

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: White, Rosie (2016) Funny peculiar: Lucille Ball and the vaudeville heritage of early American television comedy. *Social Semiotics*, 26 (3). pp. 298-310. ISSN 1035-0330

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2015.1134826>  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10350330.2015.1134826>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/25818/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

[www.northumbria.ac.uk/nrl](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/nrl)



## **Funny Peculiar:**

### **Lucille Ball and the Vaudeville Heritage of Early American Television Comedy**

**Rosie White**

**Northumbria University, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK**

In this essay I examine the traces of vaudeville performance in the first season of the early American television comedy series *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957), proposing that while sitcom may be regarded as a narratively conservative format, it may also harbour eccentric figures; the funny peculiar. American vaudeville offered a space in which normative heterofemininity was both upheld and subverted. As one of the direct inheritors of that theatrical tradition, early sitcom could embody complex negotiations of gender and identity. The first season of *I Love Lucy* is inflected by the performance traditions of American vaudeville, while its development was enabled by a theatrical tour to promote and establish the show. Funding for the pilot came from a vaudeville agency and key actors, producers and writers for the series had a background in this comedic tradition. Vaudeville comedy allowed some female performers licence to explore and explode the feminine ideal and early television comedy offered a similar potential. Lucille Ball's performance as Lucy Ricardo is exemplary in this regard.

**Keywords:** comedy, television, femininity, vaudeville, the body

This essay traces the vaudeville heritage of *I Love Lucy* (CBS 1951-57) with regard to its eccentric representation of femininity. *I Love Lucy* is an early American television sitcom about the adventures of Lucy Ricardo (Lucille Ball) and her husband Ricky (Ball's husband Desi Arnaz). In each episode she tries to escape the domestic arena and fails in her attempts. Lucy plots to enter the public sphere and find a job, usually with the help of her neighbour and friend Ethel Mertz (Vivian Vance), but their plans inevitably put them in hilariously awkward situations, often as a result of trying to conceal their machinations from Ricky and Ethel's husband, Fred Mertz (William Frawley). *I Love Lucy* was an enormous hit in America and Britain when it was first broadcast and the show continues to circulate within

global popular culture as repeat broadcasts, as box set collections, and on digital media. The show is widely-referenced across contemporary television comedy, as new sitcoms draw upon the three-camera studio-based production model which was first developed for *I Love Lucy* (Landay 2010) and actors imitate Ball's physical comedy and performance style.<sup>i</sup>

In this essay I propose that *I Love Lucy* retains the traces of vaudeville tradition and, specifically, its capacity to disrupt and undermine normative gender and sexual identities.

During a 1984 interview with Susan Horowitz Lucille Ball stated that it was the touring vaudeville shows that she saw in the early twentieth century as a child in Jamestown, New York, that inspired her desire to be in show business, initially as a variety performer:

'Vaudeville was dead, but I didn't know it!' (Ball, quoted in Horowitz, 1997: 21). Ball had seen what many consider to be the dying remnants of American vaudeville – a theatrical circuit that stretched across the United States, providing work for a motley variety of acts from the 1880s to the 1930s. Vaudeville served a range of audiences and constitutes a social and historical bridge between theatre and the moving image. As it waned in the early twentieth century vaudeville provided an infrastructure for the nascent movie industry. Vaudeville theatres became cinemas, providing convenient and ready-made venues for screening films, initially alongside vaudeville performances but eventually squeezing out the latter in favour of the new moving spectacle (Snyder 2000:155-161, Stober 2007:140).

### **Transgressive Fluidity**

The vaudeville heritage on which Lucille Ball drew for her comedy performances offered a range of techniques which embodied fluid gender and sexual identities. Female and male vaudevillians created characters which often transgressed class, gender and race binaries, and the deployment of parody, mimicry and imitation was a particular province of female performers (Glenn 2000: 74). The height of the vaudeville boom in America offered female

performers a space in which they could enact ‘rebellious, sexual and aggressive comedy’ (Kibler 1998: 60). M Alison Kibler describes a successful vaudeville performer in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

Lillian Shaw was a ‘character comedienne’, a title used in vaudeville to describe female performers who imitated various types of women in their acts. She presented at least four different characters in her routines: a wealthy, young French woman, a working-class Italian immigrant girl, a working-class Jewish woman from the East side of New York City, and a German immigrant wife and mother. The young, well-dressed French woman flirted with male strangers on the street, while her immigrant characters – with drab or tattered clothes – complained about the harsh conditions of their domestic lives and dreamed of breaking free from the authority of their husbands. While some of her characters were attractive, others were grotesque; part of her routine was sexually titillating, other parts were disgusting. In these ways, her approach to her audience as well as her commentary on women’s roles and sexual values were complex and often contradictory. (Kibler 1998: 60)

In *I Love Lucy* Lucille Ball performs similarly contradictory accounts of femininity – not only through the various roles and disguises Lucy assumes but also in the way those characters were layered *onto* the character of Lucy Ricardo *and* the star persona of Lucille Ball (Doty 1990:4).<sup>ii</sup> If at the turn of the twentieth century women in vaudeville may be understood as ‘active participants in and critical observers of their own cultural moment’ (Glenn 2000:7), then female stars in early television comedy may also be understood as embodying that contradiction.

The emerging genre of television sitcom provided fertile ground for critical representations of domesticity, as from the outset these comedies were set in the family home. Lynn Spigel

notes the ‘fractured domesticity’ which informs 1950s American sitcom, as it reflects upon the artifice of family life by presenting it as a theatrical show; a style which was to become more realist, and thus less liminal, by the end of the decade (1992: 136-180). In the early 1950s television was still a developing medium and the sitcom was yet to be established as a coherent format. The first season of *I Love Lucy* thus offers a more fluid account of gender than is evident in later seasons of the show. The first season, in particular, draws upon vaudeville techniques which serve to explode the domestic fantasy of the white middle class 1950s housewife as unselfishly in thrall to her husband and family. The traces of vaudeville in this new medium played upon a fascination with the politics of identity. Susan Murray examines early television’s vaudeville-inflected variety formats, which were called ‘vaudeo’, and proposes that:

Vaudeo’s presentational, comedian-centred, gag and slapstick style figures the vaudeo comic’s persona as one that is fluid in its relation both to narrative and to constructions of authenticity and performance. Specifically, vaudeo appears to be fascinated with the reticulations of gender and ethnicity. The vaudeo star plays with the signs of both these categories of identity and complicates them through his decentered position within the narrative and his intimate relationship with his audience. (Murray 2002: 103)

Murray’s primary example of such reticulatory performance is Milton Berle, also known as ‘Uncle Milty’, a Jewish comedian who was ‘Mr Television’ in the 1950s. His contradictory star persona included performing in drag, always carrying a cigar and being notoriously heterosexual. Lucille Ball as Lucy Ricardo is not simply a female version of this vaudeo masculinity; her fluid identity is limited by the sitcom format, and framed within discourses of 1950s femininity.

## **Femininity as Comedy**

Much of the critical work on *I Love Lucy* notes Ball's skilled physical comedy and in this regard one episode has become canonical: 'The Ballet' (1:19, 18<sup>th</sup> February 1952) features in Patricia Mellencamp's famous analysis of the series, cited as an example of 'Lucy's [*sic*] mastery of physical comedy, burlesque, and vaudeville, historically a male domain' (Mellencamp 1992:330; see also Mellencamp 2003:50). In this episode Lucy attempts to learn ballet and burlesque in yet another attempt to take part in her husband's show. At the ballet class she joins in a series of classical positions only to perform like an ungainly child, eventually transforming them into a gleeful Lindy Hop Charleston which paradoxically demonstrates Ball's clowning skills (Landay 2012:131-2). When the class moves on to the *barre* Lucy inexplicably gets her foot caught between the rail and the wall, hanging from the equipment in a gawkish mess. This sequence was developed during filming when Ball caught her foot and ad-libbed around it (Andrews 1976:61). In this scene Lucy treats her body as a disobedient Other; addressing her leg as if it were going to respond to verbal commands, and most notably as if it were not a part of her own body. Lucy thus enacts a disarticulation of western femininity through a comic disarticulation of her own body; her leg becomes the grotesque, excessive part which has mischievously trapped itself behind the *barre*, eventually coercing the rest of her body into an upside-down, incoherent performance. Unlike the disciplined, controlled bodies of other dancers in the class, Lucy's body is abject, childlike, leaving her swinging from the *barre* like a chimpanzee. The implication is that for the body of the comedian, the other is barely below the surface, and always to be relied upon as a means of invading and inverting ordered social spaces.

Ball's performance draws upon a slapstick tradition with extensive roots in burlesque and vaudeville which had long been deployed in Hollywood cinema. Alex Clayton's study of the

body in Hollywood slapstick notes, however, the rarity of women performing such physical routines:

For all the battleaxes, man-eaters and sweethearts that populate slapstick comedy at the sidelines, very few women have performed (and even fewer have sustained) the kind of raucous physical horseplay that Keaton, Chaplin, Lewis and Laurel and Hardy frequently enact in their films. (2007: 146)

Clayton examines Colleen Moore as a rare example of a female slapstick star, whose playful account of gender in 1920s Hollywood film contradicts dominant discourses of feminine beauty that represent the female body as static, carefully groomed and disciplined. Moore's slapstick body is both object and subject, as her physical comedy explodes the dualism between control and chaos through its manifestation of the body-in-the-world (Clayton 2007:145-148). That dualism – between feminine/unfeminine, object/subject, control/chaos is the basis of Ball's performance in *I Love Lucy* and she deploys her skills to shatter any easy opposition between such binaries.

Lucy's ballet sequence and its contradictory account of gender through performance can also productively be read in terms of the history of ballet on stage. Robert C Allen (1991) notes that ballet represented a problem for American theatres in the early nineteenth century, as it offered a scandalously spectacular display of active women's bodies. The disruptive potential of such display was recuperated by performers such as Madame Celeste, a French dancer who toured America in 1834 and introduced European romantic ballet with supernatural narratives: 'The romantic ballerina ... helped to dematerialize the revealed female stage body. In keeping with her ethereal roles as fairy and nymph, the romantic ballerina frequently was herself small and extremely slight' (Allen 1991:89). In this way ballet became respectable by presenting a *properly* feminine body which did not appear to

have a concrete impact on physical space. During 'The Ballet', however, Ball's performance *rematerializes* the female body, visibly uncomfortable in her too-short tutu (the dancers wear rehearsal gear), and emphasizing the difference between her larger, older, 'uncontrolled' body and the dancers' disciplined movements.

This parody of normative heterofemininity draws upon vaudeville performance traditions and that genealogy is directly acknowledged in the subsequent sequence. Ricky is looking for a dancer *and* a burlesque comedian for his show, so Lucy enterprisingly trains herself in both fields, inviting a professional vaudevillian to their apartment to teach her a comedy routine or 'bit'. When her tutor (Frank J Scammell) says he is not sure he can teach her the classic vaudeville sketch 'Slowly I Turned', because 'These bits are usually done by two men', Lucy replies 'Couldn't you just pretend I'm a man?' and he complies, giving her an old jacket and hat. This vaudeville 'bit', widely referenced in Hollywood film and early television, features a tramp with a woeful tale of betrayal; his true love leaves him for another man and he tracks the errant couple to Niagara Falls, where he attacks his rival with psychotic fury. He is so absorbed in retelling the story that he attacks his innocent listener too, which sets up a repeating pattern; the other actor only has to say the trigger word (usually 'Niagara Falls' but in *I Love Lucy* it is the name of the beloved, 'Martha') to set off the attack again, introduced by a comic build up: 'Sloooooowly I turned, and step by step, inch by inch...'. Lucy's tutor hits her with a rubber bladder, water from a soda syphon and finally a cream pie in the face.

The gender dynamics of this routine are all too easy to unpick; it is about men exchanging and fighting over a woman. In the traditional version the woman is silent and invisible, the cause of conflict rather than an active protagonist. Lucy's intervention in this sketch is always-already problematic, as the vaudevillian's comment indicates; he has to 'pretend' she is a man for it to work. Nevertheless, she successfully performs her role, clowning horror as the repeated utterance of 'Martha', is played for laughs, as is the subsequent attack. Lucy



shows that she can play the masculine role more successfully than the feminine, albeit within a comic structure, where all genders become muddled and violence is *funny*.

Having learnt the part, Lucy is crestfallen to hear that Ricky has hired his performers already. But on the opening night Ethel finds out that one of the dancers is sick and rings Lucy, failing to identify which performer they need. This leads to a new iteration of the routine, combining comedy with 'legitimate' entertainment, as vaudeville and ballet are brought together for a chaotic finale. The final sequence takes place in Ricky's nightclub where he opens the show singing a romantic Latin number about 'Martha' and the ballet trio (two men and a woman) appear during an instrumental passage. After a few minutes of the ballet routine Lucy enters in her vaudeville jacket and hat, carrying the rubber bladder, soda syphon and cream pie. She is bizarrely accepted by the dancers as an extra partner, clowning through the routine until Ricky resumes singing 'Martha' at which point she shifts into the vaudeville 'bit', whacks the two male dancers with the rubber bladder, then squirts the female dancer in the face with the soda syphon. The musicians in the background can be seen barely stifling their laughter. Lucy finally hits Ricky full in the face with the cream pie as she is carried offstage by the two male dancers.

This bizarre combination of acts is inserted into a television mock-up of Ricky's Tropicana Club, an urbane, sophisticated arena with its attendant discourses of class and gender. Ricky and the dancers are straight-faced throughout and the club is full of well-dressed white heterosexual couples in a cabaret-style setting. As in most episodes Lucy disrupts white, middle class heteronormativity. The closing scene of the episode attempts to reassert order through punishment; she arrives home (still in her vaudeville gear) to be soaked by a bucket of water Ricky has placed over the door so that the joke is literally on her – 'Now we're even'. Throughout this first season of *I Love Lucy* Ball-as-Lucy repeatedly takes to the stage in the show within a show, as if to reiterate the contradiction between sitcom domesticity and

the spectacle of vaudeville. This particular episode is overloaded with identifications; Ball-as-Lucy moves fluently between child, woman and man in a one-woman comedy cavalcade. Whereas much academic writing on burlesque and vaudeville works to reconstruct unseen performances from nineteenth century archival sources, it is also possible to excavate remnants of that live theatrical spectacle in the archaeology of early television comedy.

### **Vaudeville and television**

Early American television marked a revival of vaudeville acts. The newer medium was an inheritor of vaudeville's content, its variety and flow of programming across an evening, as well as many of its former stars (Stober, 2007:148-9). Bob Hope, one of the talents that emerged from vaudeville, put it succinctly: 'When vaudeville died, television was the box they put it in' (Brylawski). One could infer from this statement that television was a coffin for the 'live' theatrical performance medium of vaudeville and some critical accounts of vaudeville tend toward nostalgia for a more materially democratic form of popular entertainment (Allen, 1991; Snyder, 2000). In these studies vaudeville is a form of popular entertainment by and for the people rather than the mass-produced amusements which followed: 'a hybrid form of theatre, offering a distinct arena for communication that people could enter and leave from their own particular subcultures' (Snyder, 2000:xix). Early television comedy retained traces of this hybridity. Burlesque and vaudeville formats and performance styles are visible in 1950s television shows, when they were still within living memory (Mills 2009:35). The muddle of traditions and influences that merge in early American entertainment television enables dissonant voices to be faintly heard and marginal identities to be momentarily visible, not least because of the fragmentary and experimental stage style which was transferred to the small screen.

Although *I Love Lucy* was a sitcom, not a variety show, it bore the traces of vaudeville performance styles that were more explicitly articulated in early television variety shows such as *The Jack Benny Program* (CBS, 1950-1965), *The Ed Wynn Show* (CBS, 1949-50), *The Colgate Comedy Hour* (NBC, 1950-55) and the *Camel Comedy Caravan* (CBS, 1950). These shows referenced their burlesque and vaudeville predecessors, featuring proscenium-style stage sets with curtains, and often satirizing the realist narrative styles which were being established in film and television. An Abbott and Costello edition of *The Colgate Comedy Hour* (13<sup>th</sup> January 1952) opens with a lively dance troupe on a stage set, but when the number ends the camera pans out to reveal stage flats and the ‘floor manager’ calling for the stars as Abbott and Costello appear in the audience selling ice creams. At several points televisual and theatrical illusion is satirized, mostly by Lou Costello, who picks a fight with a camera operator and parodies the flimsy quality of the set by shaking it apart. Errol Flynn is the main guest star in this episode, dressed as a cowboy to perform the classic vaudeville ‘bit’ ‘Niagara Falls’ (also known as ‘Slowly I Turned’) which was employed in *I Love Lucy*. These early variety shows imitate and parody contemporary politics, Hollywood celebrity, and burgeoning television formats.

Like vaudeville, early television had a cannibalistic appetite for self-referential comedy. In NBC’s *The Colgate Comedy Hour* (8<sup>th</sup> May 1955) Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis parody CBS’s longest-running variety show, Ed Sullivan’s *Toast of the Town* (CBS, 1948-71), broadcast at the same time on a competing network. On *The Bob Hope Chevy Show* (NBC, 21<sup>st</sup> October 1956) Hope takes part in a sketch which re-stages an episode from *I Love Lucy* with Hope playing Ricky Ricardo and Desi Arnaz playing Fred Mertz. That *I Love Lucy* was so easily re-staged on a variety show is less surprising when one considers the sitcom’s own predilection for variety scenarios within its own narrative. The longstanding storyline of Ricky Ricardo’s club or, later, his television show, meant that Lucy and Desi were often

framed within the *mise en scene* of a club audience, scenery flats, a stage and curtains ('The Diet' 1:3; 'The Audition' 1:6; 'The Adagio' 1:12; 'The Benefit' 1:13). Several episodes in the first series feature Lucy taking part in a talent show or competition, where the screen is framed by a proscenium arch and she interacts with the host ('The Quiz Show' 1:5; 'The Amateur Hour' 1:14; 'Lucy Writes a Play' 1:17; 'The Ballet' 1:19). The fluidity of early television formats is mirrored by the fluidity of its stars and storylines; light entertainment television saliently inherited the popular, liminal status of burlesque and vaudeville. In the late twentieth century such genre transgressions might be termed postmodern but in the 1950s they were an indicator of television's roots in vaudeville.

### **Vaudeville Traces**

Alexander Doty cites *I Love Lucy's* vaudeville roots in his 1990 essay on Lucille Ball's star image, remarking the slapstick heritage that informs early series of the show. Doty argues that Lucille Ball's celebrity is predicated on the repression and containment of Lucy Ricardo's transgressive acts as 'infantilized' or temporary (9). He skilfully unpicks the contradictions between Lucille Ball's professional achievements and Lucy Ricardo's comically frustrated attempts to escape the marital home:

The resulting tensions between 'Lucy Ricardo' and 'Lucille Ball' in Ball's televisual star image often threaten to disrupt the series' sitcom characterizations and narrative development, thereby opening a space for more complex, if not always progressive, readings of Lucy Ricardo and the series. (1990:4)

The comedy in this situation is that of Lucy's constant resistance and return to her domestic role; as Ricky says to Lucy in the unaired pilot (and repeats in 'The Audition' 1:6): 'I don't want my wife in show business... I want a wife who is just a wife...' but Lucy always wants more. This dynamic offers an uncanny reflection upon the behind-the-scenes reality that the

business of show, and vaudeville in particular, enabled Lucille Ball to escape her Hollywood career as a mid-range contract player and become the star and producer of one of the most successful television comedies.

Ball reinvented herself through vaudeville, employing its performance style, its funders and its production staff to repackage her Hollywood star persona for television. In 1950, tired of the contract films she was being offered by the studios, Lucille Ball put together a stage show with Desi Arnaz which toured the vaudeville circuit from Chicago to San Francisco to great success. Comedy sketches for the show were produced by writers who had worked on Ball's radio sitcom *My Favourite Husband* – Jess Oppenheimer, Bob Carroll Jr and Madelyn Pugh – writers who would later work on *I Love Lucy* (Andrews 1976: 21-28). Oppenheimer had worked in radio with a number of vaudeville stars; he was a writer-producer on Fanny Brice's hit radio show, based on the 'Baby Snooks' character she had developed in vaudeville (Pugh 2007: 15-16; Martin and Seagrave 1986:113-115). Preparing for the stage show, Ball worked with a vaudeville friend of Desi Arnaz, Pepito the Spanish Clown, in order to perfect a comedy routine that would later appear on the unaired pilot episode of *I Love Lucy* and would then be recycled for the sixth episode of the first season (Ball 1996: 160, 168-9; Horowitz 1997: 25, 27-28). This sketch, which involved Lucy cross-dressing as a tramp and doing a vaudeville bit with a trick cello, again makes evident the show's theatrical genealogy (Higham 1986: 94-5, Kanfer 2003: 116-17). In the face of CBS network executives' scepticism that a mass audience would accept a television comedy based around a 'mixed race' couple, Ball and Arnaz put their own money into producing a pilot, and also got funding from the General Amusement Corporation, their agents for the vaudeville tour (Higham 1986: 105). Vaudeville's tradition of 'ethnic' comedy based on the linguistic mistakes of unassimilated or newly arrived Americans was deployed to shape Arnaz's performance, with a regular feature of *I Love Lucy* being Ricky's mispronunciations, such as 'dint' for 'didn't'

(Horowitz 1997: 112; see also Landay 2010:76-86). The performance aesthetic of the series, as well as its finance, was heavily indebted to vaudeville.

The extent to which this tradition grounds the still-extant style of sitcom itself may be seen in the innovations of *I Love Lucy*'s original director, Karl Freund. Freund had worked with Fritz Lang and F W Murnau at the UFA Studios in Germany and was already hailed as an innovative cinematographer when he moved to the United States in 1929 to work with the Technicolor Company on its new colour film systems. The director was in retirement and living on the proceeds of a light meter he had developed in the 1940s when Desi Arnaz persuaded him to work on *I Love Lucy*:

'I want to stage the show as a play,' Desi explained, 'film it in continuity in front of an audience of perhaps three hundred people, using three thirty-five-millimetre cameras and recording the audience's laughter and reactions simultaneously with our dialogue.' (Kanfer 2003: 128)

Despite Freund's initial scepticism about this approach, he joined the team for a minimal salary and produced the three-camera system that is still employed today (Landay 2010: 27-32). Arnaz' proposal underlines the theatrical roots of sitcom, aligning it with vaudeville as a staged medium (Mills 2009: 35). The show's casting was similarly informed by that tradition. William Frawley, who played Fred Mertz, the Ricardo's landlord and neighbour, had worked the vaudeville circuit in the 1920s before becoming a character actor in Hollywood (Kanfer 2003: 130, Higham 1986: 112-13). The first season of *I Love Lucy* was thus steeped in vaudeville.

The vaudeville aesthetic fed directly into *I Love Lucy*'s contradictions. Vaudeville and sitcom embody conflicting aesthetics of narrative coherence and closure on the one hand and performance as spectacle and process on the other. For vaudeville the format of the comedy

routine or 'bit' was repetitive, working toward a given conclusion or punchline, but its performance entailed tempering each show to the tastes of a particular audience (Snyder 2000; Stober 2007). Critical accounts of the television sitcom often begin with the argument that it is notoriously formulaic – a repeating narrative in which characters are returned to the same situation at the end of each episode – yet such critical accounts also argue that within this structure of repetition there is inevitable variation if only in an attempt to vary the plot within sitcom's limitations (see, for example, Mintz 1985 and Mills 2009). The contradictory aesthetic of both stage and small screen comedy represent a fleeting arena for the performance of identities that exceed, parody or transgress binary accounts of gender. Early American television sitcom is a particular example of this precisely because it is a transitional medium, negotiating theatrical vaudeville's longstanding traditions and an emergent television aesthetic.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Identification and Identities**

In an essay on 'Anarchistic Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic' Henry Jenkins (2003) notes the temptation to see certain forms of comedy (in his example, the Marx Brothers) as subversively anarchic and is sceptical about the validity of such assumptions. Nevertheless, Jenkins acknowledges the multivalent forms of address in such polysemous texts as *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey, 1933), commenting that, like vaudeville, early film comedy was: 'designed to attract a number of different types of spectators – children as well as adults, city dwellers as well as rural and small-town residents, women as well as men, working-class as well as middle-class viewers, etc.' (Jenkins 2003:92). Lucille Ball's performance as Lucy Ricardo are similarly polysemous texts designed to attract many different audiences. Ball's longevity in *I Love Lucy*, *The Lucy Show* (CBS, 1962-68) and *Here's Lucy* (CBS, 1968-74) evidences the success of that strategy.

*I Love Lucy* offers a range of identifications, not least because much of the show depicts Lucy performing a range of comic characters, as the writers repeatedly produced comedy scenarios featuring Lucy and Ethel in disguise (Higham 1986: 107-8). Lucy and Ethel's performance of social and sexual categories granted an arena to divergent cultural characters, even if such representations were the butt of the joke. Susan Murray, writing about male television comedy stars proposes that:

the variety format in which [former vaudeville stars] worked (with its emphasis on multiple characters, ethnic humour, and drag) granted them the room in which to play with these signifiers and to further complicate assumptions about stable, traditional American masculinity. (Murray 2002: 102)

In the first season, if not in later series, Lucille Ball makes an equivalent intervention as Lucy Ricardo regarding 1950s femininity, as she deploys physical comedy to explode the fantasy of the white bourgeois housewife. In *I Love Lucy* Ball is often cross-dressed, performing Lucy in 'disguise' (but always completely recognizable to the audience) as a man or boy, as a working-class or upper-class character, or as a person from a different ethnic heritage. If Lucy could put on a 'disguise' so easily it also raised questions about her 'real' role as Ricky's stay-at-home wife. This is the space that Alexander Doty describes; the tacit contradiction between Lucy's weekly failures on the small screen and Lucille Ball's evident success in her performance (1990:4). In every scenario Lucille-as-Lucy commands the stage. Ball is the titular star of the show and it is her transgressive performances that anchor the comedy throughout.

In the show's first broadcast episode 'The Girls Want to Go to a Nightclub' (15<sup>th</sup> October 1951) Lucy and Ethel argue with Ricky and Fred about what they should do to celebrate Fred and Ethel's wedding anniversary. Lucy and Ethel want to go to the Copacabana nightclub,



while Ricky and Fred want to take them to a boxing match. When they can't agree Lucy and Ethel declare that they will go to the nightclub without their husbands; Ricky and Fred decide to get 'dates' to take to the fight, calling a mutual friend to arrange it. Lucy and Ethel intervene and, disguised as hillbillies, arrive at the apartment where Ricky and Fred are nervously waiting for their dates. Lucy's red hair is covered by black wig; she wears a floral, frilly dress with hobnailed boots and carries a jug of moonshine. Ethel is dressed as a little old lady with spectacles and a stick. Lucy's voice is deep and dopey as she introduces them both: 'I'm Eugene, this here's my Ma...'. 'Eugene' subsequently assaults Ricky: 'Aw, look at him Ma, he's shy! Hurhurhur... What's the matter sonny boy? C'mon kiss me! C'mon kiss me! Kiss me *right now!*' She backs Ricky up against the writing desk at the front of the set, throwing him onto it and climbing on top of him. Ricky only escapes when 'Eugene' turns away to exclaim, with her fists in the air: 'O *boy*, Ma, this is FUN!' She follows him, throwing him down onto the sofa so hard that he bounces onto the floor, where she takes him by the lapels and kisses him again: 'What's the matter boy? Ain't I your type?' In this sequence gender and class hierarchies are transgressed. Lucy as 'Eugene' emphatically takes physical control of the space, throwing Ricky about the room like a rag doll, and becoming a sexual predator with the reiterated demand: 'Let's neck!' Ricky and Fred are horrified by these hillbilly termagants who offend their expectations of acceptable femininity. 'Eugene' and 'Ma' are too old, too uncultured and too *peculiar*. They are also sexually adventurous; 'Eugene's' physical dominance of Ricky is clownish, drawing on stereotypes of oversexed, working class women who will not take no for an answer. Ball's deployment of a deeper, more masculine vocal register as 'Eugene' merely serves to confirm the reversal. In this sketch the normative power relations of heterosexual romance are upended. Ball's clowning abilities are put to full use as she gurns, goofs it up, wrestles Ricky and jumps about the set. When Ricky is forced to sing in order to gain some distance from

her, 'Eugene' and 'Ma' perform a riotous dance, ending with Lucy/'Eugene' sprawled across the sofa, her legs akimbo. This could not be further from 1950s white middle class heterofemininity. In this episode (the first to be broadcast although not the first to be filmed), we see ample evidence of the vaudeville style which informs *I Love Lucy*, together with the carnivalesque dynamic which that tradition entails. The appearance of Lucy and Ethel in disguise prompts a hysterical response from the studio audience, which Ball plays to throughout; she is in command physically, verbally and comedically. Arnaz is cast in a role more often construed as feminine, that of the reactive foil to an active protagonist, and he looks convincingly afraid of this wild country woman.

### **Vaudeville and femininity**

Such sitcom sequences are resonant of a debate which was as relevant in 1950s America as it was in the mid nineteenth century. Robert C Allen's cultural history of burlesque and vaudeville addresses discussions in America from the late 1820s regarding femininity: '[Burlesque] emerges at a time when the question "What does it mean to be a woman?" is constantly being asked in a wide range of forums and answered by many different, conflicting voices' (Allen 1991:27). Allen notes the distinction between a woman performing a passive role on stage, such as the 'true woman', and more transgressive women's roles. The 'true woman' was often the heroine of a scripted melodrama, contained by prescribed codes of middle class femininity. She was patently different to women who took 'bitches roles' as male characters, who engaged in *tableaux vivants* ('living pictures') or those who took to the stage to perform ballets in outfits that were perceived as too short or too revealing: 'The struggle over the appearance of women onstage, then, was a struggle between spectacle and mimesis, display and drama, desire and repression' (Allen 1991: 81). Many female stars working in burlesque and vaudeville exceeded the limits of the 'true woman', thereby endangering their reputations offstage as well as on.

In 1950s American television sitcom characters like Lucy Ricardo do not represent salacious accounts of female sexuality but they do engage in debates about femininity at moment when women are once more in the spotlight (Meyerowitz 1993). The comedy format allows Ball to experiment with different forms of femininity through her many disguises. When Lucy dresses as a vamp in 'Be A Pal' (1:2) it is for comic effect – she is parodying the languid sexuality of the Hollywood screen goddess – but Lucy does represent a spectacular account of femininity. Like her forerunners in burlesque and vaudeville she engages in that contradictory debate regarding *how* women can appear in public. Lucille Ball and other star performers on this new medium, such as Gracie Allen, Martha Raye and Eve Arden, deploy vaudeville techniques to comment upon and disrupt the stereotype of the 'true woman' (Doty 1990:3).

Work on women in film and television comedy has noted how comic narratives offer a space for 'unruly women' who exceed the 'to-be-looked-at' inertia of the 'true woman' and the screen goddess, a space for femininities that are 'too fat, too funny, too noisy, too old, too rebellious' (Mulvey 1989; Rowe 1995: 19; see also Gray 1994 and Mizejewski 2014). Ball and her peers in early television comedy undercut the 'true woman' by acting outside the bounds of normative heterofemininity. They perform gender as problematic, as unnatural, as *peculiar*, deploying vaudeville techniques that by the 1950s had long been employed in Hollywood, but not often by female stars. Early film comedy after the advent of sound had also offered versions of femininity that stepped outside the norm. Henry Jenkins cites the physical comedy of Winnie Lightner as directly addressing and deconstructing feminine stereotypes: 'her unseemly acts point toward the artificiality of the glamour pose, the puffery of show business rhetoric, and the unreasonableness of male expectations' (Jenkins 1992:263). Lightner was a vaudeville star before becoming one of Warner Brothers' top female performers, but her career came to an abrupt end as she retreated from her screen

success. As Jenkins notes, being a female grotesque in early Hollywood was to be perceived as unfeminine; stars such as Lightner were subject to the misogynistic readings of an era where the 'true woman' was the approved model of femininity (Jenkins 1992: 259-69).

Winnie Lightner demonstrates that while stage and screen comedy offers a space in which female performers can address and transgress dominant stereotypes it is also a space in which transgression is licensed at a cost. In early Hollywood that cost was that the female comedy star was 'unsexed' by her performance.

Gladys Hall, in her article 'Is It Tragic To Be Comic', for the *Moving Picture Classic* magazine of May 1931, asked: 'When woman's whole aim in life is to be attractive, how must it feel to play the buffoon?' (Jenkins 1992: 258). This statement proposes the funny woman on screen as beyond the bounds of desirable heterofemininity, a concern which continues to be echoed in contemporary debates about women and comedy (White 2010). Yet by the 1950s questions were being raised in popular discourse regarding the social role of women and the fantasy of the 'true woman', challenging the proposal that 'woman's *whole* aim in life is to be attractive' (my emphasis). Joanne Meyerowitz argues that post-war debates about femininity in the articles and letters pages of women's magazines reveal 'ambivalence and contradictions in postwar mass culture' (1993:1465) which reflect upon the contradictory demands of women's lived experience. The early seasons of *I Love Lucy* demonstrate those ambivalences and contradictions through a physical comedy that draws upon vaudeville as a medium for dissent. In these terms funny women on the large and small screen, as with vaudeville, are both funny *and* peculiar, exposing the construction of gender through its humorous disarticulation.

## Works Cited:

Allen, R. C. (1991) *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.

Andrews, B. (1976) *Lucy & Ricky & Fred & Ethel: The Story of I Love Lucy*, New York: E P Dutton and Company.

Ball, L. (1996) *Love, Lucy*, New York: Berkley Boulevard Books.

Bennett, J. and Holmes, S. (2010) 'The "place" of television in celebrity studies', *Celebrity Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (March) 65-80.

Brylawski, S. (Curator) *Bob Hope and American Variety*, Library of Congress online exhibition: <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/bobhope/tv.html> (accessed 3rd February 2015).

Clayton, A. (2007) *The Body in Hollywood Slapstick*, Jefferson: McFarland.

Doty, A (1990) 'The Cabinet of Lucy Ricardo: Lucille Ball's Star Image', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Summer) 3-22.

Glenn, S. A. (2000) *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Gray, F. (1994) *Women and Laughter*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Higham, C (1986) *Lucy: The Real Life of Lucille Ball*, New York: St Martin's Press.

Horowitz, S (1997) *Queens of Comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the New Generation of Funny Women*, Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers.

- Jenkins, H. (1992) *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2003) 'Anarchistic Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic', in *Hollywood Comedians: The Film Reader*, edited by Frank Krutnik, London: Routledge.
- Kanfer, S. (2003) *Ball of Fire: The Tumultuous Life and Comic Art of Lucille Ball*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Kibler, M. A. (1998) 'Nothing Succeeds Like Excess: Lillian Shaw's Comedy and Sexuality on the Keith Vaudeville Circuit', in *Performing Gender and Comedy: Theories, Texts and Contexts*, edited by Shannon Hengen, Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach.
- Landay, L. (2010) *I Love Lucy*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Landay, L. (2012) 'The Mirror of Performance: Kinaesthetics, Subjectivity, and the Body in Film, Television, and Virtual Worlds', *Cinema Journal* (Spring), 51:3, 129-136.
- Martin, L. and Segrave, K. (1986) *Women in Comedy*, Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press.
- Mellencamp, P. (1992) *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, and Comedy*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Mellencamp, P. (2003) 'Situation Comedy, Feminism and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy', in *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*, edited by Joanne Morreale, New York: Syracuse University Press, 41-55.
- Meyerowitz, J. (1993) 'Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-58', *The Journal of American History*, 79:4 (March), 1455-1482.
- Mills, B. (2009) *The Sitcom*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

- Mintz, L. (1985) 'Situation Comedy', in *TV Genres: A Handbook and Reference Guide*, edited by Brian G Rose, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 107-29.
- Mizejewski, L. (2014) *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Mulvey, L. (1989) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, by Laura Mulvey, 14-26. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Originally published in *Screen* 16 (1975), 1-18.
- Murray, S. (2002) 'Ethnic Masculinity and Early Television's Vaudeo Star', *Cinema Journal* 42, No. 1, Fall.
- Pugh, M. D. (2007) *Laughing With Lucy: My Life With America's Leading Lady of Comedy*, Cincinnati, Ohio: Clerisy Press.
- Rowe, K. (1995) *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Snyder, R. W. (2000) *The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York*, second edition, Chicago: Ivan R Dee.
- Spigel, L. (1992) *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Stober, J. (2007) 'Vaudeville: The Incarnation, Transformation, and Resilience of an Entertainment Form', in *Residual Media*, edited by Charles R Acland, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Thumim, J. (2002) 'Introduction: Small Screens, Big Ideas', in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, edited by Janet Thumim, London: I B Tauris.

White, R (2010) 'Funny Women', *Feminist Media Studies*, 10:3, 355-58.

---

<sup>i</sup> One notable example is Debra Messing's performance as Grace Adler in *Will and Grace* (NBC, 1998-2006).

<sup>ii</sup> Ball appeared as the 'Mystery Guest' six times on the American panel quiz *What's My Line* (CBS, 1950-67), a record which attests to her celebrity.

<sup>iii</sup> It is worth noting here that *I Love Lucy* was also innovative in its use of film rather than the then more usual lower-quality kinescope to record the series (Andrews 1976:31-3; Landay 2010:26-29).