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**“I can’t believe you just said that”:
Figuring gender and sexuality in Little Britain**

**Deborah Finding,
Gender Institute, London School of Economics, UK**

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Deborah Finding (D.P.Finding@lse.ac.uk) is currently completing her PhD at LSE's Gender Institute. Her work is concerned with narratives of sexual violence in popular music, and draws upon both trauma theory and feminist cultural studies, as well as several years of NGO work with abused women. She also writes more widely on popular culture, including two publications in IB Tauris's 'Reading Cult Television' book series, and, in her spare time, is involved with several feminist activism groups in London.

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“I can’t believe you just said that”: Figuring gender and sexuality in Little Britain

Deborah Finding

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a feminist critique of the UK comedy sketch show *Little Britain*. The first part of the paper situates *Little Britain* in the context of both alternative comedy and postfeminism, with particular reference to the use of irony as a ‘get out of jail free’ card for offensive statements or stereotypical representations of a particular group, and to the notion of humour as hatred. Some of the characters of *Little Britain* (Vicky Pollard, Ting Tong and Daffyd) are then considered in depth, through an engagement with figurative analysis, to assess their status as recognisable figures (‘the chav mum’, ‘the mail order bride’ and ‘the gay man’, respectively). Other notable figures are mentioned, and the show’s creators, Matt Lucas and David Walliams, are also considered as potential figures. The paper concludes that, although there are parts of *Little Britain* in which stereotypes are challenged, and the abusive power dynamic is inverted through humour, for the most part, *Little Britain* colludes with prejudice by positing an ‘us’ - the audience, who callously mocks ‘them’ – figures representative of marginalised groups already vulnerable to harm.

1. INTRODUCTION

I started writing a feminist critique of *Little Britain* with a certain amount of trepidation. *Little Britain* is a comedy show, and – in the mainstream at least – feminism and humour are rarely mentioned in the same sentence, unless ‘humour’ is followed with ‘less’. At a time when post-feminism is more popular than feminism and a criticism of any media output for its sexism, racism, classism, ageism or homophobia is met with a chorus of ‘But it’s ironic!’, the temptation to ignore the discomfort and laugh along with the majority is compelling. However, the figure of the humourless feminist (or ‘Millie Tant’ as *Viz* would have it), who

'cannot take a joke', in itself is one reason to explore comedy for not just its appeal, but for the identity constructions and potential silencing practices inherent in that appeal.

Little Britain is a British comedy sketch show, based on recurring characters, devised by two creators – Matt Lucas and David Walliams (who are examined as figures in their own right, later on in this paper). Although originally written for radio and first broadcast in 2001, this analysis will focus on the television version, which began in 2003 and so far has run to three seasons, ending in 2005 (although there may be more to come). In addition to the television show, the main actors took *Little Britain* to the stage in 2005-2006, and there have been numerous other merchandising spin-offs, including books, games, calendars etc. In addition to this, as with many other sketch shows before it, the *Little Britain* characters and catchphrases seemed to take on a life of their own as the popularity of the show increased, being cited by broadsheets and children in playgrounds alike.

In this paper, I hope to place *Little Britain* within a wider context, in order to see its relationship with alternative comedy and postfeminism. Drawing on a brief history of alternative comedy, and its metamorphosis into new-lad comedy, I argue that *Little Britain* has far more in common with the pre-alternative comedy now known for its racism and sexism, than it does with the provocative and challenging nature of alternative comedy. Drawing on the work of Whelehan (2000), Skeggs (2004), McRobbie (2004) and Gill (2007), I argue that this back-step mirrors the cultural transition from feminist sensibilities to post-feminist ones in the media more generally, and show how irony, or the assertion of it, is used to pre-empt any potential critique.

Because of the focus on the post-feminist elements of *Little Britain* in this paper, I highlight those sketches in which irony is used, rather than parody. This is not to say that *Little Britain* does not use parody, and I return to this towards the end of the paper, exploring the difference between parody and irony, in terms of the power dynamic at play in the sketch under consideration. In examining the 'ironic' sketches, I focus in particular on the notion of the *Little Britain* viewers as 'we', and the subject of the sketch as 'them'. Feminist, queer and critical race theory all look at the ways in which images and ideas of the 'self' are produced through 'othering' practices, i.e. the production of self/other binaries. These binaries, such as white/black, man/woman, homosexual/heterosexual, western/'non-western' are always produced through exclusions and relations of antagonism. As such, it is difficult for someone who occupies a position in the more powerful half of the binary to represent the 'other'

without abusing that power (see, for example Alcoff 1995). The power can be abused in several ways. Firstly, the problem of universalism – that is, assuming that the interests of the speaker are shared by both the ‘other’ and the listener, which we return to when looking at whether or not *Little Britain’s* characterisations are ironic, parodic or neither. Secondly, if the ‘other’ is not involved in the representation at all, there is a strong risk of objectification: for example, what does it mean for Matt Lucas and David Walliams, as men, to represent particular types of women in the manner they do? Thirdly, and perhaps most obviously critiqued in *Little Britain*, is the problem of misrepresentation. If those doing the representing are ignorant (whether intentionally or not) of the ‘other’, then stereotypes are created or reinforced. Finally, there is the issue of ghettoisation – the less powerful ‘other’ is denied agency in being spoken about and for, and therefore the representations, which cannot be neutral, create as well as represent the ‘other’. This point is particularly salient for the consideration of the ‘other’ as ‘figure’ in this paper.

I consider the characters of *Little Britain* through an engagement with Imogen Tyler’s (2008) figurative analysis of asylum seekers and ‘chav mums’, and argue that the majority of the characters are stereotypes, produced through disgust at class, sexuality, race or gender. As many of these figures are heavily reliant on the body (to create the disgust), I also briefly explore the ways in which female comics have approached the body, especially the fat body. Kathleen Rowe argues that Roseanne represents an unruly and disruptive challenge to the prescribed codes of female appearance and, by association, behaviour. The kind of dysfunction presented in Roseanne’s body, sexuality and family is actually a very functional one, which is recognisable and comforting. I will return to this idea when looking at those characters in *Little Britain* who might be considered disruptive or unruly. I also look with interest at the ways in which David Walliams and Matt Lucas themselves are figured through their bodies in the media. Finally, I question the potential for true alternative comedy through the sporadic moments in which *Little Britain* does subvert or challenge these figures – through parody rather than irony - and ask whether or not these can overcome the “pleasures of hatred” (Billig 2001: 267) as the show’s primary legacy.

2. ALTERNATIVE COMEDY: BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER

In order to set *Little Britain* within its cultural context, it is important to have a brief overview of the history of British (alternative) comedy. I focus solely on the British scene, not because of the lack of alternative scenes springing up elsewhere, but because of the importance of nation and identity in comedy generally, and in *Little Britain* specifically.

The term 'alternative comedy' itself has only been around since the late 70s, when comics such as Tony Allen, bored of the traditional comedian's reliance on racist or sexist stereotypes (Bernard Manning being a prime example), began to challenge and subvert them through their own comedy. Interviewed for a book on the history of the Comedy Store, Allen remembers the genesis of the change. He said, "*A lot of comedians would put a black stocking on their head with holes for the eyes and mouth and they'd do a sort of West Indian stereotype. The horny black bloke who was over here, thieving and after white women*" (quoted in Cook 2001: 322). He would see black men in the audience, grimacing, but staying quiet. Eventually, Allen began to heckle and walk out. When he did this, he found that other audience members would do it too, and realised that he was not the only person appalled by these sorts of routines.

Allen described himself as being on a mission to drive racism and sexism out of mainstream comedy, and rather than comment and critique from the fringes, he took his stand up into traditional comedy clubs. His act went down well, and in the dressing rooms afterwards, he would challenge the other comedians on routines he had found to be racist or sexist. Looking back, Allen thinks that perhaps he was too harsh on people trying to find their way, but ultimately believes that politically, this had to be done (Cook 2001). The transition from Bernard Manning to Tony Allen was not quite so stark as it might appear here. Indeed, there were mainstream comedians at that time who were neither racist nor sexist; however they were apolitical, rather than challenging these positions. Comedians from that time, such as Jasper Carrott and Billy Connolly, who had both evolved into comedy from the folksinger tradition, were very popular, and certainly a sign that people were interested in a more observational, less stereotype-based sort of comedy.

As Littlewood and Pickering (1998: 298) have pointed out, and as anyone familiar with the comedians mentioned in this paper will notice, comedians' style and politics differed substantially within both alternative and pre-alternative comedy, as well as between them.

However, there were some hallmarks defining alternative comedy. As alternative comedy developed, it relied far more on observational humour, personal narratives, and a need for the audience to be intellectually and emotionally involved in the comedian's train of thought in order to laugh. Both 'old' comedy and alternative comedy relied on an audience's identification or agreement with the comedian – however, the targets of the jokes became more complex with alternative comedy. Punchlines were somewhat passé, and audiences started responding to the intellectual shift taking place. Alternative comedians were sending themselves and people like them up, rather than holding up a particular stereotyped 'other' as an object of ridicule. Where the target was outside the comedian's immediate experience, it tended to be a person (or an institution) of power, rather than one belonging to a marginalised group. Politics was no longer out of place in comedy, Ben Elton being a prime example of that time, and a more surreal approach was often adopted – exemplified by comedians like Paul Merton, Alexei Sayle and, later, Eddie Izzard. Despite the liberal shift taking place, it must still be noted that the majority of the comedians we think of as 'alternative' were white, middle-class (often Oxbridge-educated) men. On approaching the BBC Light Entertainment producer of the time with regard to their book on the history of women in comedy, Morwenna Banks and Amanda Swift (1987: vii) were told, *'Women in comedy? That'll be a very short book'*. Porter (1998) has also noted the huge gaps in historical documentation of female comic performers, and the lack of comic roles for women in films from as far back as silent film up to the 1990s. However, although not entirely breaking this pattern, some women were making progress in alternative comedy. In a wonderful inversion of the 'we'/'other' approach, Williams (1998: 151) notes how stand-up Lea DeLaria used to get all the men in her audience to shout, 'I am a lesbian!'. Positing lesbianism as universal has the effect of highlighting what is normally posited as universal, that is, which people are usually expected to constitute the 'we'. I will return to this in the specific discussion of *Little Britain's* characters, asking how *Little Britain* constitutes the 'we' and the 'other' in order to see whether it challenges or reinforces the dominant paradigm. DeLaria's inversion is not only funny and politically astute, but it also performs the function of including audience members, who might, until that point, have been hostile to some of DeLaria's unfamiliar material, and making them potentially more willing to accept her reference points and laugh along. For the most part, female comedians of the era tended to resemble their male counterparts; Jo Brand and Jenny Eclair may have utilised a more aggressive self-deprecation, but they remained well within a genre characterised by observational, intellectually savvy, comedy. On the whole, female comedians of the time, where they existed, almost always approached much of their material from feminist

perspectives, and in general – a somewhat more politicised awareness had taken over comedy.

Inevitably, the success (and potential downfall) of alternative comedy was that it eventually became mainstream. This is probably best exemplified by the dissolution of the TV show *The Mary Whitehouse Experience*. The show (which had been running on radio since 1989, but was brought to TV in 1991 and 1992) was a combination of stand-up and character sketches, created by its two comedic pairs: Rob Newman and David Baddiel, and Steve Punt and Hugh Dennis. When it dissolved, Punt and Dennis, who, prior to *The Mary Whitehouse Experience*, had done some comedy sketch interludes on the Jasper Carrott show, went back to this more standard material – albeit this time with a show of their own (*The Imaginatively Titled Punt and Dennis Show*). Newman and Baddiel, however, became the superstars of comedy. Their show, *Newman and Baddiel in Pieces*, with its animated version of Munch's famous painting, 'The Scream' and a Sundays soundtrack over its title sequence, immediately inherited the cult status that *The Mary Whitehouse Experience* had enjoyed. Newman and Baddiel not only played Wembley Arena in 1993, but sold it out, a first for any comedian or comedy show. This cult popularity, along with Newman's oft-(self)mocked heartthrob status, led to many newspaper articles and magazine interviews questioning whether or not comedy might be 'the new rock 'n' roll'.

Although Newman had some political material (which largely consisted of mocking individual Conservative Party members), and Baddiel occasionally mined his Jewish heritage to send himself up, their primary focus was a sort of intellectual silliness. Looking back at their work, in the early-mid 90s, it is easy to see they both engage with the New Man/New Lad transition that was happening at the time. This is also clear from their split and individual career paths. Newman's comedy often relied on him being weak, but eager – wanting to be a better person. After doing solo stand up of a similar nature for a while, Newman took some time off and wrote two novels (*Dependence Day* in 1994 and *Manners* in 1998). He later returned to the comedy scene, but this time as a full-on political and environmental activist, often sharing the bill with Mark Thomas, a comedian known for his left-wing political activism. Newman was Channel 4's special correspondent for the Seattle anti-globalisation protests, and wrote a novel (*The Fountain at the Centre of the World*, 2003) based on those experiences. Baddiel, on the other hand, was seen to struggle less with trying to be a New Man, preferring to fully embrace the New Lad. It is perhaps no surprise that after splitting from Newman, Baddiel – who had often vehemently defended his use of, and political

position on, pornography in his comedy monologues – was the one to team up with Frank Skinner for *Fantasy Football League* and, later, *Baddiel and Skinner Unplanned*, to talk beer, birds and football. Perhaps even less surprising is that Baddiel's turn to New Laddism¹ has proved far more popular and lucrative than Newman's turn to politics and activism.

Baddiel is a fascinating example of a comedian on the cusp of alternative and what came afterwards. A new era of 'lad' comedians was born, seemingly going back to the pre-alternative days in terms of material. However, something was different. Baddiel's pro-pornography monologues went unchallenged, in a way that might not have been the case at the time Tony Allen first began heckling comedians. Pressing the fast forward button to 2008, comedian, and Channel 4 favourite, Jimmy Carr regularly relies on homophobia, general misogyny and rape jokes in his stand-up shows. What has happened to allow such a backwards slide?

If the cultural changes instigated by feminism, civil rights movements and a new era of political freedoms were meant to render the sexism and racism of the past nothing more than a pitiful 'joke', then the cultural danger lies – at least for comedians – in failing to 'get it'. Yet identifying oneself as 'feminist' necessarily acknowledges sexism not as a joke, but a problem. It's not surprising, therefore, that any female stand-up who comments on sexism must preface her joke with, "I'm not a feminist but..." Many of them prefer to take on either the persona of the ladette, or identify more as a *Sex And The City* Carrie type. There seems to be little room for any other subject-position in the mainstream. This is hardly surprising given the consequences of critiquing the 'new sexism' or 'new cruelty'. After all, a comedian cannot be thought of as humourless, or not clever enough to get the joke, or she will not be accepted as a comedian. Worse, she may be thought to be critiquing sexism through her comedy because she is not pretty enough to reap the benefits of the critical male gaze, and is therefore bitter. Some comedians, such as Jo Brand, have addressed this directly in their stand-up shows - her best known heckle-putdown being, "*the reason I keep my weight up is so that tossers like you won't fancy me*" (quoted in Wagg, 1998: 112). Others, however, seem to have internalised this myth and suffer under it. In Dawn French's ITV programme, 'On Big Women' (1994), she stated, "*If I was alive [in Reuben's time], I wouldn't have to be a comedian to earn a living. I'd be celebrated as a fabulous model.*" (quoted in Hole, 1998: 319-320). As Hole points out, the logical conclusion to draw from this statement is that it is

¹ Baddiel has also written three novels – however, I have not included them here, as they were kept totally separate from his public comedy persona

more desirable or worthwhile to be a model than a comedian, and that being a comedian is some sort of fallback position for women unlucky enough to live in a time where their particular body shape is not celebrated. One might note here that the self-deprecation of the female comic here is linked with being bitter, resentful and envious, whereas the self-deprecation associated with the New Lad/New Man male alternative comedians mentioned earlier was simply accepted as funny.

It seems that when alternative comedy became mainstream, a return to the old traditional comedy became the knowing, naughty, ironic alternative. If, as seemed to be assumed, the battles over racism and sexism had been won, then there could be nothing new or interesting in talking about them or challenging them. The discourse of 'political correctness' and the tabloids' insistence that 'you can't say anything nowadays' meant that making racist or sexist comments became the new (old) alternative. I believe that we can position *Little Britain* right here. Rather than sending themselves and people like them up, the Little Britain creators rely primarily on the stereotypical Other, and their grotesqueness, for the humour of the show. Before examining the show's characters, it is important to understand how this backslide to a hatred-based humour came about, as well as the justification for this return – irony – and to set both within a context of feminist critique.

3. HUMOUR AND HATRED

Billig's (2001) work on the racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan provides some interesting insights into the links between humour and hatred. In examining some websites providing lists of racist jokes, he often found disclaimers that these were 'just jokes' and that it was not possible to genuinely take offence at them because of this. The creators of the site are not 'real life racists' – the implication being that these are just words, and that 'real life racists' would be more action-oriented. MacKinnon's (1994) work provides a clear critique of the 'only words' defence, with regard to pornography, and Billig makes a similar point with regard to its racism application. Writing about the disclaimer, "This site contains racial jokes, slurs, and an overall negative view to the black race" on a site entitled 'Nigger Jokes', he argues:

"The overall negative view is not claimed to be a joke. The jokes themselves are presented as 'just jokes'. But they are labelled as 'nigger jokes'. The category labels the jokes and is not part of the jokes. It belongs, as such, to the meta-discourse of the joke. The appellation itself cannot be justified as 'just a joke': it is a serious label whose semantics are not neutral. The extra word, as the ultimate word of racist hate, comes with ideological, historical and emotional baggage." (Billig, 2001: 275)

I include this, not because *Little Britain* can be labelled in a similarly obvious fashion, but because words and phrases which have been used to oppress, shame and mock people from marginalised groups cannot be justified or explained away by the 'just a joke' defence because they produce meaning in themselves. And although the BBC (and possibly the *Little Britain* creators themselves) would shy away from using a word like 'nigger', there is no such problem with 'chav' or 'slag', for example. However, although words or phrases alone can and do constitute a certain figure, such as the 'chav', the format of the comedy sketch show allows these figures to be constituted in a variety of (stereotyped) ways, including clothes, hairstyle, style of walking and voice, as we will see when examining the *Little Britain* characters.

This return to hate-for-laughs is not confined to comedy. McRobbie's (2004) work on post-feminist symbolic violence in makeover programmes such as the BBCs *What Not To Wear* examined in detail the expression 'Pramface'. 'Pramface' is a phrase coined by the gossip

email site, Popbitch², applicable to any girl who looks cheaply dressed and is pushing a child. It follows other expressions, such as 'Croydon facelift', referring to a (council estate) girl whose hair is scraped back so tightly that her face appears lifted. As McRobbie (2004) points out, this sort of bitchy commentating with regard to style, body shape and taste is far more closely associated with pre-feminist times. She argues that up to the last few years, teachers would have condemned this sort of talk in the playground as a type of bullying, and (liberal) adults would not have thought it appropriate to snigger at someone because she lives in a council estate or sneer that her mother does not look well off.

Gill has described this pattern of nastiness and extreme criticism (with specific reference to women's appearance) as 'the new cruelty' (Gill, 2008). It is exemplified by TV makeover shows, in which the subject is routinely humiliated and criticised at the beginning of the show for her bad haircut/poor taste in clothes/lack of style etc. We might feel a sense of relief when the cruelty stops, when the woman emerges at the end and is praised for having followed a set of rules and changing herself. No such relief exists in the comedy sphere of the sketch show. Comedy characters are not 'real people', and as such, the level of cruelty it is appropriate to exhibit is not tempered by any sort of redemptive moment. However, as we will see through the figurative analysis of the Little Britain characters, this 'not real people' justification does not work, given the ways in which these character types are represented (figured) to be both recognisable and hated.

Whelehan (2000) suggests that this back-step, or cultural undoing, of the reforms that took place from the late 1960s until the mid-1990s, although something to be extremely concerned about, was inevitable. She argues that the short-lived 'honeymoon period' of acceptance with regard to what is now condemned as 'political correctness' would always be replaced once it was realised that attitudes and practices needed to be changed after they were challenged:

"Feminists assert that language and intention as well as behaviour matter: since this implies that men in particular have to modify their attitudes, it is hardly likely to be popular." (Whelehan, 2000: 70)

² Originally to describe Kerry Katona (previously of the girl-band Atomic Kitten, and also ITVs *I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here*, but more famous for her tabloid-friendly sex/drug exploits)

However, an unthinking return to the old ways was not possible. Critiques were already in place that meant that one could simply not get away with the type of racist, sexist, homophobic and classist attitudes and slurs that had been acceptable in the past. Something would have to be added in order to make these representations palatable again. That something was irony.

4. IRONY AND POST-FEMINISM

As both Whelehan (2000) and Gill (2007) have pointed out, irony has become the 'get out of jail free' card that acts to close down the possibility of critique. Irony establishes a safe distance between the speaker and what is being said. Once this distance has been created, the speaker can say absolutely anything, no matter how superficially offensive, because we should all know that they 'didn't really mean it'. With much of this output, the critique is pre-empted and addressed in the text. This is either done by positioning the speaker as a nostalgic guardian for the good old days when you could be 'a bit naughty', or by making the potential critic a party-pooper, telling us what we can and can't say in this sensitive age of 'political correctness gone mad'. Feminists become the 'thought police', or only railing against Page 3 girls because they are not attractive enough to pose for the *Sun* themselves. Or they are simply taking everything too seriously, and don't get the joke.

Irony, and the assumption of it, has been the cornerstone of New Laddism. The tagline of Loaded, James Brown's first 'lad's mag' was 'for men who should know better'. Loaded spawned a host of similar monthly magazines, and recently, two weeklies, Nuts and Zoo. The ad campaign to launch Nuts set out its (ironically) sexist position from the start. In one of the adverts, the man (Matthew Morrison) is sitting in a broken down car, engrossed in Nuts magazine, while his girlfriend fumbles ineffectually under the bonnet of the car, in the pouring rain (in a miniskirt, naturally). The tagline reads: "Women, don't expect any help on a Thursday". The Nuts website offers a 'service' called 'Assess My Breasts', whereby women can upload a picture of their breasts to the site, and the male readers are invited to compare photos as better or worse by using their "expert knowledge of lady breasts to rate every pair!". Of course, there are plenty of topless models and reality TV stars on the website, as in the magazine, to boost this 'knowledge'.

There are still those who are willing to critique magazines like *Nuts* and *Zoo*, such as the feminist activist group, *Object*, who produce reports on lad's mags and encourage campaign letters to protest against the content. However, these groups receive little, if any media attention, and, as Gill (2008) rightly notes, second-wave slogans like 'This ad objectifies women!' are literally extinct due to the assumption that these women are sexually and financially empowered by appearing naked in these magazines. 'Upload your breasts!', *Nuts* online encourages us, and either feminist computer hackers are being thwarted in their attempts to change the text to, 'Actively participate in your own exploitation!', or potential complainants are silenced before the complaint is even voiced.

Not getting the joke or, even worse, being considered humourless, is one of the most effective ways to silence criticism. When the critic's target is a TV show as popular as *Little Britain*, it is important to look at all the ways in which the criticism is already pre-deflected. Favourable reviews of the show, playground and office repetitions of catchphrases, and identifications of the characters as figures all act to make *Little Britain* an integral part of our shared popular culture. To criticise it is to stand outside something that is both mainstream and popular, and also to invite suggestion that the critic takes everything too seriously. However, if we agree that representing certain groups in certain ways might not be 'only words' or 'just a joke', then it is worth examining those figures more closely to see how they map onto 'the real world'.

5. FIGURATIVE ANALYSIS

A figurative analysis is not the only one which could work to critique *Little Britain's* approach to gender and sexuality in this way. A similar approach could be used using the notion of performativity, or queer theory more widely. Queer frameworks examine the ways in which binary oppositions are produced discursively, leading to the construction of particular categories of both identities and practices – through the lens of constructions of sexuality. Butler (1990), Sedgwick (1991) and Fuss (1991) have all commented on the ways in which the heterosexual/homosexual binary works not only to exclude and exteriorate homosexuality, but also elides other sexual identities and practices. Butler's work on the performative aspects of gender and sexuality could certainly be utilised in exploring *Little Britain* from a queer perspective. However, a figurative analysis fits most closely with the work that has already been done on the types of characters shown in *Little Britain*, and so I use it to both draw from, and build on these previous analyses, in order to discern a fuller picture of particularly British 'figures of fun' or, more accurately, figures of hatred.

I follow Tyler's use of 'figure' to "*describe the ways in which at different historical and cultural moments, specific bodies become over determined and are publicly imagined and represented (are figured) in excessive, distorted and/or caricatured ways that are expressive of an underlying crisis or anxiety*" (Tyler, 2008: 18). Her work draws on the fetishisation of the stranger as theorised by Sara Ahmed (2000) and Claudia Castaneda's (2002) work, which inextricably links the semiotic and the material. The corporeal nature of figurative analysis is well suited to a character/stereotype-driven sketch show, as it allows exploration not just of nasty ideas as ideas, but also of the ways in which they are projected onto actual bodies.

Tyler uses figurative analysis to explore the figures of the asylum seeker (2006) and the 'chav mum' (2008), the latter of which I reference with regard to the character of Vicky Pollard. The framework has recently been applied to the figures of the 'vengeful woman', the 'hot lesbian' and 'the midriff' in Gill's (2008) work on advertising. In the next section, I examine the characters of *Little Britain* so far as they pertain to three figures in particular: 'the chav mum' (Vicky Pollard), 'the mail order bride' (Ting Tong Macadangdang), and 'the gay man' (Daffyd and Sebastian). I then look briefly at some other characters of interest who might warrant figurative analysis of their own – Emily Howard ('the transvestite'), Bubbles

deVere ('the fat woman') and Mrs Emery ('the old woman') – and suggest where such an analysis might lead in terms of *Little Britain's* representation of gender, race and sexuality.

In exploring issues of gender and sexuality through figurative analysis, there is no escaping its intersections with class and race. As the paper deals primarily with gender and sexuality, I have tried to highlight these intersections, rather than fully explore them. However, in some cases, this is not possible – for example, in the first character I consider. In this instance, it is not merely that class and gender stereotypes amplify or even intersect with one another; the class and sexuality of Vicky Pollard's body are almost indistinguishable as markers, as I demonstrate in what follows.

6. LITTLE BRITAIN FIGURES

Figure 1: 'The Chav Mum'

Vicky Pollard is perhaps the best known of all the *Little Britain* characters. Writing on hen-parties, Skeggs (2005) argues that a shift in emphasis has taken place "from the 1980s political rhetoric, which figured the single mother as the source of all national evil, we now have the loud, white, excessive, drunk, fat, vulgar, disgusting, hen-partying woman who exists to embody all the moral obsessions historically associated with the working class now contained in one body; a body beyond governance" (Skeggs, 2005: 965). I will come back to this idea of the body beyond governance when I discuss some of the other *Little Britain* figures. However, although a cursory glance at the *Daily Mail* will confirm Skeggs' theory that to smoke, drink, be fat and publicly fight and/or participate in loud hen parties is a national sin, it is less clear that we have lost the 1980s demonisation of the young, working class single mother, or at least, if we did, the character of Vicky Pollard signals a return to it.

'Chav' was 2004's 'word of the year' and 'Vicky Pollard' has become media shorthand for any unruly working class young woman, especially one with a child. This is not restricted to the tabloids. Covering the story of Tyneside teenager Kerry McLaughlin's ASBO³ in 2005, the

³ ASBO stands for Anti-Social Behaviour Order and can be imposed on someone in the UK when they exhibit anti-social behaviour. Along with 'hoodie' and 'chav', 'ASBO' has replaced 'hooligan' to describe any young, unruly, working-class person.

Sun's headline was, "Little Britain chav evicted"⁴, and the Guardian's read "Judge bans real-life Vicky Pollard from her own home"⁵. Simon Cowell rejected someone from an audition for ITVs *The X Factor* on the grounds that he couldn't take her seriously because she looked like Vicky Pollard. The Little Britain message boards contain talk about readers having seen 'a load of Vicky's' on the bus, and asks, 'don't they watch the show? Don't they know that we are laughing at them?' (quoted in Hari, 2005⁶). The 'Vicky's' are referred to interchangeably as 'chavs', 'slags' and 'whores'. This marks a clear return to the type of Othering present in comedy and comedy audiences gone by – 'we' are laughing at 'them'.

The massive popularity of *Little Britain* with schoolchildren means that not only are the catchphrases sweeping the playground, but that 'Vicky Pollard' is being used as an insult by children who are too young to have experienced the condemnation for bullying on the grounds of class or body image that McRobbie talks about; children potentially not even old enough to spell 'irony', much less understand it within this context. Vicky Pollard is described as ASBO-enthusiast, a benefit scrounging, uncaring single mother who would swap her baby for a Westlife CD, and who is so stupid that she doesn't know she is 8 months pregnant when she visits her doctor. There is one particular moment that stands out, when Vicky's doctor advises her to give up drinking, and Vicky replies, "I only drink to numb the pain of my worthless life". Admittedly, there is more than one satirical target in this sketch. Vicky has obviously internalised the 'we must understand the causes' discourse of the social worker, and this discourse itself is clearly being critiqued here, as there is no sympathy for Vicky on these grounds. As the audience, we are led to agree wholeheartedly that her life is worthless. This 'understanding' by both *Little Britain's* creators and audience with regard to which lives matter and which do not is a perfect example of both Gill's 'new cruelty' and Billig's 'pleasures of hatred'.

Vicky's heterosexuality is encoded in her 'chavviness' – in her children fathered by multiple male partners; in her discussion of her friends' sexual activities, and, I would argue, in her unthinking approach to life. The 'too stupid to be gay' theme does not extend to all the other *Little Britain* characters, as we will see when looking at Daffyd, however in Vicky's case, she is simply too 'chavvy' to be anything but straight. There is no 'gay chav' discourse, and the figure of the 'chav mum' is an undeniably heterosexual one. Might it be argued that Vicky is

⁴ <http://www.thesun.co.uk/article/0,,2-2005200779,00.html>

⁵ <http://society.guardian.co.uk/crimeandpunishment/story/0,8150,1480101,00.html>

⁶ http://comment.independent.co.uk/columnists_a_l/johann_hari/article328516.ece

a sexually empowered character? It is certainly the case that she has had many sexual partners, and does not seem to experience any guilt at not fitting into the 'good girl' image, nor any stigma associated with being a single mother. However, I would argue that the figure of the *chav* mum is such that the audience is led to feel that Vicky should feel guilty and stigmatised. These codes exist whether Vicky feels them or not. Vicky may not see herself as a 'slag' or a 'chav', but the audience certainly does. Similarly, she experiences no body-shame, nor does she worry about how she is dressed or her hair is done – those things are left for the audience to impose upon her, if she cannot do it for herself. We will see this issue arise again when looking briefly at the character of Bubbles deVere later. It is not that Vicky should not feel ashamed of her sexuality, her body and her choices in life, but rather that she is too stupid/'chavvy' to understand this and respond accordingly.

Of course, *Little Britain* does not bear sole responsibility for this figure. Vicky Pollard is clearly foregrounded in Harry Enfield's Wayne and Waynetta Slob characters, who regularly forgot about their baby (itself sometimes seen smoking or drinking alcohol – a clear indication it would inevitably turn into its parents); horrified social workers with their filthy flat and their diet of beer, pizza and cigarettes; and screamed at each other, especially with their catchphrase, "I am smoking a fag". Steve Coogan's Paul and Pauline Calf characters performed a similar function. Some might also point to Catherine Tate's schoolgirl Lauren as a Vicky Pollard-esque character. However, although Lauren might fall into the 'chav' figure, she is neither a single mother, nor an object of hatred in the way that Vicky is. Lauren is seen functioning (albeit in a disruptive way), at school and in her social network, and is a far more believable 'schoolgirl' than Vicky Pollard. It is interesting to see that in the transition from Wayne and Waynetta Slob and Paul and Pauline Calf to Vicky Pollard, that the male figure has been removed. The focus, and therefore the responsibility for the poor childcare and the unimpressive social presentation, now lies solely with the female character.

Figure 2: 'The Mail Order Bride'

The first episode of Season 2 of *Little Britain* introduced us to a Thai mail-order bride named Ting Tong Macadangdang. A mocking name, bad yellow makeup, buck teeth and an inability to pronounce 'r' certainly do nothing to set this character aside from every bad South-East Asian stereotype we have been subjected to in the past. However, there is a disturbing political element to this figure that goes much further than a racist physical representation.

Ting Tong is seen as the more powerful one in the relationship she has been bought for, as she convinces Dudley to still marry her, despite her not being as attractive as he thought she was going to be. This manages to accomplish two things. Firstly, it muddies the water with regard to the power dynamics inherent in buying a woman for sex. Secondly, it removes the potential for critique on the grounds of exploitation of Ting Tong, as she is given a potential exit, but actively chooses to stay with Dudley. The idea that actually she is the one exploiting him is not new; in fact it seems to be suggested in every Bravo/Channel 5 TV show (posing as documentary) about lapdancing, stripping or prostitution. Its popularity surely owes a great deal to its appeal – after all, if the opposite were true, then those activities would no longer be accessible as sexual titillation or naughty fun where no harm is done.

- Brother:** You must be Ping Pong
- Ting Tong:** It's Ting Tong
- Brother:** From the Philippines?
- Ting Tong:** Thailand
- Brother:** Thailand. That's right. They're cheaper over there, aren't they? Well, welcome, King Kong.
- Brother:** Did you ask for a fat one?
- Dudley:** No, it's just how she came

The dialogue once again shows a horror of the imperfect female form, in keeping with the way the other female characters in *Little Britain* are presented, as we will see. However, it also acts to do more than this. It desexualises Ting Tong by pointing out her undesirability, so that we do not have to think about the reality of a woman being bought for sex. It is impossible that Ting Tong is being exploited, because she is simply not attractive or thin enough for anyone to want to exploit her.

We might consider a small reprieve for Lucas and Walliams here – however distasteful and problematic this representation is, at least they have not relied on the 'exotic other' stereotype utilised by those same Bravo/Channel 5 documentaries, and films like 'Birthday Girl' (Butterworth, 2001). However, this reprieve would be short-lived, as they immediately go on to reap the benefits of this recognisable figure by introducing another character. After this scene, we find that the brother also has a mail order bride, the blonde Russian 'Iwanka', who was "only £200", and is later discovered to have worked in pornography. The men discover this through the machinations of Ting Tong, who is presented as being jealous of

the more attractive woman, suggesting once again that she actively wants and chooses to be Dudley's mail order bride, and is even willing to fight for the privilege.

Needless to say, there is absolutely nothing challenging or new about these characters. The figure of the mail order bride is sexual, exotic and neither damaged nor capable of being damaged. Given that this makes her not quite human, we do not have to worry about her. Links between mail order brides and women trafficked for prostitution are well established, and the available narratives of the lives of those women (for examples, see Dickson, 2004), including rape, beating and imprisonment are anything but a joke. *Little Britain* uses the characters of Ting Tong and Iwanka to imply that, far from doing any wrong or harm, it is Dudley and his brother who are hard done by, because they have overpaid (£200) for women who are not worth the money because they are either not attractive enough (Ting Tong), or 'shop-soiled' through previous sex-work (Iwanka). The laugh comes from the audience's agreement that they would not pay £200 for 'that' either, and that Dudley and his brother have been hoodwinked. The 'we' here is clearly defined as heterosexual men, and the 'other' as women who are not attractive enough, or have had too many sexual experiences (whether these are consensual or not does not seem to matter) to be worth paying for. Again, the idea that men desire beautiful virgins is neither new nor challenging.

Later in the series, some significant developments take place. The first is that Ting Tong is revealed to be "a ladyboy" from Tooting, therefore she has further 'tricked' Dudley. As there is a further section which deals with the representation of the transvestite character in *Little Britain*, I focus on Ting Tong solely as the figure of the mail order bride – however, it is worth mentioning that by revealing these details with regard to both her gender and location, her position of power, as one who can trick and deceive, is underscored. The implication is that it is foolish to trust women especially foreign ones, as they are out for what they can get, and will certainly take advantage of the poor men who were duped by their sexual wiles (into buying them). This interpretation is confirmed when Dudley allows Ting Tong to stay, but this appears to have been a mistake when Ting Tong brings her whole family over from Thailand. They open a Thai restaurant in Dudley's apartment and throw Dudley out. Being 'overrun with' or 'driven out by' foreigners is a common fear in Britain, perpetuated by the likes of the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, and by showing that exact scenario, *Little Britain* contributes to, rather than challenges, these racist assumptions. Defenders of the show might argue that these are the attitudes this sketch is making fun of, and that the Ting Tong character actually provides a nuanced critique of racial and sexual

stereotyping in Britain. However, in order for this to be the case, it would have to be assumed that the average Little Britain viewer does not hold these opinions personally, which is difficult given the immense popularity of *Little Britain* in the UK, and the fact that *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* are Britain's two top-selling newspapers.

The website, www.Thai-UK.org, which exists to "promote positive relations between Thailand and the UK", ran a survey in December 2005 about the character of Ting Tong Macadangdang, entitled 'Stereotype or Fun?' to see how its Thai readers responded to this sketch. Out of 70 respondents, 25 thought it was 'stereotyping' and 45 thought it was 'fun'. Although it is difficult to make any claims based on the results from 70 self-selected respondents, the significance of this survey lies not in the results, but in the way the survey is set up. It is interesting to note the binary presented in this choice – either it is a stereotype or it is fun. One option describes the type of representation made, and the other describes the effect or intention of the representation. 'Stereotype' and 'not fun' are not synonymous, and nor are 'fun' and 'accurate description'. If the choices had been 'stereotype' or 'accurate description', this result may have been very different. After all, not ticking the 'fun' box could mean that the respondent does not get the joke, does not have a sense of humour or is simply not fun, rather than being someone who might be all three, but finds this particular representation offensive. Again, this is a clear example of the threat of being found humourless being used to prevent any potential critique.

Figure 3: 'The Gay Man'

Surely, one might think, Dafydd, the 'only gay in the village' is *Little Britain's* trump card, when it comes to deflecting feminist critique. This sketch could not possibly be homophobic, because it is the creation of Matt Lucas, and Matt Lucas is gay. The premise of the sketch is that Dafydd runs around trying – and failing - to find homophobia in his village, when in fact, everyone is either gay themselves, or if not, totally fine with it. However, this sketch only works if one believes that we are, in fact, living in a pro-gay, homophobia-free utopia. If this were the case, then indeed it would be ridiculous to see prejudice where it no longer exists. Dafydd would then represent the sort of gay man who actively wants to be a victim, who feels that there is something lacking when there is nothing to complain about any more. One need look no further than the tabloid demonisation of left-wing gay activist Peter Tatchell to see that this is a recognisable figure.

However, the figure of the gay man in *Little Britain* goes further than this. Being gay in *Little Britain* is also associated with being ridiculous. Dafydd's outfits and demeanour ensure that this holds true for him, and mean that, after Vicky Pollard, he is probably the most recognisable of all the *Little Britain* characters. Discourse around Matt Lucas' portrayal of Dafydd is interesting – partly because of the focus on Matt Lucas as a gay man, but also because of the focus on the body of Matt Lucas – for example, that it was very brave of him to embody Dafydd in this way, because of his own physical shortcomings – too fat, too bald (and one might add, too gay). I will return to this briefly when discussing the differences in the figures of Matt Lucas and David Walliams themselves. The other gay character in *Little Britain*, Prime Minister's aide, Sebastian, is also positioned as ridiculous. He is the bitchy, jealous queen, obsessed with the Prime Minister, who concocts petty schemes in order to be closer to him. Both Sebastian and Dafydd are incredibly camp, which in *Little Britain*, is equated with ridiculousness.

In his analysis of Channel 4's *Terry and Julian* (1992), Simpson (1998) argues that the excessive campness of Julian Clary is necessary to make the show funny, because homosexuality is less intrinsically funny now that it is more public and therefore less frightening. While I agree with Simpson that the mere connotation of homosexuality is no longer naughty or taboo enough to provoke (nervous) laughter, I am not sure I agree with his conclusion that the overly-camp-for-laughs is entirely ironic. If irony works from a safe distance, this would mean that no-one could really think gay men were like that – as camp as Clary's character. Not only does this deny the possibility of varied gay subjectivities, but also assumes the same position as the Dafydd sketch, i.e. that everything is all right now. While the homo-topia *Little Britain* paints is seductive, we must be dragged, however unwillingly, back into the world we actually live in – the one in which people are not only still denied access to legal partnerships and parenthood etc. but are also beaten and killed just for being gay. The lack of a gap in content between pre-alternative, alternative and post-alternative comedy with regard to homosexuality (and, as we will see more briefly with regard to Emily Howard, transvestism) means that ironic representations are simply not applicable yet. Both Dafydd and Sebastian clearly rely on, and feed into, the existing stereotypes and figure of 'the gay man', rather than providing the sort of challenges that characterised alternative comedy.

Other notable figures

Space does not allow for an in-depth analysis of some of the other interesting figures in Little Britain, however, it is at least interesting to note three more: Mrs Emery ('The Old Woman'), Bubbles deVere ('The Fat Woman'), and Emily Howard ('The Transvestite').

Mrs Emery is presented as an OAP. OAP, we are told, stands for Old And Putrid. Mrs Emery can't control her bladder, and ends up urinating in supermarkets and other humiliating public places. A generous interpretation of this sketch might position it as crossing a social taboo – our fear of aging and having our bodies fail us. A less generous reading might see this as a cheap shot: an abuse of easy target, unable to fight back against its dominant creators.

Bubbles deVere is created by Matt Lucas in a fat suit (and in the case of Bubbles' sister, Desiree, Walliams blacked up and in a fat suit). The comedy value of Bubbles deVere is contained within her unruly body and its implicit out of control sexuality. When she cannot pay for her stay at the spa, she offers her body to the manager instead of payment. The joke, of course, is that the manager finds this offer abhorrent and not tempting in the slightest. As the audience, in order to laugh along, we have to agree that no one would ever want to touch a fat woman, a woman with cellulite or drooping breasts. Bubbles should be ashamed of her body – the fact that she is not, and wants to take sexual pleasure in it, makes her more alien, more grotesque and repellent, and therefore more funny. There is no reclamation, of the type Rowe suggested we might find in *Roseanne*; no Jo Brand-esque acerbic put-down to male disgusted responses at the body, and not even the type of brave face and pride exhibited by Dawn French. Rather, Bubbles and Desiree seem to have no understanding of the codes governing female appearance and (male) responses to it. Their overt sexuality is borne out of stupidity, not out of a desire to reclaim their bodies from these codes and gazes, and therefore it is no surprise that the constructed audience response is disgust, not empowerment.

The premise of the Emily Howard sketch is the unconvincing nature of transvestites. The two characters' voices and their facial hair break through their poor disguises and spoil their attempts to 'be a lady'. Putting aside for a moment that their constructions of what 'being a lady' entails seem to be nothing more than talking in a high pitched voice and ordering cake and wearing long skirts, this sketch is yet another example of an easy 'other' target. It is important to note here that trans issues were not at the forefront of alternative comedy's

stereotype challenging. With the notable exception of Eddie Izzard, little has been done to challenge the 'bloke in a dress' stereotype, or admit trans identities as genuine, rather than just sites for mockery. Given this, the irony defence simply does not work. If the defence is roughly described as, 'these social issues have been resolved, so it is now acceptable to go back to the old ways of talking about them, as long as we do it knowingly', the premise is flawed. Transgender rights are trailing a long way behind work on gender and sexuality in both law and popular consciousness. As such, the ridiculous images of this sketch might well be a mental port of call for ideas of trans for people who do not have any personal experience of these issues. This is especially pertinent given the popularity of *Little Britain* with children. The figure of the transvestite as presented by *Little Britain* is an easier one to call up than one of a person who easily 'passes' or simply has more interesting and diverse facets to them than their trans identity.

7. MATT LUCAS AND DAVID WALLIAMS AS FIGURES

As *Little Britain* relies so heavily on the corporeality of its characters to tell us who they are, and how we should feel about them, it is interesting to note the ways in which Little Britain's creators themselves have been figured through their bodies.

There was, at *Little Britain's* inception, a great deal of tabloid speculation and internet debate about David Walliams' sexuality. Not only was he 'playing gay', but he seemed pleased that his sexuality was seen as ambiguous, and was often more open about Lucas' sexuality than Lucas himself. However, in retrospect, this seems more like a desire to keep speculation open, and coverage ongoing, from a man who is so straight that he can do this with no threat to himself, than of any genuine ambiguity. Walliams has a sort of hyper-masculinity about him, whether he is dressing up as James Bond (for the front cover of the *Radio Times*), swimming the Channel for Comic Relief, or being romantically linked with a string of blonde uber-babes, including Abi Titmuss, Denise van Outen and Patsy Kensit. Given this heavily masculinised, almost superhero status, it seems totally safe for him to diverge from that identity with his characters in *Little Britain*. There is no risk when Walliams dresses up as a woman or plays the bitchy queen, because we 'know' he is nothing like that "in real life". Perhaps even one of the viewing pleasures taken in Walliams' characters is in seeing a man, who is absolutely coded as heterosexual in every other way, playing gay.

Matt Lucas, on the other hand, is a very different, almost tragic figure. Newspaper profiles⁷ document his loss of hair through alopecia at the age of 6, his struggles with his weight, and his difficulties in accepting his sexuality. From his first well known role, which was as the giant drumming baby (naked apart from a nappy), George Dawes in *Shooting Stars*, to dressing up for his wedding in fancy dress, or dressed as Orville the duck, Lucas' body seems always presented to us as a site of comedy, as something to be laughed at. He does not have the position of power that Walliams' uber-heterosexuality and confidence afford him (although the association surely goes some way towards this), and as such, it is easy to wonder whether Lucas' approach of laughing at himself and making people laugh with him, is to avoid the probability that people will laugh at him.

8. WHERE *LITTLE BRITAIN* GETS IT RIGHT

The notion of laughing with, rather than laughing at brings us back to the discussion of 'we' and 'them' in *Little Britain*. In the introduction, I intimated that *Little Britain* does have moments in which the powerful half of the self/other binary is challenged and stereotypes are critiqued, and it is this that I want to return to now, through three of *Little Britain's* characters.

Maggie Blackamoor and Judy Pike⁸ are two white, late middle-aged 'respectable' women from the Women's Institute who take part in many charity events in their village, Pox. They become excited when they are offered food or drink at one of these events, and comment on how delicious it is, but then vomit copiously when informed that it was prepared by someone of a different ethnicity or sexuality to them ("Please! No more lesbian jam!"). Maggie also has a kidney transplant, and vomits when learning the donor was a 'Mrs Banaji'. Of course, in this sketch, the joke is on Maggie and Judy, rather than the 'other'. They love the food until they are told of its origins, and Maggie is happy with her transplant until the donor's ethnicity is revealed – nothing is intrinsically wrong with either; it is a purely racist/homophobic etc. reaction, which is shown to be ludicrous. The fear of being in some way contaminated by the 'other' is shown by the name of the village, Pox, and by the

⁷ e.g. The Sun (<http://www.thesun.co.uk/article/0,,2001320029-2006410208,00.html>)

characters' literal purging. However, Maggie and Judy's racism and homophobia is also critiqued in some more subtle ways. Their abhorrence at literally consuming the 'other' is surely rooted in their fear of being, or being perceived to be, the other. We see this, not only through their surnames, Blackamoor and Pike, but also in an episode in which they holiday together and Maggie suggests that they kiss. The disgust at the 'other', we then see, is potentially rooted in self-disgust and fear, which gives us a far more nuanced understanding of the bigotry than the sketches that take the 'other' as their centre do.

The second character in this category is university counsellor, Linda Flint. In this sketch, a student will come into her office with a problem, and she will have to make a phone call to a man called Martin to resolve the issue. In order that Martin will know which student it is, Linda tries and fails to describe the student (who is in the room with her) in 'politically correct' and pleasant terms, but in the end, always relies on an offensive description ("big fat lesbian," "ching-chong Chinaman," "Ali Bongo," "Fatty Fatty Boom Boom," "the Oompa Loompa," etc), much to the horror of the student. Linda's office is filled with left-leaning or 'PC' files and leaflets, but however much she tries to stick to her Human Resources training on language, eventually, her prejudices cannot be contained any longer. It could be argued that the students being 'othered' in this sketch are the target of the laughter, with Linda providing relief for the audience in saying what 'we' are no longer allowed to say about 'them' in a world of 'political correctness gone mad'. However, I think a more generous interpretation may be warranted here. Both Linda and Human Resources are the potential 'powerful' targets here. Linda's prejudices, like Maggie and Judy's are obvious, however, something slightly more interesting is going on with regard to the other target. The university system has failed these students, because although they have systems in place that tell their staff what sort of language to use when describing people, this is a superficial veneer that breaks down under pressure. There is an illusion that minorities are protected because of the policies, but actually little, if anything, is done about the actual incidents that take place. Linda continues in her job, and continues to do the same thing week after week, and it is clear that her 'PC-talk' is a job-skill she has been told to acquire, rather than it having any actual effect on the way she thinks about the world.

The character of Marjorie Dawes provides the final example in this section. Marjorie runs the Fat Fighters weight loss group, and attempts to motivate the group members by insulting

⁸ Counted as one character as they perform the same function in the same sketch

them about their weight and appearance continuously. She also singles out the one non-white member of the group, Meera, for special treatment. Marjorie will pretend not to hear or understand what Meera says, because of her accent, and will ask her to repeat it several times, before deciding on her own, incorrect, interpretation. Meera is a sympathetic character, and her words are clear to the audience, leaving no doubt that Marjorie's problem with Meera's accent is not Meera's fault, but Marjorie's. This is a clear critique of the 'can't they speak English properly' attitude that some people have when dealing with people who speak English well, but with a foreign accent. In terms of the weight and appearance issues, Marjorie's hatred, like Maggie and Judy's, is seen to be motivated by fear and self-disgust. When nobody is looking, she eats copious amounts of food, despite having forced her club members into denying themselves. At the end of the third season of *Little Britain*, the members of Fat Fighters rise up and leave the group, as a protest against Marjorie's treatment of them. In providing a (somewhat) redemptive ending, rather than simply representing a similar scenario each time, those being 'othered' in the group are allowed to show some agency and stand up to the person oppressing them in such a hypocritical manner.

In all three of these examples, the focus of the sketch is the person occupying, or believed to be occupying, the more powerful half of the 'othering' binary. The fact that sometimes those characters are shown to be concerned about that position does not change this dynamic; it simply works to explain their racism or homophobia etc. It is interesting, however, that all the characters chosen to represent this power dynamic and be critiqued in this manner on the show are women. Nothing is done on *Little Britain* to critique gender inequality and the male/female binary; only (some) sexuality, ethnicity and social difference are addressed. As such, it is hard to say that *Little Britain* has utilised its opportunities for parody to their fullest potential.

9. CONCLUSION

There are moments when *Little Britain* challenges power and stereotype, as explored in the previous section. In using parody, rather than irony, in those sketches, the audience sees a situation represented which, in pre-alternative comedy times, might have had the audience laughing at the 'other', rather than at *Little Britain's* target, the person in the position of power. However, although *Little Britain* might satirise racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism and classism from time to time, ultimately, it does far more to promote them. The sketches examined in the final section of this paper are not *Little Britain's* most popular, nor do they contain the memorable catchphrases that catapult those figures into the mainstream. Those belong to Vicky Pollard, Daffydd and Bubbles deVere, among others, and provide an explanation for the fact that *Little Britain* is so loved by the *Daily Mail* and that right-wing commentator, Richard Littlejohn uses every opportunity to quote it.

Of course, there are serious problems with positioning the origins of alternative comedy as a golden age. It lacked diversity, populated so heavily by its white, middle class comedians, who themselves were certainly not above critique, and many issues were simply not addressed or challenged. However, there is no denying that there was a sense then that people were trying to shake things up, attempting to challenge prejudices and disrupt the status quo. Tony Allen once said, 'The entertainer gives the public what they want – the artist gives the public what they don't know they want' (quoted on Allen's website www.newagenda.org). It seems to me that *Little Britain* fulfils the former, rather than the latter, and has become the comedy equivalent of junk food.

The comedy that challenges stereotypes has been pushed right back into the margins. As with the origins of alternative comedy, the male comedians need to speak out and start re-challenging those attitudes and presentations. Some have noticed the shift and the return to the old ways, and have started to challenge it, in the way that Tony Allen once did. It may be too early to say that these challenges are the genesis of a turning tide, but there is some hope in this provocative quote from Richard Herring's 2007 show, 'Menage a Un', in which he pretends to support the BNP:

"Don't go thinking I'm the new Bernard Manning. I'm being post-modern and ironic. I understand that what I'm saying is unacceptable. But does that make me better than Bernard Manning, or much, much worse?"⁹

I get the joke, *Little Britain*, really I do. I just don't think it's anything to laugh at.

⁹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/britain/article/0,,2107009,00.html>

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