Comedy stretches, often breaks, boundaries; it is a risky venture. Stand-up comedy in particular has a tradition of ridiculing moral, social and political conventions. The performer steps into a space on the margin, observing the incongruities of society's behavior and/or attitudes and envisioning alternative interpretations of those behaviors. He or she then returns to the group bearing this newfound 'knowledge.' To varying degrees, stand-up comics serve as social interpreters.[1] Jeremy Beth Michaels identifies herself, and other comics, as 'living prophets': "We say the things people are too afraid to say or don't know how to say. That's why you laugh at our jokes, because you can relate to it [sic]" (Villagran, para.3). Humour depends in part on collaboration, on audience recognition and participation (active or reactive) -- no joke is funny if it has to be explained.

A common framework is logically a central element in a successful performance, but of equal, if not greater, concern is audience reaction to the performer - the message cannot be heard if the medium is rejected. "The comedian's traditional license for deviant behavior and expression," theorizes Lawrence E. Mintz, is key to "understanding the role of stand-up comedy in the process of cultural affirmation and subversion" (88). The status of comedic entertainer grants the speaker freedom to engage in "deviant behavior." A potential to affirm or subvert cultural norms gives the position an ambiguous power. The comic seemingly controls the interaction - he or she knows the intended destination of the audience - but the possibility of the crowd derailing the process is an ever-present hazard. A miscue can be fatal for any performer, but the balancing act is complicated by gender. For the purposes of this discussion, all references to gender are based upon Sally McConnell-Ginet's definition of gender as "the complex of social, cultural, and psychological phenomena attached to sex" (76). Clearly other factors like race, ethnicity, physical disability, and sexuality (whether articulated or inferred) can affect audience response, but the parameters of this discussion require a narrower focus. The subjects of this study are predominantly white (or could pass for it), most are straight, abled, and Christian, though several are openly Jewish and use this in their acts. Mintz's use of 'traditional' is a succinct modifier for, as this article will reveal, stand-up comedy has been (and regrettably still is) largely a man's domain.

The presence of a female comic elicits a much different audience reaction than that of her male counterpart. "Deviant behavior and expression" are somehow more palatable from a man. He is granted his due - assumed to be funny until he proves to be otherwise - while she starts from a different position - she must prove that she can be funny. Comedian Kim Wayans observes:

   with men they're [the audience] like eager and they're ready . . . to accept him and then he has to prove that he's not funny before they . . . back off . . . but with a woman you have to come out and you have to win them over.

This comment is taken from the 1991 film *Wisecracks* which examines the world of female comedians in Canada, the United States and Great Britain. While differing on the extent of the problem, the women
interviewed in the film conceded that gender is (at least initially) a barrier/obstacle between themselves and the audience.

Although the variety of comedic approaches are as varied as the comedians themselves, one form of humour continues to be identified with women in particular: self-deprecation. Through her 1976 study of male and female comics, Joan B. Levine determined that "self-satire can be expected to be women's niche in comedy" (174). Three years later, Paul E. McGhee concluded that the female use of self-deprecatory humour may reflect an internalization of social values, but held out hope that "changes in socialization" stemming from the "women's liberation movement should modify . . . humour preferences among women" (199). In light of women's social progress (at least for white, heterosexual, able-bodied, educated, North American women) in the twenty-six years since Levine's work, has there been any comedic 'progress' for women? This article will address the pitfalls and potential represented by self-deprecatory humour and the issue of whether or not it is a gendered practice. Is the female comic still in her "niche" or has she claimed a wider territory?

In an effort to determine if self-deprecation persists in the comedy routines of women, and if so, to what extent and to what end, one hundred and fifty performances were reviewed. Thirty-seven female and one hundred and thirteen male comics were observed. The lengths of the routines varied (from three to forty-five minutes) but the average was ten minutes. Selection was random -- a sampling of North American television and video performances from the last three decades. Of the males only five utilized self-deprecatory humour (4.4%); eight of the females used self-deprecation (21.6%). My findings indicate that self-deprecatory humour is neither restricted to, nor the staple of, female comics. It is, however, more prevalent in their stand-up routines than in those of their male counterparts.

Self-deprecation can be construed as a form of self-censorship. Satire is directed towards the self rather than confronting external targets. In a sense, it is a form of accommodation -- accommodating the perceptions of others. Censorship of female comedians arguably begins before their routines do. An example of this can be seen in the way a comic responds to hecklers. Greg Dean's guide to stand-up comedy cautions, "you can't blast women as hard as you can men no matter how much they deserve it" (164). Reasoning that "everyone has a primordial instinct to protect women" -- if only! -- Dean warns, "if you hit them with too harsh a line, the audience will turn on you" (164). Kibler's study of the representation of the audience on televised stand-up performances also raises the reality of gender and censorship. She observes that "the basic unit of [the] congenial Improv audience is a man and a woman laughing as a couple. Audience close-ups most often capture laughing pairs of men and women" (50). Dissenting laughter or the refusal to laugh at (and/or quietly accept) sexist or negative comments do not get airtime.

Skepticism about women's comedic abilities lingers. Widespread resistance to women's humour -- the persistent denial that it exists or is funny: "everyone knows women can't tell jokes" and that "feminists have no sense of humour"[4] -- often stymies the attempts of those women who venture into stand-up comedy. Kathleen Puls Andrade, co-founder of "Funny Women Fest" laments, "I still get emails saying 'It's already been proven women aren't funny, and so you can cancel your festival!'" (Amedeo, n. para.). Comic Leighann Lord notes that you "have to fight all those stereotypes . . . that women aren't funny. People still think that" [in 2002]" (Johnson, para. 2.). The assumption is twofold: women and men find the
same things funny, but women are incapable of effectively conveying jokes or humorous anecdotes.

To appreciate "male" humour is a positive female trait -- a common tip in teen magazines is to laugh at the boys' jokes, let them know you have a sense of humour[5] -- whereas the creation of "female" humour is considered to be too aggressive for a "lady." Men are expected to be the "initiators" of humour, women the "responders", concludes McGhee (183).

Traditional gender expectations thwart women's comedic efforts on yet another level: conventional definitions of "femininity" and "lady-like" behavior render the stance of superiority inherent in stand-up comedy "inappropriate" for women. "Society gyps women", complains comedian Beth Littleford, "because comedy is seen as boys' territory . . . Women have to undo society's 'lady-izing.'" (Hammer, para.61.). Stand-up comedy is an aggressive act; to elicit laughter is to exert control, even power. To stand on a stage and initiate humour in an attempt to evoke laughter (and applause) is to reject the submissive, passive role determined for women by North American social conventions. For female comics, gender-based behavioral norms collide with comedic methods. Comedian Robin Tyler offers an astute summary of the situation:

"When a comic stands on stage it is the eternal battle between the comic and the audience; one woman is not supposed to battle and have that aggression with one man let alone with an entire audience that she can dominate . . . if she not only that, exposes . . . the lies and the myths and gets people to laugh she's extremely dangerous."[6]

The threat of a woman comic is multi-layered: she displays aggression, gains dominance (if successful) and, through her words and actions, challenges conventional definitions and power structures. The issues of redefinition will be addressed shortly, but at this point it would be useful to examine the aggressive stance inherent in comedy.

Although Elinor Och's work "Indexing Gender" does not specifically deal with women and comedy, her discussion of stances, social acts, and social activities can help to illuminate the situation of women in comedy. Gender ideologies, Ochs concludes, "are socialized, sustained and transformed through talk" (336). Specifically, "the relation of language to gender is constituted and mediated by the relation of language to stances, social acts, social activities, and other social constructs" (337). Stance is a culturally determined role/identity constructed through the use of particular speech strategies. In the case of a female comedian at least two distinct stances are at play: her identity as a female and as a public performer of comedy. These are in fact two conflicting stances (from a conventional standpoint): to be female is to be passive, demure and unobtrusive, while a comedian seizes centre stage, actively engages the audience and commands attention.

The position of the female comic is further complicated by the sexual aspect of comedy. Whether or not the comedian is actually dealing with sex, the edgy, aggressive quality of stand-up comedy is frequently linked to sex. A literal loss of the microphone strikes Paul Reiser as "like having your balls grabbed . . . you have no control." The "metaphor of 'microphone as dick,'" observes Betsy Borns, is shared by "other male comedians" (21). Where does this interpretation leave the female comic?[7] Regina Barreca wittily encapsulates the dilemma: "Making a joke is like making a pass -- you take control, take a risk, and try to bring the house down. Good girls just wait."[8] The laughter and applause which follow a
successful performance, constitute, in part, what Ochs deems the act -- what is accomplished/ performed through the behavior of speaking. Many, although not all, female comedians actively strive to convey a message through their routines and arguably all comics (male and female alike) seek to make their audiences think, for all comedy is based upon incongruities. As Mintz describes it: "the essence of the art is creative distortion. Such distortion is achieved through exaggeration, stylization, incongruous context, and burlesque. (Treating that which is usually respected disrespectfully and vice versa)" (95). Expressing a specific political or social view, or even a more vague questioning of social or cultural values and behaviors may also be construed as an act under Ochs' definition.

Acts are employed within a framework of a larger event or activity -- for example, a comic performs his or her jokes in front of an audience in a comedy club. The onlookers are in effect a microcosm of the larger speech community, the members of which share, along with a set of social rules, certain conventions in the use and interpretation of linguistic features.[9] In many cultures public narration is not open to females, thus limiting the stances and acts available to women. Ostensibly, North American culture is tolerant of the entrance of women in public arenas; however, some subtle, and not so subtle, barriers obstruct the female comic in particular.

For a woman to place herself in the foreground is to threaten "the most basic social gender arrangements" observes Leigh Marlowe (150). The comedian's "conversational dominance," she continues, violates "norms of gender-based verbal socialization prescribed for females: passive presentation; hesitant, tentative speech; eye-contact avoidance; and closed body postures" (150). To put it simply: in "doing" comedian the woman ceases to "do" female; that is, the linguistic behavior of one contradicts the expected speech patterns of the other. While the woman performer may hold her personal identity to be fluid, adapting to changing social situations, the social definitions by which she can be, and is, judged are relatively rigid. Ochs in fact acknowledges the limitations in adopting stances: stance, act, and activity are linked by language, but they are not unidirectional. One can assume particular identities (stances), which are reflected in different activities, which in turn can be limited by one's stance.

Women's humour is frequently interpreted as a challenge. The assertive nature of comedy often proves to be threatening to particular audience members (chiefly, but not entirely, men). Stand-up comedy is, in and of itself, an aggressive act and female performers quickly learn that (the perception of) too much aggression can alienate the audience. Of course "overaggressive" is a highly subjective term because the very presence of a female comic is itself an affront to the power dynamic; each performer directly usurps the male "authority" to evoke laughter. All women in comedy challenge the validity of separate spheres based upon gender -- male space is public, female space is private. Whatever their style -- provocative or ingratiating -- comics command attention. The creators of Wisecracks effectively illustrate this point through the powerful juxtaposition of two disparate comedians:

Joy Behar: "I just feel . . . intellectually . . . that the power and control is in the hands of men and they think that men are funnier than women and so therefore we either have to convince them or have more power." (Smooth transition from interview to a brief clip of Ellen DeGeneres' routine): "Listen to this . . . you'll have to . . . ."

The insistence, by female comedians, on transgressing societal norms in the pursuit of their personal goals is tantamount to self-definition.[10] By seizing what has traditionally been male territory, women in
comedy are staking a claim to the power that accompanies that realm.

Humour can be a means of controlling a social situation. It can defuse a threatening situation, ease a tense moment, or destroy an adversary without an overt confrontation. Power can stem from the successful use of humour (both in personal and public situations). It is also associated with the ability to determine what is humorous. As Frances Gray observes, "to define a joke, to be the class that decides what is funny, is to make a massive assumption of power . . . that of defining and thus controlling the immediate area of discourse" (8). Power dynamics are interwoven with comedy; by pursuing their personal agendas female comics expose the politics behind definitions of what, and who, is funny.

In the case of self-deprecatory humour, the power dynamic is complicated. The performer seems to surrender control through the juxtaposition of her/his own inadequacies (self-putdowns) and the implied superiority of the audience (if I am the ugliest, dumbest . . . you can only be more attractive, smarter . . .). And yet, the comic retains the microphone (a determinant of whose voice will be heard) and center stage (the focus of attention). The surrender of power is an illusion. Even self-deprecation can "challenge the audience's expectations about women," suggests Gray, "a self-deprecating routine, can say, all right, I'm fat, I'm ugly, I'm a hopeless cook, a terrible mother, and a lousy housewife, but I'm here" (139). Comedy requires a delicate balancing act. An audience can be lost through relinquishing control via "under"-exertion (self-deprecation taken to the extreme can be a denial of authority) or "over"-exertion (turn off the crowd through aggressive superiority and/or the targeting of audience members). In each case, the group can usurp the power by withholding laughter.

Before she can attempt the daunting task of "mastering" an audience, the female comic must first successfully negotiate her way past the keepers of the gate -- the powers that decide who is given the chance to perform, assistance through the amateur ranks, and ultimately admittance to the professional circuit. Traditionally, few women have ventured into this field of entertainment and while the number of female comics has increased in the last few decades there is still a noticeable imbalance between female and male comedians. Comic Clara Clayy complains, "men tend to get more stage time than women" (Villagran, para. 5). Leighann Lord similarly laments, "we don't have as many opportunities to develop." She estimates that "for every 10 male comics there's one female, if we're even that lucky"(Johnson, para. 2). Kibler's work on A & E's An Evening at the Improv found that if a woman appears on the show "she will most likely be surrounded by four male comedians on the bill" (45).

Comedy club owner Mark Breslin comments on the situation:

". . . stand-up comedy is one of the last bastions of male heterosexual machismo in show business . . . Women are not becoming successful by and large . . . because it's a very direct affront to some people's notion of what women are all about . . . to stand on stage is de facto an aggressive act and women are not supposed to be aggressive." (Stebbins, 105-6)

Breslin does not claim (nor disclaim) these views as his own sense of the place of women in comedy; rather he offers an assessment of the general response to the female comic. Johnny Carson is less coy about his response to female performers: "[Women comedians] are sometimes a little aggressive for my taste. I'll take it from a guy, but from women, sometimes, it just doesn't fit too well" (Gray, 145). Both men have been powerful players in the careers of comedians -- Breslin in terms of a performer gaining
experience and moving through the amateur ranks into professional status, and Carson, until relatively recently, controlled access to prime national television exposure. These attitudes (whether personal or a reflection of audience response) logically affect the selection process that Breslin, Carson, and countless other comedy club owners/managers and television producers subject female comedians to -- traditional gender expectations can clearly thwart female comics' efforts.[11]

As galling as it may be, women in comedy (at least those who wish to remain) must address the issue of audience discomfort with their presence -- quite simply, the performer cannot afford to completely alienate the crowd. The strategies employed by women to attempt to defuse the aggressive nature of stand-up comedy can be as varied as the women themselves. This article will discuss only two approaches: the first appears to be an inevitable pitfall -- attempting to become gender neutral -- and the second has been deemed the "natural" niche of women in comedy -- the use of self-deprecating humour. Since comedy has primarily been a male-dominated profession, role models for women performers have been scarce. That is not to say that they do not exist, just that the women of comedy have always struggled in the shadows of their male counterparts.

One method of adapting to the demands of performing is to attempt to assimilate to the ever-present male-model. Minimizing personal attractiveness and/or avoiding jokes that emphasize gender differences can be tactics to "placate" the audience; inciting envy or resentment are not in the comic's best interest. Comedian Abby Stein articulates a particular fear of female performers:

"A very, very big fear is that the audience is going to be looking at your body instead of listening to what you say. So you try to deny any kind of gender differences between you and those [male] comics in the show." (Klein, 124)

The fear of being treated like a sex object[12] can lead to the subsequent trap of abandoning whatever unique personality, perspective, or approach made the woman funny in the first place. Stein's observations, made in 1984, echo the views of Jessica James, a stand-up comic of the late 1950s and early 1960s: "a comedienne is a kind of sex by itself . . . the stance of the thing, the physical thing is very masculine . . . So it's like you're sexless out on the stage" (Berger, 356, 357 and 359). The complications of dressing for the stage, observes Jay Sankey, are compounded for women: "I know women comics who deliberately play down their attractiveness, saying it can make women in the crowd jealous and distract men from focusing on their minds rather than their physical selves" (71-2). Nor is the fear of being objectified completely misplaced -- stand-up comic turned talk-show host Jenny Jones estimated that she lost the first minute of her routine while people decided if a buxom blonde had anything to say. However, Sankey also refers to the ramifications of dressing in "non-feminine" clothes: "I've had women comics tell me that if they wear clothing that is too androgynous, people think they are lesbians, and (as silly as it sounds) that too can be distracting."[13] The goal is not to be the object of, but rather the creator of, laughter. Gender neutrality is, however, in the final analysis a misguided, ineffectual, and ultimately impossible strategy for mitigating the aggressive nature of stand-up comedy. The "norm" in comedy is male, not neutral.

A seemingly more successful tactic for appeasing audience anxiety is the use of self-deprecating humour. The most frequently identified "staple" of women's humour is in fact the self-putdown.
Self-putdowns are ingratiating rather than overtly hostile -- animosity is internally, not externally directed. Self-deprecation allows the speaker to adopt what is essentially an authoritative stance without alienating the majority of the audience members.[14] The (implicit) threat of the female speaker is defused when she sets herself up as the target of ridicule. An interview with comic/actress Kathy Najimy offers some insight into the motivation (past and present) for adopting such an approach to comedy:

"[the audience] expect us all to be self-denigrating, self-hating, 'funny people' who have no sexuality, no personal life . . . the only way that people would let [women comics] succeed was if they made fun of themselves. Making fun of themselves dehumanized them, made them into something acceptable". (Gross, 93)

In order to be accepted and advance in comedy, many pioneering female stand-up performers succumbed to pressures to make themselves into objects of laughter. To invite the audience to laugh at you was deemed an acceptable (read non-threatening) strategy for women in stand-up comedy.

"Standup comedy as we know it," asserts Frances Gray, "began with the Music Hall of the nineteenth century . . . " (117). A broad range of female performers utilized a variety of comedic techniques -- skits, characters, songs, paired or solo routines -- to entertain the customers. Despite this reality, the tradition of women's humour is most readily identified with the self-putdowns of Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers.[15] Diller started professionally in 1955; a period in which, notes Kathleen Rowe, stand-up comedy was "an unfriendly place for female performers" (69). Diller was advised by a male club owner to smile less -- be hostile. Not surprisingly (given that it was 1955), the target of that hostility became her self. In her act she remarks on a visit to the beauty salon: 'I was there five hours -- and that was just for the estimate'; the receptionist sneers: 'Lady, we do repairs, not reclamations.' She despairs about her "Living Bra": 'it died of starvation.' (Unterbrink, 86, and Levine, 174) The inadequacies of her appearance provide the bulk of Diller's material and she quite deliberately intensifies the effect of her words by dressing outrageously, inviting audience ridicule. In an interview with Laurie Stone, Diller refers to herself as having "had a beautiful figure, like Miss America" but, because she "wanted to make body jokes . . .[she] had to hide it" (14). Attacking herself, Diller contends, "got laughs". The costumes which have become her trademark -- outlandish styles, gaudy materials, over-the-top make-up -- intensify the impact of her routine. The jokes are deceptively simple, (cataloguing her multiple short-comings), told in a rapid-fire delivery, and the tone of voice is seemingly hostile (contempt for her own pathetic appearance).

Diller's performance is of course carefully crafted. Each joke builds upon the other and is further reinforced by the comedian's own distinctive laughter: not at all a "lady-like" twitter, but rather a "raucous guffaw" (Horowitz, 57). Diller clearly takes pride in her skills: "I get twelve laughs a minute because I edit to the bone. To play to ten thousand people, your act has to be structured . . ." (56). The explicit target of her wit is herself, her own inadequacies (sexual or domestic), but there is also an implicit target: the society that sets up the expectations she "fails" to meet. She is neither a sex symbol nor a domestic figure but she is emphatically present. Societal norms create an inadequate framework; it cannot contain a woman like Diller.

Joan Rivers specifically identifies her own use of self-satire as a deliberate strategy for dealing with the confrontational aspect of stand-up comedy. She mocks her appearance in order to relax the audience: "If you come on with a superior attitude, they cannot relate to you" (Collier, 10). Nearly every performance
incorporates grotesque images of her body: "my body is falling so fast, my gynecologist wears a hard hat"
or jokes about her childhood, as a girl so fat "I was my own buddy at camp . . . in my class picture, I was the whole front row" (Unterbrink, 131). Rivers, like Diller, speaks rapidly, her jokes punctuated by the refrain "can we talk" but the level of aggression clearly indicates that there will be no dialogue -- Rivers is very much in control. However, the two performers differ markedly in their physical appearances; Diller accentuates her stance as sexually inadequate female by rendering herself a spectacle through bizarre make-up, hairstyles and clothing whereas Rivers is impeccably groomed and well dressed -- her appearance belies her words: she is performing.

Highlighting the deficiencies (at times abnormalities) of their bodies are a mainstay of the comedy routines of Diller and Rivers. As Horowitz observes, "Diller is not simply plain or sexually neutral. She is aggressively, comedically repellent" and her outfits are "grotesque, unflattering, and funny" (48). While Rivers speaks of her bodily defects, they are not discernable. The grotesque body is rendered visible via Rivers' own words. "The grotesque body", proposes Mary Russo, "is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing; it is identified with non-official 'low' culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation" (8). To step out on a stage and speak from/of "personal" experience is, in a sense, to be both "open" and "protruding"; to do it as a female comic is to be "irregular"; "secreting" on a non-literal level can indicate the (potentially) subversive element of comedy (if only a refusal to be silent and compliant, that is, to maintain the "secret" of women's humour). Given their proclivities for plastic surgery,[16] Diller and Rivers are "multiple and changing." The female comic is the "non-official" comic. But what of social transformation?

The data collected for this study on comics of the last three decades suggest that those women who do incorporate self-deprecatory humour in their routines do so with a particular agenda in mind.[17] Self-putdowns appear more often in the women's acts (over twenty percent, compared to less than five percent for men) but they are not sustained to the same degree as in the performances of Diller and Rivers -- self-directed satire is incorporated into the routine as opposed to being the mainstay of the performance. While keeping in mind that citing one or two performances out of a comedian's repertoire is inadequate proof for a definitive statement about his or her use of self-deprecation, analyzing the demeanor and delivery of these isolated events does provide some insight into the individual's use of this comedic style.

Only two of the total thirteen subjects (male and female) that used self-deprecation maintained self-putdowns throughout their acts. Excerpts from their performances include:

"I was a secretary for a life insurance company and I hated it . . . one day I just called in dead and . . . they couldn't tell the difference and like a lot of secretaries I practically ran the company . . . into the ground . . . my cousin Elizabeth looked so gorgeous in the dress she was wearing . . . she has like this hour glass figure . . . and I have an hour and a half . . . I have too much time . . . on my ass . . . and not enough at two and ten o'clock . . . I wear the eighteen hour bra in fifteen minutes . . . " (Wendy Liebman, Late Show with Letterman 1995)

"I've been getting back to nature . . . well I was evicted . . . from my parent's house . . . but we're still very close . . . genetically . . . I'm engaged now . . . it was so romantic . . . he turned off the TV . . . well he muted it . . . during the commercial . . . " (Wendy Liebman,
Late Show with Letterman 2002)

"I just broke up with somebody and uh ... I, I felt well she just wasn't into me ... I would say I love you I adore you I worship you and she said to me ain't that a kick in the head that's not enough for me . . . now she's bad-mouthing me . . . she's telling all our friends that she had to fake foreplay . . . that I gave her an anticlimax . . . I had to go to a penis awareness clinic." (Richard Lewis, Comic Relief 2)

Both comics exploit their "inadequacies" virtually cataloguing their weaknesses: Lewis highlights sexual inadequacy and the traumas of locating a new sexual partner and Liebman moves from her job failure, to marriage failure, to her physical deficiencies. In each instance, however, overt hostility or anger is absent from the delivery of the monologue. Lewis paces and plays with his hair while Liebman smiles throughout her act; each maintains an even tone of speech.

In point of fact, the use of self-putdowns in this study seems to be divorced from even the appearance of self-hatred or loathing. The self-deprecating remarks are offered in a low-key, sometimes dead-pan, manner. With the exception of Wendy Liebman's comments about parts of her anatomy, the (general) trend seems to be a movement away from overt, explicitly negative self-directed putdowns towards more vague, implicit statements of personal inadequacy. Since reproducing entire routines is not feasible, a sampling of several comedians' use of self-deprecation follows:

A: "You know I applied for a job on a construction crew once ... lot of big burly guys there ... the foreman said you can have the job just fill this out . . . and he handed me a shirt". (Paul Dillery, 12th Annual Young Comedians Show)

B: "I diet, I exercise, I still don't look anything like those women in Playboy . . . I think they get them from other planets . . . I hope so 'cause I don't want them here . . . this one girl I saw was amazing and I don't think she had silicone either . . . I think it was helium". (Rita Rudner, Women of the Night)

C: "Did you get your cat neutered? Did you get him fixed? I couldn't get my cat neutered I felt bad I couldn't get him fixed so instead I dress it up to look exactly like me and ... heck it doesn't get laid either . . . ." (Howard Busgang, Young Comedians All-Star Reunion)

D: "Today my friend and I went out without make-up and scared little kids ... you know when you think about it make-up is such a weird concept but I buy into it like every woman I know you know like I'll wake up in the morning look in the mirror ... gee I don't really look so good ... maybe if my eyelids were blue." (Cathy Ladham, 12th Annual Young Comedians Show)

The first excerpt (A) offers an interesting variation of the "boob" joke -- this time it is a man who cannot fill out the shirt. Dillery makes no explicit statement about his body or body parts (or lack thereof); instead he implies his inadequacy -- he is not masculine enough to fill out the shirt. Example C employs a similar approach: Busgang makes no blatantly negative comment about his appearance, but still manages to convey the idea that his looks alone are an effective means of birth control. What is particularly interesting about Busgang's routine is that the "neutered cat" joke follows a lengthy reference to his "sex-offender" girlfriend -- these prior statements belie the implied inadequacy of the cat joke. In his four minute routine Busgang makes only one self-deprecatory comment; in contrast, Dillery offers six
self-deprecatory statements in a six minute act. Noticeably absent from both monologues was any self-directed hostility or anger in the performance.

The implication of personal inadequacy is also common to examples B and D. Rudner initially seems to adopt the traditional formula: in comparison with the Playboy "model" she is physically inadequate despite her efforts to adapt to the standard of beauty. In the second half of the joke Rudner rejects the stance -- the magazine image is the abnormality, is alien. Example D offers a similar reversal of expectations as Ladman uses a negative statement about herself to lead into a questioning of cultural assumptions. She does more than critique standards of beauty; Ladman points out that women are guilty of complicity. Both excerpts are subversive in nature as each comic seems to accept cultural definitions of "femininity," but then proceeds to expose the idiocy of the attitude (and in the case of Ladman, the foolishness of the behavior and the choice). As was the case with examples A and C, personal inadequacy is implied rather than stated and self-directed hostility or anger is absent from the routines.

Jokes have the potential to be subversive. "A victorious tilting of uncontrol against control . . . an image of the leveling of hierarchy, the triumph of intimacy over formality, of unofficial values over official ones" is Mary Douglas' definition of a joke (98). Authority can be subverted through laughter. As the proceeding passages from the comedy routines of Rita Rudner and Cathy Ladman indicate, women in comedy are, as Nancy A. Walker observes, using "self-deprecation in a complex way" (124). On one level they adopt the traditional approach and seem to endorse the stereotype. On another level they seek to expose the "cultural assumptions" on which the stereotype is built (and thereby challenge both the assumptions and the stereotype). They step inside the claustrophobic space and transform it into a liberating site.

Stand-up comic and television actress Roseanne is a powerful (albeit controversial) example of a woman exploiting the image meant to confine her. The comedic persona she has created effectively illustrates how an imposed stereotype can be consciously adopted and redefined:

"I'm not gonna go outside myself and say what I should be, I'm gonna say what is. And I suddenly knew I could . . . get inside the stereotype and make it three-dimensional from within. And then I could call myself a domestic goddess." (Dworkin, 206)

The self-proclaimed "domestic goddess" is a far cry from the "angel-in-the-house" male fantasy of the 1950's sitcoms. Roseanne's personal "failure" to live up to the culturally defined roles of wife, mother, caregiver, and sex-symbol, provide the bulk of material for her stand-up performances:

"I will clean house when Sears comes out with a riding vacuum cleaner. If the kids are still alive when my husband comes home, I've done my job. Thank God for gay guys -- without 'em, us fat women wouldn't have anyone to dance with." (Dworkin, 108)

While her delivery is highly aggressive and charged with hostility, there is no indication that the anger is self-directed. Despite the fact that she is exposing her own "inadequacies", Roseanne is utterly unapologetic. Susan Dworkin describes her as the "symbol of the disgruntled American housewife, hanging in but perpetually pissed" (107) -- pissed at fate, the world or her family, but not necessarily at herself. Roseanne redefines the cultural definitions. By society's criteria she is not a "good" housewife or mother, but she rejects these standards, first by refusing to meet them; second, by claiming the title of
"domestic goddess," she moves beyond their power to define her. Roseanne claims the stereotype for her own purposes without endorsing it; in doing so she rejects society's authority to define her, claiming the right of definition for herself.

Subtlety is not Roseanne's strong point and she frequently alienates people through her humour (witness the reaction to her rendition of the American National Anthem). As a means of conveying a message (personal or political) Roseanne's "in your face" approach is both effective and ineffective -- she has had a widely syndicated television show, power in negotiating with her network and lots of money, and yet the media and at least part of the public seem eager to discredit her. Arguably this is a hazard that follows success (the desire to see a hero/victor fall), but a particularly troubling development occurred after the break-up of her marriage to Tom Arnold -- credit for the success of her show shifted from Roseanne to him.

Other women in comedy are less eager or able (for various reasons) to present themselves as overt threats to authority. Mercilee M. Jenkins proposes that women use humour to get around their place in society; specifically to "deal with the contradictions and myths inherent in female stereotypes in a patriarchal society" (137). Self-deprecation (or at least the semblance of it) is proving to be a surprisingly effective means of exposing the incongruities of the dominant culture. Consider the following joke by Carol Siskind: "I just broke up with someone after three years. It was a love-hate thing. We both love him and hated me" (Klein, 126). At first it sounds like self-derogation, but it is more subtle -- a comment on both male narcissism and on women's lack of self-esteem. Not just "male" myths about women are being exposed, but also women's complicity in the perpetuation of those myths. Self-deprecatory humour of this nature can be interpreted as a subversive strategy -- a voice of protest masked by apparent acceptance of the stereotype.

In theory, all comedians run the risk of alienating their audiences. Numerous interviews with comics reveal that a certain degree of anger fuels their routines and yet too much anger can frighten an audience. For a female comic, the need to recognize (and neutralize) audience resistance to her mere presence further complicates the issue of building a quick and positive rapport with her listeners. Self-deprecation can function as a means of defusing a potentially aggressive act or confrontational situation. To be able to identify the hidden (or not so hidden) truth(s) behind a cultural stereotype requires intellectual assurance. To seize center stage is to assert conversational dominance and, in the case of women, to directly challenge cultural stereotypes.

The tactic of adopting the traditional formula of self-deprecatory humour may serve as a face-saving strategy for the benefit of the audience. By exposing their own foolishness, female comics soften the jab at men; for example Rita Rudner jokes: "My boyfriend and I broke up. He wanted to get married . . . and I didn't want him to" (Women of the Night). Rudner comments on the faithlessness of men, the gullibility of women and the traditional belief that marriage is the ultimate goal of women (via the delayed punchline). Her tone of speech is gentle, her mannerisms and physical appearance ultra "feminine", but she packs a powerful message.[18] Rudner has had several television specials and numerous guest appearances; her non-confrontational approach has proven to be an effective means of conveying her thought provoking humour.
Self-deprecatory humour can serve a variety of purposes -- the multifunctionality of this comedic style depends in large part on the degree and nature of the self-satire involved. Unlike the explicit, negative comments on their body/physical appearance that are the trademarks of Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers, self-deprecation is not sustained in the more current comedy performances of women. (The one exception being Wendy Liebman; however, she smiled, almost inanely, throughout her entire performance, thus mitigating the self-criticism of her words). My research indicates that not only are women not relying on self-putdowns as the mainstay of their routines (using instead one or two moments of self-satire punctuating observational humour), but few female comics are utilizing self-deprecation at all (only eight of thirty-seven). Despite a shift to different styles of comedy, self-deprecatory humour nonetheless lingers as a strategy of women in comedy. The distance between the self-putdown employed by Diller and Rivers and those of Rudner and Ladman is quite encouraging: gone are the blatant statements of inadequacy, and the anger which was apparently directed inward has been redirected.

To be able to laugh at our foibles and follies can be a positive trait. Walker defines a sense of humour as "the capacity for laughing at oneself -- a healthy self-criticism which bubbles up from confidence and self-respect" (1). Of particular note in Walker's interpretation is the source of the self-satire: confidence and self-respect. For any comic to succeed he or she must endure rejection and intense competition; the difficulties are intensified once gender enters into the equation -- female comics must also contend with cultural definitions of "femininity." Colliding with popular definitions of what and who is funny, women in comedy must confront the male-as-norm (both as performer and audience) mentality. Comedian Jenny LeCoat comments on the value judgments assigned to the differing satiric targets of men and women, observing that women have "been accused of ghettoizing themselves" (Wisecracks). The assumption is that the subjects women in comedy explore limit the effectiveness of their routines. Pushing at the boundaries of social expectations is the hallmark of stand-up comedy. Insisting on the inclusion of "alternative" subjects and comedic styles is the very nature of the beast -- yet resistance persists.

The majority of critical studies which deal with humour in effect (if not intent) deal with male comedy. Women's humour has, to a large extent, been denied, both explicitly ("women have no sense of humour") and implicitly (by virtue of its exclusion). Several critics have sought to counter this effect, not only by documenting women's humour, but also by re-evaluating traditional interpretations of comedic strategies employed by female comics. Distinguishing women's humour from that of men is one of Emily Toth's goals in "Female Wits." She emphatically rejects the misconception that women's humour is simply men's humour reversed (given the level of misogyny in men's humour, this myth could account for some of the resistance to women's humour!). Toth theorizes that most female humorists observe a "humane humor rule"; that is, they do not attack what people cannot change (a handicap, race, physical appearance). Instead female wits "attack or subvert -- the deliberate choices people make: hypocrisies, affectations, mindless following of social expectations" (783). My study did not find the first theory to be true of all female comics; however, a tendency to mock choices and behaviors was observed in several of the performances. The "humane humor rule" can be construed as incorporating those comics who use themselves as targets of their humour, but divorce the routine from the appearances of self-hatred which permeated the performances of Diller and Rivers.

Self-deprecatory humour may be used to discover a common ground between women; drawing on
shared experiences, performer and audience connect in what LeCoat deems "a kind of process of inclusion" (Wisecracks). The listener identifies (perhaps empathizes) with the speaker. "Conversational intimacy," proposes Mary Crawford, is aided through "self-disclosure." The goal of any performer is a quick and positive rapport with their audience. The use of "apparent self-deprecation in women's humour," she asserts, is a strategy to achieve that connection (162). Once the link has been made, the potential to guide the audience to self-reflection (guilt-by-association syndrome?) is created. Qualifying her use of self-deprecation, Crawford suggests that describing one's mistakes or foibles is actually self-disclosure.

One of the more popular entertainers on the comedy circuit is Paula Poundstone. She has mastered the art of disclosure, identification and exposure:

"I decided I'd like to take better control of my life and make sure that less things go wrong each day -- so what I've been doing is sleeping up to twenty hours a day . . . I figure that in four hours even I couldn't screw up that many things . . ."

"I used to work at the International House of Pancakes . . . thank you very much . . . you set your goals and go for 'em . . . it was a dream . . . I made it happen . . ." (Women of the Night).

Poundstone's comments are self-effacing, but her inclusion on international comedy specials and position as feature performer at comedy clubs throughout the United States counteract the effect of her words. She is a strong presence on the stage, her movements are bold, and her tone is decidedly unapologetic. Poundstone discloses moments of weakness or foolish behavior, but does not display any self-loathing or hatred. Such an approach to comedy is negative from a "male-as-norm perspective", proposes Crawford, because the comic fails to show herself to the best advantage (162). An alternative interpretation might view this comedic approach as a refusal to be drawn into a competition; the power dynamic is already evident by who is holding the microphone (and therefore controlling the discourse).

Self-deprecatory humour, as this study illustrates, is neither a staple of women's humour nor the niche of female comics. As a strategy for defusing the aggressive nature of stand-up comedy, self-satire does appear to be a (fairly) successful tactic for female performers. However, it can only be effective if it stems from self-confidence; when the "inadequacy" from which the humour is evolved is genuinely felt by the comic, her humour conveys self-loathing rather than the intellectual assurance which should accompany the stance of stand-up comedian. If the female comic wishes to "expose the sex-role stereotyping in our culture and to reject, either implicitly or explicitly, these rigidly prescribed images of women," asserts Suzanne L. Bunker, self-deprecation must be foregrounded as a strategy (86). Manipulating the traditional formula of the self-deprecatory joke, current female comics like Rudner and Ladman are able to expose the insidious cultural stereotypes which surround women.

All stereotypes come from ideology; it is, logically, in the interest of the dominant group to enforce stereotypes. Comedy can help to subvert those stereotypes and highlight the power dynamics lurking behind them -- in the words of Marilyn French, "one man's subversive is another's (woman or man) truth" (219). Women in comedy challenge traditional gender structures, firstly with their mere presence (violating norms of "feminine" conduct) and secondly with their words (whether or not they challenge
social imbalances based on gender, by telling jokes they are defining "femininity" and humour from their own perspective). The increasing participation of women in comedy, both as performers and audience members, may ultimately have a positive impact on the level of misogyny in stand-up comedy. Writing in 1975, Robin Lakoff noted that "there is a whole genre of antiwomen jokes, based on sexual stereotypes as antiethnic jokes were (and are) based on ethnic stereotypes" (81). Nearly thirty years later, the antiethnic joke has decreased in use while the antiwoman joke remains popular (nor is it limited to the comedy routines of men). Perhaps as more women enter the field of entertainment a stronger, more positive image of women will emerge in and through comedy. We can but hope.

More than simply entertaining, comedy can serve as a coping mechanism. It can inspire an alternative vision even if it cannot alter power structures. Gender hierarchies and power dynamics are in fact maintained and reproduced through conversational practices. Women's sense of humour, proposes Walker, is "part of a complex web of cultural assumptions about women's intelligence, competence, and proper role" (98). Questions of who defines what is funny and who can be funny are intertwined with issues of power and control. By "usurping" the traditionally male territory of stand-up comedy, women are claiming a share of the power -- power to perform in public, power to define themselves, power to control the nature of the discourse. Confidently moving away from the angry self-putdowns of many of their predecessors, contemporary women in comedy are evoking both the derisive male snigger and the fortifying female laugh.

Notes

1 Stephanie Koziski offers a unique comparison in her article "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic"; both the importance of humour as a social/cultural text and the observational roles of anthropologist and comic are discussed. back

2 Routines that are cited in this study are indicated in "Video References", all other performances were on the following: "HBO Comedy Showcase", "Caroline's Comedy Hour", "A & E Improv", "Comics", "Young Comedians Show", "Just For Laughs", "Comedy at Club 54", and the "Late Show with Letterman". back

3 I will concede that the performances in this case are likely complicated by the criteria of television: in some ways a live act becomes a polished (edited !) piece, certain behaviors must be toned down for general viewing (what can or cannot be said, and how), the process of selecting who gets a spot is full of biases and personal agendas. However, given that a large portion of consumers of comedy are home-based (the wide-reaching range of cable and specialty channels) stand-up comedy via video is a strong indicator (perhaps formulator -- chicken/egg conundrum) of popular conceptions of stand-up comics. Michael Fuchs asserts that cable, and more specifically HBO, "rekindled the interest in comedy. It was almost a dying craft when we started." As chief operating officer of HBO, Fuchs might be biased, but comic Tom Parks concurs that "it took cable to expose America to comedy as an art form . . ." (quoted in Borns, 47). back

4 A friend brought to my attention the following passage from John Sandford's Night Prey (1994) a murder mystery novel on the New York Times Bestseller List. The exchange involves three investigators, two male (Greave and Lucas) and one female (Connell) :

"The whole thing is like some weird feminist joke" Greave said. "If their is such a thing as a feminist
There are lots of feminist jokes" Connell said "Oh, Okay, I'm sorry. You're right," Greave admitted. "What I meant to say is, there are no funny feminist jokes." Connell turned to him, a tiny light in her eye." You know why women are no good at math?" she asked. "No. Why?" She held her thumb and forefinger two inches apart. "Because they're told this is eight inches." Lucas grinned, and Greave let slip a smile. "One fuckin funny joke after thirty years of feminism." (178-9).

Note that the male characters do not actually laugh despite Greave's grudging acknowledgement that she has told a "fuckin' funny joke". back

Even though twenty-three years have passed, the attitude lingers. Women's magazines continue to cite "having a sense of humour" as an attractive quality to men and it continues to have the primary meaning "she laughs at my jokes." back

Quoted from Wisecracks. The dangerous quality of comedy often surfaces in comments by comics (both male and female). Discussions by performers are marked by aggressive terms: a comedian kills an audience on a good night and dies on a bad one. The interaction between speaker and onlooker is that of adversaries engaged in battle. back

Born offers the counter-perspective of Robin Tyler who rejects the notion that "the prick is the most aggressive thing". Tyler insists "the mind is much more powerful than the prick -- and the mind doesn't go down in two minutes" (21). back

Barreca's title -- They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted . . . -- reinforces the link between sex, aggression, and comedy. back

This definition of speech community is extracted from a discussion of Dell Hymes' "The Ethnography of Communication" which took place October 18th, 1994 in the "Language, Gender and Power" seminar at York University. back

Regardless of their individual styles (and there have been, and continue to be a wide range of comedic choices employed by women), the women who have stepped into the spotlight and attempted to elicit laughter have transgressed social norms. While pioneering comedians may or may not have "intended" to break ground for subsequent female comics, the fact that such women refused to be silenced did pave the way for all subsequent entertainers. back

Jackie Clune concedes that gender expectations have shaped her own comedic approach: "I love dead pan comics and I love people who do very kind of lazy, slow, quiet delivery that just cuts through but I don't know any women that can do that . . . that can get away with it . . . 'cause their not really allowed to . . . you kind of have to go out and go ohohoh [overly excited tone] and smile a lot" (Just For Laughs, 2001). back

Susan Horowitz notes that "many male comics got their start doing comedy in strip joints"; as a result "audiences were used to equating men with humor and women with stripping" (3). Greg Dean's anecdote about working at Chippendale's offers an ("updated") glimpse into the pitfalls of working in such a setting: "there was a woman drunk and drugged into another dimension. As soon as I entered she screamed in a three-packs-of-cigarettes-a-day, phlegm-filled raspy voice: 'Taa aake it o ooooff.' . . . it's the phrase they yell at the male strippers." (165). Not exactly "equal opportunity" at its finest! back
Sankey, 72. John Limon theorizes that Ellen De Generes neutralizes "the issue of attractiveness by a kind of girl-next-door transvestism" (55). Unfortunately, "costumes" and comedic performance fall outside the scope of my discussion. back

Self-deprecation is by no means limited to women (as is evidenced by the longevity of Rodney Dangerfield's career); it is often utilized by members of oppressed groups (whether racially, religiously, economically, politically, physically, or sexually oppressed). The confines of my discussion do not permit an exploration of how these factors affect the use of self-deprecation in stand-up comedy. back

In many "anthologies and studies of comedians", notes Horowitz, "women are significantly missing or minimized" (ix). Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers are arguably the most recognized names in this limited context. back

While the appearance of self-loathing in their performances is exaggerated for comedic effect, the fact that both Diller and Rivers have had multiple plastic surgeries, in my mind, complicates the issue. Both comedians work the procedures into their routines, but enduring painful operations to alter their looks suggests that (at least to some degree) the self-loathing is genuine. back

While the constraints of this study require the omission of a great deal of material, a (limited) context for the specific use of self-deprecation by female stand-up comics was necessary. However, I am by no means suggesting that a seamless transition from the comedic approaches of Diller and Rivers to current comedians occurred. back

Rudner's website (http://www.rita-rudner.com/bio.html) touts her graceful look: "With her gentle voice, porcelain skin and big, crayon-blue eyes, Rudner shatters the stereotype of brassy, tough comedienes with poise and sophistication." Apparently, she is simultaneously shattering the stereotype of the female comic and redefining the stereotype of a "lady". back

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