

Constructing Sarah Palin  
The Hyperreal on the Campaign Trail or The Simulacrum is True  
By Matt Fotis

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*Saturday Night Live* has a long and storied tradition of political satire. Our collective political consciousness has been greatly influenced by the late night comedy show. In some cases politicians seem to be more closely identified by their satirized selves than their “true” selves. Gerald Ford, the first *SNL* political victim, is still seen as a clumsy and bumbling fool. Ronald Reagan is asleep at the wheel (or is it all just an elaborate plan?), George H.W. Bush is the passive patrician, Bill Clinton is the womanizer with a voracious appetite, and George W. Bush is the bumbling idiot in over his head. All of these identities have been heavily influenced by the impersonations done on *Saturday Night Live*. John Feffer, author and co-director of Foreign Policy in Focus at the Institute for Policy Studies recently quipped “It used to be that prospective politicians chose law school as the first step in their career path...Future politicians [like Al Franken] may skip law school altogether and try out for the *Saturday Night Live* team instead”(Sands 2008).

It is no secret that political candidates strive to create a highly specific identity tailored to appeal to as many voters as possible. The modern candidate often uses the media to help shape and disseminate that identity, although at times the media helps create a different identity. Vaulted into the national limelight from relative obscurity, Sarah Palin provides an interesting case study. Her identity and perception/reception underwent several incarnations throughout her relatively short time on the campaign trail from unknown Alaskan Governor, to savior of the Republican Party, to small town hockey mom, to maverick outsider, to conservative vixen, to ditzy weather girl in over her head. She burst onto the scene at the Republican National Convention and spent the next several months undergoing a series of public performances designed to shape her perception. The performance with the greatest impact on Palin was her much discussed interview with Katie Couric. The equally, if not more, ballyhooed parody of the interview on *SNL* by Tina Fey had a large impact

on the public's perception of Palin, perhaps more so than anything Palin ever did, and seemingly went one step further than any previous *SNL* parody in shaping public perception of a candidate.

This study examines the impact of the Couric interview and its subsequent parody on Palin's identity construction and perception. When dealing with presidential politics the stakes are high. Investigating the ways in which candidates construct their identity, and the ways in which the media affirms and subverts that identity is extremely important. The potential of a late night comedy show influencing a presidential campaign could potentially alter the way candidates campaign. In a September 2008 *Newsweek* poll voters were asked whether Palin was qualified or unqualified to be president and the results were a near dead heat. In the same poll in early October after the Couric interview and Tina Fey's impersonation "those saying she was 'unqualified' outnumbered those saying she was 'qualified' by a massive 16 points" (Midgley 2008). Furthermore, according to a Media Curves survey given to a national sampling of Democrats, Republicans and Independents, "after viewing a Tina Fey impersonation of Sarah Palin on *Saturday Night Live*, Palin's favorability ratings dropped" (Kessler 2008). The effect of the impersonation was the equivalent "of a typical attack ad, with Palin's favorability among all voters slipping 4 points" (Ryan 2008). While there are a variety of factors at play in Palin's slipping numbers and perception, it is difficult to overlook the impact that Fey's impersonation had on the perception of Palin.

The so called Tina Fey Effect has received a lot of coverage in the popular press. During early October 2008 newspapers, magazines and blogs were a twitter with coverage of Tina Fey and Sarah Palin. Yet very little serious attention has been paid to the creation of Palin's identity and the role that Fey, Couric and others, including Palin, played. The popular media latched onto the Fey/Palin story, often treating it as a sort of sideshow or a complete affront to Palin. While polls documenting Palin's declining favorability have been done, no one has conducted a close examination of her changing identity throughout the campaign. Therefore I will be following the evolution of

Palin's changing public identities/perceptions in an attempt to further comprehend the Tina Fey Effect.

In order to fully understand the changing perceptions of Palin's identity, I will be looking at three distinct moments in her campaign. The first section, "The Alaskan Governor," will look at Palin pre-nomination to better understand her identity and perception before she was thrust upon the national scene. Section two, "From Convention to Couric" will examine how Palin sought to frame her story from her introduction at the Republican Convention to the Couric interview, including her first major interview with Charlie Gibson. Section three, "The Tina Fey Effect" will look at the *SNL* parody and original interview, and attempt to measure the impact that Fey had on Palin's identity and perception/reception. What role(s) have Palin, Couric and Fey played in creating Palin's identity? Who is the "real" Sarah Palin, and who "created" her?

In order to help frame Palin's changing identity[ies] I will be using the theories of Jean Baudrillard, focusing on his concept of the hyperreal. According to Baudrillard a simulacrum is not simply a copy of the real, but becomes truth in its own right, or hyperreal. Baudrillard begins his seminal book *Simulacra and Simulation* with a quote from Ecclesiastes that I think sums up Palin and Fey's campaign relationship: "The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth—it is the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (Baudrillard 1). For example, if I went to Las Vegas and saw the replica Eiffel Tower and then traveled to Paris to see the original Eiffel Tower, I would compare the original to the replica thus positioning the Las Vegas Eiffel Tower as the "real" Eiffel Tower. This idea especially applies to Fey's impersonation of Palin, which many in the popular press remarked was so good that it was difficult to tell which "Palin" was the real Palin. *SNL* parodied this idea when Palin appeared on the program and Alec Baldwin pleaded with the real Sarah Palin, whom he thought was Tina Fey, to not interact with Palin. This follows Baudrillard's idea of the third order of reality, where the simulacrum overtakes the original and the distinction between reality and representation breaks down leaving the simulacrum as the real.

## The Alaskan Governor

On August 29, 2008, Sarah Palin catapulted from obscurity to national prominence when Sen. John McCain selected her to be his running mate. Palin was considered a surprise choice and virtually no one outside of Alaska could tell you much about the first female Republican vice presidential nominee. While space does not allow an in depth analysis of Palin's biography, it is necessary to provide some background information because the telling of her story became one way that Palin and her supporters tried to frame her identity/perception. For example, writing about her rise to Alaska Governor, Kaylene Johnson describes Palin's biography in *Sarah* as "a political Cinderella tale in which a small-town mayor and hockey mom follows her hopes and dreams in the face of a disapproving political establishment to become the belle of the inaugural ball." She further reinforces Palin's outsider/hockey mom/small town identity, saying her story is "a version of David and Goliath... a refreshingly modern can-do story about a down-to-earth woman with energy and idealism—a homemaker and mother of five—who is determined to make a difference. And she does" (Johnson 13).

Born in 1964, "Sarah Barracuda" – her high school basketball nickname – graduated from Wasilla High School in 1982. Two years later Palin won the Miss Wasilla beauty pageant and finished second in the Miss Alaska pageant where she was voted Miss Congeniality.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps more than anything else from her past, her participation in beauty pageants was used as evidence that Palin was unqualified to be vice-president. The media latched onto the identity on the day of her nomination. For example, the Huffington Post headline read "Sarah Palin: Former Beauty Queen, Future VP?" ("Sarah Palin: Former Beauty Queen, Future VP," 2008). The article, rather than focus on Palin's political background focused on her more "feminine" qualities. The article begins with the

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<sup>1</sup> Maryline Blackburn, the woman who beat Palin for the 1984 Miss Alaska title actually performed at two inaugural balls for Barack Obama.

following: “SEE SARAH PALIN SWIMSUIT COMPETITION VIDEO.” The article’s quick biographical snapshot does not mention anything political, rather it lets readers know all about Palin’s diet and fitness routine, and provides a link to photos of Palin in *Vogue* magazine (but not the article, which does provide a well written biography), and ends with a link to information about Palin’s family life. *Newsweek*’s biography of Palin released on the day of her nomination also began “From beauty queen to vice-presidential candidate” (Henig 2008). Senior *Newsweek* editor Jonathan Alter described Palin in an article also released on nomination day thusly, “America loves a fresh face, especially one that’s a cross between a Fox anchor and a character on ‘Northern Exposure’” (Alter 2008).

The media’s focus on her pageant background framed the way that many initially viewed Palin. She was seen not as a serious political candidate, but as a beauty queen modeling for office. *Newsweek* and others focused a lot of attention on Palin’s style and sexuality, noting:

Palin was as much 2008’s stylistic wild card as its political one. For every man who loved her coquettish sexuality (red peep-toe pumps, clingy pencil skirts), there was a female critic slamming her clothes as blandly middlebrow and gal-next-door generic. Palin’s half-up mop and rimless glasses meant to evoke harried hockey mom, but ended up (when coupled with that wink) exuding a secretary-in-a-porno air. When Palin plays out her next tour on the national stage—and there will inevitably be one—she should ditch the suburban vibe and go high-powered seductress: Versace suits, Louboutin heels. The voters will forget how much she’s spending on the threads because she’ll look so damn good (Baker 2008).

*LA Times* blogger Andrew Malcolm disagreed with *Newsweek* and actually suggested that Palin should tone down her sex appeal if she plans to run in 2012: “the 45-year-old governor needs to whack off that hair, pork up a bit and get some cheap, baggy pantsuits over at the Wasilla Wal-Mart. And instead of that come-on wink that many thought they liked, she’d do well to develop an uncontrollable facial twitch” (Malcolm 2009). Malcolm’s half-serious comments were based on a study by a pair of University of South Florida psychologists that found that the more attention people paid to a woman’s appearance, the less competent they judged her to be. Surprisingly gender of the

participants did not play much of a role in the study, with both men and women arriving at similar conclusions (Heflick and Goldenberg, 598-601).

Aside from being held to a different standard than her male counterparts, at times her style and appearance worked against her own identity constructions. For example when it was revealed after the campaign that the RNC had spent nearly \$150 thousand dollars on clothes for Palin she was lambasted: 1) because this was seen as contrary to her small town paycheck-to-paycheck image that she had been touting, and 2) it also insinuated that as a woman candidate she was more interested in style than political substance. Interestingly, Fey was lauded for her resemblance to Palin, and the attention she paid to Palin's clothing and style were as celebrated as any other aspect of her impersonation save for the accent.

Aided by the scholarship money she won from the Miss Alaska pageant, Palin graduated from the University of Idaho in 1987 with a degree in Journalism. In 1992 she entered public life when she served two terms on the Wasilla City Council. During her campaign she and her husband Todd "went door to door pulling a wagon with their son Track, 4, and 2-year-old daughter, Bristol." The article goes on to argue that Palin "doesn't have to pretend to understand the sensibilities of the average citizen, because she's been there; she and her family have experienced the same struggles to get by" (Johnson 'Commentary: America, meet Sarah Palin').

Behind an emerging image as a reformer and politician of the people, in 1996 Palin ran for and was elected mayor of Wasilla, a post she held until 2002 when term restrictions forced her to leave office. A town of only about six thousand, Wasilla hardly seems like the ideal stepping stone. Yet as mayor Palin "was seen as a golden girl of the Republican Party, a hardworking, pro-business politician whose friendly demeanor (that Palin smile!) made her palatable to the typical pickup-driving Alaskan man" (Rebecca Johnson 2008). In 2002 her growing popularity landed her a position as chairwoman of the Alaska Oil and Gas Conservation Commission, a post that cemented her reputation as a reformer willing to stand up to the ethically challenged Alaska Republicans and oil

companies. When her complaints about what she saw as unethical behavior were ignored she resigned in protest.

Without a job and with her party battling for its political life Palin decided to run for Governor. As *Anchorage Daily News* reporter Tom Kizzia notes, “It would have been an ideal time for the Democrats to come back to power...but then Palin came along as a Republican outsider. Her positions may not have been as thought out as some of the other candidates, but she had this small-town sincerity that voters found very appealing.” Kizzia went on to further elucidate Palin’s image and appeal at the time: “She’s the kind of person who can sit and talk with you at her son’s hockey game.” Embracing her Alaskan roots and lifestyle, Kizzia remembers when Palin responded to a question about her favorite meal: “Moose stew...after a day of snow-machining” (R. Johnson). In 2006, riding a wave of unhappiness with Alaskan politicians exemplified by Sen. Ted Stevens’s legal battles and accusations of fraud and corruption, Palin’s squeaky clean “moose stew” image helped her upset her way to become Governor of Alaska, the first woman and youngest person to hold the office.

In two years as governor Palin worked to reform and clean up Alaskan politics. To help curb corruption within the oil and energy sectors she enacted legislation mandating a one-year waiting period for politicians between leaving office and working for the energy industry. Palin also embraced her wagon-toting past and put her predecessor’s Westwind jet up for sale on eBay. She did create a little controversy when she dismissed Alaska Public Safety Commissioner Walt Monegan. Palin claimed it was due to performance related issues, but Monegan argued that it was tied to his reluctance to fire Alaska State Trooper Mike Wooten, who is Palin’s ex-brother-in-law and at the time was involved in a custody battle with Palin’s sister (Cockerham 2008). Despite Troopergate, as the incident would be known, her work as governor and her soaring popularity in Alaska built her a small national following dubbed the Palinistas. In the *Vogue* article that caused more of a stir for its photos than its content, Palin’s future was debated thusly: “there’s a small but vocal cabal [the

Palinistas] who like to mention her as a national star, maybe even a Republican vice-presidential candidate. That seems unlikely” (K. Johnson).

### **From Convention to Couric**

On September 3, 2008, however unlikely it may have appeared earlier in the year Palin accepted the GOP nomination for vice president during the Republican National Convention. Impressing pundits and invigorating the Republican base with her speech, Palin used the opportunity to help shape her identity on the national stage. Her lack of national notoriety actually provided her, and the RNC, with an opportunity to craft a public identity, present her story and shape perception in ways that most political candidates can only dream. She used the speech to show off her energy and charisma, while stressing her small town roots and deep respect for the fabric of small town America, describing herself as a typical hockey mom. She went on to laud fellow small-towners:

They are the ones who do some of the hardest work in America...who grow our food, run our factories, and fight our wars. They love their country, in good times and bad, and they're always proud of America. I had the privilege of living most of my life in a small town. I was just your average hockey mom, and signed up for the PTA because I wanted to make my kids' public education better. When I ran for city council, I didn't need focus groups and voter profiles because I knew those voters, and knew their families, too (Palin 2008).

Palin tried to convince Americans she was a hard working, no-frills, family woman that like all good Americans puts her family and country first. She joked about her tough reformer image, “You know what they say the difference is between a hockey mom and a pit bull? Lipstick!” (Parker 2008). Not surprisingly she also used the opportunity to criticize Barack Obama, who had recently had a political flap where he stated that Americans cling to guns and religion. Not only did she repeat the quote, in fact, she tried to embody the very people Obama seemed to be denouncing. Politically she framed herself as a reformer and Washington outsider, yet those qualities took a back seat to (and Palin would seemingly argue are really just a result of) her small town personal values and beliefs.

After the convention, despite lingering questions about her abuse of power in the Troopergate scandal and the media blitz surrounding her 17 year old daughter's pregnancy, a CBS News/*New*

*York Times* poll found that a majority of previously uncommitted voters were choosing McCain/Palin, with Palin herself being especially well received. McCain closed the enthusiasm gap, which measures how enthusiastic supporters are about their candidate, and most of that credit was given to Palin, who “appears to be the breakout candidate of the conventions. 48% of voters who watched her speech say it made them feel better about her – a higher number than said that about either the McCain or Obama speeches” (CBS News Poll 2008). While she had more unknowns heading into her speech that probably pushed her number higher, it is difficult to discount her popularity immediately after the convention, she certainly appeared to be “the belle of the ball.”

Eight days after the convention Palin made her network news debut in a September 11<sup>th</sup> interview with ABC News’s Charles Gibson. The interview was Palin’s first major introduction to a national audience apart from her convention speech. Focusing mainly on her foreign policy experience, the interview sparked the first Palin parody on *SNL*, mocking both her interview and her “hockey mom” identity she worked so hard to construct at the convention. *The New York Times* described the interview thusly: “At times visibly nervous, at others appearing to hew so closely to prepared answers that she used the exact same phrases repeatedly, Ms. Palin most visibly stumbled when she was asked by Mr. Gibson if she agreed with the Bush doctrine. Ms. Palin did not seem to know what he was talking about” (Rutenberg 2008). Yet it was not her failure to understand the basic guiding principle of the last eight years of United States foreign policy that left the greatest impression. Instead, Palin claimed foreign policy experience due to Alaska’s proximity to Russia, which became the hallmark of the interview. While the argument was unconvincing, it should not have been as politically damaging to Palin’s candidacy as her inability to define the Bush Doctrine. Yet that’s what happened. Why? Because of Tina Fey.

*SNL*’s season debut on September 13<sup>th</sup> opened with a message from Sarah Palin (Fey) and Hillary Clinton (Amy Poehler). The parody ignited the show and sparked one of the campaign’s most identifiable images, Fey chirping – “I can see Russia from my house!” The line turned into the first

Fey as Palin catch phrase and began reshaping her political identity (*SNL* 'A Non-Partisan Message from Sarah Palin & Hillary Clinton' 2008). The video became a viral hit quickly spreading across the internet. In the actual exchange Palin is attempting to demonstrate her foreign policy experience due to the work that she has done with neighboring Russia:

**GIBSON:** What insight into Russian actions, particularly in the last couple of weeks, does the proximity of the state give you?

**PALIN:** They're our next door neighbors and you can actually see Russia from land here in Alaska, from an island in Alaska. (*ABC News* 'Charlie Gibson Interview' 2008).

Fey and *SNL*, by using that lone phrase to sum up Palin's foreign policy credentials, painted her as someone with little experience and foreign relations expertise. Palin spoke at length about Russia's invasion of Georgia, and how the United States must maintain a working relationship with the Russians while at the same time noting: "we've got to keep an eye on Russia. For Russia to have exerted such pressure in terms of invading a smaller democratic country, unprovoked is unacceptable and we have to keep...we have got to keep our eyes on Russia" ('Charlie Gibson Interview'). The significant impression that remained with the American people from that interview, however, is the misattribution of the phrase "I can see Russia from my house!" to Palin.

Tina Fey's impression instantly became the political buzz. In less than two weeks Palin had gone from the small town, down-to-Earth rejuvenator of the Republican Party to the butt of the joke. More so than just being made fun of though, Fey was able to rewrite the book about Palin. As Chris Stigall argues, "Everyone knows the old axiom about comedy. There's always a grain of truth in that which an audience finds funny. Done well, comedy can make you squirm with its raw honesty. It has the power to inform our perspectives about politics and news just as any good journalist. Comedy helps provide insight into human flaws just as any good psychologist" (Stigall 2009). While *SNL* benefited from a boost to its lagging numbers it did more than just attract viewers, it helped shape their notions about Palin. As Stigall notes, "Comedic lines meant to underscore Fey and company's narrative of the Governor as an intellectual lightweight rapidly became truth to many voters...Sarah

Palin's occasional missteps were artfully employed by a comedian to deliver a big sucker punch in a close election. The dead-ringer impression became a bigger story than the candidate herself. While she never actually claimed a view of Russia from her house, millions of SNL viewers still credit the famous line to Palin anyway" (Stigall).

The phrase became so popular, and associated with Palin, that it was named by *Time* as the number one "Top 10 T-shirt Worthy Slogans" of 2008 (Altman 2008), and topped the "Most Notable Quotations of 2008" as selected by the *Yale Book of Quotations* editor Fred Shapiro (Luning 2008). In less than two weeks Palin's image and identity began to take a hit, fueled in part by Fey's impersonation. A September 5<sup>th</sup> Rasmussen poll (released two days after her convention speech) earned Palin her highest favorability ratings with 58% of those polled viewing her favorably. As the poll notes, "perhaps most stunning is the fact that Palin's favorable ratings are now a point higher than either man at the top of the Presidential tickets this year" (*Rasmussen Reports* 'Palin Power' 2008). After "I can see Russia from my house!" Palin's numbers began to slip, yet she was still seen by a majority as a good VP pick and capable of leading the country. Every political figure is seemingly skewered by *SNL*, yet Fey as Palin was only beginning to pick up steam.

### **The Tina Fey Effect**

Fey's impersonation of Palin was so spot on that it was hard to tell the two apart, leading to what has been dubbed The Tina Fey Effect, where Fey's impersonation results in dropping poll numbers for Palin. Fey's impact has been widely debated, sparking some to say that "Three weeks from now, Sarah Palin may be the Vice-President elect of the United States of America. But today, few people would call her the most powerful woman in American politics. Arguably, that honour doesn't go to former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton or House Speaker Nancy Pelosi either. Today, the most influential woman in America is probably Tina Fey – a television comedienne" (Midgley 2008). Palin's interview with Katie Couric proved to be a turning point for Palin and the

national perception of her. I will be looking at three specific exchanges during the Couric interview – her comments about Russia, her reaction to the proposed \$700 billion dollar bailout, and her inability to provide concrete examples to support one of her arguments - that were then parodied by *SNL* in order to show the ways that the “real” Sarah Palin was constructed.

Palin’s comments during the Couric interview about Russia in and of themselves don’t merit much study. What is of interest is the fact that Couric chose to bring them up because they were still a large topic of conversation two weeks after the initial Gibson interview. Two weeks is an eternity in political time, so the fact that Palin was still fielding Russia questions is a little unusual. This can be partially attributed to Fey’s “I can see Russia from my house!” comment. Let us first take a look at a foreign policy excerpt from the Couric interview, starting with Palin’s attempts to reassert her small town-outsider roots, embracing a blue collar upbringing that didn’t allow her to get a passport:

**Couric:** In preparing for this conversation, a lot of our viewers ... and Internet users wanted to know why you did not get a passport until last year. And they wondered if that indicated a lack of interest and curiosity in the world.

**Palin:** I’m not one of those who maybe came from a background of, you know, kids who perhaps graduate college and their parents give them a passport and give them a backpack and say go off and travel the world. No, I’ve worked all my life. In fact, I usually had two jobs all my life until I had kids. I was not a part of, I guess, that culture. The way that I have understood the world is through education, through books, through mediums that have provided me a lot of perspective on the world.

Again, Palin is trying to turn a perceived weakness – lack of foreign travel – into identity strength; she is the outsider who had to work for everything she ever got. It’s arguably one of her strongest moments of the interview. She is attempting to craft the persona of someone that would love to backpack through Europe like rich kids (read Barack Obama and Washington elite) but unfortunately she has real world responsibilities, just like real Americans. She’s not a part of “that culture,” rather she is a part of the real America, the one that goes to work everyday and struggles to pay the bills.

After allowing Palin a chance to again rewrite her biography as a hard-scrabble maverick from a small town, Couric then turned the interview to Russia.

**Katie Couric:** You've cited Alaska's proximity to Russia as part of your foreign policy experience. What did you mean by that?

**Sarah Palin:** That Alaska has a very narrow maritime border between a foreign country, Russia, and, on our other side, the land-boundary that we have with Canada. It's funny that a comment like that was kinda made to ... I don't know, you know ... reporters.

**Couric:** Mocked?

**Palin:** Yeah, mocked, I guess that's the word, yeah.

**Couric:** Well, explain to me why that enhances your foreign-policy credentials.

**Palin:** Well, it certainly does, because our, our next-door neighbors are foreign countries, there in the state that I am the executive of. And there...

**Couric:** Have you ever been involved in any negotiations, for example, with the Russians?

**Palin:** We have trade missions back and forth, we do. It's very important when you consider even national security issues with Russia. As Putin rears his head and comes into the air space of the United States of America, where do they go? It's Alaska. It's just right over the border. It is from Alaska that we send those out to make sure that an eye is being kept on this very powerful nation, Russia, because they are right there, they are right next to our state (CBS News 2008).

What is interesting is that Palin actually acknowledges Fey's impersonation and parody, even if she does so in a round about way. She's trying to show how the "gotcha media" is targeting her because she is a real blue collar small town American. Yet the persona doesn't quite work in the interview, and she again stumbles through her answer. Her argument's reliance on portraying the media as attacking her because she is a working class outsider was not substantiated.

Let's now take a look at *SNL*'s take on the interview, specifically Russia.

**Couric/Poehler:** On foreign policy, I want to give you... one more chance... to explain your claim that you have foreign policy experience, based on Alaska's proximity to Russia. What did you mean by that?

**Palin/Fey:** Well, Alaska and Russia are only separated by a *narrow* maritime border. [she holds up her hands] You've got Alaska here, and this right here is water, and, then, that up there is Russia. So we keep an eye on them.

**Couric/Poehler:** And how do you *do* that, exactly?

**Palin/Fey:** Every morning, when Alaskans wake up, one of the first things they do is look outside and see if there are any Russians hanging around. If there are, you gotta go up to them and ask, 'What are ya' doing here?' And if they give you a good reason -- they can't -- then, it's our responsibility to say, you know, 'Shoo! Get back over there!' (*SNL* 'CBS Evening News' 2008).

What *SNL* does so well is expose the subtext of actual events. Poehler's line "I want to give you... one more chance..." exposes Couric's attempt to let Palin clear the air about a potentially damning statement. Yet in the actual interview Palin did not take advantage of this opportunity, rather decided

to spin it the other way and act as though Couric was trying to embarrass her again. In the Gibson interview, he was careful not to press Palin too hard on any issue for fear of being perceived as sexist or biased against a female candidate. As a woman Couric had more leeway in pressing Palin (though some would argue that Couric was a gender traitor), yet she gives Palin several opportunities to clear the air, opportunities that Palin and her supporters would describe as “gotcha journalism.” In the CBS interview Couric gave Palin three chances to specify why Alaska’s proximity to Russia was a vital part of her experience, yet Palin couldn’t muster a clear and cogent response. Fey chose to, in Couric’s words, “mock” Palin’s evasive answer, although she actually in satire gives a more concise answer than the actual Palin.

Fey’s succinct answer actually helps to explain why so many people attributed Fey’s words to Palin: they were catchier. George W. Bush made the bumper-sticker catchphrase effective politics for eight years (“Axis of Evil,” “You’re with us or against us,” “The evildoers”), and Fey simply followed his lead. “I can see Russia from my house!” is so concise it effectively sums up Palin’s much longer and tortuous answer in a better sound bite. The quote is close enough to Palin’s actual words that it isn’t a stretch to assume she said it. In fact, Palin’s moose hunting, hockey-mom boasting makes the statement all the more believable. Palin’s attempt to create an outsider small town identity actually increased the effectiveness of Fey’s deconstruction of that identity.

The next portion of the interview I’d like to focus on is Palin’s response to Couric’s question about the proposed \$700 billion dollar federal bailout. First, let’s look at Palin’s response in the CBS interview:

**Palin:** That’s why I say, I like every American I’m speaking with, we’re ill about this position...that we have been put in where it is the taxpayers looking to bail out – but ultimately what the bailout does is help those who are concerned about the healthcare reform that is needed to help shore up our economy – um helping the oh – it’s got to be all about job creation too, shoring up our economy and putting it back on the right track. So healthcare reform, and reducing taxes and reigning in spending has got to accompany tax reductions and tax relief for Americans. And trade, we’ve got to see trade as opportunity not as a competitive scary thing. But one in five jobs being created in the trade sector today. We’ve

got to look at that as more opportunity. All those things under the umbrella of job creation. This bailout is a part of that (*CBS Evening News*).

And now *SNL*'s version of the interview:

**Palin/Fey:** Like every American I'm speaking with, we are ill about this! We're saying, "Hey! Why bail out Fannie and Freddie, and not *me*?" But ultimately, what the bailout does is help those that are concerned about the health care reform that is needed to help shore up our economy. To help, um – it's gotta be about job creation, too. Also, about shoring up our economy, and putting Fannie and Freddie back on the right track. And, so, health care reform and reducing taxes and reining in spending, 'cause, Barack Obama, you know? You know, we've got to accompany tax reduction, and tax relief for Americans. Also, having a dollar value meal at restaurants – that's gonna help. But, one in five jobs being created today, under the umbrella of job creation. That, you know, *also...* (*SNL 'CBS Evening News' 2008*).

What makes this section so fascinating is that the segment on *SNL* is eerily similar to what Palin actually said. Amazingly, seventy-one out of one-hundred and fifty-three words are identical. When you look at Fey's speech in context, aside from the dollar-value-meal comment, nearly the entire speech is identical. Huge sections of Palin's speech were simply repeated verbatim by Fey. For instance "But ultimately, what the bailout does is help those that are concerned about the health care reform that is needed to help shore up our economy. To help, um – it's gotta be about job creation, too. Also, about shoring up our economy." Good satire always has an element of truth, but simply repeating what someone says to point out the absurdity of it is nearly unheard of. Yet the sketch was wildly popular. Perhaps more so than anything else, this segment helped Fey undercut Palin's identity constructions.

Even more importantly it ties her impersonation of Palin to the real Palin, thus making her simulation the reality, or hyperreal. The hyperreal, or reality by proxy, helps explain why Fey's impersonation was so damaging to Palin. Fey's Palin becomes real, according to Baudrillard, because audiences' consciousness cannot distinguish reality from fantasy. Here we can see Baudrillard's idea of the third order of reality where the simulacrum overtakes the original and the distinction between reality and representation breaks down leaving the simulacrum as the real (Hegarty 2004). We see Fey and associate her with Palin, much like we see the completely fabricated

world of Disneyland as real. In fact Baudrillard and Umberto Eco would argue that we see Disneyland as more real than the world around us, with the full sized houses and perfectly manicured streets that “can give us more reality than nature can” (Eco 1986, 44). Baudrillard and Eco both use Disneyland as the epitome of hyperreality. They argue that the “fake nature” of Disneyland satisfies our real life fantasies, therefore they seem more attractive and real. Much like Fey’s impersonation satisfies our perceptions of Palin. Baudrillard argues that the “imaginary world” of Disneyland has been presented as imaginary to make people believe that all its surroundings are “real,” thus making it hyperreal. *SNL* creates a similar simulated reality, mimicking the exact set, costumes and feeling of the Couric interview. We know that it is simulated, yet the hyperreality convinces us that it is actually more accurate than the original. Simply put, “It is the simulation that is effective, never the real” (Baudrillard 56).

With this in mind, let’s take a look at the end of each interview, where Palin struggles providing examples of McCain calling for increased federal regulation. First, CBS:

**Couric:** But he’s been in Congress for 26 years. He’s been chairman of the powerful Commerce Committee. And he has almost always sided with less regulation, not more.

**Palin:** He’s also known as the maverick though, taking shots from his own party, and certainly taking shots from the other party. Trying to get people to understand what he’s been talking about - the need to reform government.

**Couric:** But can you give me any other concrete examples? Because I know you’ve said Barack Obama is a lot of talk and no action. Can you give me any other examples in his 26 years of John McCain truly taking a stand on this?

**Palin:** I can give you examples of things that John McCain has done, that has shown his foresight, his pragmatism, and his leadership abilities. And that is what America needs today.

**Couric:** I’m just going to ask you one more time - not to belabor the point. Specific examples in his 26 years of pushing for more regulation.

**Palin:** I’ll try to find you some and I’ll bring them to you (*CBS Evening News* ‘One on One’ 2008).

Fey had so completely overtaken Palin’s identity that it isn’t a stretch of the imagination to think that the above exchange is actually the *SNL* sketch and not the CBS interview. Even knowing that the above is the actual interview, one can see Fey simply repeating Palin’s answers in a sketch. Aside from being politically devastating, again, it reinforces the idea that Fey’s Palin is viewed by many as

authentic, if not more so, than Palin's Palin. Fey is seen as more accurately articulating the "real" Sarah Palin.

And now the actual *SNL* version of the interview.

**Couric/Poehler:** [shaking her head] What lessons have you learned from Iraq, and how, specifically, would you spread democracy abroad?

**Palin/Fey:** Specifically, we would make every effort possible to spread democracy abroad to those who want it!

**Couric/Poehler:** Yes, but, *specifically*, what would you do?

**Palin/Fey:** We're gonna promote freedom, usher in democratic values and ideals, and fight terror-loving terrorists.

**Couric/Poehler:** But, again -- and, not to belabor the point -- one specific thing?

**Palin/Fey:** [after an extended silence] Katie, I'd like to use one of my lifelines.

**Couric/Poehler:** I'm sorry?

**Palin/Fey:** I want to phone a friend!

**Couric/Poehler:** You don't have any lifelines.

**Palin/Fey:** Well, in that case, I'm just gonna have to get back to ya'!

**Couric/Poehler:** Forgive me, Mrs. Palin, but it seems to me that, when cornered, you become increasingly adorable. Is that fair to say?

**Palin/Fey:** [in a cutesy-pie manner] I don't know, is it? [she fires her fingers like pistols] (*SNL* 'CBS Evening News' 2008).

While this section stretches the truth further than any of the others, it is still highly effective. The phone a friend line is simply exposing the subtext of the original interview and isn't much of a leap for anyone that watched Palin squirming in her chair. While she of course didn't say that, it was attributed to her because Fey's Palin was seen as more authentic. We assumed after the *SNL* sketch that Palin *was* thinking that she'd like to phone a friend. Not to belabor the point, but what leaps out from the Couric interview is the similarities between Palin and Fey, and the way that Fey's repetition of Palin's lines and exposure of the subtext of Palin's interview usurped Palin's control over her identity. Fey was telling us the truth (or what was perceived to be the truth), and therefore became the authentic and "real" Palin.

After splashing onto the scene, Palin's numbers began to dip following the Couric interview and subsequent *SNL* parody. For the first time since the convention more people felt that she lacked the leadership qualities to be president. While Palin's own performance in the interview certainly cannot be overlooked, Fey's spoof amplified the public's negative perception of Palin. Nearly a third

of independent voters said that the Tina Fey Effect was hurting Palin and their impression of her. This can be attributed to Fey simply repeating Palin's words. As conservative commentators Kathleen Parker, Rod Dreher and others pointed out, Palin was Palin's biggest problem (Parker 2008; Tapper 2008). Fey simply highlighted this fact during a few sketches and instantly crippled Palin's campaign.

While Fey's impersonation was amplifying Palin's "moose-hunting, hockey mom" image at the expense of Palin's political credibility, the "real" Palin was working hard to do damage control (Orr 2008). She began making the rounds on conservative talk shows and radio shows to help repair her small town America image. In an interview with conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt, Palin responded to the ire her campaign has received: "Oh, I think they're just not used to someone coming in from the outside saying you know what? It's time that normal Joe six-pack American is finally represented in the position of vice presidency, and I think that that's kind of taken some people off guard, and they're out of sorts, and they're ticked off about it" (Hewitt 2008). Palin went on to stress her working class roots, being more overt about her identity, and ultimately working against herself. The small town outsider boasting in the interview sounds more like Fey's Palin than the Palin from the convention, further proof that Fey had usurped Palin's authenticity.

Most *SNL* parodies stretch the truth to an absurd level in order to achieve a satirical point. Yet with Palin, Fey was almost simply repeating what Palin had said, and the results were devastating with each Fey as Palin sketch being the rough equivalent of an effective attack ad on poll numbers. Yet I would argue that more damaging than a two or three percent drop in the polls was Palin's loss of control over her message and identity. After the Couric interview and subsequent spoof, Fey became the authority on all things Palin. Whatever Fey said was the truth, with Palin simply reinforcing Fey's version of reality. As Jimmy Orr notes, "When you consider that the rise and fall of Sarah Palin has occurred in just one month, you see the impact of this incredibly short news cycle. With all the news reports, analyses, talk radio, TV punditry, late-night jokes, skits, You-

Tube remixes — it feels like we've known Sarah for months if not years" (Orr). Palin's rise and fall shows us the power of identity and perception, and Fey's work to usurp Palin's authenticity shows the power of satire in presidential politics.

Palin's fall is not solely due to *SNL*, yet it is hard to ignore Fey's impersonation of Palin. The Tina Fey Effect impacted the polls, but not because Fey satirized Palin on *SNL*. Numerous presidents and politicians have endured *SNL*'s satirical jibes. Reagan was a favorite target of the program and there is wide spread support to put him on Mt. Rushmore. What ultimately doomed Sarah Palin was Tina Fey's ability to usurp Palin's authenticity. Fey became the true voice of Palin, telling us what Palin was really thinking and feeling. By taking over control of Palin's identity, Fey doomed Palin's campaign. In the end the simulacrum was true.

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