

2019

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Recommended Citation

Lund, Holly (2019) "The Linguistic Capital of Amazon's The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel: Season 1," *Occam's Razor*. Vol. 9 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://cedar.wwu.edu/orwww/vol9/iss1/5>

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THE LINGUISTIC CAPITAL OF AMAZON'S *THE MARVELOUS MRS. MAISEL*: SEASON 1

SEASON 1

By Holly Lund

The standup comedian serves two apparently universal functions: as a licensed spokesperson he is permitted to say things about our society that we want and need to have uttered publicly, but which would be too dangerous and too volatile if done without the mediation of humor; and as a comic character he can represent, through caricature, those negative traits which we wish to hold up to ridicule, to feel superior to, and to renounce through laughter" (Mintz 1977). So states an article published in *American Humor* in 1977. While not explicitly discussed, Mintz's implications are clear: women are not funny. This sentiment echoes Robin Lakoff's groundbreaking work *Language and Woman's Place*, which introduced the linguistic world to the idea of gendered language only two years prior. In this book, Lakoff asserted that women's speech followed nine specific, universal rules. Thus, if "he" was responsible

for bridging the gap between thought and speech, speaking out and saying things that the general public could not, obviously "he" occupied a special position, an exclusive position, a gendered position not included in the rules of women's language. "Women don't tell jokes," stated Lakoff in 1975, "they are bound to ruin the punchline." We must then conclude that "he" is the only capable comedian.

One of Amazon's newest original series, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, takes aim at this gross stereotype. Winner of eight Emmy Awards, the show takes place in 1958, a year in which a woman standup comedian was confined to the realm of myth and exaggeration. Those who did find success on stage, such as Jane Lynch's character Sophie Lennon, did so through gimmicks and characters. This reliance on constructing personas mirrors real comediennees of

the time, such as Jackie “Moms” Mabley, who adopted the persona of an old toothless woman in a frumpy house dress and delivered both sexual innuendo and political satire. Others, such as Lucille Ball, found success in physical comedy. The show’s protagonist, Miriam “Midge” Maisel, forges her path in a different direction. She sets her sights, quite accidentally, on the patriarchal world of stand-up comedy, and she is good at it. This essay will examine the three most pertinent of Lakoff’s original nine assertions and analyze how each contributes to Midge’s power in the form of linguistic capital onstage in Amazon’s fictitious 1958.

METHODOLOGY

In many ways power is not a tangible quantity, easily measured and categorized in liters or Hertz. Instead, it is a cultural force, invisible like gravity and just as prevalent. For the purpose of this paper, power will be measured through Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic capital, which is the manifestation of cultural capital on the level of the individual. Linguistic capital is achieved by using the correct linguistic style for an environment, or market. The more correctly one speaks based on their market, the more value, or capital, they will have and the more successful their participation within the speech event will be. Identity also contributes to the success and capital of a speech act. In one of Bourdieu’s

MIDGE’S GENDER AND CAPITAL ARE ALWAYS CONNECTED WHEN SHE SPEAKS, BECAUSE SOCIETY’S PERCEPTION OF HER IS BASED ON HER ADHERENCE TO CULTURAL NORMS AND THE RULES OF WOMEN’S LANGUAGE.



examples, a politician speaking a local dialect will have more capital than an uneducated local woman because of the prestige associated with the politician’s identity (Bourdieu 1977). Midge’s gender and capital are always connected when she speaks, because society’s perception of her is based on her adherence to cultural norms and the rules of women’s language. Linguistic capital relates to the anthropological concept of agency, defined broadly as the capacity for individuals to act independently and with free will (Barker 2005). While performing onstage as a comedian, Midge both claims and endangers much of her agency by putting herself before a crowd. Failure risks ridicule and defamation. Success earns her fame, possible advancement, and, most importantly, personal empowerment and confidence.

It is also worth noting that Lakoff’s original assertions have been thoroughly dissected in the decades following publication of *Language and Woman’s Place*. Lakoff’s conclusions have proven to only hold for women of a white middle-class American background, rather than women universally (Bucholtz 2004, Wetzel 2011). However, the setting of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* presents an interesting parallel to the background of Robin Lakoff. Midge is a white middle-class American housewife living at the end of the 1950s. Due to a shared historical and socioeconomic context, Lakoff’s introspective assumptions should also apply to Miriam Maisel. Thus, to explore whether or not Midge



gained linguistic capital by foregoing or utilizing women's features on stage, I reviewed Lakoff's nine parameters to discover which were present and which were absent in each of Midge's stand-up routines depicted in the show. The three rules pertinent to this analysis are summarized as follows:

1. **Superpolite forms:** Women are expected to speak more politely than men, which relates to hypercorrect grammar. Women are also experts at euphemisms and never carelessly blurt out what they are thinking. Women are especially expected to avoid profanity and taboo language.
2. **Hypercorrect grammar:** Women are expected to be preservers of culture and literacy in white middle-class American society, while, Lakoff states, "literacy and culture are viewed as somewhat suspect in a male." Thus, women are much more likely to adhere to "proper" prescriptive grammar rules than men who may be in the same context.

3. **Men's Humor:** Women do not tell jokes. As the main focus of this essay, I will quote Lakoff directly: "... this point is just an elaboration on the two immediately preceding. But it is axiomatic in middle-class American society that, first, women can't tell jokes – they are bound to ruin the punchline, they mix up the order of things, and so on. Moreover, they don't 'get' jokes. In short, women have no sense of humor" (Lakoff 2004, 80-81). Lakoff later goes on to explain that women are not expected to do impressions or tell simplistic jokes rather than anecdotes. These forms of comedy are instead confined to the realm of men.

For the remainder of this paper, these points shall be referred to as hypercorrect grammar, the superpolite, and men's humor (Lakoff 2004, 78-81).

Each of Midge's performances¹ were analyzed to determine which of Lakoff's features were present and which were absent. Within the performances where she received a positive pragmatic response (such as laughter, clapping, cheering, and overall success), the features she used carried linguistic capital. In the performances where Midge did not receive a positive pragmatic response (she flopped: she doesn't receive laughs, hecklers attempt to undermine her performance and steal the spotlight, and the viewer experiences a hefty dose of secondhand embarrassment), the features used did not carry linguistic capital. I am not

claiming that violating these rules constituted “men’s language,” rather that when she did not use them and found success, it was because she recognized that the features lacked capital in the situation and that by breaking them she gained capital.²

“FUCK PENNY PAN”

The most obvious violation of women’s language in the series is the destruction of the superpolite. As Lakoff states, “women are supposed to speak more politely than men...they are experts of the euphemism; more positively, women are the repertoires of tact and know the right thing to say to other people, while men carelessly blurt out whatever they are thinking” (Lakoff 2004, 80). Midge completely shatters this expectation from the first moment she steps onstage, not only because she uses profanity without fear, but in many cases also completely skips the euphemism, “I loved him. And I showed him I loved him. All that shit they say about Jewish girls in the bedroom? Not true. There are French whores standing around the Marais District saying [French accent] did you hear what Midge did to Joel’s balls the other night?” (*Episode 1: Pilot* 2017).

Two of Midge’s first three appearances onstage occur while she is under some sort of influence; however, she consistently breaks the superpolite in every performance throughout the series, removing alcohol or drugs as the possible cause of her profanity and choice of subject matter. Below are two examples from Midge’s second act in *Episode 2: Ya Shivu v Bolshom Dome Na Kholme*, and her final act in *Episode 8: Thank You and Goodnight*, both of which were not affected by alcohol or marijuana:

ONSTAGE, VIOLATING THE EXPECTED IDEAL OF BEING A “GUARDIAN OF CULTURE AND PRESERVER OF GRAMMAR” GIVES MIDGE A LARGE STOCK OF LINGUISTIC CAPITAL WITHIN HER MARKET.

1. “I need a drink. I need a stiff drink. I need a drink so stiff I could blow it. Sorry, that’s un-ladylike... That’s the end of my show folks. Tune in next week, when my grandmother steals my pearls and fucks my boyfriend.”
2. “This girl put a lot of work into luring him away. I mean she had to [pause] have a vagina. Pretty low bar. But pretty high vagina. She’s tall... Anyhow yesterday she drags her giant vagina into my work and starts yelling at me.”

Midge’s abandonment of the superpolite seems consistent with other definitions of stand-up comedy, including Mintz’s statement that “as a licensed spokesperson [the comedian] is permitted to say things about our society that we want and need to have uttered publicly, but which would be too dangerous and too volatile if done without the mediation of humor” (Mintz 1977, 1). Onstage, violating the expected ideal of being a “guardian of culture and preserver of grammar” gives Midge a large stock of linguistic capital within her market. The comedy club where Midge performs, The Gaslight, and the stage are her environment, affecting what will and will not have value. Had Midge walked down Madison Avenue discussing how “It comes with the tits” or rode the subway and asking about “who gets first ‘fucking’ rights?” she would never have received a positive response. Her words would have possessed no

power. In the sense of linguistic capital, the power of her words stems from correct usage of illocutionary (achieving the desired outcome of the speech act) and perlocutionary (producing the desired emotional effect in the listener) force. In Midge's case, she wants the crowd to laugh (illocutionary) and she wants them to think she and the jokes are funny (perlocutionary). By utilizing profanity and discussing subjects which would be inappropriate in any other social context, she achieves this desired effect, partially by breaking free of the mold of the "superpolite woman" and partially by utilizing the mediation of humor. Even during performances where Midge utterly flops and hecklers begin to interfere, she continues to receive laughter and a positive response when employing strategies which violate social and pragmatic expectations.

Thus onstage, it can be concluded that the superpolite language lacks capital in the market of comedy. To consolidate power, Midge must instead break this feature of women's language in favor of the impolite. By doing so, she is heard and the audience believes that she is funny, meaning she has capital within her market and environment. Oftentimes, vulgarity can be used to enforce a specific cultural response. For example, Kira Hall's work at a non-governmental organization in India shows that choice of language medium can greatly affect the perlocutionary force of a speech act or event. In her analysis, several speakers chose to employ Hindi over English when discussing matters of sexuality or simply during arguments to call upon both the ideas of vulgarity and nationalism associated with using traditional Indian

languages for the topic (Hall 2011). Midge's actions are quite similar, in that she invokes the cultural taboo of vulgarity surrounding topics such as sex, marriage, and gender to exploit the culture of the white American middle-class and receive a positive response.

"MEANWHILE, I WENT TO COLLEGE TO LEARN RUSSIAN"

The only constant besides the dismantling of the superpolite is the eternal prevalence of hypercorrect grammar. Midge consistently, through success and failure, inebriation and sobriety, sticks to the "proper" prescriptive rules of her white middle-class American dialect. Despite her profanity and subject matter, she never "talks rough" as Lakoff states, utilizing "non-standard" forms such as "y'all" or "ain't." Her articulation is crisp and clear, and she never uses double negatives or split infinitives, as abhorred by prescriptive grammarians. Lakoff posits that young boys are more prone to "drop the g" at the end of the present progressive morpheme -ing on verbs, pronouncing the morpheme as [ɪn] rather than [ɪŋ]. However, young girls are quickly trained out of this habit, and this



never occurs in her speech. Thus, Midge falls into the role she has been socialized to carry out, a “preserver of literacy and culture, at least in Middle America” (Lakoff 2004, 80).

Midge also does not use slang outside of one possible instance, though the status of “whackadoodle” as slang is debatable. Her avoidance of slang is noticeable when compared to the men who perform throughout the show. One of which, Lenny Bruce, consistently uses the term “cat” in favor of “man,” “guy,” “gentleman,” or, in some regions today, “dude.” One could argue that her extensive use of profanity classifies as slang, however following Lakoff’s methodology, I found that the two fall under separate categories. Midge’s profanity is part of the white middle-class American prescriptive English lexicon, and, as far as grammar is concerned, Midge never utilizes these items incorrectly. Take her mastery of “fuck” for example, in all its forms:

As a noun: “However, the other night he came home, for some clean underwear and a fuck. Actually just for the underwear. I threw in the fuck for free.” (*Episode 8: Thank You and Goodnight* 2017)

As a derived noun: “Anyone know this fucker?” (*Episode 3: Because You Left* 2017)

As a verb: “Tune in next week, when my grandmother steals my pearls and fucks my boyfriend!” (*Episode 2: Ya Shivou v Bolshom Dome Na Kholme* 2017)

As an adjective: “Well guess what: it’s a fucking fat suit.” (*Episode 7: Put That on Your Plate* 2017)

As an adverb: “And one of the things he says is, ‘trust yourself. You know more than you think you do.’ Are you fucking kidding me?” (*Episode 3: Because You Left* 2017)

“Fuck” is clearly a versatile word in white middle-class American English, often falling into the categories of noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. Above, Midge employs “fuck” correctly given the syntactic and semantic rules of her English variety, meaning that



while profanity could be qualified as slang along with “y’all,” “ain’t,” and “-in,” it is still used in acceptable forms conforming to the rules of distinct lexical categories and thus does not violate hypercorrect grammar.

The only other woman to appear onstage in the show is the comedian Sophie Lennon, played by Jane Lynch. Lennon is a famous comedian, “Queen of vaudeville, conquered radio,” whose onstage persona is that of a large, coarse housewife from Queens, dressed in a shabby floral dress with her stringy red hair pulled back into a bandana. It is revealed later in Episode 7 that the real Sophie Lennon lives in an enormous townhouse with hired help, priceless antique furniture, and a closet full of fur coats, all of which is completely at odds with her comedian persona. Her frumpy appearance is the product of a fat suit and wig, and when she and Midge eat together, all Sophie does is suck a lemon down to the rind, laughing when Midge has the audacity to take a bite out of a macaron.



Sophie's onstage persona does not utilize hypercorrect grammar. First and most noticeably, she speaks with a fake accent meant to make her seem lower class. Like the young boys described by Lakoff, she "drops the g" pronouncing the progressive verb morpheme /ii/ as [in]. In her act, which is featured in *Episode 7: Put That on Your Plate*, she also utilizes many lexical constructions that white middle-class Americans have been conditioned to avoid:

1. "Oh, my first husband and me, we didn't get along too good."
2. "In Queens, we got a neighborhood called Flushing..."

However Sophie, in the shows mythology, remains an absolute legend. Susie notes how she pulled many Americans through The Great Depression, and Midge comments on how even her father, who is not easily pleased by anything, found her funny on the radio. Therefore, it is evident that Sophie's persona gains a large amount of linguistic capital onstage by violating expected hypercorrect grammar. If she were to follow the ideal of hypercorrect grammar, her character would no longer be a caricature of the working class in Queens and she would likely not have received such a strong pragmatic reaction (defined by her laughs and the status which allows her to play huge venues, as seen in Episode 7) in the market of comedy.

THUS, THE CAPITAL OF HYPERCORRECT GRAMMAR SEEMS TO DEPEND ON THE MORE SUBTLE ENVIRONMENT BELOW THE OVERARCHING COMEDIC MARKET.

However, evidence from Sophie's performances does not imply that Midge loses agency and capital by using hypercorrect grammar. While the two women are distinctly different in style and performance, both are incredibly successful in the same market. Thus, the capital of hypercorrect grammar seems to depend on the more subtle environment below the overarching comedic market. In order for this practice to have capital, one must first take into account the expectations of the audience. The character of Sophie Lennon is beloved and well-known, with a history of fame dating back twenty-five to thirty years by Susie's comment. The Great Depression was a time before many women began to gain more agency during the Second World War by leaving the home and joining the working world. It was also a time before Second Wave Feminism, which promoted sexual and employment rights (for white heterosexual women). Because of the time period, Sophie likely did not have the opportunity to take the stage as herself and expect people to take her seriously, resulting in the birth of her "whackadoodle character." Thirty years later, the audience who attends her shows expects her to be the lower-class vaudeville queen from Queens, not a well-kept, well-spoken graduate of Bryn Mawr College. Midge's audience, on the other hand, does not hold these vaudeville expectations. They are simply patrons at a nightclub, which showcases everything from slam poetry about Spokane and Wichita to jazzy musical acts.

Rusty Barrett's work concerning a "white-woman" style used by African American drag queens addresses this idea of audience expectation. Barrett defines drag as subverting traditional gender roles for a queer audience, while female impersonators mock women for the entertainment of a heterosexual audience (Barrett 2011, 414). The difference between imitating women to subvert gender roles and mocking women purely for entertainment value demonstrates how performers tailor their act to fit certain markets where alternative performances may lack value. Sophie and Midge's performances follow the same principle. In order for hypercorrect grammar to carry capital, one must consider the audience expectations as an important factor in the market. Other

rules, such as subversion of the superpolite, would have similar results in both women's shows because they are expected parts of comedy and holding the stage. Grammar and grammatical style, on the other hand, create a character, a persona, and not all personas hold capital universally. To conclude, hypercorrect grammar does have capital when Midge is performing because she presents herself as a white middle-class American housewife and that is the style in which the audience expects her to speak. Hypercorrect grammar does not have capital when Sophie is performing because it is not the speech style of her character and would be inappropriate for the market of her audience.

"BUT I THOUGHT JOEL WANTED MORE THAN STUPID"

Once I finished my analysis of Midge's performances, I returned to earlier episodes to look at a different category of performers: the men. The most dramatic difference between Midge and the men is the emergence of men's humor. Men's humor, Lakoff's eighth rule, is the basis of this paper. In *Language and Woman's Place*, she states, "Women don't tell jokes... they are bound to ruin the punchline, they mix up the order of things, and so on. Moreover, they don't 'get' jokes. In short, women have no sense of humor" (Lakoff 2004, 80-81). As she addresses in her original work, this is a stereotype, not a fact, though it holds sway over Middle America. By Lakoff's analysis, this is directly related to the idea that women are believed to be less assertive and straightforward than men, since they prefer the use of the anecdote over a simple knock-knock joke.

It is true that Midge never gets up in front of her audience and tells a straight joke. She relies solely on the humor of timing and storytelling. There is one instance when a man in the audience begins to heckle her. Midge responds by calling him out and challenging him to do better. He stands up and tells the following joke:

1. "A Spanish magician tells the audience he'll disappear on the count of three. He says '*uno, dos.*' Poof. He disappeared without a tres." (*Episode 5: Doink* 2017)

This is a fascinating instance, because to outdo the woman on-stage, the man in the audience does exactly what women are not supposed to do. Furthermore, he receives a positive pragmatic response to the joke.³

Each man in the show also does impressions. For the sake of this analysis, we can consider impressions a form of joke because men repeatedly receive positive pragmatic responses⁴ when this tactic is utilized. Midge attempts several, the majority during her disastrous fourth performance, while the men each accomplish them successfully in all their performances. Lenny impersonates George Macready and then later changes his voice (which typically has a heavy New York accent) to that of a radio announcer when imitating a cigarette advertisement. Bob Newhart's performance revolves around the imitation of Abraham Lincoln's press secretary. Howard Fawn imitates a soldier during the war of 1812 in his brief appearance. Even Red Skelton, who is barely shown, includes an impersonation of a screaming fan during his limited screen time.

GRAMMAR AND GRAMMATICAL STYLE, ON THE OTHER HAND, CREATE A CHARACTER, A PERSONA, AND NOT ALL PERSONAS HOLD CAPITAL UNIVERSALLY.



Thus, men's humor does have linguistic capital onstage during the men's performances. Conversely, according to my methodology, Midge's use of impression, which does not receive a positive pragmatic response, does not have linguistic capital. Again, this could be contributed to audience expectation, just like the violation of hypercorrect grammar and the superpolite. It does not fit with Midge's persona as a middle-class housewife because a middle-class housewife is not expected to do impressions. Similarly, impressions also contain less overall shock value than profanity. It could be argued that because Midge's attempt at impersonation occurred after her performance had already begun to flop, the expectations of the audience were not important because they had already disconnected with her. Either way, the explicit use of men's humor seems to benefit the men while simultaneously not serving as a valuable or viable tool for Midge.

CONCLUSION

The primary focus in this essay has been concerned with identifying features of Lakoff's women's speech which have capital on the fictional stage of 1950s stand-up comedy. Originally, I expected Midge to break all the rules set forward by Lakoff in a subconscious effort to loosen the restrictive shackles of women's speech in 1958. Rather, it appears she uses a carefully crafted combination of rules to gain both agency and capital.

While not a direct representation of women's speech and onstage capital in 1958, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* attempts to present the audience with a snapshot of a woman's linguistic position in the world of comedy sixty years ago. Many will find similarities between Midge's fictional performances and comedians of today. One modern woman who has stormed the world of comedy, Eliza Schlessinger, does not hold back when it comes to the use of profanity or the lack of euphemism. Eliza does

not hide her preference towards anecdotal punchlines rather than simple jokes. However, Eliza is also notable for the wide breadth of impersonations in her comedic routines. These include characters such as "The Party Goblin" and the "She-Dragon." Each of these routines are met with a noticeably positive pragmatic response, just like the performances of the men depicted in the show (*Eliza: Elder Millennial* 2018). Perhaps this possible evolution is merely a coincidental conclusion caused by the plot of *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, or perhaps it depicts real evidence of a change in cultural attitudes regarding women's language.

Today, we also see comedians who break through the mold of binary gender identity taking the stage. DeAnne Smith, in a performance on Netflix, speaks about taboo subjects, including being non-binary, lesbian, and the unwitting participant in a very interesting waxing session. Urzila Carlson, a South African comedian, also discusses her homosexuality onstage (*Comedians of the World* 2018). While Midge was not afraid to break the taboos associated with women's speech and discuss her own sex life, broaching topics outside heteronormative sexuality and binary gender may have seemed far too risky or even untouchable in her time period.⁵

This evolution in both the range of topics available to modern women onstage—reflected by the superpolite—and the growing positive response from the audience—reflected by men's humor—shows a shift in the status of women's linguistic capital. One might claim that the gender biases presented in Lakoff's original work have lost their potency; however, I would argue that they have not disappeared completely from the American psyche. Women in the public sphere are still expected to speak with some



semblance of hypercorrect grammar and are still met with strong resistance when this rule is forgone or misinterpreted. A contemporary example of this can be seen in the 2015 controversy surrounding NPR, in which listeners complained about women broadcasters' use of vocal fry (the tendency to draw out the end of a sentence with a creaky voice). However, as linguist Penelope Eckert later explained in an interview, men use vocal fry quite often as a stylistic device. Eckert went on to discuss the difference in her reactions and those of her students following the broadcast. To Eckert, the style of vocal fry was something hyper-masculine and something inaccessible to professional women; to her students, it was something positive and authoritative (NPR 2015). This generational difference reflects the prevalence of linguistic pressure on women in the public sphere. However, it also reflects the changing attitudes of younger generations, which will likely morph the landscape of expectation surrounding gendered speech in the coming decades.

HOWEVER, IT ALSO REFLECTS THE CHANGING ATTITUDES OF YOUNGER GENERATIONS, WHICH WILL LIKELY MORPH THE LANDSCAPE OF EXPECTATION SURROUNDING GENDERED SPEECH IN THE COMING DECADES.

In *Language and Woman's Place* and *The Marvelous of Mrs. Maisel*, many aspects of comedy are typically associated with one gender, such as the use of impressions and ability to discuss explicit content. By seeing the evolution and increased freedom utilized by women and people of non-binary identities onstage today, we see the beginning of a redistribution in linguistic capital. Practices and styles no longer belong to one gender of performer. Rather, they are becoming more freely traded within an increasingly diverse comedic marketplace.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ While Midge often “performs” in social settings throughout the show, these instances do not reflect the same market for linguistic capital; therefore I will only focus my analysis on her onstage performances.
- ² As *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* is a product of the twenty-first century, not a primary source from the 1950s, I must acknowledge the cultural bias of myself and the filmmakers. I must also note that I am operating within an ideology that gives less capital to women’s language.
- ³ It is also worth noting that Jane Lynch’s character, Sophie Lennon, does tell some non-anecdotal jokes. However this usage harkens back to the discussion of audience expectation. While these instances do receive a positive pragmatic response, it is unclear whether this due to her persona of the capital of men’s humor overall. I would hypothesize that Midge would not receive the same response due to her persona as a white middle-class American housewife, as opposed to Sophie, who has a different speech style and character.
- ⁴ Characterized by laughter and applause from the audience. This is the same response triggered by jokes and anecdotes.
- ⁵ Although the second season was not yet released when I performed my initial analysis, it is worth noting here that when Midge attempts to speak about pregnancy onstage in the season 2 finale *All Alone*, she is immediately pulled off by the club manager, who claims the subject is “foul.” When Susie retaliates, noting how the man who performed before her discussed sexually transmitted infections, the club manager claims that was funny. In contrast, pregnancy is “female stuff.” It is not allowed on his stage. It is not “funny.” (Episode 10: *All Alone* 2018). Today, it is possible for a woman comedian to perform pregnant, namely Ally Wong, who does so in not one, but two, comedic specials.

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