melissa McCarthy, Kristen Wiig, Sarah Silverman, Amy Schumer, Sofia Vergara, Aidy Bryant, Margaret Cho, Leslie Jones, Jenny Slate, Kate McKinnon, Wanda Sykes, Maya Rudolph, Aubrey Plaza, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and Tig Notaro (I could go on) are all highly successful comedians and performers. This argument about women not being funny is old and inaccurate, yet publications like *Vanity Fair* are confident enough to revive it through publishing blatantly misogynist writing. Women comedians must be exhausted from having to repeatedly account for their success to the media, something that their male counterparts are rarely asked to do. Writing a memoir therefore becomes a useful way of 'explaining' the phenomenon of the successful, funny woman. In each of the celebrity memoirs discussed, the women writers use humour to transgress socio-political concepts of women, to challenge patriarchal assumptions about female success, and to entertain the reader, as these memoirs are all well-written and sharply observed. In these women writers' hands, comedy is a powerful weapon for feminist commentary, and the act of writing itself is inherently political.

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[1] Christopher Hitchens, "Why Women Aren't Funny," *Vanity Fair*, January 2007, accessed September 1 2016, http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2007/01/hitchens200701.

This article will explore the relationship between transgressive humour and popular feminism in the autobiographical writings of four contemporary American comedians: Lena Dunham, Tina Fey, Mindy Kaling and Amy Poehler. Lena Dunham's *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's "Learned"* (2014), Tina Fey's *Bossypants* (2011), Amy Poehler's *Yes Please* (2014) and Mindy Kaling's *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)* (2011) and *Why Not Me?* (2015) have all been received with varying degrees of critical success. Dunham is the creator, writer, star, and sometimes director of the hit HBO series *Girls* (2012-present) which has received a range of Emmy awards and nominations, as well as a Golden Globe for Dunham in 2013 for Best Actress in a Television Series. In the same year, Dunham was also the first woman to win the Directors Guild of America Award for Outstanding Directing. Fey was the first woman to be appointed as head writer for the long-running and hugely popular *Saturday Night Live* (1975-present). She wrote the screenplay for cult hit film *Mean Girls* (2004) and was the creator, writer, and star of the critically-acclaimed *30 Rock* (2006-2013) which was based on her real-life experiences at *SNL*. She is the creator of the Netflix hit series *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-present) and has starred in various films including *Date Night* (2010) and *Sisters* (2015). She was won and been nominated for a range of awards for her writing and performing. Fey became the youngest recipient ever to receive the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in 2010. A long-time collaborator with Fey, Poehler is also a veteran cast member of *SNL*. She starred in the critically-acclaimed *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) for which she won a Critic's Choice Award and a Golden Globe Award for Best Actress in 2012 and 2014 respectively. Fey and Poehler hosted the Golden Globes ceremony together from 2013-2015 to great critical acclaim. Poehler is the executive producer of comedy shows such as *Difficult People* (2015-present) and has starred in numerous films including *Blades of Glory* (2007) and *Inside Out* (2015). Kaling – who also lent her voice to *Inside Out* – began as a writer for *The Office* (2005-2013) for which she received a series of Emmy nominations. As a performer, she acted in *The Office* and later went on to create,

write, star, and produce her sitcom *The Mindy Project* (2012-present). Defying Hitchens' construction of the unfunny woman, Dunham, Fey, Poehler and Kaling are all highly successful writers, comedians, and performers who have used their comedy to explore a range of contemporary feminist issues.

For each of these women, creativity and the act of writing is identified as key to their on-screen success, and they have all been lauded (especially Dunham and Kaling) for their writing as much as their performances. Much of their humour stems from questioning the double standard, and all of them have championed women's causes in their roles as public figures. Their books have been read predominantly as entertaining memoir: *The New York Times* reviews, for example, noted that Poehler's work has 'a lot of filler'[2] and that Dartmouth educated Kaling's *Why Not Me?* is 'breezy' and 'chirpy'.[3] Dunham's writing is 'familiar fare' but 'often hilarious'[4] and only Fey's is considered 'dagger-sharp, extremely funny'.[5] The reviews are mostly fair, and often appreciative, but rarely do they acknowledge the political potential of this type of writing (autobiographical) by this type of women (successful, intelligent, famous) as being worthy of note. Dunham and co. have written themselves into the public record through their scripts, screenplays, essays and memoirs. Their concerns with contemporary women's issues (body shaming; negative representations of feminism; attitudes to female sexuality) all deliberately spill over into their on-screen comedy personas.

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[2] Dwight Garner, "'*S.N.L.*' Memories and Getting-Some-Rest Dreams," review of *Yes Please*! by Amy Poehler, *New York Times*, November 4, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/05/books/book-review-amy-poehlers-yes-please.html?_r=0.

[3] Carina Chocano, "Mindy Kaling's *Why Not Me*?" *New York Times*, October 9, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/books/review/mindy-kalings-why-not-me.html.

[4] Sloane Crossley, "A Voice of a Generation: Lena Dunham's *Not That Kind of Girl*", *New York Times*, November 16, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/12/books/review/lena-dunham-memoir-not-that-kind-of-girl-review.html?_r=0.

[5] Janet Maslin, "Tina Fey Is Greek and Also Teutonic, but She Isn't a Troll", *New York Times*, April 3, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/books/bossypants-by-tina-fey-review.html.

Writing the 'femoir':

In 2012, Kaitlin Fontana wrote about the genre of the 'femoir' as a way of describing the new wave of memoirs penned by female comedians. The rise of the femoir has become more and more noticeable in the last few years. Fontana dates the start of the genre to Chelsea Handler's *My Horizontal Life* (2005) in which the comedian revealed a series of stories about her one night stands. Sex sells, and Handler's book went on to be a bestseller and pave the way for other female comedians to tell their stories. In the past few years, the genre has moved on, and has become less about revealing sexual prowess or comedic sexual disaster, and more about promoting an 'everywoman' image. Fontana argues that 'Memoirs are particularly essential for female comedians, for whom awkward, soul-bearing confessions have become a currency'.[6] Writing a book has now become part of a contemporary female comedian's brand, and all of the women writers discussed here have their own television show and/or are in the process of breaking into film. Their written self, their assembly of a textual 'I' is an extension of their public personas. This form of popular feminist autobiography can be understood in the way that other feminist life-writing has been read, as a form of oral history and as an important form of feminist story telling.

As a genre, the femoir is easy to critique. Hadley Freeman notes that with the recent increase in publications, 'with repetition the format has calcified'.[7] There are certainly lots of similarities: all the texts contain stories about childhood, a few anecdotes about disastrous dates, and the eventual journey to professional success, critical recognition, and celebrity status. Suzanne Ferriss identifies the femoir as a type of 'non-chick fic', suggesting that this creative non-fiction actually shares many of the bestselling tropes of chick lit. 'As contemporary fiction featuring identifiable,

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[6] Kaitlin Fontana, "The Rise of the Femoir," *Hazlitt*, August 23, 2012, accessed 1 September, 2016, http://hazlitt.net/longreads/rise-femoir.

[7] Hadley Freeman, "*The Girl With the Lower Back Tattoo* by Amy Schumer review – the problem with 'femoirs'", *Guardian*, September 9, 2016, accessed September 9 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/09/the-girl-with-the-lower-back-tattoo-review-amy-schumer-autobiography-memoir-femoir.

young heroines facing a series of romantic, professional, and cultural hurdles specific to their generation, chick lit has attracted readers who find pleasure in seeing their own experiences mirrored in its characters and plots'.[8] The femoir occupies a liminal narrative space somewhere between fiction and autobiography, drawing on both genres to forge something new. Ferriss argues that the narrative voices of the femoir 'adopt the first-person point of view characteristic of chick-lit novels and create nonfiction personas of themselves as identifiably flawed, accessible young women—despite their professional successes. Their works invoke the same post-feminist or third-wave feminist concerns of chick fiction, such as the pursuit of sexual independence and pleasure. They also highlight the tensions of contemporary women's existence, including their struggles to balance professional success and personal relationships, and to simultaneously resist and conform to gendered expectations for appearance'. There is certainly some evidence that the femoir functions as a form of *bildungsroman* interwoven with elements of the contemporary romance genre. All the narrators understand themselves as flawed in some way, and they all address problems relating to professional pressures, and body image. However, in the examples examined in this analysis, the writers are very careful about revealing too much information about their real life partners. This is a crucial point of departure from the fictional chick lit genre. Dunham frequently mentions her partner, Jack Antonoff, but gives out few details about their daily lives, and does not offer the story of how they met. Instead she states that she has written their story but 'surveying those words I realized they are mine. He is mine to protect'.[9] Fey jokingly offers a range of pseudonyms forher husband, Jeff Richmond, and relates a story about their disastrous cruise ship honeymoon, but does not pitch her text in any way as romantic comedy. Kaling is single, and offers some anecdotes about former partners, but does not 'end up' with anyone as the chick lit genre might seem to demand. Poehler talks briefly about her

[8] Suzanne Ferriss, "Chick Non-Fic: The Comedic Memoir," *Feminist Media Studies*. 14.2 (2014): 208, accessed February 10, 2016, doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2014.887811.
[9] Lena Dunham, *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's "Learned"* (London: Fourth Estate, 2015), 77.

divorce from fellow actor Will Arnett, but focuses mainly on the support she received from female friends during this time. Part of what makes these particular femoirs interesting is the focus each author places on their career. There is certainly some overlap with the chick lit genre, and there is clearly a shared readership with the femoir market, but Dunham, Poehler, Kaling and Fey are significant in the focus they place on professional success and the importance of female community. Their unwillingness to turn their life stories into romantic fairytales demonstrates how the genre can be used for more political purposes.

This article seeks to challenge some of these assumptions about popular female autobiography by suggesting that these femoirs actually fulfil an important function in terms of women's writing that goes beyond simply adding more examples to the celebrity autobiography genre. Dunham, Fey, Poehler and Kaling each use autobiography and life-writing as a source of humour, but their engagement with feminism as both writers and public figures offers an alternative narrative to the male-dominated Hollywood environment in which they exist. Focusing on their successful self-fashioning, this article will seek to argue that women's autobiography offers an essential space for transgressive forms of humour.

Marketing the brand:

The marketing of these texts is crucial to their commercial success, and considering the extratextual materials of these books helps to understand what each text and author is attempting to achieve. Dunham's *Not That Kind of Girl* has a front cover that references both the bestselling status of the literary product, and Dunham's media status as 'creator and star of HBO's *Girls*'. The cover is carefully staged and shows Dunham, who is to the far right of the page and has half of her body obscured by the edge of the page, dressed in a paisley two piece in soft pinks and greens. She is positioned, rather awkwardly, leaning against a table with a white cup and saucer

and pile of coffee table books, and the creams and browns of the surrounding furniture lends a retro vibe to the scene. Dunham, looking polished and poised, is a world away from her *Girls* character, Hannah Horvath, and the femoir's title seems to seek to position its author as separate from her most famous literary creation. The cover's message is clearly designed to convey the idea that this is a serious book of essays. In contrast, Fey's *Bossypants*, goes for the obvious visual joke. She is dressed in man's shirt and tie, and a pair of hairy male arms has taken the place of her own. On her book cover, Fey deliberately usurps the male role, dressing as a stereotypical businessman, whilst implicitly identifying herself as the 'bossypants' of the title in a neat undermining of the patriarchal power embodied in a business suit. Poehler's *Yes Please* is the simplest cover, with the author wearing a plain white vest and black trousers in front of the title of her text, which is lit up in pink neon. Poehler is looking directly at the camera and has her hand in the air as if she is attempting to answer a question. The pose is performative and effective, inviting the reader to know more. This is Poehler paring back her image so that the reader thinks she has a chance to get to know the 'real' Amy behind the award-winning performances and famous celebrity impersonations. Both of Kaling's texts, *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)* and *Why Not Me?* are fairly conservative in comparison. In *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?* Kaling is pictured wearing a pink dress and looking sweetly puzzled in front of a pale green floral backdrop. In *Why Not Me?* her pose is considerably more confident, and she is looking straight at the reader and smiling as she emerges from a behind a pale green door. Both covers announce her success as the 'creator of *The Mindy Project'*. The details of these book covers are important as they reveal the marketing behind the texts' success. The celebrity status of the women authors is central to selling the books, and their appearance on the covers helps to generate crucial sales. Fey dedicates her book to her mother; Poehler to her two sons. Kaling has a photo dedication to her parents in her first book, and a photo of her mother (who died before Kaling's career accelerated) in her second. Dunham dedicates her book to her family, to the (late, great) Nora Ephron who mentored Dunham, and to her partner Jack.

Dunham includes an epigraph that juxtaposes a quotation from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) with a line from her father 'admonishing' her. Cleverly, she places herself alongside the literary greats by referencing Flaubert's tale of a woman who yearns for more than her provincial life (albeit with disastrous consequences) whilst concurrently placing herself within the subject position of daughter.

The narrative structure of each text is largely similar. Each femoir is composed of chapters made up of essays, lists, and emails. The narrative tone of all these texts is designed to be confessional and intimate, following the established style of the female essayist. Dunham's book features illustrative line drawings by Joana Avillez; Fey and Kaling's texts contain black and white photographs of themselves. Poehler's *Yes Please* has the most dynamic structure, with the sections illustrated by colour photographs, slogans, collages, and even poetry. Seth Meyers contributes a chapter, and there are interactive sections where the reader can write notes. All five books offer themed sections and chapters on issues such as body image, love and relationships, and the media. All authors dispense some wisdom to the reader whilst being self-deprecating about their abilities to dispense said wisdom. Dunham states at the end of her introduction that 'I am a girl with a keen interest in having it all, and what follows are hopeful dispatches from the frontlines of that struggle'.[10] She positions herself as a 'girl' as opposed to a 'woman' and implies that she is well-placed through her life experience to author these 'hopeful dispatches'. Fontana is cynical about the well-established format of the femoir: 'These books being psychoanalytic by their very nature, there will be at least one essay about a father or father figure, one about a terrible relationship that went on far too long, and one about a lover that was too ideal and was therefore set aside in order to continue to succeed at failing'.[11] This is a fair criticism; Fey has a whole chapter devoted to her father, and nearly all the other texts offer the story of at least one 'bad' relationship. These confessions allow the writers to establish their credentials as 'real'

[10] Dunham, *Not That Kind of Girl,* xxi.
[11] Fontana, "The Rise of the Femoir."

women with experience drawn from the 'frontlines' as suggested by Dunham. This first person voice is carefully crafted in each text to appeal to the reader and convince her that these famous women are, in fact, just like her. Freeman notes: 'Whereas a memoir will underline its subject's uniqueness, the femoir intimates that the author is just like the reader. It will include anecdotes about how the writer is insecure but also, like, really strong, and there will be a continual emphasis on how the writer is fallible but simultaneously inspirational'.[12] Unsurprisingly, this puts pressure on a narrative voice that must be conversant in celebrity gossip whilst also maintaining a sense of normality. The writer of the femoir must be unique yet still relatable, or she will not be able to sell any books.

In Kaling's *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?* she deliberately pokes fun at the femoir genre. Her 'Introduction' offers a set of questions and answers that are designed to place her book within the realms of other similar fare. One of the questions is 'Why isn't this more like Tina Fey's book?' to which Kaling offers the answer: 'Unfortunately, I can't be Tina, because it's very difficult to lure her into a *Freaky Friday*-type situation where we could switch bodies, even though in the movies they make it look so easy. Believe me, I've tried'.[13] She deftly acknowledges Fey's bestseller status and reassures the reader that she fully understands the genre. In the next chapter, Kaling offers a list of alternative titles for her book, including So You've Just Finished Chelsea Handler's Book, Now What?.[14] By offering tongue-in-cheek intertextual references to other texts that she clearly knows well, Kaling cleverly sets her text apart from other examples. Just like Fey, she opens the book by addressing the reader directly: 'Thank you for buying this book. Or, if my publisher's research analytics are correct, thank you, Aunts of America, for buying this for your niece you don't know that well but really want to connect with more. There are many teenage vampire books you could have purchased instead. I'm grateful you made this

[12] Hadley Freeman, "The problem with 'femoirs.'"
[13] Mindy Kaling, *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)* (New York: Random House, 2011), 5.
[14] Ibid., 7.

choice'.[15] Fey, Poehler and Kaling all noticeably 'thank' the reader for reading the book. The purchase of the text is implied, drawing attention to each text's dual status as both literary product and brand commodity.

'I'm an unreliable narrator' states Dunham, going on to suggest that she fabricates stories, particularly those about her mother and sister.[16] Even the narrative voice of the text becomes part of her wider performance of the Dunham brand. Shari Benstock notes that what is not detailed in autobiographical writing is just as important as what is: "Autobiography reveals gaps, and not only gaps in time and space or between the individual and the social, but also a widening divergence between the manner and matter of its discourse. That is, autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction'.[17] Reviewing Amy Schumer's recent contribution to the femoir oeuvre, *The Girl With the Lower Back Tattoo* - for which Schumer allegedly received a nine million dollar advance - Freeman notes that most of the material from the book featured as part of Schumer's most recent stand-up tour.[18] Benstock's point that autobiography is an intentioned act of truth-telling that inevitably becomes fiction is proved in Schumer's case, where the narrative voice of her written text is revealed to be, quite literally, a performance.

At the start of *Yes Please*, the longest book in this selection, Poehler repeatedly addresses her status as a writer and the inescapable fact that writing is hard work: 'No one tells the truth about writing a book. Authors pretend their stories were always shiny and perfect and just waiting to be written. The truth is, writing is this: hard and boring and occasionally great but usually not. Even

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[15] Kaling, *Is Everyone Hanging Out*, 3.
[16] Dunham, *Not That Kind of Girl,* 51.
[17] Shari Benstock, "Authorizing the Autobiographical" in *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 11.
[18] Hadley Freeman, "The problem with 'femoirs.'"

I have lied about writing'.[19] Poehler's demystifying of the creative process works to establish her as a serious literary voice who understands how narrative is constructed. This is also a narrative with gaps and silences because as Poehler states, 'I don't like people knowing my shit'.[20] She sets the boundaries of her own authorial voice, reinforcing the sense of performativity. Like Kaling, Poehler is clearly aware that she is contributing to a genre that has been steadily growing for the past few years. She references all the recent books by Dunham, Fey and Kaling as 'superb and infuriating'.[21] The sense of a working community of female comedians is therefore reinforced through repeated acknowledgement and mutual respect of each other's work.

Unruly bodies:

Dunham opens her text with a paragraph of self-analysis:

> I am twenty years old and I hate myself. My hair, my face, the curve of my stomach. The way my voice comes out waveringly and my poems come out maudlin. The way my parents talk to me in a slightly higher register than they talk to my sister, as if I'm a government worker that's snapped and, if pushed hard enough, might blow up the hostages I've got tied up in my basement'.[22]

This is a classic autobiographical trope, the reconstruction of the younger self by the older authorial self. Dunham constructs the twenty year old Lena as in a state of post-teenage confusion and self-loathing. She hates her body and the way she sounds. Importantly, by the second sentence of her memoir, Dunham has situated herself as a writer. She is producing poetry, even if she has decided that it is 'maudlin'. Dunham does not like the sound of her own voice – a lovely irony with which to start an autobiography – and imagines that her parents use a special vocal register to address her. She constructs herself here as sensitive, imaginative and performative. The formation of the split subject and the written construction of the younger self is an essential strategy in memoir writing. In these femoirs, the construction of self is more

[19] Amy Poehler, *Yes Please* (London: Harper Collins, 2014), x.
[20] Ibid., 87.
[21] Ibid., xiii.
[22] Dunham, *Not That Kind of Girl,* xv-xvi.

complicated, as the writer is creating a version of herself which the reader – her potential audience for future projects – must be able to relate to and recognise. As an actress, Dunham has been both praised and harangued for her decision to appear nude in several episodes of *Girls*. Her body is not that of a supermodel, and Dunham understands that her on-screen nudity can unsettle her audience. Stefania Marghitu and Conrad Ng read Dunham's naked body as an important part of the feminist discourse of the programme, pointing out that her body does not 'make her undesirable in the eyes of attractive men'.[23] Moreover, they underline the fact that Dunham 'has not posed naked in other mediums not created by her, demonstrating controlled authorship of her body'.[24] As the 'author' of her body, Dunham utilises it to great effect to help establish the authenticity of her creative voice.

In *Not That King of Girl* she relates a disturbing story about a violent sexual encounter with a student named Barry. Dunham did not realise at first that she had been assaulted. She makes a serious point about the complexities of rape and how there needs to be more education about consent. Relating the event by phone to her partner Jack when he is away on tour offers her a way to narrate her trauma to him, and by extension to the reader. Like many victims of sexual assault, Dunham confesses to feeling guilt about how her own actions might have implicated her, but is quick to reorientate herself for the reader's benefit: 'But I also know that at no moment did I consent to being handled that way, I never gave him permission to be rough, to stick himself inside me without a barrier between us. I never gave him permission. In my deepest self I know this, and the knowledge of it has kept me from sinking'.[25] This revelation of sexual assault was overshadowed upon the book's release after Dunham was accused in the media of being a sexual molester, after she wrote about the time she realised her younger sister had

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[23] Stefania Marghitu and Conrad Ng, "Body Talk: Reconsidering the Post-Feminist Discourse and Critical Reception of Lena Dunham's *Girls*," *Gender Forum*, 45 (2013): 2, accessed 24 January, 2016. http://www.genderforum.org/issues/special-issue-early-career-researchers-i/body-talk-reconsidering-the-post-feminist-discourse-and-critical-reception-of-lena-dunhams-girls/.
[24] Ibid., 2.
[25] Dunham, *Not That Kind of Girl,* 65.

inserted several pebbles into her own vagina. Dunham was forced to apologise and had to cancel several appearances on her book tour.[26] Dunham is aware that her body can be read and understood as a political space; she 'reveals' it on screen and on paper as part of a wider social criticism.

Fey's approach to the split subject is to address the reader directly when writing about her body. In the introduction she states: 'Perhaps you're a parent and you bought this book to learn how to raise an achievement-orientated, drug-free, adult virgin. You'll find that, too. The essential ingredients, I can tell you up front, are a strong father figure, bad skin, and a child-sized colonial-lady outfit'.[27] Fey continuously constructs herself as someone uneasy with her own body. Relating the tale of how her mother prepared the young Tina for the start of menstruation by giving her a "my first period" kit containing a leaflet entitled "How Shall I Tell My Daughter?" Fey, yet to start menstruating, 'shoved the box in my closet, where it haunted me daily'.[28] She recalls going for her first gynaecological appointment at the age of twenty-three even though: 'My whole setup was still factory-new. But I had never been and I had some insurance, so why not be proactive about my health like the educated young feminist that I was?".[29] Here, Fey's understanding of herself as a feminist is part of the joke; she enjoys this image of her younger inexperienced self, going to a Planned Parenthood office wearing a 'Sojourner Truth button'.[30] Attempting to take an intellectual control of a body she does not fully understand does not go well. Once the nurse inserts the speculum, Fey promptly faints, coming around to be bluntly told she has a 'short vagina' at which point she faints again.[31] The account of the gynaecological appointment makes light of what must have been a genuinely distressing episode for Fey. She is

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[26] Alison Flood, "Lena Dunham apologises after critics accuse her of sexually molesting sister," *The Guardian*, November 5, 2014, accessed September 27 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/nov/05/lena-dunham-statement-abuse-claims
[27] Tina Fey, *Bossypants* (London: Sphere, 2011), 3.
[28] Ibid., 13.
[29] Ibid., 17.
[30] Ibid., 17.
[31] Ibid., 17.

disinterested in her own discomfort, however, offering a well-observed and endearingly candid analysis.

Fey is appealing forthright and self-effacing when describing the faults she perceives with her body, and even includes a list of twenty-five 'deficiencies' that women commonly recognise in their own bodies including 'big pores', 'cankles' and 'muffin top'.[32] To balance this, she lists all the body parts she is grateful for, in typically self-deprecating fashion: 'Droopy brown eyes designed to confuse predators into thinking I'm just on the verge of sleep and they should come back tomorrow and eat me'.[33] When addressing the issue of body image Fey ends her chapter on 'The Secrets of Mommy's Beauty' with the advice to 'always remember the most important Rule of Beauty. "Who cares?"'.[34] Fey spends several pages describing her experience at various photo shoots where the emphasis is placed on the artificiality of the whole process: 'Once your hair is straightened, it will be curled, then shown to the photographer, who will stare at it with his or her head cocked to one side. Then it will be restraightened'.[35] She discusses Photoshopping cover pictures of actresses - one of the biggest debates of recent years surrounding women in the media - and acerbically states that '*only people over seventy are fooled by Photoshop*'.[36] Ferriss suggests that by using humour to discuss a relevant issue for contemporary women, Fey effectively sidesteps the real issue: 'Her humor deflates her proclaimed feminist agency, injecting the characteristic paradox of post-feminism: critique exists simultaneously with recognition, if not acceptance, of contemporary consumerist and cultural pressures to conform'.[37] Fey may be unconvinced about the evils of Photoshop but she is scathing when discussing the poses that actresses are asked to adopt for the cover of men's magazines: '(That "thumbs in the panties" move is the worst. Really? It's not enough that they got greased up and in their panties for you,

[32] Fey, *Bossypants*, 20.
[33] Ibid., 24.
[34] Ibid., 114.
[35] Ibid., 151.
[36] Ibid., 151.
[37] Suzanne Ferriss, "Chick Non-Fic: The Comedic Memoir," 220.

Maxim?)'.[38] It is the implied message of the photographs that disturbs Fey, the implication that a woman is available for male consumption, not the fact that the model has been edited into a slimmer, neater version of herself.

Kaling's approach to writing about bodies and specifically her body is to be both confident and accepting. When her show *The Mindy Project* debuted in 2012, it made Kaling the first Indian American woman to both star in and produce her own show. Kaling has noted in many interviews that she is not supermodel slim, and in *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me* she addresses this explicitly. Relating a story of when she was much younger and lost weight to impress a boy, the adult narrator of the split subject authorial position is reassuringly confident and body positive: 'Being called fat is not like being called stupid or unfunny, which is the worst thing you could say to me'.[39] Rather less earnest in narrative tone than Dunham, Kaling's approach to dieting is refreshingly upbeat: 'whenever I lose, like, five pounds, I basically start considering if I should "try out" modelling'.[40] This endearing self-belief is a definite shift from the Bridget Jones style self-loathing that permeates much of the chick lit genre. Dahlia Schweitzer notes how Kaling has explored body image through her show *The Mindy Project*, where she stars as Dr Mindy Lahiri. Comparing Kahiri to Liz Lemon, Fey's character from *30 Rock,* Schweitzer suggest, 'there is not a preoccupation with Mindy's failures in life. Jokes are not made about her bad hygiene or poor fashion sense. Mindy does not apologize for being young, hot, and funny. She simply *is*. And that fact is one of the most radical aspects of *The Mindy Project'*.[41]

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[38] Fey, *Bossypants* , 161.
[39] Mindy Kaling, *Why Not Me?* (New York: Random House, 2015), 20.
[40] Ibid., 20.
[41] Dahlia Schweitzer, "*The Mindy Project*: Or Why "I'm the Mary, You're the Rhoda" Is the RomComSitCom's Most Revealing Accusation," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 43:2 (2015): 67, accessed 3 February, 2016, doi: 10.1080/01956051.2015.1027648.

Feminist Laughs:

Gina Barreca argues that comedy and feminism are not natural enemies, and cites Poehler, Fey, and Kaling alongside other female comics such as Chelsea Handler and Sarah Silverman as expert in the use of humour to make a feminist political point. Describing Silverman's willingness to address rape during her stand-up routine as a way of highlighting the 'authentically taboo' subject that rape victims are often too traumatised report the crime, Barreca suggests: 'The funny woman wields humor in such a way as to remove one gag (through her refusal of silence), even as she makes another – a joke'.[42] In the same way, the act of writing the femoir can be understood as a 'refusal of silence'.

The sense of a female community is at the core of all these narratives. Kaling got her big break playing Ben Affleck in a short play about the friendship between Affleck and Matt Damon that Kaling wrote one of her best friends from college, Brenda. They wrote the play and performed the play and Kaling remembers that, 'It was a special kind of fun to be two best friends playing two other best friends'.[43] As well as writing their memoirs, Dunham, Fey, Kaling and Poehler have all been responsible for writing the material that has launched their careers as performers. Dunham created *Girls*, Fey wrote *30 Rock*, Kaling authored *The Mindy Project*, and Poehler penned several episodes of *Parks and Recreation*. They all recognised that writing their own material was crucial to their critical and commercial success. In *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?* Kaling wrote an essay on female archetypes in romantic comedies that was printed in the *New Yorker*. She skilfully deconstructs the popular female characters that typically feature in rom-coms. Focusing on a type that she identifies as 'The Woman Who Is Obsessed With Her Career And Is No Fun At All' she notes that being a professional woman does not mean that she is unattractive or boring company: 'I didn't completely forget how to be nice or feminine because I have a

[42] Gina Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White…But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2013), xxx.
[43] Kaling, *Is Everyone Hanging Out*, 86.

career'.[44] By tackling the way that professional women are presented as problematic in Hollywood she inadvertently offers another rationale for writing her book. Kaling's confident narrative voice challenges the movie persona of the lonely, professional woman who is secretly sad because she has 'chosen' her career over a personal life, offering a persuasive alternative narrative that has a basis in fact as opposed to fiction. Through creative non-fiction she seeks to re-imagine the fictional portrayal of women in other media. As Schweitzer argues with regards to *The Mindy Project*: 'the show self-reflexively both repurposes and comments upon cinematic conventions from the romantic comedy genre to show the usefulness (or lack thereof) of these tropes to the modern woman and modern romance'.[45] All Kaling's writing, whether for the screen or for the page, can then be understood to be part of a wider revisionist project.

At the core of most of these narratives lies a clear appreciation and gratitude for female friendship. Dunham offers a list of things that one cannot say to one's best friend. Kaling discusses why female best friends share beds, and why this is important. Fey offers several 'love letters' to her fellow *SNL* alumni, Poehler. In return, Poehler stresses Fey's support and her ability to write brilliant sketches for other women. She is fulsome in her praise for Fey: 'People think of us as a "comedy team" and I am not quick to correct them. Why wouldn't I want to connect myself to the fiercest and most talented voice in the comedy world?".[46] Dunham thanks Kaling in her acknowledgements. Kaling discuses her inauspicious time at *SNL* but notes the kindness of Poehler in coming to talk to her, 'Everyone has a moment when they discover they love Amy Poehler'[47] and cites Fey's performance in *30 Rock* as one of her favourite moments in comedy.[48] Each women writer places female community and friendship as part of her public and professional success.

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[44] Kaling, *Why Not Me?*, 101.
[45] Dahlia Schweitzer, "*The Mindy Project,* 64.
[46] Poehler, *Yes Please*, 229.
[47] Kaling, *Is Everyone Hanging Out*, 130.
[48] Ibid., 136.

Professional success is the real story of all these femoirs. Kaling advises hard work is the only real route to success, suggesting that young women who want to work in television should do as she did and 'stay in school and be a respectful and hardworking wallflower, and go to an accredited non-online university'.[49] Focusing on the important of work, Fey recounts a moment from the writers' room at *SNL* when Poehler had just joined the cast. Pitching ideas with Seth Meyers, Poehler made a vulgar comment and Jimmy Fallon, then one of the big stars of *SNL*, turned to Poehler 'and in a faux-squeamish voice said, "Stop that! It's not cute! I don't like it!" Fey states that Poehler then "dropped what she as doing, went black in the eyes for a second, and wheeled around on him. "I don't fucking care if you like it."' Fallon was 'visibly startled' by Poehler's response.[50] Fey tells this story because Poehler's reaction was important. Male approval is not necessary for her professional development. Women do not need to be validated by men, especially in the male-dominated world of comedy. Fey references Hitchens' article on why women are not funny in her analysis of this scene and notes that she was delighted to have the support of Poehler in the male-dominated writers' room. Martha Lauzen highlights that: 'When addressing questions regarding women's status in comedy, Fey's humor becomes more aggressive, explicitly pointing out double standards based on gender. The resulting persona simultaneously positions Fey as everywoman and superwoman'.[51] Detailing her journey from a cast member on *SNL* to writing and running her own show, Fey is typically self-deprecating about why *30 Rock* was picked up by the network: 'NBC executives must have seen something of value in my quirky and unique pilot (Alec Baldwin) because they decided for some reason (Alec Baldwin) to "pick it up"'.[52] It is Fey's writing and performing talent that has transformed *30 Rock* from an idea to a script to a pilot but she ironically notes it is the presence of film star Baldwin

[49] Kaling, *Why Not Me?*, 31.
[50] Fey, *Bossypants* , 143.
[51] Martha Lauzen, "The Funny Business of Being Tina Fey: Constructing a (feminist) comedy icon" *Feminist Media Studies* 14.1 (2012): 117, accessed 4 February 2016, doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.740060
[52] Fey, *Bossypants* , 172.

that actually translates it into a viable creative project. Fey downplays her stress when juggling being the creator of *30 Rock* and being a mother, suggesting (quite understandably) that coal mining and military service are far more stressful.[53] Having to publicly account for her professional success whilst acknowledging her private roles of wide and mother is clearly something that Fey has had to do again and again, 'My standard answer is that I have the same struggles as any working parent but with the good fortune to be working at my dream job'.[54]

Lynn C. Miller and Jacqueline Taylor argue that: 'The story of women's autobiography is the story of resistance to the disembodied, traditionally masculine "universal subject," whose implicit denial of skin color, gender, sexual orientation (other than the heterosexual), an economic disparity constrained many women as "others" with no voices or physicality".[55] The femoir offers a potential counter-narrative of female embodiment, empowerment and self-expression. The format of this kind of text is problematic, as is the concept that women comedians now have to produce a book to validate their brand. There is the worry that feminism is simply in fashion at the moment, and that is why these books are being produced. For Dunham, Fey, Kaling and Poehler, however, writing their stories is just another medium for them to explore. Much of the issues they interrogate – such as body shaming, and the importance of a supportive female professional community - they have addressed repeatedly through interviews, other writing, and in their on-screen characters. It is not difficult to criticise the celebrity autobiography, but the femoir offers a fascinating space for feminist commentary and transgressive humour.

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[53] Fey, *Bossypants*, 189.
[54] Ibid., 256.
[55] Lynn. C. Miller and Jacqueline Taylor, "Introduction," in *Voices Made Flesh, Performing Women's Autobiography*, ed. Lynn Miller, Jacqueline Taylor, and M. Heather Carver. (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 3.

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