

Rebooting Roseanne: Feminist Voice across Decades

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In recent years, the US television landscape has been flooded with reboots, remakes, and revivals of “classic” nineties television series, such as *Full/er House* (1987-1995, 2016-present), *Will & Grace* (1998-2006, 2017-present), *Roseanne* (1988-1997, 2018), and *Charmed* (1998-2006, 2018-present). The term “reboot” is often used as a catchall for different kinds of revivals and remakes. “Remakes” are derivations or reimaginings of known properties with new characters, cast, and stories (Loock; Lavigne). “Revivals” bring back an existing property in the form of a continuation with the same cast and/or setting. “Revivals” and “remakes” both seek to capitalise on nostalgia for a specific notion of the past and access the (presumed) existing audience of the earlier series (Mittell; Rebecca Williams; Johnson).

Reboots operate around two key pleasures. First, there is the pleasure of revisiting and/or reimagining characters that are “known” to audiences. Whether continuations or remakes, reboots are invested in the audience’s desire to see familiar characters. Second, there is the desire to “fix” and/or recuperate an earlier series. Some reboots, such as the *Charmed* remake attempt to recuperate the whiteness of the original series, whereas others such as *Gilmore Girls: A Life in the Year* (2017) set out to fix the ending of the original series by giving audiences a new “official” conclusion.

The *Roseanne* reboot is invested in both these pleasures. It reunites the original cast for a short-lived, but impactful nine-episode tenth season. There is pleasure in seeing Roseanne (Roseanne Barr), Dan (John Goodman), Jackie (Laurie Metcalf), Becky (Lecy Goranson [seasons one to six, ten], Sarah Chalke [seasons six to nine]), Darlene (Sara Gilbert), and DJ (Michael Fishman) back in the Conner house with the same well-worn couch and afghan. The (attempted) recuperation is of author-star Barr, whose recent politics are in stark contrast to the working-class second-wave feminist politics of her nineties’ persona. This article is particularly interested in the second pleasure, because both the original series and the reboot situate the voice of Barr as central to the series’ narrative and politics.

Despite achieving the highest ratings of any US sitcom in the past three years (O’Connell), on 29 May 2018, ABC announced that it was cancelling the *Roseanne* reboot. This decision came about in the wake of a racist tweet, where Barr compared a black woman (high-ranking Obama aide Valerie Jarrett) to an ape. Barr’s tweet and the cancellation of *Roseanne*, highlight the limits of nostalgia and *Roseanne*/Barr’s particular brand of white feminism. While whiteness and a lack of racial awareness are (and always have been) at the centre of Barr’s performance of feminism, the political landscape has shifted since the 1990s, with the rise of third and fourth-wave feminisms and intersectional activism. As such in the contemporary landscape, there is the expectation that white feminist figures take on and endorse anti-racist stances.

This article argues that the reboot’s attempt to capitalise on nineties nostalgia exposes the limits of *Roseanne*/Barr’s feminism, as well as the limits of nostalgia. The feminist legacy of nineties-era *Roseanne* cannot and does not recuperate Barr’s star-persona. Also, the reboot

and its subsequent cancellation highlight how the feminism of the series is embodied by Barr and her whiteness. This article will situate *Roseanne* and Barr within a feminist tradition on US television, before exploring how the reboot operates and circulates differently to the original series.

From *Roseanne* (1988-1997) to *Roseanne* (2018)

In its original form, *Roseanne* holds the distinction of being one of the most highly discussed and canonised feminist-leaning television series of all time, alongside *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *Cagney and Lacey* (1981-1988), and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2004). *Roseanne* also enabled and informed many popular feminist-leaning contemporary series, including *Girls* (2012-2017), *Mom* (2013-present), *Better Things* (2016-present), and *Dietland* (2018). Although it may seem anachronistic today, *Roseanne* and Barr helped define what it means to be a feminist and speak feminist politics on US television.

Roseanne depicts the lives of the Conner family, headed by parents Roseanne and Dan. They live in the fictional blue-collar town of Lanford, Illinois with their three children Becky, Darlene, and DJ. Both Roseanne and Dan experience precarious employment and embark on numerous (mostly failed) business ventures throughout the series' run. The reboot catches up with the Conner family in 2018, after Roseanne has experienced a health scare and single mom Darlene has moved into her parents' house with her two children Harris (Emma Kenney) and Mark (Ames McNamara). In the new season, Roseanne and Dan's children are experiencing similar working conditions to their parents in the 1990s. Becky works at a Mexican restaurant and is eager to act as surrogate mother to earn \$50,000, Darlene is recently unemployed and looking for work, and DJ has just returned from military service.

A stated objective of reviving *Roseanne* was to address the contentious US political landscape after the election of President Donald J. Trump (VanDerWerff). Barr is a vocal supporter of President Trump, as is her character in the reboot. The election plays a key role in the new season's premise. The first episode of season 10 establishes that the titular Roseanne has not spoken to her sister Jackie (who is a Hillary Clinton supporter) in over a year.

In both its nineties and 2018 incarnations, *Roseanne* makes apparent the extent to which feminist politics are indebted to and spoken through the author-star. The series is based on a character that Barr created and is grounded in her life experience. Barr and her character Roseanne are icons of nineties televisual feminism. While the other members of the Conner family are richly drawn and compelling, Roseanne is the centre of the series. It is her voice and perspective that drives the series and gives it its political resonance. Roseanne's power in the text is authorised by Barr's stardom. As Melissa Williams writes: "For nearly a decade, Barr was one of the most powerful women in Hollywood" (180).

In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, Roseanne (and Barr) represented a new kind of feminist voice on US television, which at that stage (and still today) was dominated by middle-class women. Unlike Mary Richards (Mary Tyler Moore), Claire Huxtable (Phylicia Rashad), or Murphy Brown (Candice Bergen), Roseanne did not have a stable job and her family's economic situation was often precarious. Roseanne/Barr adopted and used a feminism of

personality popularised on television by Mary Tyler Moore and Lucille Ball. Unlike her foremothers, though, Roseanne/Barr was not slender, feminine, or interested in being likeable to men. Roseanne did not choose to work outside of the home, which marked her as different from many of US television's other second-wave feminists and/or mothers. As Rachael Horowitz writes: "Roseanne's feminism was for women who have to work because bills must get paid, who assert their role as head of the house despite the degrading work they often do during the day to pay for their kids' food and clothes" (9).

According to Kathleen Rowe, Barr is part of a long line of "female grotesques" whose defining features are excess and looseness (2-3). Rowe links Barr's fatness or physical excess with her refusal to shut up and subversive speech. The feminism of Roseanne is contained within and expressed through Barr's unruly white body (and voice). Barr's unruliness and her unwillingness to follow the social conventions of politeness and decorum are tied to her (perceived) feminist politics.

Understandings of Barr's stardom, however, have shifted considerably in the years since the publication of Rowe's analysis. While Barr is still "unruly," her unruliness is no longer located in her body (which has been transformed to meet more conventional standards of western beauty), but rather in her Twitter presence, which is pro-Israel, pro-Trump, and anti-immigration. As Roxane Gay writes of the reboot: "Whatever charm and intelligence she [Barr] brought to the first nine seasons of her show, a show I very much loved, are absolutely absent in her current persona, particularly as it manifests on Twitter."

Feminist Voice and Stardom on US TV

Roseanne performs what Julie D'Acci calls "explicit general feminism," which is defined by "dialogue and scenes that straightforwardly addressed discrimination against women in both public and private spheres, stories structured around topical feminist causes, and the use of unequivocal feminist language and slogans" (147). However, the feminist politics of *Roseanne* and Barr are (and never were) straightforward or uncomplicated.

Studies of feminism on US television have primarily focused on comedies that feature female television stars who function as advocates for feminism and women's issues (Spigel; Rabinovitz; D'Acci). Much of the critical discussion of feminist voice in US female-led television identifies the feminist intervention as taking place at the level of performance (Dow; Spigel; Spangler). Comedic series such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998, 2018-present), and *Grace Under Fire* (1993-1998), and dramatic series', such as *Cagney and Lacey* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, privilege the articulation of feminist ideas through performance and character.

Roseanne is not a series that derives its comedy from a clash of different perspectives or a series where politics are debated and explored in a nuanced a complex way. *Roseanne* promotes a distinct singular perspective – that of Roseanne Barr. In seasons one to nine, the character Roseanne is rarely persuaded to think differently about an issue or situation or depicted as "wrong." The series centres Roseanne's pain and distress when Becky elopes with Mark (Glenn Quinn), or when Jackie is abused by her boyfriend Fisher (Matt Roth), or when Darlene accidentally gets pregnant. Although those storylines are about other characters, Roseanne's emotions are central. Roseanne/Barr's perspective (as fictional character and

media personality) informs the narrative, sensibility, and tone. *Roseanne* is not designed to contain multiple perspectives.

Roseanne is acutely aware of its place in the history of feminist voice and representations of women on US television. Television is central to the series' articulation of feminism and feminist voice. In season seven episode "All About Rosey," the series breaks the fourth wall (as it does many times throughout its run), taking the audience behind the scenes where some of US television's most well-known (and traditional) mothers are cleaning the Conner's kitchen. June Cleaver (Barbara Billingsley) from *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963), Joan Nash (Pat Crowley) from *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* (1965-1967), Ruth Martin (June Lockhart) from *Lassie* (1958-1964), Norma Arnold (Alley Mills) from *The Wonder Years* (1988-1993), and Louise Jefferson (Isabel Sanford) from *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985) at first sit in judgment of Barr and her character Roseanne, claiming she presents "wrong image" for a TV mother. However, Roseanne/Barr eventually wins over the TV mothers, declaring "the important thing is on my show, I'm the boss and father knows squat" (7.19). It is in contrast to more traditional television mothers that Roseanne/Barr's feminist voice comes into focus.

In the ninth and final season of *Roseanne*'s initial run, the series (arguably) becomes a parody of its former self. By this point in the series, "Barr was seen as the sole cause of the show's demise, as a woman who was 'imploding,' 'losing the plot,' or 'out of control'" (White 234). White argues that depicting the working-class Conners' social and economic ascension to upper-class diminishes the distinction between Barr and her character (243). White writes that in the series' finale, the "line between performer and character is irrevocably blurred; it is unclear whether the voice we are hearing is that of Roseanne Conner or Roseanne Barr" (244). This blurring between Roseanne and Barr becomes particularly contentious in season 10.

Rebooting *Roseanne*: Season 10

Season 10 redacts and erases most of the events of season nine, which itself was a fantasy, as revealed in the season nine finale. As such, the reboot is not a simple continuation, because in the season nine finale it is revealed that Dan suffered a fatal heart attack a year earlier. The final monologue (delivered in voice-over by Barr) "reveals" that Roseanne has been writing and editing her experiences into a digestible story. The "Conners winning the lottery" storyline that dominated season nine was imagined by Roseanne as an elaborate coping strategy after Dan's death. Yet in the season 10 reboot, Dan is revealed to be alive, as is Darlene and David's (Johnny Galecki) daughter Harris, who was born during the events of season nine.

The limits of Roseanne/Barr's feminism within the contemporary political landscape come into focus around issues of race. This is partly because the incident that incited ABC to cancel the reboot of *Roseanne* was racially motivated, and partly because Roseanne/Barr's feminism has always relied on whiteness. Between 1997 and 2018, Barr's unruliness has become less associated with empowering working-class women and more with railing against minorities and immigrants. In redacting and erasing the events of season nine, the reboot attempts to step back the conflation between Roseanne and Barr with little success.

In the first episode of season 10, "Twenty Years to Life", Roseanne is positioned as the loud-mouthed victim of circumstance and systemic inequality – similar to her nineties-persona.

Yet in 2018, Roseanne mocks same things that nineties' Roseanne took seriously, including collective action, community building, and labour conditions. Roseanne claims: "It is not my fault that I just happen to be a charismatic person that's right about everything" (10.01). Here, the series attempts to make light of a now-outdated understanding of Barr's persona, but it comes off as tone-deaf and lacking self-awareness.

Roseanne has bigoted tendencies in both the 1990s and in 2018, but the political resonance of those tendencies and their relationships to feminisms and nostalgia differs greatly from the original series to the reboot. This is best illustrated by comparing season seven episode "White Men Can't Kiss" and season 10 episode "Go Cubs." In the former, Roseanne is appalled that she may have raised a racist son and insists DJ must kiss his black classmate Geena (Rae'Ven Larrymore Kelly) in the school play. Towards the end of this episode, Geena's father comes by the restaurant where Roseanne and Jackie are closing up. When the tall black man knocks on the locked door, Roseanne refuses to let him inside. She appears visibly afraid. Once Roseanne knows he is Geena's father, she lets him in and he confronts her about her racist attitude. Roseanne (and the audience) is forced to sit in the discomfort of having her bigotry exposed. While there are no material consequences for Roseanne or DJ's racism, within the context of the less intersectional 1990s, this interaction does not call into question Roseanne or Barr's feminist credentials.

In season 10, *Roseanne* tackles similar issues around race, ignorance, and bigotry, but it plays out very differently. In the reboot's seventh episode, Roseanne suspects her Muslim refugee neighbours Fatima (Anne Bedian) and Samir (Alain Washnevky) are terrorists. Although Roseanne is proven wrong, she is not forced to reckon with her bigotry. Instead, she is positioned as a "hero" later in the episode, when she berates a supermarket cashier for her racist treatment of Fatima. Given what audiences know about Barr's off-screen politics, this does not counteract the impression of racism, but compounds it. It also highlights the whiteness of the politics embodied by Roseanne/Barr both on-screen and off. Although these are two very different racial configurations (anti-blackness and Islamophobia), these episodes underline the shifting reception and resonance of the feminism Roseanne/Barr embodies.

Conclusion

In June 2018, shortly after the cancellation of the *Roseanne* reboot, ABC announced that it was developing a spin-off without Barr called *The Conners* (2018-present). In the spin-off Roseanne is dead and her family is dealing with life after Roseanne/*Roseanne* (Crucchiola). Here, Roseanne suffers the same fate as Dan in season nine (she dies off-screen), but now it is Barr who is fictionally buried. While *The Conners* attempts to rewrite the story of the Conner family by rejecting Barr's racist views and removing her financial and creative stake in their stories, Barr cannot be erased or redacted from *Roseanne* or the story of the Conner family, because it is *her story*.

The reboot and its cancellation illuminate how Barr and *Roseanne*'s feminist voice has not evolved past its white second-wave roots. The feminism of *Roseanne* is embodied by Barr in all her unruliness and whiteness. Roseanne/Barr/*Roseanne* has not taken on the third and fourth-wave critiques of second-wave feminisms, which emphasise the limits of white feminisms. The failure of the *Roseanne* reboot reveals that the pleasure and nostalgia of seeing the Conner family back together is not enough. Ultimately, *Roseanne* is without

intersectionality, and thus cannot (and should not) be recognised as feminist in the contemporary political landscape.

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