

AMERICAN STANDUP COMEDY BY WOMEN
AND THE DISCOURSE OF CULTURAL
NEGOTIATION IN AMERICAN LIFE

Maria Rhodora G. Ancheta

Abstract

This paper tracks the development of stand-up comedy in American popular culture, and examines the potency of female humor in the textualized routines of Ellen Degeneres and Judy Tenuta, two American female stand-up comics. The paper posits that in Degeneres and in Tenuta, we see two examples of late 20th century contemporary humor by women in the United States, and in examining the forms this humor takes, stand-up comedy, in this case, and the strategies it uses, moments of identification and connection are isolated, permitting the American female comic to create liberative spaces to reveal potent and latent values in current American society.

It is ironic that in a country like the Philippines that prides itself on its possession of a sense of humor, very little study has been done of the functions that this humor is used for, or at the very least, the forms that this humor takes. I shall address this point with more detail later in my paper, but I begin here by stating that this paper is an exploration of stand-up comedy by female comics in the United States, an examination spurred by the adoption and adaptation of this popular cultural form in many Philippine clubs, vide the mushrooming of “comedy bars,” of stand-up comedy routine competitions a la “Last Man Standing,” sponsored by both local media or by university and college organizations, mostly on an amateur level. And while in the Philippines, the stand-up comedy phenomenon is in the preeminence of gay comic performers in comedy bars, many of whom are either in drag, or are associated with drag performances---the performance of comedy that features femaleness,

or usurps it--- the appeal of stand-up comedy as a popular cultural form is perhaps most evidently based on the view of it as another venue for entertainment, and on its capacity to expand a comic's popular base as he or she is made a celebrity by his or her routine. Indeed very shallowly reckoned with, stand-up comedy ranks and functions no better than a forgettable B-movie, a soppy daytime or night time soap that engrosses us momentarily. In the case of stand-up, a good one is worth a full belly laugh, a bad one gets chalked up as an add-on to a dinner or a drink.

This paper aims to study the tactics of female humor within a general conception of the functions of humor within American culture. In examining the works of female stand-up comics in the late twentieth century, we are able to place these comic acts as patently transformative ones, far from being the apparently trivial and temporarily entertaining observations they are made out to be. These are also seen within the rubric of subversion and anti-authoritarianism in which American humor thrives, and are now comic sensibilities imbued with potent strategies in which gender is underscored to confront the often-camouflaged assaults of class, power, and status in contemporary American life.

WHAT IS STANDUP COMEDY?

Stephanie Kozinski Olson, in her essay that is among first initial studies of stand-up comedy in America, cites the eminent Lawrence Mintz, who defined standup comedy as "an encounter between a single, standing performer who behaves comically and says humorous things to an audience without much use of costume, props, or setting" (110). This definition underscores the "direct communication between the artist and the audience," and focuses on "the high proportion of comic behavior and comic dialogue to the development of plot and situation" (110). Mintz emphasizes the largely solitary nature of the comic performance and its lack of dependence on a completed narrative, as compared to the elaborate set-up used by theater, film, TV, or other media forms in setting up a humorous situation or story.

Olson looks into the roots of standup comedy to as far back as the ancient cultures of Asia, Africa, South and Central America, Europe, in the clowns, jesters, tricksters, fools, buffoons of these early cultures. The buffoon acts of ancient Greek plays featured fools in solo roles, or as comedy teams in which an impostor and a straight man exchange humorous dialogues, the impostor is later cunningly exposed by the straight man, and a third actor acts as explainer or translator of the exchange to the audience

(110-111). The itinerant clown troupe traditions of Europe also featured traces of standup comedy in its farcical depictions of scenes from everyday life, in making fun of social issues and figures (111). Medieval jesters and fool societies likewise satirized the injustices of despotic leaders from the royalty or the nobility, in addition to irreverently mimicking or inverting the status of the clergy in Feasts of Fools and Feasts of the Asses, parodying the liturgical calendar (112).

In America, Albert McLean noted that prior to 1860, public demand for entertainment was satisfied by traveling menageries, circuses, minstrel shows, independent repertory theaters, road shows, and show boats... Various kinds of musical entertainment, including musical comedy, appealed to scattered audiences of quality, while the less cultivated enjoyed the musical and humorous festivities of taverns, saloons, and brothels (in Olson 113).

The late 1800's saw the popularization of the one-ring circuses which featured the clown traditions that will be the forerunner of the later, more contemporary standup acts. While the main attraction of the clown entertainment lay mainly in acrobatics and other physical stunts, they also employed "stylized comic dialogues, joke tellings, comic songs, parodies of political and religious rhetoric, witty repartee, puns, malapropisms, double entendres, topical commentary, funny costumes, ridiculous props, slapstick, buffoonery, and magic tricks" that found their way to the performance styles and formats of standup comedians' acts (112). Olson noted that the "comic interplay between the buffoon clowns and the more refined brunt of the clown's jokes, the ringmaster, mirror the dynamics of the comedy teams" in minstrel acts, vaudeville, burlesque, and later standup comedy teams that American show business mined (112).

The nineteenth century in America also saw the rise of philosophical jesters and spokesmen in the lecture circuit, such as the self-educated Dan Rice, then a famous speaker known for his "pungent wit" (113). More familiar to us are Mark Twain, and other literary humorists such as Josh Billings, Artemus Ward, who plied their tall tales in the lecture circuits. Approximating the clown tradition are the minstrel tandems too, many of whom performed in blackface, using sexually suggestive material at times, whose blackface performances afforded them "the whimsical detachment from the real world which the clown needs to perform his psychic magic" (113).

Burlesque was another popular entertainment form in the late nineteenth century, which featured striptease acts, and in between each performance, standup comedians showcased "zany behavior," insult, and

joke comedy. This also became training ground for comedians wanting to break into the follies, vaudeville, and musical comedy shows. Until the 1920's burlesque was considered family entertainment and the jokes used in it were surprisingly relatively clean (114). By the 1900's, vaudeville theaters were in most American towns to house burlesque acts, and vaudeville in America offered the variety show conventions, featuring comic monologues, songs, dances, skits, elements of the minstrel show (114). Variety theaters such as the Ziegfeld Follies produced such comedy acts such as Eddie Cantor, Fanny Brice, Will Rogers, but the staple of vaudeville is ethnic stereotyping coupled with the "refinement" of topical banter, social satire, and clever song-and-dance. Its humor is "new"--- the "hard-hitting, crass, unsentimental humor of the city streets," exhibited in the "rapid cross-fire of jokes, puns, riddles, and insults which brings the audience to a pitch of amusement" (114). Olson cites McLean in saying that vaudeville "was a response to the... new industrialism and urbanization" that was changing America in the early 20th century. Showmen entrepreneurs directed audience members to these cultural and sociological changes [and] encourage[d] a belief in social progress and personal success as a virtue on the vaudeville stage (114).

The twentieth century inherited the vaudeville of the late 19th century and it witnessed the rise of many comedians to lucrative fame, such as Eddie Cantor, Bob Hope, Eddie Foy, tandems like George Burns and Gracie Allen, comediennes like May West and Sophie Tucker (115). Also, entertainment of the sort flourished "in resort towns, summer camps, and tourist bungalow colonies in New York's Adirondacks, Pennsylvania's Poconos, and New England's Berkshires, called the "Borscht Belt." The Borscht Belt became the training ground of the 1930's standup comics, a mostly male contingent, whose most famous members ultimately broke into the entertainment business--- Jerry Lewis, Danny Kaye, Joey Adams, Red Buttons, Buddy Hackett, Mel Brooks, and Sid Caesar. Comedians in the Borscht Belt also acted as producers, writers, directors, actors, song-and-dance men, emcees or comperes, stage managers, stagehands and at times, even as waiters. After the show, the comedian had to "mingle with the guests, dance with fat old women, and romance the 'dogs'" (115).

The rapid development of the film industry in the early 20th century, and the rise of radio as the period's most common fixture and most popular medium, extended the possibilities of humorous entertainment. Vaudeville waned, but this was replaced by other venues for the standup comic, aided too by the need of new instant media to disseminate material rapidly. By 1927, talking pictures required new types of performers, "who could sing, dance, and talk," and therefore the format of augmented

entertainment, with live shows, organ playing, orchestras, faded, with comedians no longer finding employment in this field.

Radio became the refuge of vaudeville comedians who made this successful transition--- Cantor, Hope, Burns and Allen, Jack Haley. Comedy personalities will be created by new technologies. Where previously standup comedians had acts that revolved around a single routine, “the instant dissemination of a comedy routine through radio, film, or later television, instantly communicating the act to millions of people, required fresh material from established comedians and demanded new comedy personalities” (116). This too created a new phenomenon--- the comedy writer. And while many comedians wrote their own material, others hired professionals to write new joke routines for them (116).

The 1940’s and the 1950’s made several media channels available to the standup comedian. First, novelty records with comic songs or song parodies became popular and available to Americans, and this began the rise of the non-music record, with comics like Redd Foxx, Bob Newhart, Tom Lehrer lording it over this genre by way of their comic monologues. The 1960’s saw the rise of Bill Cosby, Flip Wilson, Richard Pryor, and George Carlin, who later won Grammy Awards for their albums (117).

Film comedies showcased the talents of many comedians who started by writing for standup, or who featured in standup comedy routines--- Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, the Marx Brothers, W.C. Fields, Jack Haley, from the 1930’s to the 1950’s, Woody Allen, Buddy Hackett and Don Adams, the Smothers Brothers in the 1960’s and the 1970’s. In the 1970’s and the 1980’s, standup comics like Steve Martin, Richard Pryor, Lily Tomlin, Martin Mull, Goldie Hawn, Eddie Murphy, *Saturday Night Live* veterans Gilda Radner, Bill Murray “moved to big-time movie success” (117). This has since become the template for standup comics transitioning seamlessly from stage to screen, seen in the careers of Whoopi Goldberg, Robin Williams, Jay Leno, Steve Martin, Eddie Murphy, Goldie Hawn, Chris Rock, and the female comics whose works I am discussing in this paper.

The 1950’s television mediascape introduced many comedians to the public by way of shows like Rowan and Martin’s *Laugh-In*, model for the contemporary *Saturday Night Live*, a mixture of skits, acts, parodies of current social, political, commercial affairs. Steve Allen hosted *The Tonight Show* from 1948 to 1950, followed by Jack Paar in the 1950’s and the 1960’s, Johnny Carson in 1961 to 1994, and Jay Leno from the 1990’s to his announced retirement in 2009. His successor, Conan O’Brien, started his career as a comedy writer for *Saturday Night Live* and for the animated

primetime show *The Simpsons*. Shows like the *Tonight Show* began scouting new talent from the comedy clubs to discover new talent for television.

Coffeeshouses and small nightclubs became the vogue in the 1950's and 1960's, and this marked the change too in the kind of standup comedy being performed in America. The "traditional" style of comedy, whose proponents were the likes of Red Skelton, Joey Adams, Milton Berle, Red Buttons, to name a few, was marked by "formal, glib, structured routines." In the 1960's, part of the nightclubs were comedy clubs like The Bitter End in New York, or the now legendary The Improvisation, or more fondly called Improv, in Los Angeles, featured local professionals, but also paved the way for beginners to try their acts by allowing them amateur nights for "audience exposure and experience" (118). These new clubs became sites of "new wave humor", humor which was irreverent, iconoclastic, shocking, combative, cynical, bitter, bizarre, sophisticated, intellectual and complicated... involving highly political, sexually explicit, [or] satiric social commentary... in monologues delivered in 'informal, relaxed and spontaneous' manner to create an 'atmosphere of a conversational off-handed discussion of the subject at hand" (118).

1950's/1960's new wave humor, such as that seen in Lenny Bruce or George Carlin, was deemed by many as "sick," and indeed chronicled, not now the early traditional humor of the "wisecrack, the tall tale, the deadpan japes, the shaggy-dog story" (118), but the serious and "ghastly-funny" subjects like nuclear annihilation and the Vietnam war (118). Barre Toelken looks at this as an indication of the emotional concerns of a society (118). Other mutations like the 1980's everyman humor "may be the first generation of comics to forgo the funnyman's implicit plea: love me by laughing at me," using joking routines that do not employ "whimsical stories of urban childhoods" that Bill Cosby and George Carlin used, that "did not deal in self-hatred and analysis," for which Woody Allen and Rodney Dangerfield, and Don Rickles were famous, that did not feature "topical or political humor" in which Johnny Carson was an expert (121). These new comedians as Steve Allen rightly puts it, are "everymen" because they "imitate jerks." And indeed, Steve Martin's film so-titled during this period explains the popularity of this kind of comedian's humor in the late 20th century. Other comedians who followed in this vein were the late John Belushi and the late Chris Farley, portraying obnoxious characters at which we laugh because they represent the "lower than average Joe," especially appealing in the years that lionized success and status.

THE HUMOR OF EVERYDAY LIFE

I see this new wave humor morphing into other more domestic concerns in the 1990's to the present, many standup comics proffering routines that now take on the guise of observational humor, which “draws [its] rich comic mother lode of ‘everyday life’ and ‘uses a reverse type of humor, turning the truth inside out, helping us to see other angles, other ways of feeling...” (122). I am examining here several routines by two well-known female standup comics in the 1990's, both of whom have written books based on, or using, the very routines that made them famous.

I start here with Ellen Degeneres whose first book, *My Point... and I Do Have One*, published by Bantam in 1995, hit instant bestseller status. The rather long excerpt that follows is part of a comic routine that she became famous for, much like her “Letter to God” routine that she first did on the *Tonight Show* early in her career.

But back to feeling like an idiot. Two places that tend to bring out the “Oh my god, I'm such a nincompoop in most of us are elevators and public bathrooms. Now, the difference between an elevator and a public bathroom is...Wait. If you don't already know the difference between an elevator and a public bathroom, nothing I say is going to be of much help. In the best-case scenario, you're going to be standing in a stall for a long time, wondering why you're not going anywhere. I don't even want to think about the worst-case scenario.

When we're inside an elevator, we feel we have to look above us at the floor numbers changing, as if it's by the force of our will that the elevator is rising. If you want to make others uncomfortable, stay facing the back wall after you enter. The downside of this little gag is that you're pretty likely to miss your floor.

We always do this: we walk up to an elevator, someone's already there, they're waiting, they've pushed the button, the button is lit. We walk up and push the button, thinking, “Obviously you didn't push it correctly. I'll have to push it myself. Now the elevator will come.” Then someone else walks up and they push the button again. Suddenly you're offended. You want to

say, “You idiot, I pushed it, he pushed it.” Then, to the original pusher, “Can you believe people?”

Or, if you go to the elevator by yourself, you push the button, you wait for the elevator to come, the elevator doesn’t come. You push the button six more times. Like that’s helping. As if the elevator’s thinking, “Oh, a half dozen people are there now, I better hurry. I thought it was just that one woman. I was resting. Oh no, I... I could lose my job! I could become stairs!

In a public bathroom you’re in your own little individual private stall, actually going to the bathroom. For some reason either you forgot to lock the door, or the lock is gone. Suddenly, a perfect stranger opens the door on you. They look at you. You always look at them the same way (sort of a cross between a deer caught in the headlights and a deer caught doing something else, I’m not sure what). They close it immediately and always say, “Oh I’m sorry.” Then we say, “It’s okay.”

We don’t mean this. I think we’d be surprised if they turned around and came back in, actually. “Oh-oh!” “you said it was all right. Hey everybody, come on in! She said it was okay! Let’s go Julie. Yeah, she said it was okay. I wouldn’t have just walked in.”

It’s just so scary if there’s no lock on that door, you’re so vulnerable at that time. You’re scared someone’s going to push the door open on you. Imagine if someone had an aerial view of what we looked like in there, trying to keep the door shut. The positions that we have ourselves in. then we have the “em-em” noise, that territory cough that we use. Somehow it scares people away. Eemmmmm.

But, even if there’s a lock, there are some people who will continue to try to open the door until you say, “Somebody’s in here.” What are they thinking? It’s just stuck, I know it. Just somebody’s shoes they left in there earlier...” (190-192)

This routine begins with “back to feeling like an idiot,” which signals to this condition as a chronic one. While truly self-effacing this

particular routine also exhibits what John Limon refers to as “abjection” in America, most specifically in its standup comedy. Limon goes back to Julia Kristeva’s abjection theory, in which she referred to abjection as a state of “negative ecstasy,” an individual in abjection being “literally beside himself.” Limon adopts abjection here to talk about jokes, “referring to abasement and groveling prostration,” a definition parallel to Kristeva’s in that “abjection is a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot get rid of, such as blood, urine, feces, nails, and the corpse” (Nilsen 425). I see this so clearly used in Degeneres’ humor, which on the surface appears to talk about trivial structures like elevators and public restrooms. On the one hand, we are asked, in Degeneres’ comedy, to re-view the ways by which we deal with the ordinary accoutrements of modern life, but in fact these same structures bring home the point of abjection, as we are rendered doubly idiotized by the act of abjection [feeling like idiots], in structures, spaces, and situations that are so ordinary they ought to have been, literally, fool-proof.

Another way by which we could understand abjection in Degeneres is to look at the underlying bases of the humor of the book. Nilsen says that “the joke of the book is that she really doesn’t have a point. But in fact, that is the point” (429). Degeneres in this routine relies so subtly on the pivot of idiocy we almost forget the aggressively female nature of this observation, especially in the restroom joke, in which humor functions as a means of communication than a means of self-presentation, a sharing of experiences rather than a demonstration of cleverness” (Gillooly 488). Eileen Gillooly cites Nancy Walker in saying that “women’s humorous expression is almost never purely comic or absurd... [and] carries with it not the lighthearted feeling that is the privilege of the powerful, but instead a subtext of anguish and frustration (488-489).

“Going bathroom” becomes an experience that is far from trivial or neutral, but is here fraught with risk--- mental, emotional, and even physical, for women. The experience of abjection is allied with the double threat of having to endure the humiliation of negotiating public and private spaces, inside and outside the stall, but also the “outing” of feminine corporeal fluids that are hinted at so heavily in this toilet joke, making of this a truly carnivalesque circumstance. Degeneres on the other hand, has found a way to deal with “hostile” space in real time, as in her text she enjoins women to laugh, not at, but for themselves [to] create female bonding... thus displac[ing] the male from the center of knowledge and meaning as well as from the center of gender relations... (Reincke 34).

THE HUMOR OF AGGRESSION

Judy Tenuta could not be farther from Ellen Degeneres in her comic routine. Where Degeneres' comedy rests on the comic pose of the Everywoman, Tenuta's is decidedly grounded on the pose of the female extraordinaire, in which she takes on a pose so superior she literally becomes her cult's own goddess.

In her book *The Power of Judyism*, published in 1991, a few years before Degeneres', Tenuta mines her stand up routine's personas by situating these in a new "religion" that "will give [you] eternal life, infinite candypants, and love slaves a plenty..." (Tenuta 3), a religion she eponymously terms Judyism. Right off she juxtaposes the novelty of this "religion" by clarifying that "...it's *Judyism*, not *Judaism*. In my religion, only I get to whine" (3), immediately denigrating tradition in the face of her strident affirmation of superiority and supremacy over "trogs" [troglogytes], "pigs," "trolls," "zombies," "toads," "swine," "hogs," "squids"--- all of which are variations of labels for the inferior male.

It seemed timely that Tenuta wrote this book after years of taking on the "goddess" persona in her stand-up routine. A year after this was published, Nancy Wride wrote an article in the *Los Angeles Times* about the growing wave of male-bashing jokes, and in this article, "some observers opined that 1992 was "the year of the woman," and others, such as anthropologist Alan Dundes averred that the rise in "men-as-nincompoops" jokes in the 1990's will be around for some time (Nilsen and Nilsen 135). Tenuta's "Judyism" is evidently set within gender-related humor, in which "the most obvious kind... is that jokes [are] used by one gender to put down the other" (134). Where previously these were seen in common jokes about "virgins, older women (especially mothers-in-law)... talkative women, unattractive women..." (134), Tenuta's routine has adopted an almost male cynicism in her approach to life (137-138), that is belied by the apparent femininity of her joke work. When she refers to her "incarnations" as "the petite flower, giver goddess, fashion plate, saint, earth mother, geisha girl, buffer of foreheads, blesser of bunions, healer of hermaphrodites, queen of candypants, and empress of Elvis impersonators" (Tenuta 5), she appears at once to exhibit and defy the prevailing norms that privilege a stereotypical femininity, in its frailty and vulnerability [petite flower, geisha girl], in its selflessness [giver goddess, saint, buffer of foreheads, blesser of bunions], and in its obscure or overt sexual objectification [earth mother, geisha girl, fashion plate, queen of candypants].

The sting of her invective-filled routine, is in fact obscured by appearing perennially garbed as a Greek goddess [all flowing, gauzy costume] accompanying her monologue with accordion music, referring to herself as “The Aphrodite of the Accordion” (5). Her assertion of supremacy as the center of the universe [“... Yeah, like I have no time to rule the world. I am Judy, master of space, time, and panty shields. I HAVE THE POWER TO TRANSFORM MYSELF INTO ANY LIFE FORM I CHOOSE, DEPENDING UPON WHEN MY TAXES ARE DUE... (4)] is usually delivered to the strains of accordion music and said in a sing-song manner. This sight gag contributes to the humor of the piece, but is not far-off in portraying herself as almost an oracular vessel, out to remedy the “excision of woman in formulations of comedy” (Fischer 63). That her list of incarnations now includes new roles that are outré, unacceptable and cheap [healer of hermaphrodites, queen of candypants, empress of Elvis impersonators] appears to support what Martin Grotjahn views as the “comedienne of modern times,” one who “seems to play the strange role of a woman impersonating a man” (63).

Because Tenuta’s comic pose is that of multiple alien selves within the “goddess” icon, her persistence in taking on literally alien ground allows her to assume a voice of authority, but when we, the audience, hear this voice, we only hear the voice of the perverted male. When Tenuta answers “letters to the Goddess,” her overt and unflinching reference to sexuality is deemed comic because it harks back to a similar humor employed by male stand up comics, like Richard Pryor or John Belushi. A joke in the form of question and answer riffs male comics and male comedy so evidently:

Dearest Judy,

In your infallible opinion, which comics have the longest careers?

Sincerely,

Earl Butts

Dear Mr. Butts,

The ones who smoke cigars and/or do Jell-O Pudding commercials (Tenuta 141).

Here, Tenuta metonymically refers to George Burns and Bill Cosby by referring to their comic personas so familiar to the American audience,

Burns as a long-lived comic taking on the wise fool persona, performing until his nineties, appearing with his usually unlit Havana as part of his comic routine, and Cosby whose endorsement of Jell-O pudding rested on his wise, benevolent father persona in the 1980's. Not only does Tenuta play with the familiarity with which very famous stand-up comics are received in American popular culture, she also offers a rather pointed derision at the fact that the "longest-lived" careers in comedy are reserved only for men.

Tenuta employs, and in fact, appropriates a male voice in the next letter:

Dear Judy,
Is there sexism in the world of comedy?

Your Loving Libber,
Hugh Hefner

Dear Hef,

Does Rose Kennedy own a black dress? You bet your air-brushed breasts there is. I had to grow a twelve-foot ego and stuff it in my pants just to get this far. That's why I'm known as Judy "The Wad" Tenuta (141).

Tenuta's confirmation of comedy being a male domain is not so much the point here. Rather, it is the admission that echoes Grotjahn's "association of transvestitism and comedy by seeing the male specter inhabiting the bodies of all comic women" (Fischer 63). Tenuta uses obvious references to genitalia here, thus taking on the risqué jokes that erotic humor or sexual joking most often used by comics in late night talk shows (Nilsen and Nilsen (112). But more than just appropriating the male voice here, her response in this joke affirms her usurpation of a male body [growing a penis] to be taken seriously in the "world of comedy". Her insertion of the alias "The Wad" which refers to the act of ejaculation emphasizes this creation, not of a transvestite, outwardly appearing male, as Grotjahn posits, but as a hermaphrodite, being both female and male. This returns us to one of her incarnations, not now only as a hermaphroditic empath, but as an alien figure whose [comic] power is derived from this fluidity of sexuality and identity.

Tenuta's comic routine also shares in the observational humor we saw employed by Degeneres, except that in these observations of things

she dislikes, she continues to use her “goddess” persona, and thus applies a mainly superiority, or aggression-based, humor in this jokework. Unlike Degeneres, whose humor “relies on acknowledging common experiences: that is, audience members are positioned to identify with her narratives...” (Fraiberg 321), Tenuta’s overt discourse is superior--- these views she raises are special, precisely because her perspective is inhuman, for humans are lower-life forms, and are thus “pigs,” “troggs,” “plankton,” “squids.” When Tenuta says that the following are “mortal sins against the goddess,” this rhetoric carries an assumption of extraordinary individualism, if not extreme self-absorption. Her view of home visits assumes of her the domestic and maternal woman of which she readily disabuses us, which Fischer calls the “suppression of the maternal” (65):

These squids who invite me to their homes for dinner, but instead of giving me food they say, “Hey Judy, come upstairs and look at our kids.” Like I have time to see how their chromosomes mutated (Tenuta 176).

The laughter that Tenuta engenders is a teeth-baring one, and we laugh at the way her narrative is riddled with conflict and insults, constantly defying our view of the peaceable female:

When I go into a museum and touch and exhibit, but it’s actually the security guard. She says, ‘Don’t touch me.’
I say, ‘I’m so sorry, I thought you were the first age of man.’
She says, ‘No, I’m the security guard.’
So I ask, ‘Can you please tell me where the petite flower, giver goddess ladies’ room is?’
She yells, ‘Look for it yourself.’
So I say, ‘Well, I was going by my sense of smell, but it led me to you’ (177).

Tenuta’s goddess comedy, while it purports to undermine an ideology that more than being dominantly male is also common, popular, and plebeian, in fact enters into it and positions itself as an agency to subvert and critique this very ordinariness by pointing to her complicity in this banal, almost subhuman, world. Its very observation is tied to the apparent triviality of American middle class existence, one that Tenuta both acknowledges and satirizes.

AMERICAN HUMOR

In "What Makes People Laugh?: Cracking the Cultural Code," Arthur Asa Berger interweaves humor directly to "the cultural code" of a given country--- to the assumptions people make about time and space, to the values they hold, to their historic experience" (28) In these texts, while we do understand the complexities the jokes and the history of standup comedy we have seen in this paper, we also realize that these jokes and the history of the genre to which they belong, are distinctly American, giving us insight into ways by which we understand the American social world.

What makes it American, then? Louis Rubin gives us a measure of this, when he says that "the central motif of American humor [lies in] the contrast, the incongruity between the ideal and the real," seen in the "incongruity of the formal, literary language of traditional culture and the informal, vernacular language of everyday life (34). This disparity we have seen in the penchant of standup comedy to remain in the realm of the popular and the everyday, challenging the "traditional" terrain of high culture, of authority, of normality. By doing so, this humor that rests on the constant centralization of the everyday and the trivial, therefore underscores the "heart of American experience," "the conviction that ordinary people can evince the wisdom to... demonstrate the capacity for understanding and cherishing the highest human values through embodying them in their political and social institutions" (35). This democratic ideal animates the humor that is utilized in standup comedy. While this is truly admirable, Rubin does speak of the downside of this democratic ideal--- the truth, too, he points out is that "the individual citizens of a democracy are indeed ordinary people, who speak, think, and act in ordinary terms, with a suspicion of the abstract ideas and values" (35). They, therefore, threaten to "cheapen and vulgarize democracy's highest social, cultural, and ethical ideals" (35), and the problem of democracy and culture is how to encompass its members to join this decision-making process without compromising these very ideals (35).

Standup comedy, in all the forms that it has taken, has exhibited both American humorous faces, what Arlen Hansen calls an entropic one, a "fondness for breaking up," or challenging, "systems," extending the democratic spirit and "presupposing an innate attraction to anarchy, iconoclasm, and... chaos" (406), thus allying itself to Rubin's view of the ordinary, "rowdy" American that tends to vulgarize tradition and authority, and a transformative one, that "speaks to the American characteristic of transforming reality through creative and inventive talk," creating "worlds

elsewhere,” perhaps as an attempt “to disguise his nature and fantasize away his actual lot in life” (412-413). Hansen adds that in transformational humor, “the humor arises naturally from the discrepancy between his actual condition and his transformed version of it...” (413)

The short excerpts we have seen exhibited these two types of American humor, in transformation in Tenuta’s creation of a new religion that centers her and her own experiences, and entropic humor in Degeneres’ disorderly reaction to life’s “small stuff,” elevators and public restrooms, and in Tenuta’s constant denigration of a workaday culture that is peopled by unlovely creatures. In Degeneres and in Tenuta, we saw two examples of late 20th century contemporary humor by women in the United States, and in examining the forms this humor takes, stand-up comedy, in this case, and the strategies it uses, allows this humor to isolate moments of identification and connection (cf. Fraiberg 325), and permits the American female comic to create liberative spaces to reveal potent and latent values in current American society.

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