

*Laughter, Pregnancy, and Subjectivity: A Corporeal Feminist Interpretation of Ali Wong's Standup Comedy*

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**Abstract**

This paper focuses on the standup comedian Ali Wong and her three Netflix specials, *Baby Cobra*, *Hard Knock Wife*, and *Don Wong*. Taking a corporeal feminist approach, this paper sets out to analyze pregnancy, the central topic in Wong's comedy, and its relation to her subjectivity. It is argued that pregnancy, as an authentic female experience alongside childbirth and breastfeeding, enables Wong to challenge and thereby subvert the prevalent narratives of motherhood and sexuality, articulating a female autonomous voice. From the disciplinary body in *Baby Cobra* to the misshapen body in *Hard Knock Wife* to the sexualized body in *Don Wong*, the three comedy specials both witness and reveal a gradual and subtle enhancement of her subjectivity. With this regard, pregnancy as a unique female experience does not deprive her sense of self but fuels it.

Keywords: Ali Wong, Standup Comedy, Feminist Humor, Pregnancy

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## Introduction

Standup comedy, a spoken and comic performance by a single individual that addresses the audience directly, won popularity rapidly in the late 1970s, “coincident with the emergence of cable television, particularly HBO” (Brodie, 2014, p.12). The academia was slow to recognize its value at first and it remained a “relatively undervalued genre” (Mintz, 1985, p.71) compared with comic literature and film comedy. In recent years, however, with the rise of streaming service platforms such as Netflix, standup comedy has expanded its access to many online viewers, transcending time and space. Standup comedians thereby become famous with the clips of their performances posted or reposted on social media. The scholarship on standup comedy has surged ever since.

Among many standup comedians, Ali Wong stands out as a high-profile comic, actress, and writer who has skyrocketed to fame with three standup comedy specials released on Netflix. An Asian American woman, a mother, and a breadwinner of her household, Ali Wong both perpetuates and breaks stereotypes of Asian women. Her Netflix standup specials, *Baby Cobra* (2016), *Hard Knock Wife* (2018), and *Don Wong* (2022), are primarily autobiographic and observational, recounting her marriage, pregnancy, childbearing, and breastfeeding experiences with raunchy characterization and vulgar diction. Notably, Ali Wong performs the previous two specials seven and a half months pregnant while bouncing around the stage energetically, which attracts and simultaneously worries the audience.

Scholars pay acute attention to Ali Wong’s standup comedy both thematically and narratologically. Sharon Tran labels Wong’s comedy as cringe humor, whereas Lockyer and Benedictis place it under the framework of pregnant standup comedy. By thematic analysis, they point out how Wong’s works negotiate with and even disrupt the mainstream representation of femininity and motherhood. On the other hand, Wong’s humor strategies or narrative techniques are scrutinized to evince that she “intentionally challenge[s] gendered cultural norms” (O’Keefe 46). Insightful and illuminating though they are, these studies might be too comprehensive to notice a recurring theme that threads Wong’s three specials. What distinguishes Ali Wong from many other hilarious female comics—Chelsea Handler, Iliza Shlesinger, and Taylor Tomlinson—is that Wong always deals with the postpartum misshapen body and female genitalia unabashedly and unapologetically. Fraught with indecent and abject descriptions of excretions and childbirth, her Netflix specials present a female body that defies cultural expectations of proper femininity and repudiates the perfect image of women in neoliberal capitalism discourse.

This paper, therefore, focuses on Wong’s jokes about the female body, especially the pregnant body, and deals with the three specials in chronological order. Taking a corporeal feminist view, this paper will disentangle the complex dynamic of pregnancy, sexuality, and subjectivity. Corporeal feminism rises coincidentally with the “body turn” in many disciplines<sup>1</sup>. The female body is double obscured in Western metaphysics, which emphasizes mind over body and male over female, and the “body turn” places the female body front and center. For instance, Grosz, the corporeal feminist precursor scholar, theorizes the sexually differentiated specificity of bodies and analyzes philosophically the corporeality of the female body. Recognizing the corpus of feminist work that theorizes the female body, this paper engages with such practices that draw on the concrete specificities of bodies (Grosz, 1994). By textual

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Witz has discussed the corporeal turn in sociology, drawing extensively from Crossley, Falk, and Synott, among many other sociologists. The stress on corporeality fills out the absent, more-than-fleshy sociality of women traditionally repressed within sociological discourse.

analysis of Ali Wong's transcripts and investigation of reports on her professional success, this paper endeavors to argue that Wong weaponizes pregnancy as a bodily experience and a commercial label of her standup comedy to negotiate with the public discourse on pregnancy yet devoid of female voices and gain female subjectivity.

### **The Disciplined Body in *Baby Cobra***

Wong's first standup special *Baby Cobra* was released on Mother's Day in 2016, which garnered her a new fan base. As a pregnant woman in her third trimester on the stage, Wong alternated jokes about her previous dating experience with hipsters to trapping her Harvard Business School husband, deliriously filthy and funny jokes woven into a tacit feminist accusation of the double standard of parenting. She begins her comedy with aging anxiety, humorously highlights her marriage with her husband, and directs her cringe humor toward the disciplinary mechanisms of corporate culture on women. This paper interprets these parts as the grumble of a woman disciplined by conventional social norms in her workplace and in the marriage market.

To begin with, Wong expresses her aging anxiety as a thirty-three woman. She acknowledges her jealousy when encountering eighteen-year-old young girls "because of their metabolism... they could just eat like shit, and then they take a shit and have a six-pack, right?" Ageism, the discrimination or prejudice based on a person's age, disproportionately affects women in that they are expected to stay young and beautiful by society. Wong's anxiety stems from a variety of societal, medical, and cultural discourses that women could hardly get rid of. As women age, they lose societal value and visibility, career opportunities, and optimal time for pregnancy. Ali Wong got pregnant at 33, an age which is not technically high risk to bear children, but she could feel bodily changes. She also admits that she turns to hormone pills to regulate her progesterone levels and makes love to her husband according to a rigid schedule. Wong's experience as a thirtysomething woman who attempts to get pregnant reveals the permeation of medical discourse into her body, or in her own words, "it gets very clinical." When medical and scientific discourse dictates people's lives and serves as an important reference in the decision-making process, individuals live up to those standards to ensure controllable and desirable consequences. Therefore, bodies, female bodies in particular, are under scrutiny and discipline.

In addition to medical discourse, Wong also complains about the corporate culture that seeks to regulate the body to ridiculous extremes. She ironically glorifies the housewives who can afford leisure time on the toilet and do not have to rush to finish wiping their buttocks compared with other unfortunate women in the office. Even the toilet paper, labeled as "communist toilet paper," is designed to be ineffective for wiping the excrement in an effort to minimize the cost of company supplies. She remarks, "You can never finish wiping at work because you always feel rushed 'cause you're paranoid that your co-worker's gonna recognize your shoes underneath the stall. And you're like, 'Oh, no! Courtney's listening. She's waiting. She's timing me.'" The dramatic representation of people's mentality reflects how corporate culture pursues efficiency regardless of the physiological reactions of employees. Moreover, it discloses the embarrassment and humiliation employees might encounter at work—they are afraid of being recognized and timed by colleagues, which mitigates their authority among co-workers and substages their elegant white-collar workers' image. The toxic culture, combined with the notion that women should not behave unruly, keeps haunting and bombarding women, disciplining them to withhold normal bodily changes.

Furthermore, Wong recounts her love story with her husband, who is also an Asian American but a graduate of Harvard Business School with a perceived promising future. She says fearlessly that she has deliberately trapped her husband because of his “earning potential”, indicating that women internalize the rules of husband-hunting, permanently occupied with judging and evaluating. In order to marry him, Wong pretends to be virtuous and submissive, keeping the perfect body shape and a decent manner. She compares her body to “a secret body” that rejects promiscuous men, but in fact, it is a “public park”. In order to show her chastity and proper femininity, she does not kiss him until the fifth date and packs his lunch every single day not out of a good heart but out of financial investment. After her husband gets used to it and proposes to her, Wong stops dieting and does not manage her body shape anymore. Through her description, Wong perpetuates the notion that heterosexual marriage is invariably a prerequisite for women to enjoy a better life. In this sense, women voluntarily objectify themselves and display the qualities of a docile housewife. Stuck in a system where marriage is regarded as a shortcut to early retirement, women also need to compete against each other scrupulously to secure a satisfied husband. Although she reverses this joke by discovering that the Harvard Business School graduate is \$70,000 in debt, Wong still showcases that women are disciplined to make efforts to marry wealthy and are prone to prioritizing marriage over a career in most cases.

As Kate Millett (1971) contends in *Sexual Politics*, women, “as non-persons without legal standing, were permitted no actual economic existence as they could neither own nor earn in their own right” (p. 48), thus financially depending on men. Good-looking and submissive women are privileged in both the job market and the marriage market. It is further attributed to the patriarchal system that reduces women to one-dimensional characters and evaluates them on the metric of appearance. Consequently, women are inculcated with this idea of pleasing men and disciplined to perform femininity in their daily lives. John Berger (1990) has once observed that “men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (p. 41), perfectly illustrating how women are socially constructed to value their appearances. In *Baby Cobra*, Wong presents herself lightheartedly as a woman who falls victim to the standards our society imposes on women. Tripartite disciplinary mechanisms are identified in this comedy special, divulging that she, at this point in her life, has not been empowered to fight against the system and has not wielded her female autonomy.

### **The Misshapen Body in *Hard Knock Wife***

The second Netflix special *Hard Knock Wife* was again released on Mother’s Day two years later, which delves deeper into pregnancy, parturition, and motherhood, as Wong has experienced childbirth and is now pregnant with her second baby. She boldly makes jokes about urinating, various sexual acts, and the dirtiest of all, childbirth. At first glance, the second special is nothing more revolutionary than the previous one, oscillating around topics like marriage and parenting. A closer examination suggests that one thing distinguishing *Hard Knock Wife* from *Baby Cobra* is her treatment of the postpartum body in a raunchy and profane way. This paper will analyze the parts that deal with pregnancy and breastfeeding experiences and claim that, in Wong’s case, pregnancy precipitates a profound shift in her subjectivity. In other words, pregnancy enables Wong to challenge the discursive authority that tends to beautify motherhood.

Wong picturizes her stay-at-home life after giving birth to a baby girl. Far away from the dainty and tranquil life she had imagined for herself, pregnancy, birthing, and parenting

exhaust Wong and occupy her whole life. The suffering, hardships, and alienation pregnant women might undergo have almost been erased and substituted with “the atmosphere of approval” in a society that “narrows women’s possibilities to motherhood” (Young, 1984, p.53). However, Wong rejects this narrative that circumscribes women into the aura of motherhood, deglamorizes it, and voices the authentic experience of it. In *Hard Knock Wife*, she elaborates on how brutal breastfeeding is, asserting that “breastfeeding is this savage ritual that just reminds you that your body is a cafeteria now”, which breaks the stereotypical scene where a mother bonds physically and emotionally with the child through breastfeeding. The simile reminds readers of a market-driven relationship between the mother and the child, suggesting that motherly supply should not be taken for granted. By emphasizing the utility of “the most visible sign of a woman’s femininity, the signal of her sexuality” (Young, 2005, p.78), Wong ruthlessly pricks the bubble that embodies sexual fantasy in the phallic culture.

Besides this, Wong narrates her visit to one of her best friends who has struggled for 72 hours for a natural delivery but ends up with an emergency C-section. Upon their meeting, Wong is surprised by the fact that the “grueling labor renders her friend’s female genitalia unrecognizable” (Tran, 2022, p.628) which resembles “two hanging dicks side by side” in Wong’s words, interpreted by Tran as Wong’s “defying the sanctified image of motherhood” (Tran, 2022, p.628). Ali Wong becomes a detached observer in this case to dramatize her friend’s suffering that epitomizes women’s sacrifice in childbirth. When it comes to her own body, she mentions an encounter with other mothers who recommended stealing free diapers from the hospital. The diapers are for her postpartum pussy through which the baby’s “house” exits. As a result, Wong has to walk around “with a top knot, giant diaper, nipples bleeding, like a defeated sumo wrestler.” Her description presses us to consider the sharp contrast between a woman’s real-life experience and the general accounts of pregnancy, the latter one replete with glory and approval. In this sense, Wong presents the authentically misshapen bodies destroyed by childbirth and breastfeeding that are usually shielded from public discourse because it does not conform to the gender expectations of proper femininity.

Additionally, the experience of pregnancy blurs the dichotomy constructed between nature and nurture, between body and mind, and between the intuition of a mother and knowledge acquired by learning. Wong has joined a mom’s group in Los Angeles that aims to help new mothers out of confusion and potential trouble by imparting their experiences. She does so not out of interest or fun but an urgency to survival: “You just gotta hook up with a crew to survive,” evincing the necessity of absorbing other mothers’ experiences in raising children. Similarly, Wong relates to her insistence on mother milk instead of formula and the prentice manner of breastfeeding. She rejects the whitewashed and highly commercialized “local, organic, free-range, farm-to-mouth” slogan but states she chooses to breastfeed because it is free. The free feeding turns out to be not free “because you have to buy all of these pillows and pumps to support your breastfeeding, and then you might get a clogged duct... And then you have to call a lactation consultant.” Wong’s reversal of this joke manifests how consumerism penetrates women’s lives, coaxing women into buying and listening to various instructions. Nonetheless, Wong ignores the disciplinary narratives and turns to her own intuition, a token of articulating her own ideas.

It is generally acknowledged that pregnancy does not belong to the woman herself, for she serves as a primary “container” or is treated as a clinical “observable process coming under scientific scrutiny” or seen as a temporary “condition” (Young, 1984, p.45). Discourses on pregnancy and motherhood often surround medical science and deprioritize the experience of women. Bartlett (2002) notices this authority shift when she probes into breastfeeding in the

context of the professionalized sector of experts and attributes it to “the masculinization and institutionalization of midwifery” (p.376). The expulsion of women in delivery practice can be traced back to the 16th century when the witch-hunting movement was on the rise<sup>2</sup>. Gradually, women have been deprived of the authority and control over pregnancy and childbirth. Women seldom participate in the production of narratives that document their experience except for rare occasions where autobiographies and diaries are permissible.

Cixous (1976) made a manifesto in “The Laugh of the Medusa” to appeal to women’s writing: “Women must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing” (p.875). She regards women’s writing about women as “the invention of a new insurgent writing” (p.880), which helps women return to their bodies and seize the occasion to speak. Inarguably, Ali Wong’s comic performance belongs to women’s writing, in which women’s bodies are heard. By poking fun at the anguished but obscure experience of women, Wong successfully challenges female representation in public discourse and articulates her own version of childbirth and breastfeeding. Compared with the disciplined body presented in *Baby Cobra*, though battered and misshapen, the postpartum body in *Hard Knock Wife* showcases Wong’s efforts to strive for discursive power and control over her life. In this light, this section concludes that through the experience of pregnancy, Wong dismisses the tripartite disciplinary mechanisms mentioned previously and starts to embrace her subjectivity.

### **The Sexualized Body in *Don Wong***

The third comic special *Don Wong* keeps with Ali Wong’s usual raunchy style. It features her life changes brought by her meteoric rise to stardom and continues to discuss the double standard between men and women. Her rise in social status and professional fame, however, renders *Don Wong* a comic performance overtly political, audacious, and even devilish. She takes a step further to address one overarching idea—she intends to cheat her husband and seek extramarital affairs. The explicit expression of sexuality perpetuates the stereotype that Asian American women are sexually active, but juxtaposed with her identity as a mother, it also elicits a cringe. This section will focus on her choice of obscene and taboo topics, such as infidelity and sexual pleasure, and demonstrate that her jokes not only criticize the separation of motherhood and sexuality but also shed light on the intersectional dynamic of gender and class. Many critics (Jones, 2022; VanArendonk, 2022; Wong, 2002) would agree that Wong has arrived at the peak of her career with this special, and this paper considers it as validating her female subjectivity as well.

Western metaphysics is established through oppositional categorizations, and by no means could women escape the yoke of being located in a dichotomy. The dichotomy of motherhood and sexuality mirrors other binary oppositions like good/evil and pure/impure. Young clearly explains that mother love is “entirely defleshed, spiritual” (2005, p.86), whereas fleshy eroticism is despicable and bad. A mother should be self-sacrificing and purge sexual desire that can be dangerously tempting. Therefore, the separation of motherhood and sexuality ensures that the mother is constantly giving unconditionally instead of wanting or desiring. Ali Wong seems to overlook the rigid confinement and presents herself as a hypersexual mother. She has performed oral sex, imitated male masturbating, and showed women faking orgasms on the stage. She declaratively exclaims that she wants to cheat on

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<sup>2</sup> This idea is indebted to the book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* by Silvia Federici. She illuminates that the fact that women were prosecuted and executed for infanticide in 16th and 17th-century Europe led to the marginalization of midwives, causing women to lose control over procreation.

her husband and fuck other men. In *Hard Knock Wife*, Wong even fantasizes about a male mammy who is young, sexy, and caring, and in *Don Wong*, she warns her fans not to be disappointed if “the TMZ video of [her] face getting fire-hosed by Michael B. Jordan” would be disseminated. As Young concludes that “one of the subversive things feminism can do is affirm this undecidability of motherhood and sexuality” (2005, p.88), Wong’s self-affirmation of sexuality subverts the misogynist dichotomy that regulates women’s sexuality, embodying different facets of “mothers.”

In *Hard Knock Wife*, Wong ironically responds to the question of what her husband thinks of her scatological jokes on stage by saying that she is fearless because the mortgage and the baby have handcuffed them together. The same logic applies here: she is even more fearless, talking about cheating on her husband not only because they are bonded together but also because Ali Wong turns out to be the breadwinner of the household. The underlying principle seems to be that those who earn more talk louder in a family. Normally, men are expected to be breadwinners and dominate the decision-making process. With the gender role reversal in Wong’s family, she now enjoys the right to take control of everything and is able to boss around.

As is exemplified in *Don Wong*, Wong starts to unveil the truth, which is seldom articulated and promulgated in our society. One important declaration she makes in *Don Wong* is “no more faking orgasms”, bringing to light the thorny question of equal pleasure. Wong illustrates the differences in sexual pleasure perceived by different sexes: “Very difficult to make a woman, especially a new woman, cum ... There [are] too many factors ... The lighting, the temperature, the news. You can’t be all up in your head about the global supply chain being backed up.” Yet women would rather pretend to be enjoying themselves than offend men by exposing the truth. Wong’s performance elucidates the power imbalance between men and women and the male control over sexual discourse. Women tend to prioritize men’s feelings over their own, protecting men’s self-esteem. When she achieves financial independence, Wong is asked again how she manages not to make her husband “feel smaller”. The typical attitude confirms the stereotypical subjugation of women. However, Wong chooses to smash the myth of masculinity instead of perpetuating it by calling out the truth, the testimony that millions of women would give—men do not fulfill a sexually satisfying job.

The power imbalance in terms of careers also looms large in Wong’s comic special. She compares “fan pussy” (female fanbase) with “fan dick” (male fanbase) and condemns that men receive too many tangible benefits with too little achievement. In other words, men can reap obscene rewards from their fanbase, which reflects the rampant occupational sexism in our society. Alongside the disparity in the quality of the fanbase, Wong admits that women are normally underpaid in the job market and make much more effort to accomplish work. She has been too busy with work to go to the toilet and has to go to the hospital to check her body. By contrast, her husband is relieved from the “pressure to provide” and can sit on the toilet serenely to avoid “family responsibilities”. Wong’s narrative effectively discloses the hardship of the mother who struggles in the workplace and their efforts to balance family and career, thus censuring men for reaping more than they sow.

In *Don Wong*, Ali Wong emanates a powerful air that grounds her ability to speak. The rise in career path bestows her more opportunities to observe the structural problems and call out the injustice. She boldly deals with taboo topics and debunks the glorification of masculinity. The previous two comic specials which concentrate on her pregnancy have stabilized her

reputation in the field of standup comedy and paved the way for her expansion to movie-filming in the entertainment industry. Symbolically, the third one witnesses another change in Wong's autonomy and subjectivity: Wong presents a disciplined body in *Baby Cobra*, subject to various discourses; with real-life experience in pregnancy and child-rearing, Wong discovers a misshapen body that has been shunned in mainstream narrative and unmasks the postpartum body in *Hard Knock Wife*; and in *Don Wong*, building on the commercial success, Wong sexualizes her body and in this way is capable of addressing more questions that have been plaguing women in general. With each comic special being released, the female body changes, and her subjectivity is enhanced. Pregnancy does not split or alienate her from her body but enables her to gain autonomy both monetarily and spiritually.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has discussed Ali Wong's three Netflix specials from the perspective of corporeal feminism. Given that pregnancy is the recurring theme that threads Wong's comic performances, this paper deems the three Netflix specials as her autobiography-like documents that depict her life in three stages: *Baby Cobra* as pre-pregnancy, *Hard Knock Wife* as pregnancy, and *Don Wong* as post-pregnancy. With this regard, three bodies are identified in respective specials, and Wong's autonomous awareness is proven to be strengthened. In *Baby Cobra*, Wong experiences aging anxiety and body dissatisfaction, presenting a disciplined body suffocated by tripartite mechanisms permeating her private life and the workplace. She has unconsciously internalized the disciplinary discourses and surrenders to them. As she experiences more, from pregnancy to childbirth to breastfeeding, Wong realizes the gulf between the mainstream celebrated narratives about motherhood and her authentic experiences. In *Hard Knock Wife*, therefore, Wong subverts the former by presenting a misshapen body that bears C-section scars and is merely reduced to the baby's cafeteria. It shall be seen as her effort to negotiate the unrealistic representation of motherhood in the public sphere thanks to her pregnancy-related experiences. Ultimately, in *Don Wong*, the special filmed after Wong obtained a flourishing career, Wong addresses her sexuality and harshly reproaches double standards and gender inequality on a wider scale. She sexualizes her body and demands equal pleasure besides equal pay. It is entirely safe to argue that pregnancy as a thematic content in her comedy and as an authentic experience of her own enables Wong to achieve an autonomous life free from any disciplinary discourses and symbolically helps her to gain female subjectivity. This paper shall conclude by quoting Cixous again: "In body. –More so than men who are coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation, women are body. More body, hence more writing" (p.886). Such is the manifesto that more body, more writing, more writing, more voice, more voice, more discursive authority.



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