Philosophical Feminism and Popular Culture

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Chapter 1

The Seriously Erotic Politics of Laughter: Bitches, Whores and Other Fumerists

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Our Introduction and Warm Up Act: Humor as a Neglected but Critical Force in Feminism and its Corrective Role Against the Constant Temptation of the Moralizing Self-Righteous Impulse*

Do you know the joke about the man who couldn't find the humor section in the feminist bookstore? Probably. Because feminists don't have a sense of humor, do they? Despite Wanda Sykes, Roseanne Barr, Margaret Cho, Tina Fey, the Guerrilla Girls, Ellen DeGeneres, Sarah Silverman, and Monique, the first thought any of us might have if asked about feminism and humor could easily be a perplexed, "what?" This common failure to recognize the importance of humor for feminism might be expected given that all too often feminists themselves have been treated as a joke while humor has seemed to belong to a more exclusively male terrain.[1] Scholars have indeed noted the erasure or supposed "lack" of feminist humor.[2] Cultural critic Susan Douglas, for example, has illuminated the ways in which the news media has transformed feminism into a dirty word through its depiction of the typical feminist as a woman with "... the complete inability to smile—let alone laugh."[3] And certainly, coming of age with or soon after the second wave of feminism, it is hard for us not to be well versed in the sad facts about hostile workplace climates, statistics on violence against women, the need for equality in a workplace for women who are primary caregivers—facts that do not have the effect they might have on some of us self-declared

rational creatures. Of course, we must also wonder, if rational arguments for equality worked, that fortress of reason called philosophy would not rank near the bottom of the humanities in measures of academic workplace equality.[4] And if reason as a persuasive tool is at best only indirectly effective, and a weak tool on its own, might not the sting of ridicule or the contagion of joyous laughter prove to be more effective weapons for social change? Or, to turn the question around, what devices are more explosive in the social sphere, more discomforting to our conventional modes of thought, more invasive of our quasi-private store of associations, than the well-placed joke, the display of wit, or the well-honed use of irony!

In fact, poststructuralist perspectives on power and knowledge influenced by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Judith Butler among others should give us plenty of reason to suspect that various forms of humor or irony might be a more appropriate means of philosophical suasion than fact or argument alone. Recall that Foucault turns Platonism topsy turvy, and posits that the soul is the prisonhouse of the body, instead of the other way around.[5] In other words, reason itself might be as much the problem as the solution. Where is there reasoning that is not trained by a culture that imposes its own set of norms? Given that social norms shape cognitive habits, the unraveling and disrupting of conventional norms through ridicule might free our thinking as well. In Parts One and Two of this essay we aim to spotlight the subversive force of feminist humor on knowledge and power at two key nodes: motherhood and sexuality. The erotic force of feminist humor not only messes with oppressive networks of power. This force eroticizes feminist power by intensifying and augmenting its sources of pleasure. Part Three offers some key philosophical elements towards a genealogy of feminist humor. There we discuss the aim, figures, conception of power, and the cathartic effects of an erotic politics of laughter. Our conclusion is that future waves of feminism should recall and reinvoke the weapons and insights of humor from earlier waves of feminism, bringing humor right into the very core of our academic practices as well as our social movements.

Poststructuralist legal theorist Janet Halley offers some of the most ironic, if not provocative, remarks on the feminist movement. In her words, one of the most interesting contributions of the critical stance that has evolved out of the feminist movement reflects the degree that it has allowed us "to take a break from feminism."[6] Her claim is that the feminist romance with a theory (with a capital T) of domination should give way to a politics and hedonics, in fact to an erotic politics that is, as she puts it, "fun."[7] The central target of her neo-Nietzschean queer sensibility is "governance feminism"—or those so-called "schoolmarmish feminists" (again her words, not ours!) who take themselves as experts on political correctness and who play innocent to their own will to power.[8] We endorse one aspect of Halley's provocative remarks in our insistence upon the central relevance of pleasure for the feminist movement, but we take up our project with due caution. We do not intend to take a break from feminism. Our aim is to shake up any stultifying "moral compass" with the kinds of

laughs that knock power off of its throne.[9] Our claim is that this kind of humor will free us from oppressive norms, some of which can seep into our feminisms as well. Moreover, a touch of self-irony serves as a corrective to any moralizing, self-righteous tendencies of our own. While we note that a social movement fueled by outrage is always relevant and often warranted given the hardships that women continue to endure, we want to combat oppressive norms and to add to our sources of pleasure through an erotic politics of laughter and joy.

This Is Not Your Mother's Maternalism

Feminists and feminism have often been the targets of a venomous conservative ridicule. Subtle and not so subtle waves of mockery reinforce a cloud of associations that accompanies women in their working lives—for example, creating climates that range from hostile to chilly and that diminish voices of protest before they are even heard. This mockery—as all mockery—makes it difficult to claim that this opposition is "hard fact." Consider Gloria Steinem's interview on "Meet the Press" in 1972. Larry Spivak appears to be less the aggressive interviewer after the facts, than a caricature, the male chauvinist pig, a cartoon figure, as he snaps out at Steinem: "[In your words] women are not taken seriously, we are undervalued, ridiculed and not taken seriously by a society that views white men as the norm. . . . [Yet] men are virtually controlled by women from birth onward." Thus Spivak scoffed, "Why haven't you done a better job . . .Well, hasn't she had an opportunity to brainwash the male during those early years. Why hasn't she done it!"[10] Steinem responds with the facts, maintaining a poise that commands seriousness and respect, and this perhaps was the best strategy. Certainly respect is the goal. But still one could see the temptation to slap back, through sharper, more pointed ridicule. This we would call turning the master's tool so-to-speak against him.

Meanwhile, some decades later, after the rise and retreat of second wave feminism, during the era of a Teflon presidency and an ascendancy of family values a stand-up comedian and soon-to-be television icon took yet a new and more incisive grasp at the master's tool. Indeed, the same questions that feminists like Steinem worked hard to rebuke with careful, reasoned discourse in the 1970s, Roseanne Barr dismantles with her bawdy, working-class sense of humor in the 1980s and 90s. Barr is not the first female comic—just think of Gracie Allen, Phyllis Diller, Joan Rivers, Lily Tomlin and Whoopie Goldberg. With so very few women to lead the way, she takes her inspiration from Lenny Bruce. Barr's humor has the potential to empower women as it reflects traces of feminist and working-class anger. Still her humor emerges off center from the movement's emphasis on the harms of domination and legal protection of those perceived as weak and vulnerable. Barr's target was a particularly invidious form of social power—norms of the family to which she refused to be subjected.[11] In one scene from the show *Roseanne*, Roseanne's good friend Crystal

insists that Dan is the ideal man. Roseanne, unimpressed, snarls back at her friend "Do you think he came that way? . . . It's fifteen years of fight'n that made him like that." After all "A good man just don't happen," Roseanne insists, "they have to be created by us women."[12] As she continues her tutorial on the subject, Roseanne reaches toward the plate of doughnuts as a visual prop and begins to explain to her female coworkers that "A guy is a lump . . . like this doughnut." Flicking the sprinkles off the icing she illustrates how first "you got to get rid of all the stuff his mother did to him." After breaking the doughnut in half she points out that "then you gotta get rid of all the macho crap they pick up from beer commercials." Finally she gets to her "personal favorite, the male ego," that is symbolized by the small bite of doughnut that she happily devours. Rather than playing the worshipful wife, Roseanne explains how her relationship with Dan really works—with humor. Like Spivak, Roseanne blames the mother—or at least her mother-in-law—for her role, perhaps more minor (the sprinkling on the doughnut) than male culture (the beer commercials), in supporting the male ego. But her candidate for mothering, or remothering, is the grown man, and not the son, and this mothering fosters "fifteen years of fight'n." Comedy, it seems, is warfare by other means. This is not your mother's maternalism.

It is hard to imagine Steinem ever emulating the crotch-scratching, off-key anthem singing Roseanne Barr, but in part this is not about their singular personalities. Instead this difference in style reflects the fact that feminists as a whole were not seen as having much of a sense of humor. Perhaps it is Roseanne's working-class identity that matters most. Of course, we are not suggesting that if only Gloria Steinem had been on a break from a factory job and sitting in front of a plate of doughnuts, her response to her host would have resembled Roseanne's. Still a play on crass class distinctions did propel Roseanne's feminism to mainstream television. The frequently overlooked impact of feminist humor may reflect its occasional bourgeois aesthetics. But it remains somewhat odd, given the rich tradition of street theater that women have utilized in everything from the 1968 Miss America pageant protest and Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell's (W.I.T.C.H.) 1968 "hex" on Wall Street, to the ironic cheers of Radical Cheerleaders in the late '90s and early '00s. Roseanne, of course, mixes her feminism with a multitude of traditions of ongoing labor boycotts and picket lines, not unlike those that continue to mock patrons and scabs outside conference hotels or those that fill the state capitol in Madison, Wisconsin.[13] At the same time, let us not ignore the already forgotten feminist humor that at that time was front and center of the movement. For Steinem, too, has long understood how to play with the master's tools. In an iconic 1978 *Ms. Magazine* essay, "If Men Could Menstruate . . .," Steinem seemed to be writing for such future stand-ups as Margaret Cho. Steinem insists that "men would brag about how long and how much."[14] At that time, the association of men and menstruation was more than just humorous inversion. This use of humor accumulates political force by borrowing from the

shock value of the (allegedly) obscene, a feature of feminist humor that we will return to later. As part of broad-based political movements of the 60's and 70's, the incendiary humor of political radicals does not simply create diversionary tactics or comic relief. By illuminating the inversions and inflaming the passions that fuel social awareness and activism, this humor can produce climate change.

Regardless of your view of this early female humor, the humor of later comics like Cho, Sykes, and others operates quite differently—they turn the anger outward in explosive and self-affirming joy. We will return to this cathartic element in Part Three. Here we note that the history of female comedians has moved from the subtle double entendres of Gracie Allen or Lucille Ball to the fiery and often enraged provocations of feminist humorists. This firebrand humor, both fuming and fun, sets the stage for a refreshed politics of feminism. Writer Kate Clinton nicely coins a term for this explosive mix as "fumerist" because "it captures the idea of being funny and wanting to burn the house down all at once."[15]

For fumerism does something more constructive than burn down the house, even as it exorcises any trace—perceived or real—of the schoolmarmish demeanor in what Halley calls governance feminism. We aim to pursue this corrective break from the moralizing posture for feminist politics. We are fully aware that this break could be disorienting, given that the role of moral guardianship has afforded generations of women the credentials to move into the male terrain of politics.[16] Nonetheless, we want to foreground a feminism that does *not* brood over victimhood, or inadvertently perpetuate images of female suffering and sacrificing. This feminism would shake up oppressive norms with a good and gutsy belly laugh, and we are willing to pay the price of abandoning, at least temporarily, all traces of the early nineteenth century embrace of republican motherhood, as well as any contemporary notions that somehow mother knows best. In order to smash the normal images of motherhood, again we turn to Barr "because her mission was simple and welcome: to take the schmaltz and hypocrisy out of media images of motherhood."[17] Consider her famous line from her stand-up routine: "If the kids are alive at five, hey, I've done my job."[18] Cho goes so far as to entirely refuse maternal destiny, insisting, "I'm not a breeder . . . I have no maternal instincts . . . I ovulate and [w]hen I see children I feel nothing."[19] Barr and Cho, along with other female stand-ups, use humor to critique the politics of conventional motherhood and its moral respectability that such politics does not always, if ever, question. In solidarity with Kate Clinton, Gina Barreca, Janet Halley, and others we call on feminism to engage openly and playfully with various forms of humor and irony as weapons of choice in tribute to fumerism.

"Famous Penises" and "Detachable Pussies"

Fanning the flames of fumerism is a long-standing problem that women face when they make that fateful transition to womanhood. All too often women have found that both on street corners and on the comic stage they are reduced not only to the butt of a joke but also to its tits and ass. A well-rehearsed tradition of standup male jokesters that reflects, as Catherine A. MacKinnon charges, a larger culture that not only tolerates but eroticizes male domination, prompts a woman to understand herself as a woman the moment she is being objectified.[20] A seemingly irrepressible flow of male libido reduces women to just the parts men find funny, often making women all too vulnerable to obsession with their bodies and body parts. Fumerism, however, turns the tables and mocks the mocker with a release of female libido that eroticizes its own sources of power. This feminist tradition of humor refuses to pay tribute to acts of harassment or objectification. Instead this tradition affords women the role of trickster rather than "trick" as they sort out the implications of "famous penises," "detachable pussies," and those oh-so-sensual "loaf-of-bread-size maxi pad[s]."[21]

All of this reminds us first and foremost of comedian and producer Tina Fey's salute to her own childhood memories of coming of age. In her biography *Bossypants*, Fey recounts some of the uncomfortable common experiences that let a girl know that she is now, ready-or-not, a woman, such as her mother's handing a ten-year-old Fey the Modess company's "'my first period' kit" that came with a "vaguely threatening" pamphlet about "Growing Up and Liking it." Her mother was no doubt supposed to have read the prescriptive information entitled "How Shall I tell My Daughter," but instead she just "slipped out of the room" and Fey was left to figure things out on her own.[22] Fey soon realized that she had been "misinformed from commercials that one's menstrual period was a blue liquid that you poured like laundry detergent onto maxi pads to test absorbency" (which is why she ignored, at least for the few hours, the onset of menarche). But in her defense, she recalls that, "nowhere in the pamphlet did anyone say that your period was NOT a blue liquid." As she tells it, "at that moment, two things became clear to me. I was now technically a woman, and I would never be a doctor."[23] She also recognized that the virtues of female modesty can set you up to play the fool. As head writer on *SNL,* however, she would routinely invert the expectations of who would joke about whose body parts and hence who was the fool. Repeatedly confronted with the question of what is "the actual difference between the male and female comedian *writers*" she retorts, as she takes a poke at the male body: "The men urinate in cups. And sometimes in jars." (so as not to disturb the genius at work.)[24] Also it seems that ". . . they had never been handed a fifteen-year-old Kotex product by the school nurse."[25] This difference led to Fey's "proudest moment," the moment when she got her male colleagues to understand what a hit a parody skit would, indeed, be if it featured *SNL*'s "female dream team" living it up in their hot "'modern gal' activities while giant sanitary napkins poked out of their low-rise jeans." This humor may not have been your mother's maternalism, but, as the *SNL* skit quipped, "This *is* your mother's pad."[26]

Modesty wasn't the only female virtue that Fey had learned to avoid. Fey realized while doing research for her hit Hollywood movie *Mean Girls* that playing the "nice girl" is not always the smartest way to play. She discovered while attending a bullying workshop with Rosalind Wiseman (author of *Queen Bees and Wannabes* [2002], which was the basis for the film) that there were lots of women who recalled that as young girls their transformation to womanhood often had something to do with "car creepery" that is ". . . mostly men yelling shit from cars" such as "Lick me!" or "Nice ass." Indeed, Fey wondered as she recounted all of these stories from women of diverse backgrounds if men purposely organize this ritual of harassment. "Are they a patrol sent out to let girls know they've crossed into puberty?" Her own thirteen-year-old response to a guy shouting about her "Nice tits" was to tell the creep to "Suck my dick" which she now realizes "didn't make any sense, but at least I didn't hold in my anger."[27]

Not holding in anger is what feminist comedy does best. You may be a victim but you will have your revenge, and a clever one at that. For the woman-turned-comedian, her act of revenge grants a seat at the table in a kind of game with different house rules: let's deal a new hand as we play, "Who's the real victim?": To unravel this mystery we turn now to "our Senior Women's Issues Correspondent Kristen Schaal" who recently on *The Daily Show* played the game while coming to terms with latest round of Republican woes over their already bulging pocket books. "Hallelujah," declares Kristen Schaal, "it's about time." Finally, "Congress is redefining rape to protect us from the worst kind of rape . . . money rape." You know the "forcible taking of tax payers' money to pay for abortions." It seems that American taxpayers have had "no say in the matter . . ..They just have to lay back and take it while their bank accounts are violated over and over and over again." But in February 2011, our brave Republicans in congress decided to make a change and proposed that abortions should be paid for only in cases of "rape rape" that is to say "forcible rape," "finally closing," in the words of Schaal, "the glaring rape loophole in our health care system." Our *Daily Show* correspondent can't believe "how many drugged, under-aged, or mentally handicapped young women have been gaming the system!" What an outrage that our "hard earned dollars should go to women who have only been rapished . . . Sorry ladies, the free abortion ride is over." Getting rid of those loopholes will prevent "money rape" and protect victimized taxpayers who don't want to pay for a young woman who has been drugged or who is with limited mental capacity let alone one who has undergone statutory rape. Just think of Roman Polanski's "plying a thirteen year old with quaaludes, alcohol and a famous penis—that isn't rape rape it is just rapesque and it shouldn't be covered—only rape-rape."[28]

And if you don't agree with this twisted logic Schaal understands why. "Clearly you've been traumatized by years of money rape" but it's "ok to talk about it." Reaching for her chauvinist piggy bank Schaal encourages the real

victims to speak out—that is, the victims of money rape to "Show me on the piggy bank where Obama took your money for abortions was it here . . .." It is hard to speak out loud of the kind of violation that, for example, occurred in one year alone in 2006 when a handful of women who received abortions because of rape, incest, and health risks endangering their lives took a shocking "two-tenths of a penny per tax payer" to fund those services. Indeed, as the comedian is suggesting, one might wonder how America can sleep at night! Clearly losing your money can lead to suffering. Liberals should not overlook the fact that the violation of trust and unfair taxation are moral issues. But the underlying point of the sketch is that rape, too, is a moral issue. Schaal mocks those who mock the victimologists, here those big strong men who in congress claim to speak for ordinary Americans who would never cry (notwithstanding Speaker of the House John Boehner). Schaal makes us wonder who is the wuss as she asks, "Does it hurt here?" on the figure of the pig suggesting the republican congress should tell mommy what happened.[29]

Of course there is something women do have that is valued almost like money. This is something mothers know and girls find out. As Wanda Sykes insists "even as little girls we are taught . . . 'You have something that everybody wants. You gotta protect it. You gotta be careful. You gotta cherish it.'" And she adds, "that's a lot of fucking pressure." But "wouldn't it be great if you could just leave your pussy at home?" In other words, what "if our pussies were detachable!" And "just think of the freedom you'd have," if, for example, you wanted to hang out with a famous penis, (not a movie director this time but as Sykes suggests a professional ball player.) Now, you can even go to his "hotel room at 2 o'clock in the morning." And if he wants you or rather your thing, you just have to remind him "Look, my pussy's not even in the building—I'm just here to talk about your jump shot." Sykes can't help but think about how convenient it would be to have a detachable vagina. You would never worry again about going places by yourself at night. Think about getting home from work late and you're contemplating going for a jog, "but it's getting too dark." Then you remember "I'll just leave it at home." Sykes explains to her audience "It could be pitch black" and "this old crazy guy jumps out of the bushes" you don't have to be scared . . . because you can let him know "I left it at home. Sorry, I have absolutely nothing of value on me—I'm pussiless."[30] To be pussiless and hence lack anything of value seems reminiscent of old-school male tits and ass humor, the stuff that nice girls were not supposed to talk about and the kind of humor men have long relied upon to keep women off their patriarchal playing field. Yet Sykes turns on its head this formulaic reduction of women to property that has for far too long served to erotize male domination. Humor may not stop the crime of rape but it does joyfully and hilariously erotize women's own sources of power through shared laughter. Sykes gives us a hint about the bonds that come of this shared laughter as she ponders on how leaving your pussy at home has its own set-backs. Just think of the problems you can confront if you are on an "unrespectable" hot date and need your girlfriend to help you out. According to Sykes, it gets at some "sisterhood." That is when you call up in the middle of night and say "Look, do me a favor; run by my house and grab my pussy," it lets "you find out who your real girlfriends are."[31]

But leaving your pussy at home when you are not there to keep an eye on it can call for a return of the maternal reprimand. Imagine coming home after being out with the girls and finding your "pussy all bent out of shape." "Ladies, you know you can't trust them." In fact, Sykes suggests you can't trust them "with shit." When confronted, her man is just "stand'n there" with a stupid look on his face and a sorry excuse that "some of the fellows came by." Now as she confronts him wallowing in his chauvinist mess, she finds her pussy like an old worn sock needing to be "put it in the dryer" to get it back in shape. She adds with disgust "I better put a Bounce in there." This kind of house cleaning that might make you dread coming home once again affords Sykes the role of the trickster and the means to bounce back against threats both on the comic stage and on the street corner. By turning male humor inside out she takes her own property back. With a nod she gives back power to the pussy and erotizes that old maternal wisdom that also allows her to put her house back in order.[32]

Towards a Genealogy of Feminist Humor: Its Aim, Figures, Concept of Power, and Cathartic Effects

In this essay we aim to do more than juxtapose a maternal politics of self-righteousness with an erotic politics of feminist humor, or fumerism. While we would agree with Halley that it is best to take a break from theory with a capital T, we would also like to propose some philosophical elements for a genealogy of feminist humor. Here we offer a Foucaudian-inspired genealogy of humor for feminism because like Foucault, we, too, see that history with all of its ironies, inversions, and unexpected surprises matters. Having unearthed some of this history's irresolvable contradictions and stubborn demarcations of power, our genealogical approach is now in the position to examine the aims and functions of feminist humor, two "figures" (Foucault's term) for this humor: a concept of everyday power, and some possible cathartic effects of humor.

While humor can invert a social order only to reestablish hierarchy and identity,[33] it can also subvert this order and achieve a more democratic aim. In her classic 1966 essay "Jokes," Mary Douglas teases out relevant, if ultimately misleading aspects, of humor's "subversive effect on the dominant structure."[34] Douglas contrasts humor as a temporary holiday from the normal order with the shock value of the obscene, which calls that order into question in a way that is dangerous or otherwise subversive for the social system. Douglas mistakenly leaves the reader assuming that in contrast with the shock of the obscene, the break or "holiday" that humor provides from social norms is simply a temporary

diversion. In other words, for Douglas, a joke is just a joke—a holiday from the normal constraints of politics and morality, and not a means of social change. However, our glimpse into the history of feminist humor suggest that both the amusing joke and the shock of the obscene can under certain conditions function within a social movement to effect egalitarian social change. That is, the aims of some humor are democratic and not reactionary or for sheer fun. Such humor aims not to exclude but includes diverse social groups and individuals. And it does not reinforce or invert hierarchies; it levels them. Moreover, humor may take a more progressive aim precisely when it refuses to sharply distinguish itself from the obscene. Recall in this context Steinem's essay on men and menstruation. By illuminating the inversions and inflaming the passions that fuel social awareness and activism, this edgy humor helped to stir a political movement. To be sure, a joke can be just a joke, but the experience of pleasure in subversion is not always an illusion or a brief diversion. As we shall further argue, in the process of subversion humor can transform a politics of resentment into a politics of joy. The techniques of inversion and leveling that can account for the pleasure of the joke are well suited for the central aim of a feminist ethical vision—one of social equality and inclusion.

Cultural theorists provide support for our feminist account of transformative strains in humor by suggesting a source of humor's pleasure that does not stem from feelings of superiority or in-group/out-group hierarchies. Lisa Henderson finds that "humor both reveals and produces intersubjectivity, a cultural mortar or strain of recognition and alliance among even the most tenuously related persons."[35] Here, community does not result from recognition of a shared identity position, or "shared subjectivity," but rather from a loosely defined intersubjectivity. The "unity" of this intersubjectivity—of laughing together—occurs though suspending reified positions of identity. Similarly, we argue that fumerist comedy can make visible the history of identity and the struggles for recognition and identification, but as a moment of dislocation and transformation. In other words, the moment of laughter may jolt one out of habitual habits and cognition, and open up fresh possibilities. Comedy can create a new kind of temporary community, not based on homogeneity or rigid identities, but rather on a shared dislocation out of the customary lines of identity.[36] The joy of fumerist comedy is not in having one's preconceived identity and views confirmed, but in momentarily being startled out of one's customary alignments of identity—self—community.

If the pleasures and subversions of comedy serve unconventional moral aims, it seems fair to ask what are its implications for ethics? Mintz argues that comedians' "complaints contain a critique of the gap between what is and what we believe should be."[37] We understand this ethical "should," in contrast with a moral "ought," as opening the way towards what poststructuralists (following Nietzsche) propose as a postmoral ethics. The problem with the discourse of morality is that it entails interpreting subjectivity in terms of the rational and/or self-interested individual who acts according to rules. For the poststructuralist,

this discourse fails to understand and subvert the disciplinary matrix of power with which moral codes and normal modes of subjectivity are complicit. In contrast, the "should" of comic discourse eschews the standard moral language with its problematic notion of the moral subject, and in place of rules, it deconstructs the disciplinary matrix through a style of comportment that is egalitarian and even visionary. Indeed, all feminist politics, Charlotte Bunch argues, requires a utopian vision—implicit or explicit.[38] When fumerists joke, mock, and critique the micropractices of everyday life, their humor may offer glimpses of a better world. Fumerist humor critiques conventional morality and the underlying codes of normalization and social exclusion that this morality sustains through an ethical stance and a social vision. Normal moral codes and rules yield to a more playful and egalitarian ethics.

Of course tragic harms, often perpetrated through structures of domination, merit a sober and impassioned expression of direct moral outrage. Our point is simply that power does not only operate through the hierarchies or inequalities located by theories of domination. It operates as well through the micropractices of everyday life, practices that make up the normal and normalizing codes of gender and other sites of oppression. Individuals regardless of gender perpetuate these norms through practices that are often perceived as voluntary. Just as ridicule and humor provide an arsenal of tools that can reinforce these norms and practices so, too, this arsenal can tear those conventions down.

Poststructuralists like Foucault, Deleuze, and Butler do not intend to sidestep the dominance paradigm of power. On the contrary, they relocate domination within more invidious practices and techniques of normalization. They argue that these practices and techniques of normalization hold us in check as administered subjects through modes of discourse and knowledge that mold the mind as well as the body. As Ladelle McWhorter emphasizes, the target of the disciplinary apparatus in modern society is abnormality.[39] She explains that for Foucault, "[n]onconformity was not mere eccentricity; very often it was symptomatic of disease."[40] Those classified as sexual deviants were "subject to surveillance and constraints imposed through psychiatry and other means by or on behalf of society as a whole."[41] These sexual deviants along with hysterical women and other so-called moral monsters cannot always and easily reason their way out of their subordinate positions and derogatory classifications in modern networks of power and knowledge. The reason is that the moral judgments it utters are themselves part of the power apparatus. This apparatus constructs reason as codes, standards and habits that that render some of us or some of our experiences abnormal, disgusting, or even obscene.[42] Just as central, perhaps, for the poststructuralists as the post-Nietzschean critique of reason as the ruse of power, is the use of irony as an epistemology and a methodology. It is easy to forget the twinkle in Foucault's eye that casts a certain slant over his entire project already from the pre-genealogical *The Order of Things*. Yet as Halley too suggests, remembering this twinkle is key to understanding the force of his project—a project, that was designed, after all, to critique reason in part

through odd juxtapositions and inversions.[43] Recall that Foucault began his book, as he explains,

> out of a passage in Borges, out of laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought—our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography—breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things . . .. This passage quotes a 'certain Chinese encyclopedia' in which it is written that 'animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification . . . (n) that from a long way off look like flies' . . . and so on. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap . . . is the limitation of our own.[44]

The ironic voice should not be viewed as a distraction from the analytic mindset of social critique, but as vital to the insights produced by the genealogical method and by the momentum of real social change.

Thus we aim to develop our genealogy of feminist humor with the irony of the genealogical method front and center, beginning with our treatment of those normalizing micropractices. Foucault uses what he terms "figures" to map nodal points in the matrices of power. In the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault's most ironic book according to Lynne Huffer, Foucault highlights the figures of the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, and the sexual adult in order to locate the ways in which sexuality is controlled through biopower in the nineteenth century.[45] Other philosophers have also located figures in matrices so that we might better understand the basis for social power. Todd May develops a genealogy of neoliberalism by foregrounding the figures of the consumer and the entrepreneur.[46] Feminist movements have also exposed various figures to mark nodes in networks of power. These movements, during one of their fumerist moments, countered one of these figures—the playboy bunny—with a figure of its own, the male chauvinist pig.

To understand the role of these figures in everyday practices of power we must look back to the emergence of second wave feminism. Hugh Hefner had just invented the playboy bunny as the newest toy for what Barbara Ehrenreich and Susan Bordo describe as the movement that preceded and solicited the women's movement—a movement of rebellious young men who aimed to reclaim their masculinity from what they perceived to be a new domestication, the suffocating maternalism of the post-World War II era.[47] If the male movement had its bunny, the women's movement also produced a figure of belittlement if not ridicule—"the male chauvinist pig"—and this figure was designed to outmaneuver the tactics of the playboy club.

While the bunny may function as a serious figure for men of male desire, the pig functions for the feminist movement as a figure of comic ridicule and outright disgust. Rabbits are also known for their frequent (and mindless) copulation, and so provide a degrading image for women as Gloria Steinem's 1963

exposé revealed.[48] The pig, on the other hand, is not simply a serious figure of women's outrage. The pig is perceived to be (no doubt unfairly to the animal!) a comical and even obscene creature, far from the macho predatory beast of masculine fantasy. The pig wallows in its own filth, without recognizing how disgusting it is. Calling a pig a pig was speaking truth to power with a certain style.

This practice of speaking truth to power through ridicule or irony recalls the ancient practices of the Cynics as described by Foucault. Foucault himself in his later writings aims to emulate this ancient practice of truth-telling, or what the Cynics term *parrhesia*.[49] The Cynics were social critics who avoided systematic philosophy, and instead cultivated the art—Foucault calls it an aesthetic practice—of ridicule and improvisation to draw attention to the arbitrary aspects of social norms. For example, the Cynics would use the technique of *reductio ad absurdum*—but instead of pointing out the fallacies of arguments, they exposed the absurdity of what would pass for common sense. In the process, their obscene antics, including masturbating in the streets, would upset public mores. In effect, these philosophers were the Lenny Bruce of their day. When fumerists practice this art of speaking truth to power through irony, they too take up in their own way the spirit of *parrhesia*. Lynne Huffer contextualizes this spirit of ridicule within a Foucauldian "political ethic of eros," and understands it as an ethic that fosters self-transformation through practices that undo the normal core of the self.[50] The emancipatory practices of truth-telling through the undoing of rigid notions of identity and community release energy and eros for personal and social change.[51]

But is the queer pleasure of this cathartic release genuinely progressive and inclusive, or might this release be forgetful of race or other dimensions of power? Any genealogical study of the figure of the pig in feminist truth-telling must also point out that the chauvinist pig owes much to the Pig—that is, the Pig that SNCC and the Panthers confronted in the 1960s—the Pig that caused Watts and the assassination of Fred Hampton.[52] For, as white feminists have had to learn, race certainly can fuel the desire to burn down the house.[53] Patricia Hill Collins' nuanced development of identity politics pinpoints the multiple variables of domination and prepares for what is called third wave feminism through her contributions to intersectionality theory.[54] Intersectionality theories typically retain the focus on exposing power through various structures of domination as they tease out the interrelationships between class, race, sex, gender, and other key factors in the function of power. This leaves open the question of whether our engagement with fumerism converges with this understanding of multiple dimensions of power that we find in theories of intersectionality or assumes instead that these theories' contributions are more germane to domination theories.

Identity politics expresses the political interests and epistemological standpoint of group location in a network of interlocking forms of domination and power. As one of its most prominent theorists, Collins emphasizes the stakes for African American women, whom she urges to draw upon experiences sup-

pressed by systems of knowledge that have been legitimated in elite white male institutions, and to produce instead independent self-definitions and self-valuations. As she points out, black people share a common experience of oppression based on race; women, based on gender oppression; and black women based on intersections with these other social groups but also based on their own specific experiences. These various experiences give rise to specific points of view ("epistemological standpoints") that in turn generate group identities through shared interests. Stories from lived experiences not found in the public archives hold together African American communities and families by recovering energy and eros from systems of oppression and by generating meaningful lives based on rich social ties. The challenge is to free the mind and the community of toxic images and definitions imposed by dominant groups, and to reaffirm a perspective that acknowledges its own partiality but also its own value from a specific location and standpoint. In other words in contrast with joyful post-Nietzschean becoming at the expense of all administrative norms, this approach asks that we acknowledge self-determined norms and social bonds as both limits and sources for identity and power.

Now let's replay the concerns of intersectional theory by way of the humor of comedian Wanda Sykes. When Sykes emphasizes in her stand-up routines the unexpected ironies of her experiences as a black woman who is also a lesbian, she poses for intersectionality theory some twists and turns that can multiply perspectives and identities to a dizzying degree. The resulting disturbance of any readymade norms, whether imposed by the white community or from the self-defining black community, amplifies the insights of intersectionality theory while shifting the insights of this theory to a new and delightfully raucous terrain. In some ways, intersectionality theory locates domination on a high-powered, multi-dimensional, and arguably a tad bit Cartesian-like grid or map of precisely defined locations and hierarchies. Black lesbian women would find their points of convergence through the intersection of multiple forces of domination at particular locations in a map of power. Sykes' black lesbian irony does certainly pick up on these multiple sources of domination, but her humor does not then proceed to redefine or relocate the self-in-community in any kind of bounded way. Her humor disturbs nodes of power and the boundaries and hierarchies that circumscribe these nodes as she mocks them. Indeed, in her humor there is a cathartic subversion of any attempt to reassert impermeable boundaries around the self or one's community without—just as importantly—forsaking social ties for an unbound self, dispersed in infinite joy. On the contrary, her humor works to alter specific clusters of social ties, and to make possible new ones that are no longer so sternly based on taxonomies of race, class, gender, or sexuality, or on the toxic emotions of fear and resentment that can reinforce the normalizing power of these taxonomies. The contagious laughter provoked by Sykes' black lesbian humor breaks up the normative narrative of the white heterosexual audience.

Consider Sykes' particular way of declaring that it is "harder to be gay than it is to be black."[55] She quips that there are things she had to do being gay that she didn't have to do being black. "I didn't have to come out being black . . . I didn't have to sit my parents down and tell them about my blackness."[56] She then imagines telling her "mom and dad—I'm Black" and her mom acting hysterical and first thinking "you know what, you've been hanging around black people . . .They got you thinking you're black . . . They twisted your mind . . . I know I shouldn't have let you watch Soul Train."[57] Through mocking narratives of gay development, Sykes allows us to reimagine narratives of Black development. Sykes' characteristic irony draws our attention to modes of resistance or tactics of empowerment that do not rest firmly within any given boundaries of community and family nor on any epistemic attitude that assumes for some social group a correct point of view. What Collins begins as a powerful inflection of intersectionality into identity politics ends up with what the Nietzschean (mindful that the last god resides in grammar) might applaud as Sykes' grammatically incorrect "I'ma-Be-Me-politics."[58] Sykes sidesteps the downside of the victim sweepstakes, that counter-productive game of who's on bottom. This erotic politics cuts across so many lines of identity that one is left wondering who's on top and who's on bottom. When the ironist confronts the powers-that-be, it is true that she does not challenge this power directly. It is also true that she engages, subverts, and—obliquely—opposes it. The ironist's oblique politics may not map neatly and nicely into the oppressive taxonomies or progressive redefinitions of community and selfhood in subordination theory, theories that carefully locate intersectionality. But her irony does release the fervor of insubordination that converts the toxic effects of ordinary politics into an edgy kind of joy, one that neither entirely lacks anger nor entirely embraces innocence. Sykes' style of humor sets in motion perpetual reversals of expectations and norms, a plurality of counter-positions and shifting grounds, rather than positing codes and grounding theory. Comedy intensifies genealogy's heightened sense of the contingent and the paradoxical. In short, queer humor treats intersectionality to the cathartic dynamic of energy and eros that Foucault, like Collins, has called freedom.

Similarly, Margaret Cho encompasses everything that Collins understands as intersectionality and then some. In *Notorious C.H.O.*,[59] Cho recalls that she never saw any Asian American role models as serious actors. So she thought "maybe I could be an extra on MASH . . . maybe . . . maybe I could play a hooker or something." "What I do . . . is I take a stereotype and I enlarge it to the point where it seems ridiculous."[60] This comic technique reveals how limiting the roles are for Asian Americans and how impossible it is to imagine oneself as an agent in those roles. By over-playing the stereotype, Cho asserts her agency and undermines the stereotype. Through her use of irony, she has made it big on the comic stage and so big that when asked if she is gay or straight she throws all dichotomies out the window and insists she is neither but instead a "slut." She likes to have sex with everyone, including "butch lesbian"—but real-

ly butch, in her words, "the kind that roll their own tampons"[61] and that is why she wants to know where her parade is, you know the "Slut Pride Parade."[62] The street theatre of Gay pride festivals, featuring the pride parade, grew out of the use of the comic to convert the negative energy of shame to self-affirming pride. Cho's skit on slut pride does not simply invert the value of the whore over the mother, to invoke the classic dualism. Instead, in proposing a pride parade for sluts, Cho uses comedy to dismantle shame and release erotic energy for us all. That's slut power.

A significant advantage of a genealogical method is that it brings both history and structures of power and its abuses to bear on ethical and political projects. This history of power and abuse does not aim to re-invoke standard genres of story-telling and the emotions that those genres entail. The rage against past abuses—being labeled for example a whore or a slut for entering male space—can weigh heavily on an oppressed people, increasing the resentment of some, and prompting others, including Janet Halley and Wendy Brown, to argue that we need to get over victim feminism and its brooding memories. The concern is that this kind of feminism perpetuates traumatic memories and the rage and resentment that this feminism would aim to overcome. African American pragmatist Eddie Glaude shares this same concern in the context of his own discussion of race, emphasizing through his own genealogical approach to history the need to renew ourselves by cultivating some degree of active forgetfulness.[63] He writes: "For Nietzsche, human beings are separated from animals in part because we are burdened by the past. We live historically. But in order to live full lives, in his view, we must cultivate an ability to live unhistorically . . . We must, if we are to experience happiness, be able to forget (as well as remember) at the right moment."[64] In contrast with Cornel West's greater attention to the tragic, Glaude urges a balancing tilt toward the joy of forgetfulness. Now at a moment when the Texas Board of Education is so brazenly rewriting history, if not deleting significant moments of that history entirely,[65] we take our cue for the proper formula of joy plus memory from stand-ups like Cho and Sykes.

Sykes demonstrates our own approach to history and remembrance with her 2009 appearance at the White House Correspondents' Dinner. In her routine, she applauded Michelle Obama for finally unveiling a bit of the past—a bust of Sojourner Truth—in the White House. Also knowing that what goes around comes around, Sykes warns the first lady to "nail it down real well" because "the next white guy to come in—they going to move it to the kitchen."[66] How easily ordinary history forgets, conceals and hides—how easy it will be for the next president to hide the bust of Sojourner Truth! In our alternative history, comics function as "social interpreters."[67] When we recognize ourselves in the comic, they function as well, as Mintz suggests, as our "comic spokesmen."[68] When scholars like Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm try to unearth a bit of irony in the past, they often turn to popular culture and "organic intellectuals" like Bruce Springsteen to understand aspects of working-class identity. Cowie and Boehm put forth the Springsteen rock anthem "Born in the U.S.A." as "jagged pieces of the puzzle of both the song and the subjects' social history."[69] So too, feminist comedians offer jagged pieces of a puzzle that speak to their subjects' social history, a social history that is all too often in the kitchen, and not in the front parlor. This kitchen and the routines that recall its memories are an important locus for our own genealogical approach.

This history often goes missing from the public archives as well as the censored textbooks. Wanda Sykes claims her jokes come from the fact that "people will tell me anything," insinuating that as a black comedian she is treated like a maid, a cook or even a stripper as people will "tell a stripper anything."[70] As our substitute for the academic historian, Sykes is privy to sources not otherwise available. Yet from her position on the comic stage, and in contrast with the self-righteous expert or spokesman of a social group, she refuses moral or epistemic privilege to her standpoint. She admits, for example, that she is no better than those in the parlor when it comes to racial profiling and that this is a fault that she, like other blacks, shares with whites. When she sees a black man running down the street she wonders "what has he been up to" and when she sees a white guy running down the street she assumes that he is just late.[71]

Indeed, Sykes' self-ironic response to the problem of racial profiling returns us to the ethical aims of fumerist comedy. Check out her response to the question: if you can't solve racial profiling what do you do? Perhaps "just treat everyone like a criminal."[72] And indeed laughter can be a great social leveler. Sykes does not take up those stories in the kitchen, stories well beyond the public archives, as straight humorless histories. She tells her stories with the attitude and sense of irony that draws on comedy's catalytic power to alter what we think justice is: "white men get nervous . . . when a minority or another race gets a little power..." because in her words "they scared that that race is going to do to them what they did to that race. They get nervous so they start screaming reverse racism." But that is not reverse racism. "Isn't reverse racism when a racist is nice to somebody . . . ?" What they're afraid of, she insists, is really "called Karma."[73] Karma is also history—but with visions of justice in the mix.

Let's recall as well the cathartic effect of how humor achieves its egalitarian aims before we yield to the larger forces of Karma and bring our essay to an end. Humor might be just the medicine for what ails us in our social norms. Consider Stanford psychologist Claude Steele's research on the impact of gender and race stereotypes on performance among stereotyped populations.[74] This research demonstrates that these stereotypical associations impact performance even among individuals who reject the stereotypes and that a situation that renders group identities salient may suffice to trigger the associations. For example, women perform less well on math exams when they are moved into a room with men presumably because the presence of men triggers the stereotypical associations of female inferiority in mathematics. Steele speculates that anxiety associated with various stereotypes may account for what hinders their targets' performance. If so, then humor offers a remedy. Think of Wanda Sykes' attitude about racial profiling. Not only does the ridicule of stereotypes undermine them

as social norms; humor also dissipates anxiety and other negative emotions through its cathartic powers. And for those who fear that identity politics threatens to exacerbate the toxic effects of stereotypes through their mere mention to the point that like Halley they are convinced that we should take a break from feminism, we remind our readers of alternative feminisms. Feminism as fumerism offers one way to confront and detoxify the stereotypes, and to joyfully reappropriate the energy and eros from systems of domination. The seriously erotic politics of laughter burns down by bringing down the house.

Notes

* Parts of this essay appeared in Cynthia Willett, Julia Willett, and Yael Sherman, "The Seriously Erotic Politics of Feminist Laughter," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 79:1 (Spring 2012), pp. 217-246 (www.socres.org). The latter offered a glimpse into the history of humor in second wave feminism that is absent from the present essay. It includes new work on sexuality.

1. See discussion in media as taken up by *Salon* on whether women have less of a sense of humor than men:
http://www.salon.com/life/broadsheet/2006/12/06/hitchens/index.html and
http://www.salon.com/life/broadsheet/feature/2009/03/02/women_and_humor/.

2. Philip Auslander, "'Brought to You by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender" in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 316; Gail Finney, "Introduction: Unity in Difference?" in *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*, ed. Gail Finney (Langhorn: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 11; Danielle Russell, "Self-deprecatory Humour and the Female Comic: Self-destruction or Comedic Construction?" *thirdspace* 2/1 (November 2002), http://www.thirdspace.ca/articles/druss.htm.

3. Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books/Random House, 1995), 165; see also Susan J. Douglas, *Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message That Feminism's Work is Done* (New York: Times Books/Henry Holt, 2010).

4. Sally Haslanger, "Changing the Ideology and Culture of Philosophy: Not by Reason (Alone)." *Hypatia* 23 no.2 (2008): 210-223.See also: http://web.mit.edu/sgrp following the link "Materials concerning women and minorities in philosophy" for more material on this topic.

5. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 30.

6. Janet Halley, *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006).

7. Halley, *Split Decisions*, 13.

8. Halley, *Split Decisions*, 7. For an account of an erotic politics that traces back to Audre Lorde, see Cynthia Willett, *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 38.

9. Halley, *Split Decisions*, 363.

10. This exchange was replayed as a "Meet the Press Minute" in Take Two: http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3032608/vp/33368606#33368606 "Meet the Press," October 18, 2009; msnbc.com.

11. Kathleen Rowe, "Roseanne: Unruly Woman as Domestic Goddess" in *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*, eds. Charlotte Brundson, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 82.

12. *Roseanne*, "Life and Stuff," October 18, 1988. And for interview see Roseanne Barr: First TV Interview, 1984 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8AlNnYQwOk.

13. The original occasion for this essay is a panel organized by Sharyn Clough for the Committee on the Status of Women at the Pacific American Philosophy Association in April, 2010 in San Francisco. During this time, Local 2 of the Unite Here union called for a boycott of several hotels, including the conference hotel. At the time of completing the essay, the public employees in the state of Wisconsin are protesting the governor's attempt to pass legislation that would cripple their efforts at collective bargaining.

14. Gloria Steinem, "I Was a Playboy Bunny" in *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, second edition (New York: Holt, 1995), 367.

15. Clinton as quoted in Gina Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White...but I Drifted* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 178.

16. Donald Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton N.J. Princeton University Press, 2005); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure* (New York: Columbia Press, 1999); Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* (New York: Random House, 2002); Lori Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the 19th Century United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

17. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 284.

18. Barr as quoted in Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 284.

19. *CHO Revolution* 2004.

20. Halley, p. 28; MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An Agenda for Theory." *Signs* 7, no. 3 (1982, 515).

21. First quote is from *The Daily Show* "Rape Victim Abortion Funding" Episode 16019 aired 2/07/11 http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-february-2-2011/rape-victim-abortion-funding. The second quote is from Wanda Sykes, "Sick and Tired."

The third is from Tina Fey, *Bossypants*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), p. 141.

22. Fey, *Bossypants*, 11-12.

23. Fey, *Bossypants*, 14.

24. Fey, *Bossypants*, 136.

25. Fey, *Bossypants*, 141.

26. Kotex Classic SNL http://www.metacafe.com/watch/5624980/kotex_classic/

27. Fey, *Bossypants*, 14-15.

28. "Rape Victim Abortion Funding," Episode16019, http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-february-2-2011/rape-victim-abortion-funding.

29. "Rape Victim Abortion Funding."

30. Sykes, "Sick and Tired."

31. Sykes, "Sick and Tired."

32. Sykes, "Sick and Tired."

33. Humor is not a cure-all for our social ills. On the contrary, as cultural theorists, historians, and philosophers warn, comedy all too often reproduces narrow forms of community and identity in ways that can pose serious challenges to the egalitarian emphasis of our fumerism. Indeed, the philosopher Simon Critchley speculates that "most jokes are reactionary or, at best, simply serve to reinforce social consensus" in his book *On Humor* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 11. The reactionary function or aims of many jokes coheres with broader claims about comedy from historian Gail Finney. It is her observation that "[c]omedy is based on shared experience, attitudes, and values; it creates in-groups and out-groups by mocking aberrations from the norm or the norm itself." See her "Introduction: Unity in Difference," 6-7. This mocking of aberrations from the norm produces pleasure in the audience through feelings of superiority that come from punishing or excluding so-called inferiors. Lawrence Mintz similarly warns that a potentially narrow identity is central to a community that is held together through ridicule or in-jokes. In his words, "[t]he comedian must establish for the audience that the group is homogenous, a community, if the laughter is to come easily." See his "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation." *American Quarterly* 37.1 (Spring 1985), 78. Philip Auslander highlights the specifically gendered nature of some of these groups. He notes that when, for example, the female comedian addresses female audience members, she "creates a community with other women based on common experience (frequently of men) . . . [and even] a shared subjectivity that excludes men." Of course, as Auslander notes, this kind of comedy can be empowering for women by offering forms of identification or recognition. It may operate in the same way that separatism does in a social movement—enabling an oppressed minority to claim an identity, a shared history, and a voice. In short, the subversion of comedy can operate through cementing forms of identity and by inverting assumed superiority and inferiority, and this dynamic of exclusion might not always be bad or for that matter even avoidable. See Auslander's "Brought to You by Fem-Rage," 320-321. After all, as Joanne Gilbert insists, "[h]ierarchy is essential to most humor." See her "Performing Marginality," 324. This research should leave us wary that despite its understandable appeal for marginalized groups, comedy may reinvoke insider/outsider and hierarchical social structures. The humor of marginalized communities may invert but not fundamentally alter the system of oppression, and may for this reason sow the seeds of resentment and backlash rather than progressive social change.

34. Mary Douglas, "Jokes." In *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology (* London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 95.

35. Lisa Henderson, "Simple Pleasures: Lesbian Community and Go Fish" in *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*, eds. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 135-136.

36. Gina Barreca, "Introduction" in *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988), 15.

37. Mintz, "Standup Comedy," 77.

38. Charlotte Bunch, "Not by Degrees: Feminist Theory and Education" in *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 244.

39. Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 34.

40. McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*, 30.

41. McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America*, 31.

42. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990b), 100.

43. Halley, *Split Decisions*, 200.

44. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xv.

45. Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 210.

46. Todd May, "Approaching Neoliberalism Genealogically: Methodological Considerations," paper presented at the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, New York City, December 27-30, 2009.

47. Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1999), 120; Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (New York: Anchor Press/Double Day, 1983), 41.

48. Steinem, "I Was a Playboy Bunny."

49. Thomas Flynn, "Foucault as Parrhesiast: His Last Lecture Course at the College de France (1984)" in *The Final Foucault*, eds. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 102-118.

50. Huffer, *Mad For Foucault*, 242.

51. Huffer, *Mad For Foucault*, 242-278 and 279-280.

52. G. Louis Heath, *Off the Pigs! The History and Literature of the Black Panther Party* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 1976); Philip Hearst, *Wimmin, Wimps, and Wallflowers: An Encyclopedic Dictionary of Gender and Sexual Orientation in the United States* (Boston: Intercultural Press, 2001); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2007); Manning Marrable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945-2006*, Third Edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

53. Mel Watkins, *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2002).

54. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 201-238.

55. Wanda Sykes, *I'ma Be Me*, HBO, 2009.

56. Sykes, *I'ma Be Me*.

57. Sykes, *I'ma Be Me*.

58. Recall that for Nietzsche, grammar is the last refuge of piety: "I am afraid that we cannot get rid of God because we still have faith in grammar." Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols" in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 483.

59. Margaret Cho, *I'm The One That I Want*, 2002.

60. Margaret Cho as quoted in Allison Fraiberg, "Between the Laughter: Bridging Feminist Studies through Women's Stand-Up Comedy" in *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*, ed. Gail Finney (Langhorn: Gordon and Breach, 1994), 324.

61. Margaret Cho, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iY9G52IKsyc (accessed December 26, 2011).

62. Margaret Cho, *I'm The One That I Want*.

63. Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 66-88.

64. Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 80.

65. Russel Shorto, "Founding Father?" *The New York Times Magazine* (February 14, 2010), 32-39, 46-47.
66. Wanda Sykes, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7m2ubJYJXUo (accessed December 26, 2011).
67. Russell, "Self-deprecatory Humour."
68. Mintz, "Standup Comedy," 74.
69. Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm, "Dead Man's Town: 'Born in the U.S.A.', Social History, and Working-Class Identity," *American Quarterly* 58.2 (2006), 354.
70. Sykes, *I'ma Be Me*, 2009.
71. Sykes, *I'ma Be Me*.
72. Sykes, *I'ma Be Me*.
73. Sykes, *I'ma Be Me*.
74. Claude M. Steele, "A Threat in the Air: How Stereotypes Shape Intellectual Identity and Performance," *American Psychologist* 52.6 (1997): 613-629.

Chapter 2

Black Female Crossover Comedy: Freedom, Liberty, and Minstrelsy[1]

Naomi Zack

American Stand-Up Comedy, Its Complexity and Cross-Overs[2]

Comedy that is inflected by race and gender is a complex site of multiple forms of oppression and freedom. American stand-up comedy became something more than entertainment in a turn toward cultural criticism during the 1960's-1970s. Aggressive, sarcastic, dystopic, and transgressive performers appropriated the entertainment sub-genre of directly addressing a live audience, which dated at least to vaudeville and minstrelsy. The general trend in this new stand-up comedy has been to say outrageous but true things about social and political aspects of American life. The new stand-up comic offers commentary on subjects that are not discussed in mainstream public forums or polite private company. And, he or she may talk about such things in crude language. Insofar as the stand-up comic is a peoples' philosopher or cultural critic, the laughter of the audience can be viewed as much as a form of applause for a truth plainly spoken, as a reaction to humor—the audience laughs if the comic gets it right, even though the subject may be quite grim. (The laughter at stand-up comedy material that is not joyfully funny can be viewed according to Freud, who thought that jokes brought what was hidden to the surface in a way that conserved psychic energy.[3]) The first standup comics in this new vein were white males, such as Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce, but the liberatory changes in society after the 1960's, that is, widespread integration and the 1964 Civil Rights act outlawing discrimination against nonwhites and women in employment, made racial minority male, white female, and racial minority female, stand-up comedians possible. Black