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The Seriously Erotic Politics of Feminist Laughter

OUR INTRODUCTION AND WARM UP ACT

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, the Guerrilla Girls, Ellen DeGeneres, Sarah Silverman, and Mo'Nique, 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 (Auslander 1993, 316; Finney, 1994: 11; Russell 2002). 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" (Douglas 1995, 165; see also Douglas 2010). 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 (Haslanger 2008, 210–223).² 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 prison house of the body, instead of the other way around (Foucault 1995, 30). 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 Part One of this essay we seek to untangle the often hidden history of feminism and humor, revealing aspects of the history and influence of feminist humor on knowledge and power as well as glimpses into where humor has played a key role in the success of social movements. Part Two offers some key philosophical elements toward 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 feminist conversations should recall and re-invoke the weapons and insights of humor from earlier waves of feminism and bring 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” (Halley 2006). 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” (2006, 13). 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 (2006, 7).³ 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” (Halley 2006, 363) with the kinds of laughs that do not just knock power off of its throne but that 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 aim for a more joyful politics, we note that a social movement fueled by outrage is always relevant and often warranted given the hardships that women continue to endure. The fact of domination ensures the need for what Halley calls dominance feminism. But dominance feminism is only one strand among many: US feminism is made up of varied approaches and histories. Indeed, the concern in Part One of this essay is with how feminism has been misrepresented, particularly with respect to the role of humor.

PART ONE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ROLE OF RIDICULE AND HUMOR IN SECOND AND THIRD WAVE FEMINISMS

Though effaced in traditional history, feminism has often employed the playful, subversive tactics of humor. Yet we must also remember why humor has too often not been viewed as a friend of the feminist move-

ment. In the 1960s and 70s, the ridicule against women was chronic, if often mild, and would easily turn more hateful and disdainful when directed at the movement. Susan Douglas points to the news coverage of the women's protests that seemed to always be reported with a bit of a smirk. Take for example her discussion of ABC news anchorman Howard K. Smith's opening for a 1970 lead story on what at the time was the largest protest for women's rights in our nation's history. "Three things have been difficult to tame," Smith asserted, "The ocean, fools, and women. We may soon be able to tame the ocean," he continued to insist, "but fools and women will take a little longer" (Douglas 1994, 163). As Douglas notes, "[t]his was the lead-in to ABC's coverage of the Women's Strike For Equality" celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of women's suffrage (1994, 163). To add insult to injury, the expert on women and the source of Smith's quote was then Vice President Spiro Agnew who, as Smith noted, was "wisely" out of the country. Looking back decades from the vantage point of Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* "double takes," one wonders where was Samantha Bee—our "senior female correspondent"—when we needed her to lambast Smith and the likes of CBS commentator Eric Sevareid, who began his coverage of the Women's Strike with an equally patronizing quip about how "no husband ever won an argument with his wife" (1994, 164). The use of humor to diffuse and dismiss serious political charges rather than confront the enemy directly as so-called manly men claim to do is guaranteed to kindle smoldering resentment, a general distrust of humor, and righteous outrage.⁴ As writer and comedian Kate Clinton notes: "Men have used humor against women so long—we know implicitly whose butt is the butt of their jokes—that we do not trust humor" (Barreca 1991, 179).

Happily, the practice of belittling women and their political claims does not always work, and even backfired against one of the major conservative plots of the 1960s. As popular historian Gail Collins tells the story, the refusal to treat women and women's issues as serious subjects of political debate made it seem unlikely that women would be included as a protected group in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Collins

2009, 75–81). Congresswoman Martha Griffiths, who pushed hard for including women in the legislation, backed away from the issue under the threat that their inclusion could derail the entire legislation. In fact it wasn't Griffiths or one of her progressive colleagues who eventually proposed that the amendment include women. It was proposed by the conservative congressman Howard Smith. The idea seems to have come to him from an interview on *Meet the Press*, when a female reporter urged him to add women to the list of minority groups to be protected under the equal opportunity clause of Title 7. After some strategic thought, Smith did indeed return to the House to propose the amendment but knowing full well that the idea of equal employment rights for women would strike many of his colleagues as ludicrous. As he later confessed to Griffiths, "Martha, I'll tell you the truth. I offered it as a joke" (2009, 81). The tactic of including women was meant to obstruct the legislation's passage through the sheer force of ridicule. A very cool Griffiths realized that the momentum for passage would be ruined unless she could find some way to counter the laughter coming from the floor of the House. In a clever retort she rose and spoke: "I presume that if there had been any necessity to point out that women were a second-class sex, the laughter would have proved it" (2009, 77). The legislation passed, with women included. In this turn around, we can surely say that the irony was sweet.

Like their cause, feminists have often been the targets of a venomous conservative ridicule. Subtle and not so subtle waves of mockery reinforce in ways that are difficult to establish as hard fact a cloud of associations that accompanies women, in their working lives, for example, creating climates that range from hostile to chilly and diminishing voices of protest before they are ever heard. 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!” (MSNBC 2009). 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 of second wave feminism seemed to fade, 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 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—all of whom used the comic stage to add voices that complicate our understanding of distinct linear feminist waves. Nancy Hewitt cautions “The script of feminist history—that each wave overwhelms and exceeds its predecessor—lends itself all too easily to whiggish interpretations of ever more radical, all-encompassing, and ideologically sophisticated movements” (Hewitt 2010, 5). Hewitt instead suggests the notion of “radio waves” that she sees “echo Elsa Barkley Brown’s description of gumbo ya ya—everyone talking at once—and remind us that feminist ideas are ‘in the air’ even when people are not actively listening” (2010, 8). Barr, to no surprise, often cites Lenny Bruce as her inspiration and thus does manage to emerge with very few other women to visibly show her the way (Barr 1984). Barr’s humor has the potential to empower women as it reflects traces of feminist and working-class anger. But 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 (Rowe

1997, 82). 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 15 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" (*Roseanne* 1988). 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," 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 "15 years of fight'n." Comedy, it seems, is warfare by other means. This is not your mother's maternalism.

It's hard to imagine Steinem ever emulating crotch-scratching, off-key anthem singing Roseanne Barr, but in part this is not about singular personalities but instead reflects the fact that feminists as a whole were not seen as having much of a sense of humor. Perhaps Roseanne's working-class identity matters most. Of course we are not trying to suggest 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 be different. However, a play on crass class distinctions did jettison 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 1990s and early 2000s. Roseanne of course mixes her feminism with a multitude of traditions of ongoing labor boycotts and picket lines like those that continue to mock patrons and scabs outside conference hotels or those that fill the state capitol in Madison, Wisconsin.⁵ At the same time, let's not ignore the already forgotten feminist humor that 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" (Steinem 1995, 367). 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 obscene, a feature of feminist humor that we will return to later. As part of broad-based political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, 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.

And yet, the shock value of feminist humor continues to go unnoticed and under-appreciated, thus diminishing its political effects. The "kings of comedy," like those of the academia, continued all too often to have been men. Like the hallways of academia, the comic stage has been a male domain in which the stage itself would have to be re-imagined and for good reason (see Horowitz 1997; Lavin 2004; Martin and Segrave 1986; Sochen 1991; Staples 1984; Warren 1994). This stage even when presided over by a lord of misrule is hardly innocent of power. We are not surprised to learn through the history of stand-up comedy and its precursor in vaudeville that men have long been considered the jester rather than women. When women did appear, they often took the form of stock types, not just the virgin or the whore, but also the shrew, as in the taming of—wherein the shrew is tamed through ridi-

cule as well as physical violence. Remember *The Honeymooners*' Jackie Gleason's frequent threat: "One of these days Alice, straight to the moon." It is not surprising then that years after Gloria Steinem's essay, when Margaret Cho did her own stand up bit on menstruating men, she pays tribute not to a witty second wave feminist, but to a male comic—Richard Pryor—as one of the souls of comedy. In *Notorious C.H.O.* (2002), Cho jokes that she didn't know if she would talk about menstruation "because it freaks out straight guys" but as she told her audience "I bet if Richard Pryor had a period he would talk about it." Whether or not Cho was aware of Steinem's infamous essay, her audience undoubtedly would have been better versed in Pryor's comic legacy. Whatever the reasons, this moment in comedy does not challenge as it might the erasure of feminist humor.

Claiming the comic stage as female is by no means an easy task. It has been hard to be seen as a funny woman—or at least not a Dumb Dora but as a wit with an incisive bite. Even as recently as 2004, while contemplating for *Ms.* the absence of a female joke teller, Gina Barreca insists that "[w]omen are funny," yet "the feminine tradition of humor, ubiquitous as it is, remained essentially hidden from the mainstream" (Barreca 2004). She sees a reflection of "the Tupperware mentality that sought to preserve humor by keeping away from the potentially hazardous male gaze . . . that could define women as foolish" (2004). For as many female comedians certainly know, it is not just feminists who are perceived as not being able to laugh. Women in general have not been viewed as intentionally funny even when they do funny things. As the old saw goes, you can be good or you can be funny, and women were meant to be good. To perform stand-up comedy—to be aggressively funny—is to violate the norms of femininity (Barreca 1991, 6; Russell 2002). Funny women were liable to be seen by men as buffoons, not comics—that is, funny for all the wrong reasons.

And so we are not surprised to learn that the history of stand-up comedy and its precursor in vaudeville finds men and not women the jokester. Indeed, as the documentary *Make 'Em Laugh: Funny Business* (Michael Kantor 2009, episode one) shows female comics were few and

far between for much of the twentieth century. The narrator of the film, Amy Sedaris, points out that “in the middle of the uptight Eisenhower era, you couldn’t be more out of the mainstream than to be a female comic,” to which comedian Lilly Tomlin follows up with the provocative remark, “that was an incredible frame of mind that society had—that a woman couldn’t tell jokes because it was too powerful; that to make an audience laugh meant that you had control over them in some way.” In the same documentary, Joan Rivers describes one of the first female comedians to gain any notoriety during this time, Phyllis Diller: “She had the anger that is now in all of us. She was the first one that there was such rage and such anger in her comedy; and that is what made it so funny because she spoke for all these women who were sitting home with five children and a man who didn’t work.” Joanne Gilbert and Danielle Russell both argue that the self-deprecation in Diller and Rivers operates as cultural critique, and that it is subversive (Gilbert 1997, 319; Russell 2002). Philip Auslander, on the other hand, critiques their humor, arguing that “whatever anger may be implicit in the self-deprecatory comedy of Diller and Rivers has been turned inward onto the female subject herself, rather than outward onto the social conditions” (Auslander 1993, 326–327). 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 Two. 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” (Barreca 1991, 178).

Fumerism does something more constructive than burn down the house, even as it exorcises any trace—perceived or real—of the schoolmarmish demeanor in our so-called dominance feminisms. We aim to pursue this corrective break from the moralizing posture for

feminist politics, but we are fully aware as well 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 (see Critchlow 2005; Enstad 1999; Freedman 2002; Ginzberg 1990; Kerber 1986; Norton 1980; Stansell 1987). Yet in our effort to foreground a feminism that does *not* brood over victimhood, and thereby inadvertently perpetuate images of female suffering and sacrificing, one that would shake up oppressive norms with a good and gutsy belly laugh, we may need to ditch at least temporarily all traces of the early nineteenth-century embrace of republican motherhood as well as any contemporary notion that somehow mother knows best. With the aim of smashing 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 (Douglas 1995, 284). Consider her famous line from her stand-up routine: “If the kids are alive at five, hey, I’ve done my job” (1995, 284). Cho goes so far as to entirely refuse maternal destiny, insisting, “I’m not a breeder. . . . I have no maternal instincts. . . . I ovulate sand. . . . When I see children I feel nothing” (Cho 2004). Barr and Cho, along with other female stand-ups, use humor to critique the politics of conventional motherhood and of moral respectability that this politics doesn’t always question. In solidarity with Kate Clinton, Gina Barreca, Janet Halley, and others we call on feminism to engage openly and playfully with humor and irony as weapons of choice in tribute to fumerism.

PART TWO: TOWARD A GENEALOGY OF FEMINIST HUMOR

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 histo-

ry'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,⁶ 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" (Douglas 1985, 95). 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 suggests that both the amusing joke and the shock of the obscene can under certain conditions function within a social movement to effect social change. That is, the aims of some humor are democratic and not reactionary nor for sheer fun. Such humor aims not to exclude but to include 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

suiting 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" (Henderson 2007, 135–136). 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 through suspending reified positions of identity. Similarly, we argue that feminist 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 (Barreca 1988, 15). The joy of feminist 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.

But then, what kind of ethics do the pleasures and subversions of comedy serve if they are not conventionally moral aims? Mintz argues that comedians' "complaints contain a critique of the gap between what is and what we believe should be" (Mintz 1985, 77). We understand this ethical "should," in contrast with a moral "ought," as opening the way toward 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, instead 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 (Bunch 1987, 244). 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, but it does so through an ethical comportment 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 (McWhorter 2009, 34). She explains that for Foucault, “[n]onconformity was not mere eccentricity; very often it was symptomatic of disease” (2009, 30). 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” (2009, 31). 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. This is because the reason that utters moral judgments is itself part of the power apparatus. This apparatus constructs reason as codes, standards, and habits that render some of us or some of our experiences abnormal, disgusting, or even obscene (Young 1990, 100). Perhaps also just as central 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* and yet key to remember this twinkle if one is not to miss the force of his project—a project, after all, designed to critique reason in part through odd juxtapositions and inversions (cf. Halley 2006, 200). 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 (Foucault 1994, xv).

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 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 (Huffer 2009, 210). 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 (May 2009). 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 have to 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 (Bordo 1999, 120; Ehrenreich, 1983: 41). 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 (Steinem 1995).

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* (Flynn 1991, 102–118). 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 stand-up comedians 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 ethics of eros and understands it as an ethic that fosters self-transformation through practices that undo the normal core of the self (Huffer 2009, 242). 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 (2009, 242–278, 279–280).

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 the Student Nonviolent

Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Panthers confronted in the 1960s—the Pig that caused Watts and the assassination of Fred Hampton (see Heath 1976; Hearst 2001; Joseph 2007; Marrable 2007). For, as white feminists have had to learn, race certainly can fuel the desire to burn down the house (Watkins 2002). Patricia Hill Collins' nuanced development of identity politics pinpoints the multiple variables of domination and prepares for third wave feminism through her contributions to intersectionality theory (Collins 1991, 201–238). Does our call for feminism converge with this understanding of multiple dimensions of power that we find in theories of intersectionality or are these theories' contributions 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 suppressed 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. 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 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 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 ready-made 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, multidimensional, but nonetheless 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 on 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 make possible new ones no longer based so sternly on taxonomies of race, class, gender, or sexuality and the toxic emotions of fear and resentment that can reinforce their normalizing power. The contagious laughter of Sykes' black lesbian humor jolts white heteros from their normative scripts.

Consider Sykes' particular way of declaring that it is “harder to be gay than it is to be black” (Sykes 2009b). 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” (2009b). 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*" (2009b). Through mocking narratives of gay development, Sykes allows us to re-imagine 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 or 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."⁷ Sykes sidesteps the downside of the victim sweepstakes, that counterproductive 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, she does not challenge this power directly but she does engage, subvert, and obliquely oppose 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 a fervor of insubordination that converts the toxic affects of ordinary politics into an edgy and not entirely angry-less and certainly not an entirely innocent kind of joy. 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 (Willett 2008).

Similarly, Margaret Cho encompasses everything that Collins understands as intersectionality and then some. In *Notorious C.H.O.*, 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"

(Fraiberg 1994, 324). 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 overplaying 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 lesbians—but really butch, in her words, “the kind that roll their own tampons” (Cho 2008) and that is why she wants to know where is her parade, you know for “Slut Pride” (Cho 2002). 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.

As our brief history of humor in Part One suggests, a significant advantage of our genealogical method is that it brings history to bear on ethical and political projects. This history does not aim to re-invoke standard genres of storytelling 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 (Glaude 2008, 66–88). 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” (2008, 80). 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 (Shorto 2010, 32–39, 46–47), 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” (Sykes 2009a). 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” (Russell 2002). When we recognize ourselves in the comic, they function as well, as Mintz suggests, as our “comic spokesmen” (Mintz 1985, 74). 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 USA” as “jagged pieces to the puzzle of both the song and the subjects’ social history” (Cowie and Boehm 2006, 354). So too, female 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. 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” (Sykes 2009b). 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 see 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 (Sykes 2009b).

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” (2009b). 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” (2009b). 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 (Steele 1997, 613–629). Steele speculates that anxiety associated with the 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 re-appropriate the energy and eros from systems of domination. The seriously erotic politics of laughter burns down by bringing down the house.

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NOTES

1. See the 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. See also <<http://web.mit.edu/sgrp>> following the link "Materials

concerning women and minorities in philosophy” for more material on this topic.

3. For an account of an erotic politics that traces back to Audre Lorde, see Willett (2008, 38).
4. Lest one think that the era of championing “manly men” is over, see Mansfield (2006).
5. 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 original essay, public employees in the state of Wisconsin were protesting Governor Scott Walker, who is now facing a possible recall election after his failed attempt to pass legislation that would cripple their efforts at collective bargaining.
6. 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 feminism. 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* (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” (Finney 1994, 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 Mintz (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 (1993, 320–321). After all, as Joanne Gilbert insists, “[h]ierarchy is essential to most humor.” See Gilbert (1997, 324). This research should leave us wary that despite its understandable appeal for marginalized groups, comedy may reinvolve 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.

7. 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” Nietzsche (1968, 483).

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