

## Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity, and Cultural Critique

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*Stand-up comedy is a powerful form of autobiographical performance unique in its simultaneous construction of personal identity and cultural critique. This essay looks at the humor of comics Phyllis Diller and Roseanne Barr in order to explore the potentially subversive use of self-deprecation and to analyze the way these comics construct themselves and others as butts of jokes. Keywords: Marginality, Humor, Feminism, Identity, Barr, Diller*

When I was performing stand-up comedy in New York in the mid-eighties, I was told several times by Comedy Club owners that I had too happy a childhood to be a stand-up comic. What they meant was that I was not foregrounding the trendy, angst-driven humor that characterized the acts of so many of my comedic colleagues. In essence, I was being told that I was not performing enough autobiography. And yet, even amidst the topical musings and witty oneliners, I was engaged in autobiographical performance. Like any comic, I was performing a version of myself that suited the audience and the occasion. What was it that made club owners perceive the performance of personal pain and anger as more "authentic" than the performance of humorous anecdotes about family members?

Performing autobiography is, in one sense, something we all do every day. When creating a staged, public autobiographical performance, however, we select bits and pieces of ourselves to share with an audience. In the genre of stand-up comedy, performers present a pastiche of observations and characters both real and imagined. At bottom, however, is the autobiographical self—a multifaceted, protean entity that encompasses both onstage and offstage personae. Stand-up comics simultaneously perform self and culture, offering an often acerbic social critique sanctioned as entertainment because it is articulated in a comedic context. Perhaps because of this cultural critique, stand-up comedy as a unique and powerful autobiographical form has been largely overlooked in the scholarship on autobiographical performance.

Female comics provide particularly interesting examples of autobiographical performance. Because they represent a group marginalized by the dominant (male) culture, female comics rhetorically construct and perform their marginality onstage. In so doing, they perform both self and culture, exemplifying for audiences the inevitable interdependence between personal and social identities. Because of the "us against them" nature of marginal humor (humor performed by any marginal group, e.g., African-American, gay/lesbian, Jewish comics etc.), marginal comics often construct themselves as victims. In so doing, however, they may subvert their own status by embodying the potential power of powerlessness. Their social critique is potent and, because it is offered in a comedic context, safe from retribution as well.

In this sense, female comics, like so many others, perform their marginality in an act simultaneously oppressive (by using demeaning stereotypes) and transgressive (by interrogating those very stereotypes through humorous discourse). In order to explore the potentially subversive use of self-deprecation and the rhetorical construction of victims and butts of jokes, this essay examines the politics of "performing marginality" by focusing on the humor of comics Phyllis Diller and Roseanne Barr.

### Performing Identity

In the context of female comic performance, the issue of women's use of self-deprecatory humor appears repeatedly (e.g., Auslander Barreca; *Snow White*, Dolan; Martin & Segrave), yet is frequently subject to oversimplified, often myopic analysis. Whether they are writing about female comics for academic or popular audiences, critics unanimously condemn women's use of self-deprecatory humor as negative, suggesting that it merely reinforces stereotypes, reinscribing patriarchy in the process.

Although some of these same critics explain that female comics who used self-deprecatory humor in the past can be forgiven because this was their only means of defense given sociocultural parameters (e.g., Auslander, J. Levine, Martin & Segrave), others view self-deprecatory humor as the antithesis of feminism. Barreca for example, asserts that "nearly all women's humor is in some way feminist humor (with the exception of those early, self-deprecating 'I'm so ugly . . .' jokes associated with the very earliest comedians)" yet adds almost immediately that "anytime a woman breaks through a barrier set by society, she's making a feminist gesture of a sort, and every time a woman laughs, she's breaking through a barrier" (*Snow White* 182). In the above statements, Barreca succinctly articulates the paradox apparent in much "feminist" criticism, known in some circles as the "Madonna question": power—ostensibly obtained by whatever means necessary—is desirable, yet self-objectification as a means of obtaining power (whether through Diller's self-deprecatory humor or Madonna's manipulation of sexual representation) is unacceptable.

This paradox is central to feminist, Marxist and postmodern criticism; indeed, when critiquing cultural representation—from pornography to MTV videos, from prize-winning "literature" to weekly sitcoms—the issue of power—where it resides and how it is negotiated—is key. Is Madonna the ultimate feminist, completely in control of her economic resources, or is she a mere tool of the patriarchy, perpetuating misogynistic stereotypes? And, similarly, is a female comic who uses self-deprecatory humor insidiously subverting the status quo or affirming oppressive cultural beliefs?

Dolan notes that "At last, women have turned comic perspective outward, away from dingbat and self-deprecatory humor, toward comment on their world." Similarly, Auslander maintains:

Clearly, 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 that made it necessary for Diller and Rivers to personify themselves in this way in order to have successful careers as comics. (327)

The above critics fail to consider that self-deprecatory humor may be construed as

cultural critique. Ironically, many critics of humor seem to forget that they are analyzing *jokes*—humorous discourse that reminds the audience not to take it (or themselves) seriously with every punchline. Indeed, humor is a rhetoric unique in its ability to undermine its own power with the “only joking” disclaimer. Critics, especially those most adamantly opposed to self-deprecatory humor, however, appear to overlook the fact that *these are the jokes, folks!* An excellent illustration of this point can be found in the performances and careers of Phyllis Diller and Roseanne Barr.

### *The “Whiner”: Phyllis Diller*

Although Diller devoted a fair amount of her material over the years to putdowns of her fictitious husband, Fang, as well as of other women, it is always the use of self-deprecatory humor for which she is noted. The critics who view Diller only as a comic limited to self-deprecatory humor, internalizing anger in an attempt to please patriarchy (e.g., Auslander; Barreca, *Snow White*; Martin & Segrave, Merrill) fail to recognize that all of Diller’s jokes about her appearance were precisely that—jokes. Diller never truly believed she was grossly unattractive, but donned a fright wig to amuse audiences. Neither did she ever feel flat-chested, but in fact, had breast reduction surgery.

Although initially her self-deprecatory material may appear demeaning (toward herself and/or women in general), a closer scrutiny reveals that Diller’s jokes accomplish what all marginal humor accomplishes—they call cultural values into question by lampooning them. Whether she mocks her domestic routine of putting ironing in the refrigerator and hanging a turkey out the window or her newly reconstructed appearance, Diller always mocks society as well. From being on the “fourteenth year of a ten-day beauty plan” to being “. . . so wrinkled I could screw my hats on,” Diller has used herself as the butt to make fun of culture at large. Through self-deprecatory material, a comic ridicules the society that creates ideals for appearance and behavior as well as individuals who subscribe to those standards. Diller believes that even early in her career she was a champion of housewives because she said what “they wanted to say but couldn’t” (qtd. in Martin & Segrave 343).

Diller is still performing self-deprecatory material. She tells jokes about her many facelifts, illustrating that although she may have invested a great deal in cosmetic surgery, she maintains the ability to laugh at herself and—by extension—the culture which created facelifts. She is also speaking the unspeakable. Cosmetic surgery is not talked about precisely because the work women do to achieve a “youthful” and “feminine” appearance is supposed to be invisible. She is, in essence, laughing at the human condition and its frailty and foibles (as well as at the cosmetic surgery industry for its “solution” to aging). Indeed, self-deprecatory humor can be viewed as subversive if given more than a cursory interpretation. As Walker maintains, “Self-deprecation is ingratiating rather than aggressive; it acknowledges the opinion of the dominant culture—even *appears* to confirm it—and allows the speaker or writer to participate in the humorous process without alienating the members of the majority” (emphasis added) (*A Very Serious Thing* 123). Apparently unaware of its subversive potential, critics continue to dismiss self-deprecatory humor as negative.

Comics themselves are aware of the bad reputation this type of humor has. Diller explains:

Of course, I was accused of being self-deprecatory. I've got to be . . . Comedy is tragedy revisited or hostility. It is mock hostility, of course, or it would be ugly. . . . But I would come out on stage and put everybody down—myself, the children, the lady next door, the cops. Everybody has got to be bad. See, if everything is good, you've got Grace Kelly and that's not funny. (qtd. in Martin & Segrave 341)

What Diller is saying is something that all performers know—use what *works!* Hence, the real question to be asked here is not, “Why do female comics use self-deprecatory humor?” but “What is it about contemporary American culture that makes this type of marginal humor “work” with diverse audiences?”

Has Diller been a feminist all of these years? *She* thinks so! Her entrance into the world of professional stand-up comedy was economically motivated—she needed to support her five children. Emulating male role models, particularly Bob Hope, she entered a male-dominated profession and within the male-defined parameters of stand-up comedy, told jokes that she knew would “work,” making millions of dollars in the process. In fact, she is still going strong. Yet, many critics do not consider Diller's brand of comedy “feminist.”

#### *The “Bitch”:* Roseanne Barr

They do, however, accord that “privilege” to Roseanne Barr. Like Diller, Barr was a “housewife.” Unhappy with her blue-collar surroundings, in the early eighties she began to vent her anger onstage in vitriolic stand-up monologues. Her 1987 HBO special, *The Roseanne Barr Show*, launched what has now become a multi-million dollar career, replete with film, books, and one of the most popular shows on television during its nine-season run. Indeed, Barr is to the “Bitch” persona what Diller is to the “Whiner” persona.<sup>1</sup> Barr has always highlighted her anger in her comedy, yet she acknowledges Diller's legacy. In a 1993 *Playboy* interview along with then husband, Tom Arnold, Barr describes her humor:

Instead of espousing political theory I changed it into women's point-of-view jokes. But it wasn't just role reversal. I didn't want to have a husband named Fang, because that had already been done—and very well. Men became the butt of my jokes, only I tried not to be mean-spirited. I joked about how we women thought instead of how we looked, about our hypocrisy. As for packaging, I used the cover of being everyone's fat mother, fat neighbor. I used a funny voice. (68)

In the above statements, Barr contradicts herself, both claiming not to base jokes on female appearance and immediately admitting that her own weight and voice are the features that made her safe and funny.

As Tom Arnold notes, “If an insecure man looks at Roseanne, instead of having to deal with who she is, he says, ‘She's crazy and she's fat.’ That way he doesn't have to deal with the fact that she's powerful, intelligent and brilliant” (68). Using her weight, Barr objectifies herself. If others dehumanize her—see her as a “thing”—then they will not be threatened and will be able to laugh. In the *Playboy* interview, Barr complains:

I've talked about this stuff [feminism] to the media for years, but it never gets printed. The media only want to hear about how much I eat because it's threatening to read about a

woman who has a vision and a fucking brain. . . . I'd like it to be about my body of work,  
not just my body. (67)

And yet, she makes "it" (her act) about her body. Auslander contends that "Whereas the Diller and Rivers personae make their own supposed physical unattractiveness a source of humor, Barr insists on her right to be overweight, making those who are not the object of her humor" (327).

To illustrate his point, Auslander quotes material from Barr's 1987 special: "If you're fat, just like *be* fat and shut up. And if you're thin—fuck you!" By failing to see the way in which Barr self-objectifies in order to tell the preceding joke, Auslander, like so many others, mistakes anger for feminism. Barr considers herself a feminist. But does this make her humor "feminist humor?" And why does the overt anger that she and other so-called "feminist" comics use seem to fuel critics' desire to apply this label? Clearly, Barr is only able to perform the "if you're thin—fuck you!" punchline because she is speaking as someone who is not thin. She tells "fat" people simply to "shut up," and saves her real venom for the "thin." True, she never says, "I'm so fat that . . .," but does she really self-objectify less than Diller? Is the internal/external anger binary truly applicable?

In their acts, Diller and Barr talk about themselves, men and the comedy of the quotidian. They both perform lines about male vs. female driving habits. They both ridicule domestic tasks. They both offer social critique in the form of stand-up comedy. Yet Barr is often considered a "feminist" comic and Diller is usually acknowledged as a precursor, forgiven for doing the best that she could. Both academic and popular critics lack a sense of cultural history when they impose nineties feminist standards on sixties feminist practices. The message seems to be: if Diller made fun of herself, then she did not perform "feminist" humor because to be a true feminist by contemporary standards requires overt rather than subtle anger.

Auslander cites Barr's "Suck my dick!" line, calling it an example of "the comic woman's most overt challenge to phallocentrism . . . humor that altogether usurps the traditional male prerogative" (330).<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging that the line also functions as a "dick joke" designed to shock the audience, Auslander explains:

By claiming to possess a metaphoric penis . . . [Roseanne] claims her right to the comic stage and challenges the cultural values that assert that women are not supposed to be aggressive and funny, are not supposed to have access to the power that humor represents. (330)

Barr's line is both an effective appropriation and a subversion of a standard "dick joke." Most critics would probably consider this an example of "feminist" humor.

Another example of Barr's humor, however, is a line not performed in the 1987 special. Noting that "It's gonna piss everybody off," she includes it in the *Playboy* interview at Tom's urging: "I used to be a feminist, until the first time Tom grabbed me by the hair, threw me up against the wall and fucked me in the ass." After a brief interchange with Tom, she adds, "That's every guy's fantasy—that his wiener saved your life" (67). Clearly, critics who condemn female comics' use of self-deprecation would likely be horrified at the above joke. To be horrified, however, is to fail to recognize it as a joke. By articulating these words in a humorous context, Barr is subverting the status quo. She is not saying that all a woman needs to be happy is to

be sexually dominated and abused by a man. On the contrary, she is lampooning this belief.

In the *Playboy* interview, Barr asserts that "Everything comics do is to expose hypocrisy and dishonesty" (60). And this is exactly what she accomplishes in the "wall" joke. She is not advocating or valorizing violence against women. Neither is she suggesting that becoming a "real" woman requires disavowing feminist ideology. Rather, she seems to be asking, "Can you believe women who drop their best friends when a guy calls for a date?" or, in this case, "who drop their ideology for a good time?" Barr clarifies her view by adding the lines about "every man's fantasy." She makes explicit her intent—to ridicule the people who believe that a woman's place is on the end of a man's penis. And she does this constantly, describing it as "telling the truth—a revolutionary act" (67). In this sense, the "wall" joke is a case of the ends justifying the means. "*How* I got there is not the issue," Barr seems to say, "but *that* I got there."

On her second *Tonight Show* appearance, Barr performed the following material:

Men are here for one reason only: to serve me, to bring back food and build a comfortable hive for me and my larvae, to willingly move on when it's time for a younger drone with more stamina. Oh, call me old-fashioned. (67)

Barr does not perceive any of her material to be sexist toward either gender. In the above lines, she mocks traditional sex roles by parodying domesticity with a bawdy spin. The "queen bee" metaphor is a classic symbol of female power. And the punchline, "Oh, call me old-fashioned" reminds the audience that it is precisely "old-fashioned" mores that are being mocked, and hence challenged, through humor.

Does Barr's blatant attack on hegemonic culture make her humor *more* "feminist" than Diller's? And what about Barr's material that puts down specific groups of women like those with eating disorders? Is her 1987 line "Hey—I eat the same amount of food that *you* eat—I just don't *puke* when I'm done!" affirming women's experience or is she simply relentless in her quest to unmask hypocrisy wherever it resides? Is she the quintessential feminist who will use *whatever means necessary* to retain power? Has Barr taken her metaphorical penis too literally? Certain critics would undoubtedly delight in relegating her "non-feminist" material to the "male" model she must emulate in order to succeed within the genre of stand-up comedy.

Does this mean that in order to perform stand-up comedy successfully in America today, a comic must assume "male" characteristics? Clearly, hard and fast "male" and "female" distinctions usually preclude rather than encourage further discussion and investigation. Instead of making the oversimplistic assessment that all humor is inherently aggressive and therefore, inherently male, we need to consider the nature of the subject-object relationship fundamental to all humor.

### Performing Culture: The Politics of Performing Marginality

#### *Humor and Objectification*

With the exception of wordplay and some types of observational humor, there is no "equal opportunity" humor. Some individual, group or institution is always the target of humor, especially marginal humor. Comics deal with generalizations, with

*stereotypes*. Comics say, "Women are . . ." or "Men are . . ." or "Construction workers are . . ." or "Doctors are . . ." Comics may even say "Comics are . . ." and "Audiences are . . ." The "All" before the subject is implicit—comics speak in absolutes. Stereotypes are objectifications. Yet, scholars of marginal humor believe that using the type in order to explode the type may be considered a subversive act (e.g., Boskin; Dorinson; L. Levine; Mintz; Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*). As Lawrence Levine explains:

Marginal groups often embraced the stereotype of themselves in a manner designed not to assimilate it but to smother it. . . . To tell jokes containing the stereotype was not invariably to accept it but frequently to laugh at it, to strip it naked, to expose it to scrutiny. (336)

Stereotypes are part of the currency of stand-up comedy. Comics constantly type themselves and their targets. Are they attempting to educate their audiences by caricature or are they simply using what "works" in order to get laughs and, ultimately, dollars? And, more importantly, what is it about stereotypes that "works" for most audiences? Why do some of the same audience members find Diller's self-deprecatory digs and Barr's acerbic critique of patriarchy equally amusing?

The link between stereotypes and objectification is well-documented in scholarship from numerous academic fields, including Communication, English, Sociology and Women's Studies. Said contends that when the "other" is culturally represented not only as different but as foreign—a "thing" to be despised and feared, the result is a systematic objectification, devaluation and dehumanization of the "other." Being dehumanized begins with allowing someone else to define who we are (and who we are not). According to many feminist theorists, avoiding or escaping such domination requires claiming or reclaiming subjectivity. Modleski notes that the "most useful" type of criticism is that which ". . . analyzes male power, male hegemony, with a concern for the effects of this power *on the female subject* and with an awareness of how frequently male subjectivity works to appropriate "femininity" while oppressing women" (7). To experience subjectivity, Modleski (and others) imply, is to eschew oppression. Discussing her concept of "feminist" humor, Merrill contends that "to refuse to see the 'humor' in one's own victimization as the 'butt' of the joke or the 'object' of ridicule, while seizing and redefining the apparatus of comic perspective so that it is inclusive of women's experience is a necessary and powerful gesture of self-definition" (279–280).

The performances of female comics share characteristics with the humor performed by members of other marginalized groups such as African-American, gay/lesbian and Jewish comics. The issue of subjectivity is central to marginality. Specifically, critical discussions of "feminist" humor designate this category as one which affirms women's experience and grants them subjectivity. What these discussions fail to recognize is that this subjectivity is only won at the expense of another's subjectivity—usually a male's.

Indeed, objectification is at the heart of stand-up comedy. By performing in a public space, the comic is exposed, made vulnerable before the audience. With every action, every utterance, she calls attention to herself—as art, as entertainment, as commodity. Sometimes, she makes herself the butt of her jokes (Diller); at other times, she targets individuals or groups, reducing them to stereotypes (Barr). The audience identifies—sometimes with the comic, sometimes with the target (indeed, sometimes the audience *is* the target). Yet in marginal humor, no subject-subject

relationship exists. Within the context of marginal humor, *to treat someone comically is to deny subjectivity*. In order to make someone the “target” or “butt” of a joke, it is necessary to make that person a thing, an object; only then is it permissible to laugh at him/her. By laughing *at* someone else, we elevate ourselves; this is the classic “superiority” theory of laughter and humor conceived by Plato, extended by Aristotle and ultimately developed most fully by Hobbes (Morreal 19).<sup>3</sup> As Boskin explains:

Because of its aggressive aspect, humor is one of the most effective weapons in the repertory of the human mind. It was for this reason that Thomas Hobbes conceived of laughter in relation to power . . . Hobbes offered an explanation of social rivalry. The passion of laughter was nothing, he argued, save the “sudden glory” emanating from the realization of “some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others,” or with our own former position. (256)

This is the essence of “putdown” humor. Putting the “object” or butt of a joke “down” raises the subject or teller of the joke “up.”

Because of the objectification inherent in and necessary for humor to occur, even when the audience identifies with a comic taking a literal or figurative pratfall, the identification is with the “object” status of the comic—the “butt” of the joke. If the audience identifies with the comic as joketeller, the audience, like the comic, is placed in a subject position only at the expense of the object. In order for a joke to “work,” the audience must “get it.” And in order to “get it,” identification or “dis-identification” (i.e., identifying and immediately dismissing the identification) must occur—the audience must see itself in order to construct its identity as either subject or object.

If the inferiority/superiority dichotomy undergirds all marginal humor, then the use of the “master’s tools” is inevitable. This “turnabout is fair play” rhetoric must be recognized as such before claims for a humor which escapes “traditional” or “male” constraints can be made. Hierarchy is essential to most humor. And historically, because they have been perceived as powerless, women have been objectified through humor as in other forms of cultural representation (Barreca, *Last Laughs*). Mellencamp notes that, “In his study of jokes, particularly tendentious or obscene jokes, Freud assigns woman to the place of object between two male subjects” (91). From Legman’s assertion that “. . . there is no place in it [the ‘dirty joke’] for women except as the butt” (qtd. in Mitchell 23) to countless male comics’ performance of “dick jokes” which objectify women, humor in American culture has traditionally depicted women as objects.

Film theorist Laura Mulvey maintains that in traditional cultural representation, “women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (436). Women have also typically connoted *to-be-laughed-at-ness*. Perhaps Mulvey’s notion of the “male gaze” can be applied to the “male guffaw,” a means of denuding women of dimensionality, of constructing them as mere objects of scorn and derision, as “the unlaughing at which men laugh” (Barreca, *Last Laughs* 15).

A “feminist” humor, suggests Merrill, is one which “posits a female spectator” (279). Throughout her discussion, Merrill, like many feminist critics, seems to equate “female” with “feminist.” Phyllis Schlafly is a female spectator, but probably not the one Merrill has in mind. When female comics disparage other women in their acts, is



it because they are *not* positing a female spectator but, having internalized patriarchal values, are playing to an audience of “universal males” (i.e., constructing a “male” spectator)? Is denying male subjectivity the only way to posit a female spectator? Might comics of either gender posit a “feminist” spectator (of either gender)?

Auslander contends that during their acts, female comics create a “community” with female audience members and that:

In the hands of the most skilled practitioners this community becomes a strategic community, a moment at which a shared subjectivity that excludes men is created under our very noses . . . placing the men in the audience in the position women have traditionally occupied as comedy spectators . . . the articulation of the comedian’s performance as cultural text . . . can produce circumstances within the context of the performance that run counter to the social norm, circumstances in which women may find a sense of empowerment through a sense of shared subjectivity. (321)

This description of female comics and female audience members exemplifies the subject-object paradox of marginal humor. For men to assume the traditional “woman’s” position necessitates a loss of male subjectivity. Hence, when Anita Wise advocates “contraceptive beer” as “something we women could be sure you [men] were taking,” when Lizz Winstead says that “Every time I see a guy around forty in a Corvette, I just want to scream out, ‘Sorry about your penis!’” or even when Rita Rudner observes that men like to barbecue because “they’ll only cook if danger’s involved,” the male is objectified as the target of humor.

Whether female comics truly subvert patriarchal norms through their discourse is, of course, contingent upon audience interpretation. Certainly, female comics *invert* the “traditional” stand-up comedy scenario to the extent that male and female exchange subject-object positions as the hierarchy is turned upside down. In this configuration, female comics are just as capable of insults as their male counterparts. Rather than construct a feminist versus sexist humor dichotomy, therefore, it seems more appropriate to examine humor in terms of female versus male “point of view” jokes.<sup>4</sup> And rather than limit discussion to issues of gender, it is important to explore the larger category of marginal humor.

### *Self-deprecation and Subversion*

Most studies of marginal humor focus on Jewish and/or African-American humor, frequently noting the similarity of these two traditions. As Lawrence Levine suggests, “the need to laugh at our enemies, our situation, ourselves, is a common one, but it often exists the most urgently in those who exert the least power over their immediate environment; in those who have the most objective reasons for feelings of hopelessness” (300).

A primary feature of marginal humor is the use of self-deprecation. As Boskin and Dorinson observe, “Mocking the features ascribed to them by outsiders has become one of the most effective ethnic infusions into national humor, particularly by Afro-Americans and Jews” (116–117). Abrahams illustrates the reason for self-deprecation in the tradition of Jewish humor:

. . . one can almost see how a witty Jewish man carefully and cautiously takes a sharp dagger out of his enemy’s hands, sharpens it so that it can split a hair in mid-air, polishes it

so that it shines brightly, stabs himself with it, then returns it gallantly to the anti-Semite with the silent reproach: Now see whether you can do half so well. . . . It is as if the Jew tells his enemies: You do not need to attack us. We can do that ourselves—and even better. But we can take it and we will come out all right. (qtd. in L. Levine 336)

Self-deprecation may also be subversive. Discussing the humor of African-American comics, Dorinson and Boskin maintain, “Inwardly masochistic, indeed tragic, externally aggressive, even acrimonious. . . . Theirs is the connection between subserviency and humor and the use of humor to overturn roles and position” (174). In this way, Dorinson and Boskin suggest, jokes function as the Freudian notion of “mini-rebellions” (176).

Lincoln maintains that oppressed groups have three options: acceptance, avoidance and aggression (qtd. in Dorinson & Boskin 181). Clearly, marginal humor is an aggressive response to domination. Although it is not always overt, the aggression in marginal humor may be discerned as cultural critique. Discussing self-deprecation as “a major subversive device of the domestic humor of the 1940s and 1950s,” Walker asserts that “By denigrating her own ability to live up to societal standards of domestic excellence, she appears to take the blame for her failure, and thus to accede to those standards; but the underlying message is that the standards—and those who seek to enforce them—are at fault” (*American Humor* 125–126).

Indeed, when self-deprecation is strategic, its subversive effect may be to send a subtle double message, at times becoming a type of supplication, an embodiment of the power of powerlessness.

Marginal humor may also be overtly aggressive, launching blatant attacks on the dominant culture for the entertainment of the dominant culture. African-American comic Dick Gregory noted the irony of this situation in the sixties: “I’m getting \$5000 a week—for saying the same things out loud I used to say under my breath” (qtd. in L. Levine 361). Boskin maintains that “American humor of the twentieth century is the humor of the urban, alienated minority groups whose experience has largely been that of outsiders” (49). Yet, it is precisely this alienation—the “outsider within” status—that affords marginalized individuals a unique vantage point and produces a unique humor.<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, humor created by women has been compared to that of other marginalized groups. Walker maintains that the humor of women:

employs the same subversive strategies as does the humor of racial and ethnic minorities, camouflaging with laughter the pain of the outsider who is denied access to power and must live by someone else’s rules. Yet the situation of women is more complex because of their close involvement with members of the dominant group, which has blurred the boundaries between “us” and “them.” (*A Very Serious Thing* 137–138)

Indeed, the us/them distinction is central to marginal humor as it creates victims and butts—not necessarily one and the same.

As discussed earlier, the self-deprecatory humor often employed by comics like Diller and other marginalized individuals may send a double message: first, its objectifying use of reductive stereotypes may fuel the fire of racist, sexist or other “ist” rhetoric; the less overt message, however, may be construed as a subversive critique of social norms and cultural representation. Because of the first message, self-deprecatory humor is a “safe” and effective means of both entertainment and

social control. Hence, when Diller makes fun of her own physical appearance—her fictive self—audiences laugh at her; Diller's purely autobiographical self, however, lampoons the society which sets unattainable standards of female beauty—standards she simultaneously acknowledges as powerful forces in her own physical reconstruction.

Self-deprecation is safe entertainment because it does not abuse or offend the audience—in fact, it *appears* to reaffirm hegemonic values. It, like all marginal humor, is effective social control because it accomplishes what professional fools have always accomplished—critique with impunity—impunity granted, of course, by the status quo. Ironically, in the context of public comic performance, the status quo is perpetuated because it has institutionally “allowed” a potentially subversive discourse to be voiced.<sup>6</sup>

### *Victims and Butts*

Whether the victim is the same as the butt in marginal humor depends entirely upon audience identification and interpretation. In fact, when comics play the victim—whether of an individual or of society—they do what professional fools have always done—become “foolmakers.” Indeed, being “wise enough to play the fool” suggests the ability to make others the butt or target of humor in a variety of ways not always immediately apparent. Even overtly hostile marginal humor does not necessarily construct victim and butt as one and the same.

In Barr's “wall” joke, for instance, she may appear to be both the victim of domination and abuse by her husband and the butt of the joke—the joke being her own ideological sell-out. Another possibility is to see Barr as victim and all feminists, even all women as the butt—easily placated by a good time. A final interpretation, however, places women, specifically feminists, as victims and American culture itself as the butt. Barr may be saying that any society that actually finds this (a woman being raped—ideologically or otherwise) natural and appropriate needs to have its collective unconscious radically interrogated. It is important to remember, however, that Barr offers this critique in a comedic context. Like all jokes, this one depends upon audience interpretation to determine its effect. And like all jokes, the extent to which this one “works” determines its inclusion in the comic's act.

The above discussion is not meant to suggest that, in marginal humor, victim and butt are never the same. Although the victim/butt dichotomy is at the heart of the “us against them” nature of marginal humor, only audience identification can designate victims and butts. Hence, if a male in Barr's audience feels victimized by her impotence jokes, he can conceivably construct himself as both victim and butt of the jokes. Indeed, it seems that the more overtly hostile the humor (e.g., much material performed by comics assuming the “bitch” posture), the more clearly victim and butt are distinguished or conflated. A direct attack appears strategic and certainly less ambiguous than the more sophisticated social critique embedded in other forms of humor.

Thus, when “bitch” comic Judy Tenuta calls Madonna “. . . a mattress with a microphone” or tells a male audience member that she was “lookin’ for someone a little higher up on the food chain,” victims and butts are easily seen as one and the same. When “whiner” comic, Henriette Mantel says that she only wants to be unplugged from life support after getting “down to a size eight,” however, Mantel

may be seen as the victim and the society which promotes this type of thinking as the butt. Even Diller's use of self-deprecation can be seen as much more than merely self-ridicule. By self-scapegoating, Diller and other "whiner" comics substitute self for society; the social critique is, therefore, *implicit* rather than *explicit*. Indeed, it is precisely the failure of many feminist critics to recognize the *difference* between victims and butts that prevents them from viewing self-deprecation as a potentially subversive rhetoric.

What are the politics of performing marginality? They are social. They are economic. They are rhetorical. When a female comic performs her marginality, is she challenging the existing power structure? Yes. By the very act of standing onstage speaking about any topic and getting paid, a female comic is empowered rhetorically and economically—by most standards, a "feminist" triumph. Does her behavior change existing power structures in any way? Perhaps not visibly—not immediately. No single joke is likely to precipitate the decline of prevailing ideologies. Still, given the inherently subversive power of humor, jokes may be a place to begin.

### Conclusion

Focusing on the acts of Phyllis Diller and Roseanne Barr, this essay has discussed the powerful social critique inherent in the construction and performance of comedic identity. Considering the potentially subversive use of self-deprecation and the rhetorical construction of victims and butts helps us see that both Diller and Barr employ multiple selves onstage in order to speak the unspeakable. When Diller mocks her many facelifts or Barr insists on her right to be overweight, cultural taboos are broken. The culture that says women should be seen (and seen as attractive) and not heard is comedically castigated, and in this topsy-turvy universe, women emerge triumphant. Using self-deprecation along with other strategies in their rhetorical arsenal, Diller, Barr, and many other female comics engage in a powerful autobiographical performance of personal identity and cultural criticism. Although these performers may always be found wanting according to various notions of the ideal female or even the ideal feminist, perhaps this says more about the narrow and circumscribed space within which women are expected/permitted to speak as authors of their own stories than about the limitations of performance. By transgressing boundaries and inviting women to be the laughers rather than the laughed-at, they are attacking hegemonic power and privilege in the public sphere.

The work of female stand-up comics is a significant form of autobiographical performance. In the tradition of one-person shows and predating performance art, stand-up comedy, like both of these forms, allows the performer to perform both self and culture—to embody the interconnections and contradictions that such autobiographical performance necessarily entails. Stand-up comedy employs autobiography almost exclusively in the service of social critique. Female comics negotiate myriad selves as they commodify both insights and insults, reminding audiences that to be human is to be involved in power relationships—a reality that shapes and defines who we are, what we believe and even why we laugh. And because it is always framed comedically, female comic performance, like all humor, simultaneously advances agendas and disavows its own rhetorical potency.

In my own stand-up performances, whether I recounted actual events in my life

was not a primary concern. I simply did what all comics do—I created an onstage persona that was both me and not me—an “autobiographical” self that was at once cultural construction and cultural critic, participant and observer, performer and performed.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For further investigation of the five comedic postures assumed by contemporary female comics—the kid, bawd, bitch, whiner, and reporter—see Gilbert’s “Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender and Social Control.”

<sup>2</sup>The line is from Barr’s 1987 HBO Special: “Like a lot of people come up to me all the time. . . . They go, ‘. . . Roseanne, you’re not very feminine,’ . . . So I say, ‘Well suck my dick!’”

<sup>3</sup>Morreall maintains that the Superiority Theory, popular for over 2,000 years, does not account for many types and instances of humor. The Relief Theory developed by Freud, Morreall suggests, is limited as well. The Incongruity Theory currently in vogue, Morreall asserts, “seems more promising than its two competitors, simply because it attempts to characterize the formal object of amusement” (6). In the context of marginal humor, however, Superiority Theory is most relevant as it deals explicitly with targets, and consequently, subject-object relationships.

<sup>4</sup>The point of view of the performer should not be confused with the various points of view she/he performs during a single act. Both male and female comics *perform* male and female point of view (usually performing the opposite gender parodically), but the performer’s own point of view (shaped by a constellation of factors including race, gender, sexual orientation, and life experience) is clearly the determining factor—the unitary “voice” and ideological foundation behind the multiple masks that she/he may employ.

<sup>5</sup>Mintz offers a taxonomy of stages of Jewish humor which may well apply to the humor of other marginal groups: (1) critical—targets the outgroup; (2) self-deprecatory; (3) realistic and (4) critical—targets the ingroup (qtd. in Nilsen 220). Although Mintz’s schema identifies important types of marginal humor, it suggests that the development of such humor is a linear process. More recent data (e.g., Gilbert), however, indicate that self-deprecation and attack on the hegemonic culture are present *simultaneously* in the marginal humor of contemporary female comics (i.e., Barr’s impotence jokes)—indeed, sometimes even within a single act. Certainly, the same is true of Jewish, African-American and other types of marginal humor as well. Although attack on self may precede attack on other in the *historical* development of marginal humor, in contemporary comedic discourse, Mintz’s types can perhaps best be seen as a constellation existing concurrently.

<sup>6</sup>As Eagleton notes, “carnival” only occurs due to “a permissible rupture of hegemony” (qtd. in Stallybrass & White 13). And Stallybrass and White point out that Kings and Queens were actually crowned during “Carnival,” that officially sanctioned comic chaos.

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