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Saturday Night Candidates: Comedic Brands on *Saturday Night Live* During the 2016 Presidential Election.

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Abstract

NBC's *Saturday Night Live* (SNL, 1975-) is an institution for political humor on the American television. The key for many successful impersonations seems to be hiring popular comedians who build heavily on their own identity and stardom, exploiting the bodies of politicians to define and promote their own comedic persona in the public arena. This is especially true for the seasons that led to the 2016 presidential election, as shown by the strategies enacted by impersonators like Kate McKinnon, Alec Baldwin and Larry David, who respectively played the role of Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. This essay will take into account the aforementioned caricatures from the 2016 electoral cycle, highlighting the pivotal roles of intertextuality and reflexivity for SNL's political impersonators. Therefore, sketches and interviews will be considered, especially those that shape the comedians public image and explore their relationship with the candidates and the program's production cultures and practices.

Keywords: Comedy; Satire; Saturday Night Live; Presidential election; Television.

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1 Introduction: situating political sketch comedy and comedians on *Saturday Night Live*

The 2016 Presidential campaign proved to be "one of the ugliest in modern American history" (Kruse and Zelizer 2019: 330), but it was also a highly entertaining race filled with singular personalities, each of whom characterized by their own distinctive features: therefore, not only political pundits threw themselves into the field to comment it, but also comedians. In the Twenty-first century, entertaining political programming had become, in fact, "an integral component of American political culture" (Jones 2010: 13) usually by using the genres and language of comedy and satire. The late-night programming is the main setting of political humor, and on Saturday, at 11.30 on NBC, the week is closed by *Saturday Night Live* (SNL, 1975-), a live variety show that has staged the spectacle of democracy trough the genre of sketch comedy since 1975 (Grey et al. 2009; Marx et al. 2013).

This essay will examine SNL's political impersonations during the 2015-2016 presidential campaign enlightening the strategies put in place by Kate McKinnon, Larry David, and Alec Baldwin — impersonators of Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump respectively — to define their comedic star persona and promote themselves while exploiting the likeness and feature of the presidential candidates. Politics has always been at the center of SNL's "brand", functioning as "a narrative strategy in the historical development of the show and in establishing the show's standout star personas", and as "a means of periodically reasserting and reaffirming the program's cultural relevance" (Jones 2013: 78). Referring to the aforementioned cases, the concept of "show's standout star personas" can be adjourned and extended to include guest impersonators — like Baldwin and David — who are not part of SNL's regular cast and whose importance drastically increased during the latest electoral cycles. They too have their own "brand", built transmedially through tv shows, movies, social media, and interviews on traditional news outlets.

After all, sketch comedy itself is a very flexible genre, suitable to be commercialized in a hybrid media system and malleable from a cultural point of view: a live show like SNL, which is produced weekly, can quickly address the current events and ever-changing sensibilities, and has a certain amount of space to experiment, to express different and sometimes contradictory ideas. In fact, this 'flexibility' is also 'reflexive', in the sense that sketches tend "to joke about their own creative processes, differences from previous comedic traditions, and roles as arbiters of broader cultural debates" (Marx 2019: 2-3). For instance, political sketch comedy, in the form of an impersonation, is used by comedians to talk about themselves, to establish their role in the television industry and in the public arena.

The ever-shifting and flexible nature of sketches calls for an historical and systemic understanding of their features: "depending on the comedian, sociohistorical context, and production pressures a show faces, a sketch — and its presumed funniness — can flexibly take any number of forms" (Marx 2019: 19) which are always the outcome of a complicated negotiation, that mirrors the world of the cultural industries, "product of the clash between different subjectivities, each one with its own role, which find, in the content they generate, a mediation" (Barra 2012: 78).

The theoretical framework implemented to study media production cultures comes in handy to investigate these subjectivities. Three of the four modes of analysis proposed by John T. Caldwell (2008: 4) can be useful to examine, from an historical and spatial distance (Noto, Di Chiara 2016: 111-112) self-theorists such as the comedians of SNL, who talk widely about their work and express their beliefs about their place in society: the analysis of the artifacts — in this case, the sketches — (1) will be linked to personal accounts and interviews (2), as well as to the economic-industrial context (3). Moreover, giving the subject matter, it will be pertinent to recall some of the political events from the 2016 presidential election. Interviews given at the time enlighten the ideologies and self-representations at play, which sometimes collide and contradict themselves: if we read the interviews with an approach of interpretative anthropology (Geertz, 1973) we'll find extreme self-aware individuals, who reflects on themselves and on their own texts, adding layer after layer to their cultural products. Of course, these accounts are useful but biased, and we should not forget the mediation of the interviewer, who adds another level to the interpretation. Due to this, the role of the press in crafting the public narrative about SNL cannot be understated: "with each campaign season, as SNL routinely ventures

into political caricature, journalists and television critics hype the show and repeat these cultural moments, thus explicitly asserting a cultural relevance that isn't to be missed" (Jones 2013: 86).

The comedians' answers, on the other hand, tend to manifest the strong self-awareness of those who work in the media industry, accustomed to find themselves "mirrored on the press and at the center of the public's attention" (Barra 2016: 55): "The media industry speaks, reflects, discuss about itself in a constant way, and the researcher must not adhere uncritically to this discourse but re-elaborate it, understand it and make the best use of it" (Barra et al. 2016: 24). That lead us to adopt a skeptical attitude, and to operate a constant triangulation between different accounts, carrying on an interpretative undertaking that provide reasons for omissions and incongruities. In this regard, the results of this essay will have implications for the historical understanding of comedy production, while interacting with accounts about politicized celebrities (Wheeler 2013) and several studies on comedic production and performance, that already observed the construction of comedic star personas on SNL (Whaley 2010, Robinson 2010, Day and Thompson 2012, Jones 2013, Marx 2019, Fotis 2020).

2 The funny politics of empathy: Kate McKinnon and Hillary Clinton

SNL's episode right after the presidential election of November 2016 (42.6) opened for the last time with Kate McKinnon in Hillary Clinton's drag. Dressed in the candidate distinctive white pantsuit and sitting alone at a piano surrounded by darkness, she started singing *Hallelujah* by the late Leonard Cohen, deceased the day before the vote: with no comedy at all, the sketch expressed the grief for the loss of the artist intertwined with Clinton's defeat, generating a "political catharsis" (Davisson 2018: 200). It was also the end of a journey started in March 2015, when McKinnon took to the stage widespread stereotypes about the candidate, upon which past impersonators on SNL, such as Amy Poehler, insisted: her monstrous ambition, duplicity, stiffness and inability to relax (Fotis 2020: 175-180). However, at the same time, the actress started to overturn these clichés, picturing a more nuanced portrait of the former first lady. "I did my best, it wasn't much. / I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch. / I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you": these are some of the verses carefully selected for her version of *Hallelujah*, which ended with a call to action: "I'm not giving up, and neither should you" said a noticeably moved Clinton-McKinnon, looking straight down the camera.

In many interviews, the comedian insisted on two key issues: her explicit political endorsement to Clinton, and her need to establish a deep emotional connection with the subject of her impersonation. At times, to rationally justify the coexistence in her caricature of both relatable and unfavorable elements, she also used the notion of 'comedic juxtaposition' — a simplification of what is known as the 'incongruity theory' (Carroll 2014: 16-37) — in which humor arises from the pairing of two or more very different elements. This highlighted a compromise between the comedian's will and the commercial needs of playing on the superficial features of a politician, since they are the most recognizable by the broader public (Jones 2009). Maureen Dowd (2015) asked McKinnon to address this apparent contradiction: "You're an outspoken Hillary Clinton supporter, but your impression of her sort of dovetails with the haters' assessment of Hillary: that she is pathologically ambitious and insincere." McKinnon tried to evade the question by responding with the notion of juxtaposition and the commonsense statement that her job was to "make comedy out of current events." Then she attributed to society's traditional gender norms the fact that a "staunch passionate lady" like Clinton was laughable per se. However, she also insisted on her respect for the candidate, explaining the struggle to make an empathetic impression that underlined the silver lining of Clinton's staunchness, to be brought forth through a commonality of character: "what I find so lovable about her is her conviction. And I feel like I have that. I just love how badly she wants to fix stuff. I would like to do that. I'm just not smart enough." At this point, McKinnon already supported Clinton, but the politician was not fully integrated in her comedic brand yet: the comedian presented herself as cautious, very skeptical of the possibility of saying something meaningful, let alone making a difference in the race: "I unequivocally want her to win, and I don't really think I have the power to sway anything".

Nevertheless, at the end of the forty-first season, McKinnon presented herself as more self-confident. During an interview in July 2016 to Jane Borden, the comedian articulated her idea about the sociopolitical role of comedy: "Comedy is a tool of togetherness [...] It's a way of putting your arm around someone, pointing at

something and saying, 'Isn't it funny that we do that?' It's a way of reaching out." Because of this, she reaffirmed, "I can't do impressions of people I can't relate to [...] It has to come from a place of understanding and celebration." Again, McKinnon affirmed that she felt "so connected" with Clinton: but while in September 2015 she dismissed the prospect of any usefulness of her impersonation, in 2016 she inscribed it in a more active sociopolitical perspective, inspired by the democratic candidate: "I can relate to pushing yourself because you want to help, and move culture toward justice" (Borden 2016). The fulfillment of her press-driven, self-reflexive journey was expressed one month later to the *New York Times*, when McKinnon said:

I look at a politician or a scientist and think, they're creating the content of humanity. I can't believe I get to even comment on this in some small way. This whole year, with Larry [David] as Bernie [Sanders] and me getting to play Hillary was, like, the closest I'll ever come to being involved in something that's as important as politics or science. Comedy has become, I think, a very important branch of public intellectualism. But it still ain't Washington. (Itzkoff 2016).

Of course, "it still ain't Washington," and yet she started to argue that comedy mattered. It's no surprise that these statements came after Donald Trump had locked the republican nomination. It became clear that progressives had to rally around Hillary Clinton, and McKinnon may have felt the urgency and the responsibility of her work like never before, along with the need to better position herself in the polarized political debate. Thereby, her implicit plea for comedic communality coexisted, not without friction, with her struggle to make a partisan case for Clinton. This combination of activism, emotional elements, and comedy was the specific comedic brand trough which McKinnon introduced herself to the public, and it emerged clearly in an interview with *Rolling Stone* (Morris 2016), where she's described in tears after the interviewer said to her that she may become "the first woman in *Saturday Night Live*'s history to play the president of the United States," to which she replied: "progress, real progress, makes me cry harder than anything."

Along with empathy and ideological affinity, her Clinton commented on the negotiation of gender norms carried out by women in politics: McKinnon's endorsement was indeed traced back by some to her identity, radically opposed to the "populist masculinity" (Hakola 2017: 36) of Trumpism. A woman and a lesbian, McKinnon began her career in *The Big Gay Sketch Show* (2007-2010), she then became the first openly gay cast member on SNL, where she played several LGBTQ+ characters and brought to the stage cross-gender impersonations such as the Justin Bieber one. McKinnon's interest in playing with gender roles and identities, as well as with sexual orientation, also emerged in the summer of 2016, when she was featured in the all-women reboot *Ghostbusters* (2016), playing Dr. Jillian Holtzmann, a "pansexual beast" — according to director Paul Feig — who constantly flirts with her teammates (Dunstall 224). McKinnon's performance received praises from the critics, whereas the movie, a commercial failure, was thrown into the heated political fight, being targeted by a misogynistic campaign on the internet as well as by the dismissive comments of Trump himself (Cieply and Barnes 2016). Therefore, gender and politics intersected also in McKinnon's public persona. She was the generally recognized impersonator of Clinton, and she took part in a movie viewed as part of the same liberal culture. The connection was made clearer when talk show host Ellen Degeneres booked for the same episode both Hillary Clinton and the *Ghostbuster*'s main cast, seizing the opportunity to make McKinnon and Clinton interact with each other on the air: "Anyone who figured that the remake of 'Ghostbusters' would become connected with Hillary Clinton's presidential bid during parallel appearances on 'The Ellen DeGeneres Show' figured right" (Cieply and Barnes 2016).

After all, the connection between gender and politics had already been exploited by SNL to popularize McKinnon's impersonation since December 2015. An episode (41.09) co-hosted by Tina Fey and Amy Poehler was the setup to incorporate McKinnon's Clinton in a lineage of great female political parodies, which dates back to the ones made by the comedic duo in 2008. In a sketch inspired by Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, the overly ambitious and self-confident "Hillary of the present" (McKinnon) received a nightly visit from the "Hillary of 2008" (Poehler), who warned her to not take her victory for granted as she had done eight years earlier. Suddenly, a bewildered Sarah Palin (Fey) joined the two: traveling "trough time and space again", she thought she barged into the bedroom of a lesbian couple, but then she recognized the two Hillaries and stated a rambling speech. Poehler and Fey's costumes and performances mimicked those of a popular sketch from 2008 (34.1), that played out an encounter between the two politicians — which never happened — only to celebrate the comeback of Fey to impersonate Palin and the pivotal role played by SNL's women in the political com-

mentary. Similarly, the sketch from 2015 had little to do with current political events and it was even more self-reflexive, suggesting an intergenerational connection that presented McKinnon's Clinton as an updated version of Poehler's, under the blessing of the most popular impersonation of a female politician up to that point: Tina Fey's Sarah Palin (Jones 2013, 86-87).

Thereby, Kate McKinnon exploited the likeness of Hillary Clinton through an impersonation that bided together both original and classical elements related to the former secretary of State, thus becoming the latest manifestation of a political impersonator elevated to success from within the ranks of the program, a practice that dates back to Chevy Chase's Gerald Ford (Jones 2013: 79-80). But while Chase's used SNL as a launchpad for his movie career, McKinnon did not leave the program and on the contrary she became its main political impersonator. She negotiated her own personal brand with the one from SNL, constructing a cohesive narrative amidst her engagement with the press, based on her identity and on empathy, intended both as a comedic tool and as a political one. The moment in which, visibly in tears at the end of *Hallelujah*, McKinnon invited the public not to give up and to continue to fight for what they believe in, was not only the summary of her work on Clinton, but also of her negotiated public image.

3 Celebrity, reluctance, and civic duty: Alec Baldwin and Donald Trump

A New York media celebrity as much as the subject of his impersonation, Alec Baldwin often twiddled with the idea of running for office. Despite being an outspoken liberal activist and democratic voter, "Baldwin's tabloid infamy in New York has, at times, rivaled the heady of Trump" (Crouch 2016), as testified by the ugly details of his divorce, occasional anger outbursts, and several accusations of misdemeanors, homophobia and racism. Baldwin public persona is indeed the result of approximately thirty years of debates and modeling by media commentators, with whom he often had a turbulent relationship — another element of similarity with Trump, along with a "pugilistic" style on Twitter (Nir 2016). When the newly elected president and the actor argued on social media, Tina Fey joked: "You [Trump] think you're good at being a jerk on Twitter? You will now face the grandmaster of being a jerk on Twitter." (Letterman 2016). Accordingly, when Baldwin's Trump impersonation made the headlines, media commentators could not resist to apply another layer to an already stratified figure:

There is the sense that Baldwin is a man who can't get out of his own way—something that is also true of Trump, but which Trump appears to lack the self-awareness to understand. It's what makes Trump ridiculous. Baldwin recognizes it in himself—"I know there's an impression that I'm someone who seeks to have violent confrontations with people," [...] Both men seem constitutionally unable to let a feud drop quietly, to resist having the last word in a public argument, or to feel that they have ever been properly understood by the press (Crouch 2016).

Therefore, Baldwin was presented as a left-wing version of Donald Trump: perfect for the role, him being another tough, outspoken and pugnacious New Yorker who can directly confront the republican nomination (Crouch 2016, Jones 2017). There is a kernel of truth in these parallels, but Baldwin's comedic credentials must be also taken into account, as well as his closeness with SNL (Jones 2017). For the show's enthusiasts, Baldwin was already a familiar face: he hosted the show sixteen times from 1990 to 2011, and he did ten cameo appearances (snlrchives.net, Alec Baldwin). At times, he mocked conservatives on the show, like in October 2008 (34.5), when he jokingly insulted Sarah Palin in a sketch where he mistook her for Tina Fey. During those years, he was featured in another product connected to SNL's mythology: the sitcom *30 Rock* (2006-2013), where he played the comically egomaniac Jack Donaghy, a Republican and super-wealthy network executive. Produced by SNL's creator Lorne Michaels, the series was created, directed and co-produced by Fey, who based it on her real experience as SNL's head writer and starred in it as the main protagonist along with Baldwin (Fey 2011: 170). The actor said in interviews that sometimes he still talks and behaves like his *30 Rock*'s bossy character (Jones 2017, Rose 2018), and his Trump can in fact appear as a degenerate version of Donaghy, but this connection was never fully articulated by him or in the sketches. Nonetheless, his Trump's impersonation remains an outcome of the long professional collaboration with the SNL's system as much as his status as a movie star: Michaels cleverly presented casting Baldwin as Fey's idea (Abramovitch 2016), playing on the anointment by the popular comedian to legitimate the choice, thus reinforcing the myth of a greater

"SNL Family", whose ties are never broken. Baldwin's Trump was described by scholars as aggressive, nasty and "more openly critical toward Trump's populist image" (Hakola 2017: 33) than the one presented by his predecessor on the role, Darrell Hammond, a great impressionist that never had much of a success outside the show (Edgers 2017). Even so, others said that Baldwin's Trump may have become less and less biting on the long run, giving that the parody often detached itself form satirical commentary, picturing the president just as an ill-prepared buffoon (Fotis 2020, Tryon 2018b).

Baldwin himself was ambivalent about his caricature. First, he presented his work on Trump as a public service: the commitment of a widely recognized celebrity who lent his face and body to satirize the Republican nomination. He argued that his comedy had rational political motivations: "I don't hate him. I want him to enjoy his life. I just want him to not be the president of the United States — as quickly as possible." (Barbaro 2016). Thereby it consisted in a natural prosecution of his political activism with a notable difference from McKinnon's Clinton: Baldwin insisted on his own opposition to the candidate, becoming uneasy when journalists underlined the aforementioned common traits between him and Trump (Jones 2017). He publicly signaled that he took the responsibility seriously when he clashed with Trump himself on twitter (Becker 2018) and when, on January 20th, 2017, the day of Trump's inauguration, he spoke at a protest in front of the Trump Tower: after imitating the president voice, he called for hope, fighting, and "100 days of resistance" against the new administration (Schrodt 2017).

However, concurrently, he clarified that his job consisted only in a performance, while Chris Kelly and Sarah Schneider were responsible for the writing (Abramovitch 2016, Ryan 2019). After his first portrayal of Trump, he even said that he was "not interested much by what's inside him" (Nir 2016) but rather in what he showed, and for him Trump was someone who was "always searching for a stronger, better word" without finding it. He then added: "I had no idea what I was going to do. I mean literally the moment I walked out there, I just said to myself, 'Eyebrow out.' I tried to stick my face out, my mouth out." (Russonello 2017). In this, he insisted on presenting his contribution mainly in language and body acting: the satirical criticism was a matter for a comedy writer, which he was not. Was the liberal celebrity aware that parody, understood in these terms, could have had the effect of humanizing Trump? "I do recognize that is a possibility" he said, but he stood by the idea that his work was still politically relevant, especially after Trump was elected: "I think that now that he is the president, we have an obligation [...] to dial it up as much as we can." (Nir 2016), trusting, presumably, that the writers of SNL would have given him poignant satirical jokes.

These apparently contradictory remarks make sense if we consider the broader reluctant behavior through which he presented his work on Trump. In an interview on *Vanity Fair*, he said he had strong reservations on accepting the job: he thought it was not for him, telling Michales he was "out of his mind", and that if it wasn't for a movie deal that went off, he would never have accepted it (Busis 2017). At the end of the first season in Trump's shoes, he said it was an enormous effort and he would have preferred doing other things like spending time with his family (Rose 2017). He implied multiple times that he might have not returned for the season to come (Press Association 2017, Ryan 2019) and that it was a profound "agony" to impersonate a man he despised (Butler 2018). Nevertheless, he always came back, until after the elections of 2020, when he said he was "overjoyed" by the loss of his job as the president's impersonator (Hibberd 2020).

This Baldwin, a reluctant and ambivalent impersonator, always reconciled in the end with Baldwin the political activist, thanks to the role of an imagined audience: he explained that the appreciation from the democratic voters, and the fact that he got under the president's skin, prevented him from leaving the role (Jones 2017, Rose 2017, 2018). In particular, he claimed that many New Yorkers stopped him and thanked him on the streets multiple times and that he felt finally beloved by African Americans, thus driving him to keep the impersonation going. He framed these encounters in a way that justified his comebacks as Trump not for personal ambition, but because he didn't have a choice, convinced that he would have disappointed millions of viewers who needed to get through the madness of the Trump years. According to him, they were not expressing simple appreciation for a celebrity, but gratitude: "people will go, 'Don't you dare give that up, we need you.' Like I've gotten people through something in our nation's history" (Rose 2018).

Trump's impersonation guaranteed Alec Baldwin a renewed success and a reaffirmation of his status as a liberal celebrity: it coincided with SNL's highest ratings in twenty-three years, it earned him an Emmy (Robinson 2017) and a revalidation of his comedic credentials. The frame of reluctancy permitted him to distance himself in

the public sphere from the man whom he impersonated, emphasizing that his job only consisted in caricature, while at the same time presenting his repeated comebacks as a political necessity. He was comforted in this by the supposed support of the democratic public, as well as by the hate manifested to him by Trump himself and by his supporters. Nevertheless, it can be argued that this was a clear strategy to promote his upcoming autobiography (Baldwin 2017) and to hold still as a resolute although ambiguous liberal icon (Rose 2018).

4 Reaffirming a comedic heritage: Larry David and Bernie Sanders

Larry David argued that he had the idea of proposing his Bernie Sanders' impersonation to the SNL's crew: "Every time I watched Bernie Sanders, I would repeat everything that he said, because I know that I can talk like that." (Holloway 2017). Furthermore, David and SNL framed the casting as a natural outcome of the two men common ethnicity: they are two Ashkenazi Jewish born in 1940s' Brooklyn, as pointed out by their physical resemblance — the baldness above all — and distinctive accent (Dowd 2016). In several sketches, David mocked the Jewish traits he shared with Sanders, but as Mark Sienkiewicz (2017) wrote, his latest comedy series, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-), is the story of a "Jewish man who can never quite connect:" the humor frequently arises from David's "Jewish alienation" which represents exactly what "Bernie's commitment to extreme Jewish universalism works to dispel". Hence, insisting only on the element of identity could have become problematic for David, as the senator's humanitarianism threatened to taint his own individualistic and self-reflexive comedic persona, which run constantly throughout his already popular works on tv and in movies. Thus, the senior comedian resolved this dilemma trough the explicit use of intertextual mechanisms, superimposing his own brand to the one of Sanders, with the complicity of SNL's authors.

Larry David was the co-creator and head writer of *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), the successful sitcom produced along with stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld. The protagonists are extremely chatty friends always fighting with each other, who do not seem to learn anything and get mixed up in "the infinite details of contemporary life" (Barra 2020: 69). Humor arises from small choices, frustrations, misconceptions exaggerated by the psychosis and fixations of the characters. As David himself explained: "I think that what goes on in people's lives is that most of their mind, most of the day, is occupied with tiny struggles. That's what people's lives are about." (Levine 2010: 32). While Seinfeld acted as himself, various accounts insisted that David's distinctive point of view was expressed mainly through the likeness of Jason Alexander, who played George Costanza, Jerry individualistic, insecure and rabid best friend: "A sick part of my personality" David said about George, "but only one side." (Levine 2010: 33). Although the writer left the sitcom production after the sixth season, he accumulated a fortune, constantly growing after the renewing of the sitcom's syndication rights. The new Larry, wealthy and relocated in California, was the subject of a new comedy series created by him, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (Barra 2020: 80). In this case, he played the role of himself in semi-retirement after the success of *Seinfeld*, of which *Curb* appears as the natural prosecution: the caustic humor and comedic situations are similar, the sitcom is regularly brought up in dialogues and even its actors appears as themselves several times. All of this affirms David's role as *Seinfeld*'s creator and ultimate owner (Leverette 2004). Furthermore, the blending of the "real" Larry David with the one from the series goes along with the format and style of the show, which is largely improvised and filmed with a handled camera to produce a reality effect.

Therefore, Larry David is a highly self-reflexive comedian, as he demonstrated when he hosted SNL on February 6, 2016 (41.12). Along with SNL's writers Chris Kelly and Sarah Schneider, he developed a sketch inspired by *Curb*, with him as the protagonist in the shoes of Sanders. Hosting a SNL's episode means to work closely throughout the week with the program's cast and crew (Castle 2015), and this guaranteed his deep involvement in the writing process. According to Schneider, the comedian who created some of their favorite products, and who they themselves revered, pitched the idea, and had the last word:

we know the show [*Curb Your Enthusiasm*] very well but we knew that we needed Larry to okay the arc and the plot line because it's so his style and tone. Once we had that okay'ed by him, we felt good to write the script (Steiner 2016).

As it was confirmed by the sketch, David's comedic heritage was so dominant that he didn't have to adjust it to the new scenario, instead it was SNL who adapted to him. The result was a registered segment titled *Bern your enthusiasm* (41.12), more of a tribute than a parody of *Curb*, with the same score, shooting style and comedy

devices. The plot and the dialogues are also an homage to the series, where David always finds himself to be both victim and culprit:

because of his failure — or refusal to follow unwritten social guidelines [...] a series of minor events coincide to turn Larry into a social pariah. What begins as a relatively minor transgression became transformed in the public eye into a major crime. [...] While Larry is innocent of these major transgressions, it is usually his own actions that lead to the misunderstanding. (Gillota 2010: 155).

Several times, these transgressions have to do with race. Therefore, the opportunity given by Sanders' narrow defeat in the Iowa caucuses and his struggles with African American voters (Bitecofer 2018: 66-69), became the foundation of the sketch. In the aftermath of a rally, Larry-Bernie categorically refuses to shake the hand of an African American supporter (Leslie Jones). Indeed, he sees the woman using the hand to cover her mouth while coughing up, and he does not want to get infected; however, Bernie's refusal is read by her and her family as a sign of his racism. Furthermore, later in the sketch, Bernie witnesses a car accident: he comes to the aid of the driver (Aidy Bryant) who asks him to "pop back in" her shoulder, but he refuses to do it and runs away horrified. In the end, Bernie and his staff watch the announcement of Clinton's victory on television, discovering that he only lost by five votes: it seems that the African American family and the woman from the accident, who are waiving to the camera, voted for Bernie's adversary, as they are dressed up as Clinton supporters.

A cold open from a later episode (41.18) needs also to be addressed, in which Larry David reinforced not only his comedic persona at the expense of Sanders, but also his role as *Seinfeld*'s creator, seizing the opportunity of having the show hosted by Julia Louis-Dreyfus, who in the sitcom played Elaine Benes, one of the main characters. On the reenactment of the Democratic debate held in Brooklyn, Louis-Dreyfus reprised the role of Elaine, asking a question to the senator and thus sparkling a very "seinfeldian" exchange.

Elaine. So listen, you have been pretty vague in the past, but how exactly you're going to break up the big banks?

Bernie. You mean the big-bank-breakup?

E. Big-bank-breakup.

B. ...You break 'em up! [he waves his arm]

E. How...how?

B. One I'm elected president, I'll have a nice schvitz in the White House gym, then I'll go to the big banks, I'll sit them down and yada-yada-yada, they'll be broken up.

E. No, no, you can't yada-yada at a debate, also, you yada-yadaed over the best part.

B. No, I mentioned the schvitz!

This, indeed, was an adjustment of a dialogue between Jerry, Elaine and George from an episode of *Seinfeld* called, appropriately, "The Yada Yada!" (8.19), where several characters use the expression 'Yada yada yada' in a speech, to gloss over important details of a story. Later in the debate, Elaine even screamed to Bernie: "You're bald!" to which he responded: "Bernie's getting upset!". These are two additional quotations from the sitcom, the first from "The Beard!" (6.15), where Elaine makes fun of George's baldness, and the second is similar to a recurring catchphrase of George himself — see, e.g., "The Jimmy" (6.18), "The Pool Guy" (7.08). While it should be noted that "The Yada Yada" was not written by David, who left the sitcom's production after season six, the sketch reaffirmed his acknowledged overlapping with the character of George and especially his role as the sitcom father. The segment even ended with David fictionally breaking character after his self-interest had the better of Sander's egalitarian ideals, emphasizing the contradiction of a rich man like him playing the democratic socialist senator.

Elaine. Yeah uh Senator Sanders, you believe that the super rich should pay more in taxes, but wouldn't that be bad for actors who made a lot of money on a certain very successful sitcom?

Bernie. Yeah so?

E. Well I mean wouldn't it be even worse for the person who created that sitcom? I mean wouldn't he loose a lot of money? Don't you see what I'm saying? [Sanders stats to look uncomfortable]

B. Yeh, yeah-yeah-yeah. You should vote for her. [pointing at Clinton]

In summary, the experience of Larry David on *Saturday Night Live* showed how a veteran comedian, who rarely focused on satire of political individuals and institutions, exploited the relevance of SNL's political comedy during presidential elections to superimpose his bulky comedic brand onto the candidate, thus promoting his own shows and cohesive comedic heritage. It should not be forgotten, after all, that the latest season of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* was released in 2011, and in summer 2016 his creator announced that he decided to return for a new one the following year (Prudom 2016). On the other side, SNL was happy to indulge David, configuring itself as the crossroad of American comedy, may it be present, past or future.

5 Conclusion: entering and re-entering Studio 8H

These case studies show how comedians, on and off the stage, signify their work through the use of self-reflexive and intersexual strategies to situate themselves in a precise field in the comedic and political debate. McKinnon played on her political and emotional affinity with Clinton, trying to shun the danger of presenting a stereotypical and conservative parody. Baldwin, on the contrary, played on the elements of difference and reluctancy in front of the danger of blending his public persona with that of Trump. David, instead, didn't frame his impersonation as a political statement but only as a comedic one. Eventually, all of them exploited the appealing popularity of political humor, as well as SNL cultural relevance, to promote their own comedic brand: in so doing, David revived *Curb Your Enthusiasm* after a six-year hiatus, with two acclaimed new seasons and another on the way (Snierson: 2020). Baldwin coincided his impersonation with the release of his new memoir, he also co-authored a satiric book about Trump, and he impersonated him for four years, along with a sustained movie career and a liberal reputation restored despite a few tensions arisen with the #MeToo movement (Rose 2018). McKinnon, after Clinton's defeat, took the role of many Trump's collaborators empathically framed as victims of their master, and she reiterated the sealing between political, empathy, and gender identity with the recurring impersonation of democratic senator Elizabeth Warren (Hughes 2020). She still embodies the last manifestation of the traditional comedic impersonator bred inside the show (Whalley 2010), but she represents an anomaly today: she had to integrate SNL's longstanding practices of comedic star-building with those of her own in order to became one of the most recognizable members in a rather anonymous cast (Shevenock 2021). 2016, indeed, implemented a centripetal tendency where comedy stars and celebrities, who are not part of the regular cast at the time, come or return to SNL to impersonate a politician. This routine of 'outsourcing' political impersonations to popular stars allows the show to maximize the ratings in key weeks like those of the presidential elections, but on the other side seems to adversely affect the resident ensemble cast, as a recent investigation by *Morning Consult* showed:

in satirizing the Trump administration, "SNL" often turned to a stable of notable guest stars, including Alec Baldwin as Trump, Ben Stiller as Michael Cohen and Matt Damon as Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, which at times took the spotlight off the ensemble and may have contributed to respondents' low awareness of some cast members, particularly newer players (Shevenock 2021).

Saturday Night Live continues to apply these strategies in the struggle to remain the common denominator of American political comedy and a relevant voice in an ever-shifting media environment, with disputed long-term effects. What is certain, is that a growing crowd of "Saturday night candidates", not so much from the inside, but from the outside of Studio 8H, understood that SNL's stage is a luxury ballroom to dance with political humor, a necessary step to climb the ranks, or to stay on the top, of television comedy.

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