

# Women's Comic Voices: The Art and Craft of Female Humor

Andrea Greenbaum

*And Sarah laughed within herself, saying: "After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?"*

Genesis 18:12

Sarah, overhearing her husband, Abraham, telling others that at her old age she will bear a son, cannot help but make a private joke. And her promised son bears the indelible mark of her wit and sense of humor—Isaac (*Yitzhak*—to laugh). But it is quite telling that Abraham, after hearing her laugh, is quick to stifle her. "Then Sarah denied, saying: 'I laughed not': for she was afraid. And He said: 'Nay,; but thou didst laugh'" (*Genesis* 18:15). Sarah's laughter is interpreted as disrespectful, but in fact it is not turned outward at God or her husband, but inward toward herself and her aging body as a source of sexual pleasure; it is, as I discovered in my investigation of stand-up culture, a decidedly feminine approach to humor—inner directed, self-aware, and sexually knowing.

For over a year I studied the community of stand-up comedians in the Tampa, Florida area. As a participant-observer, I was able to attend comedy workshops, conduct numerous interviews with professional as well as amateur comedians, and observe, night after night, the way comedians hone their comedy craft in front of an audience. As my study progressed, I discovered that the bifurcation in gender humor that I mildly observed watching televised performances were distinctly prevalent in live performances, where the material was often more raw and obscene than allowed during televised broadcasts. Further, it seemed that women's humor was more internally focused on relationships, emotions, politics

as it relates to feminism, and body image, while male humor concerned itself with external issues of performance, current events, popular culture, and professional achievement (Greenbaum iii). While June Sochen's *Women's Comic Visions* and Nancy Walker's *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* explore these gender distinctions and remain a staple in gender and humor scholarship, there is, quite simply, a dearth of critical investigation into the area of female stand-up comedy. Allison Fraiberg's "Between the Laughter: Bridging Feminist Studies through Women's Stand-up Comedy," and Linda Pershing's study of feminist comedian Kate Clinton remain, as of the writing of this essay, the few articles which specifically address the role of the female stand-up as an American cultural phenomenon. And while both Fraiberg and Pershing provide much needed insight into the field of female stand-up humor, both are limited in scope and focus. Fraiberg's investigation of comics such as Ellen DeGeneres, Margaret Cho, and Paula Poundstone are not based on personal interviews or evaluation of live performances, but rather on televised performances and printed interviews. On the other hand, Pershing's investigation is closer to a true ethnographic study, as she did personally witness multiple performances of Kate Clinton and had the opportunity to interview her. However, Pershing's focus on a single comedian, while useful in broadening the discussion of female stand-up humor as a cultural and political phenomenon, is insufficiently narrow.

My study of female stand-up comedians, however, directly explores the range of female comic narratives. The three female comedians whom I profile in this investigation,\* Margaret Smith, Diane Ford, and Etta May, have constructed different stage personae—Smith embodies the World-Weary-Woman, years of therapy, bad dates, and a dysfunctional home life; Diane Ford is the Quintessential Feminist, angry, brash, and fully believing that the personal is the political; Etta May is White-Trash-With-An-Attitude, the spokeswoman for the blue collar gal—but their disparate humor is ultimately conjoined in their feminine perspectives.

During the interviews, the three comedians separately acknowledged that they are engaged in a predominately male form of discourse (although, of course, they did not use that word)—a narrative style that is decidedly aggressive and confrontational. William Keough, in *Punchlines: The Violence of American Humor*, connects the mechanics of stand-up comedy with the hostile stance of a boxer. "A comic enters, takes the mic, and tries to 'destroy' his audience with some feints, a few well-placed jabs, a haymaker or two. His job is to deliver the payoff, the punch line" (171). Women, in general, are socially conditioned to avoid confrontation, but stand-up comedians, if they are to be successful, must engage themselves with the audience, and by doing so, put themselves at verbal risk. Deborah Tannen, in her research on gender and language, confirms that male speakers are more likely to engage in conflict talk than their female counterparts, since women more readily avoid conflict (179). In order to achieve this assertive stance, female comics must eschew conventional notions of social

behavior—a point I will elaborate on in a moment. Second, the comic lifestyle of frequent travel, performing in multiple venues, encourages independence and self-reliance, invariably negating proscribed views of female attachment to the home. Etta May articulates this perspective in her interview when she argues that women are “trained” to wait for men to return, from war, from work, but men are not accustomed to waiting for women, one of the many hazards of being a heterosexual female comic.

While women stand-up comics are becoming more plentiful, women have traditionally not adopted the role of social clown—primarily because, as Regina Barreca sees it in *They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted*, “good girls don’t.” Humor, like other socially stigmatized behavior, was something Barreca thought only bad girls did, analogous to letting a boy get to second base on the first date. Barreca learned that women were expected to laugh at the jokes that men tell, rather than the other way around. To not laugh would be impolite, *unfeminine*. Cheris Kramarae, in *Women and Men Speaking*, citing Anne Beatts’ 1975 article, “Can a Woman Get a Laugh and a Man Too,” notes that,

Men fear women who try to be funny. Humor is aggression, because women are not rewarded socially for being funny (but rather for being nice to men), and had to live a life dealing with what she terms trivialities, there is likely to be a difference in women’s and men’s senses of humor: women’s humor is subtler than men’s—it is rooted in everyday events. (Beatts 184) [And that] Beatts believes that girls learn, along with other rules pertaining to dating, how to laugh at the jokes of males but to stifle any clever remarks of their own. (Kramarae 58)

Cameron, McAlinden, and O’Leary, summing up Robin Lakoff’s view of women’s speech patterns, argue that, “women are brought up to think of assertion, authority and forcefulness as masculine qualities which they should avoid. They are taught instead to display the ‘feminine’ qualities of weakness, passivity and deference to men. It is entirely predictable, and given the pressures towards social conformity, rational, that women should demonstrate these qualities in their speech as well as in other aspects of their behavior” (76). They point out that women’s passivity in language is perpetuated generationally, since girls imitate their mother’s speech, as well as other feminine role models. In my interview with Diane Ford, she confirms that the reason she believes she is so adept at stand-up is because of the early death of her parents. Without a female role model, Ford felt unrestrained to develop her aggressive wit. Likewise, Margaret Smith’s emotional estrangement from her family, her isolation, allowed her to develop her sense of humor. Interestingly, Paul McGhee, in his often cited psychological study of humor, concurs: “for a female to develop into a clown, joke-teller or story

teller, she must violate the cultural expectation that females should not aggressively dominate mixed-sex social interaction” (201). Moreover, McGhee’s research revealed that males tend to find jokes funnier when females are made the butt of the joke (204). Further, studies conducted by Zillman and Stocking suggest that “females give higher funniness ratings than males to self-disparaging jokes, regardless of the sex of the person being disparaged” (quoted in McGhee 205), while males find jokes funnier when females are the object (204).

Because ethnographic studies can be written in many different styles and formats (Fetterman 22), I have used a great deal of artistic and stylistic liberty in conducting my investigation of women’s comic culture. I allow the comics to use their singular voices, permitting them to recount their personal narratives, a strategy consistent with ethnographic investigation, as such close verbal scrutiny “allow[s] the reader to judge the quality of the work—how close the ethnography is to the thoughts of the natives in the field” (Fetterman 22), so what emerges is a glimpse into the culture as a whole, their patterns of discourse, social activity, and values. Listen. . . .

### Margaret Smith

My mom always asks me when I’m going to have kids. Like  
I need a bunch of people hanging around my apartment.  
Yelling at me because I broke their yolk.

The deadpan, world-weary voice of 38-year-old Margaret Smith fills the room of the Comedy Works. Her comic style is slow, more narrative than one-liner, and the audience knows it must wait patiently for her to deliver the punch. She begins her set talking about her “dysfunctional family,” her passive, compulsively cleaning mother and her alcoholic father. Margaret tells her audience that her mother pressures her to buy her father a card for Father’s Day. “I buy him a blank one, and draw a picture of myself hanging there.”

Her humor bites, in quick bursts, like a nervous Chihuahua, and she makes you sense that her jokes have more truth than fiction. Later, during our interview, I ask her about her family. “My mom’s Jewish. My dad’s Irish Catholic alcoholic,” she quips, but in the joking there is thinly-veiled anger.

During her set, Smith often questions the audience, bringing them into her comedy. She notices the smooth, freshly shaved legs of a woman sitting at a front table. Smith comments to the audience that she wishes she were a big bushy woman. She has the following exchange with the woman’s companion:

SMITH: Do you like bushy women?  
DATE: Not particularly.  
SMITH: You don’t think hair is sexy?  
DATE: On your head.

The exchange is amusing. Of course, men do not like “bushy women,” Smith knows that, but she uses the line as way to draw her audience into the realm of feminine humor, which often uses the body as a point of reference. Smith’s use of the notion of a hairy woman is designed to draw subtle attention to sexual stereotypes, since a heterosexual American woman is certainly expected to shave if she wants to maintain the illusion of her femininity.

Smith again plays with the notion of body as discourse when she does her routine about the French abortion pill.

Have you heard of the French abortion pill? It’s illegal you know. The FDA hasn’t approved it yet. They’re very skeptical because it has adverse effects. Pain and bleeding. Pain and bleeding. Why is everyone so concerned about our pain and bleeding? Pain and bleeding. I’m thinking, oversized penises cause pain and bleeding, and I don’t see anybody putting a warning label on *that*. (beat) Not that I’d ever seen one. Oh, once. But I screamed and it got small again.

Smith, like the other female comedians I observed, uses the feminine body as a foundation in the narrative—this point will become more evident in the sections with Diane Ford, whose entire act is structured around the feminine form, and with Etta May, who uses her large body as a source of physical humor.

Another commonality among the female comedians is the view that they needed to develop a “voice” in order to craft a comic routine. Smith, who started playing comedy clubs in New York City back in 1981, recalls that it took her three years to find her “voice.”

“What happens is, when you first start doing comedy, before you have a voice, you write a lot more.” I ask her what she means by “voice,” and she hesitates before she answers. “A voice. A definite personality. The first three years is spent developing a voice. Where you can sit down and write for yourself. It’s sort of trial and error. You’re kind of finding out who you are up there. And that continues to grow over the years.”

Her first experiences as a stand-up were “horrible,” primarily because she didn’t have the confidence to carry it off. “I had all these ideas, and then I wrote them down, and then I realized that to pull anything off you needed confidence and that the overriding factor in any of my beginning performances was terror and fear and . . . Someone who is totally afraid isn’t going to be funny, because the audience can’t get over your uncomfortableness. So they really are uncomfortable with your suffering. So I was suffering.”

I question whether it was actually her confidence or her material that needed further development. She is quick to respond: “No. Because material that didn’t work my first year I brought it back two years later and it killed. I just didn’t have the confidence to deliver it. And confidence is experience.”

In the cluttered back room of the Comedy Works, Smith sits poised, ready to answer my questions. The manager had told me that I could have only ten minutes, and my interview is going past fifteen. I interrupt her, and ask her if she would like me to stop. “No,” she insists. “I like talking about myself.”

I ask her about her writing. She tells me that she is working on a screenplay, a love story, and has aspirations to star and direct her film. While she admits that she doesn’t write daily, she continually works on various projects.

I want to do a one-woman show. So I’m writing childhood stories. Today the topic was kind of depressing. I wrote about . . . I wrote about how appealing . . . how much more appealing men seemed when I didn’t have any money. Isn’t that horrible? And how . . . because I was sitting at a restaurant, and I can go into a restaurant and order anything I want. And I own my own home. And I do very well. I’m very fortunate. And this guy sat down next to me. And he ordered dinner. We’re both sitting at the bar at Shells. And he ordered and he said, ‘Give me a half-dozen of these raw oysters too.’ And I thought to myself how most of my life how I never could go in and get what I wanted. I’ve had to say, ‘Gee, can I scrape enough money together to get the salad and bread and full up on.’ And I thought back to those times, and I thought of how interesting I would have found his company if I could go and order anything I wanted. Because I would have thought . . . you know it just occurred to me, that little thing . . . I thought, men were more appealing when I thought I was less fortunate than them. Now that I’m as fortunate . . . And then I went into this whole thing about my disappointment . . . I think my greatest disappointment see . . . I would think I could . . . I think women would have very different lives if they didn’t operate from a point of need. If they operated from a point of abundance . . . So I wrote about that today. It might lead to some comedy. And then again it might be something . . . I try not to discriminate and say, ‘I’m just going to write a joke.’ Because it doesn’t fill me anymore. To just sit down. In the beginning of my career, I sat down every day for two, three, four hours and wrote funny stuff. Taking everything else in my life out. Not even putting it on the paper.

Smith admits that over the years she has added more feminine topics to her set list. She is quick to point out that being female in the primarily male-dominated world of stand-up comedy has helped her career. “I think at some point in my career it was more advantageous to be a woman. Because it was a rarity.

Now . . . See there's a million guys out there all doing the same thing. No one's doing what I'm doing." Like many comedians, Smith is concerned about the current state of the stand-up market. The Eighties saw a burgeoning of comedy clubs (Smith recalls that in the beginning of her career, she played clubs which still had their disco ball dangling from the ceiling), and there was enough work to go around. But now, the clubs are closing, the market is saturated, and comedians are left to scrounge (since this interview was conducted in 1994, the Comedy Works has indeed closed).

While she undeniably loves doing stand-up, she seems to have reached a point in her career where she can relax and appreciate the success she has earned over the years:

It's not my whole life. It used to be. I used certain things throughout my whole life to make me feel whole. And comedy worked for a long time. At one time in my life so did drugs and alcohol . . . And then that stopped working. I would say that it isn't my whole life. And because it's not, I really am having a second relationship with it, and that I really love to do it now. When it was my entire life, it drained me, and now that I have a more integrated life, and have friendships and love in my life, I like to do other things like ride horses, I run every other day. . . .

During her set, Smith jokes about being in therapy, but for Smith therapy is connected to comedy. She explains that her writing helped to alleviate some of the pain she experienced growing up in a dysfunctional family:

I picture the audience as I'm sitting there. I have a couple of topics written down. And I picture the audience. I used to write on the sheet of paper, "family," and I would list certain people in the family, and I would start writing about them. And ways that they profoundly affected me and out of the . . . It was my therapy for probably the first eight years of my comedy career. Until I could afford the real thing. Yeah. Probably comedy kept me alive.

### **Diane Ford**

Men, when a woman looks at you and says one of two things, 'Do you think I look fat?' or 'Let's talk about our relationship,' run for the fuckin' hills. You don't have an answer for any of those questions, buddy. Just get out of there. Your ship's already sailed. Don't look back, you'll turn into salt.

Helen Reddy's 1970s feminist anthem, "I am Woman," blares from the crackling speakers as Diane Ford, dressed in a silk white shirt and casual slacks, takes the stage. In addition to the requisite microphone and black stool that decorate the stage, Ford has an additional prop, a giant poster outline of a faceless woman, whose body is sectioned off, labeled like a beef chart. Her breasts, for instance, bear the phrases, "Baby Feeder," on the left and "Male Ego Feeder" on the right. Her feet are "Shoe Receptacles," her stomach, a "Chocolate Bank." The poster tells us Ford has named her act "Anatomy of a Woman," and she begins her routine on the offensive. "By the way, there has to be some comparisons: woman to man, female to male, positive to negative, right to wrong. . . ." Ford launches into her act by talking about her first job experience, as a salesperson for a beef company.

The reason I mention that last job, is that is where the germ of the idea for the show came from. I used to have to sell beef by pointing out a beef chart. So I thought I could explain a woman by pointing out a woman chart. We'll start at the outside and work our way in . . .

By structuring her entire act around the feminine body as a source of discourse, Ford enables herself to speak from the subject position, a position of power and authority. As Linda Alcoff reminds us, "Rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act of political struggle" (293). And Ford does not shy away from the politics associated with feminist humor. For instance, the room turns perceptibly quiet when Ford asks the audience if there are any feminists in the crowd.

Do we have a lot of feminists here tonight? One, two, three? Just me? You say you're a feminist, every man's beeper's going off. 'Oops. Gotta go! Not the consciousness-raising comedy. Tell a dick joke!' Feminism shouldn't scare you. There's nothing about feminism that should scare anybody. The search for equality is something we all need. What's it gonna take for all the women to stand up and scream, 'I'm a feminist. I'm searching for my equality.' It's not enough that women make sixty cents on every man's dollar, and still have to do the housework. If that's not enough to make you scream, 'I'm a feminist, I'm searching for equality,' how about the fact that every time you complain about something you're called a nagging bitch. Well, listen to this: They could make panty hose that won't run, and they won't fuckin' do it! Feminism scares men because it's an angry issue. They don't like angry women.

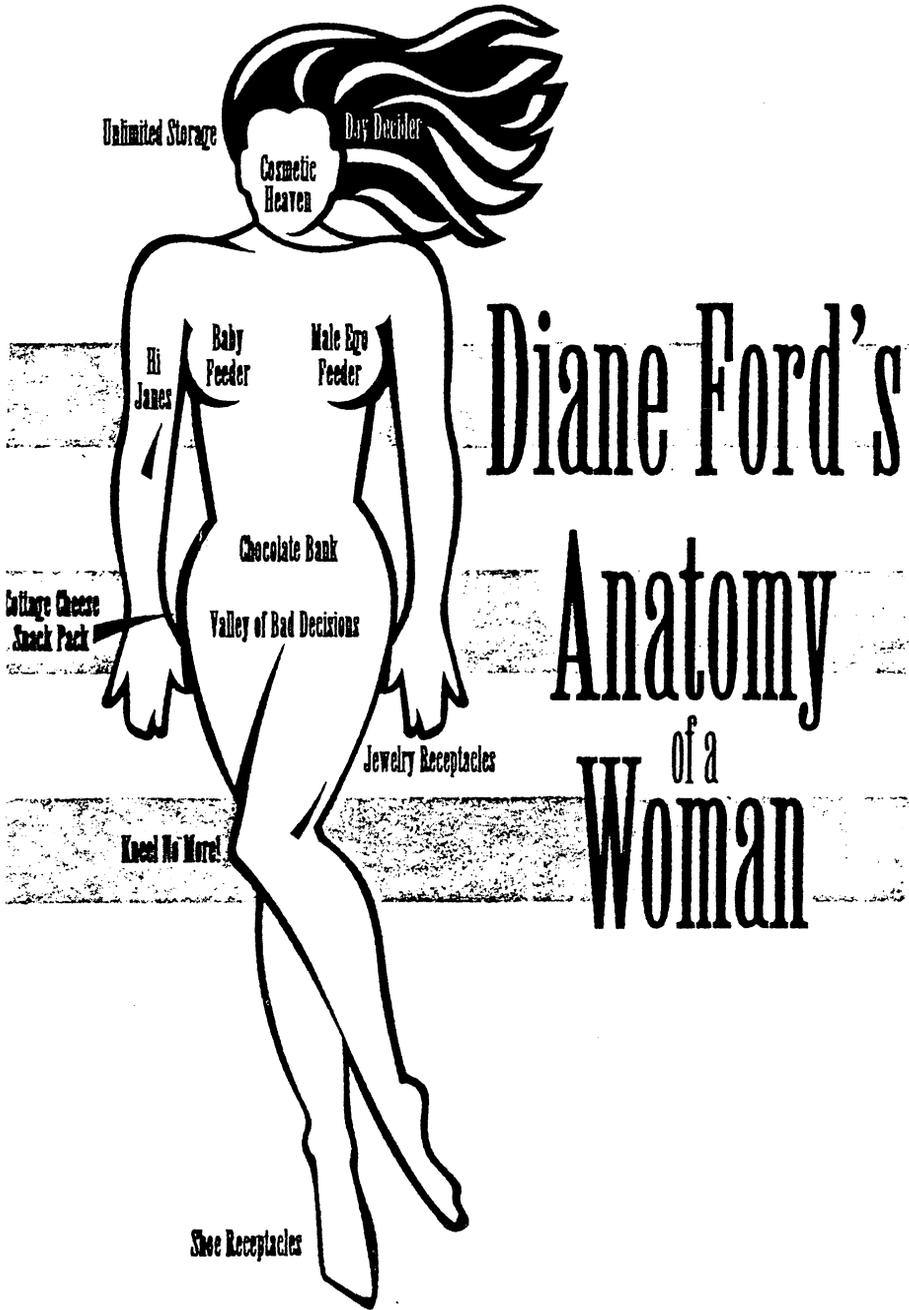


Figure 1: Diane Ford's "Anatomy of a Woman."

Women are not raised to be angry. When we're little we're told it's not nice. It's not pretty. Little girls' don't. That's why when we get angry it scares the shit out of them. I was at the airport the other day, and this guy walks up to me. I was having a bad day, I admit it. This guy walks up to me and goes, 'Hey, why don't you smile?' Has a man ever walked up to another man and said, 'Hey buddy, why don't you smile? The world would be a prettier place.' It made me so mad that a stranger would come up to me and demand that I smile. 'Why don't I smile? What are you? The fuckin' attitude police? Like I'm not entitled to my bad mood. You don't know what just happened to me, buddy. Maybe my dog died. Or maybe I lost my job. Or maybe, just maybe, did you ever think of this, it takes 43 muscles to frown and 13 to smile, and maybe I'm fuckin' exercising.' (beat) I'm done now. It feels so much better. It's like a cleansing thing. They put a little pill underneath his tongue and he was fine.

Later, during our interview, I question Ford about this moment in her routine. If women are not raised to be angry, how does she reconcile the fact that female comedians are participating in an arena that is inherently combative?

I think that's why a lot of female comedians are gay. I mean they've already bucked the biggest social mores. They're lesbians. Women are not raised to express their sense of humor. They're raised to laugh at men's sense of humor. So in order to find your sense of humor, expressed in front of people, you have to be a very independent spirit. Now I was free of the taboos that are probably placed on most women around the age of 13 and 14 because I lost my parents at that time.

During her act, Ford silences the room when she recounts this experience of losing both parents in an automobile accident. Ford tells us that she spent the next four years bouncing from relatives' houses to a Catholic boarding school. "Like my life wasn't fucked up enough," she jokes with the crowd. But in our interview, Ford says that she was actually happiest at the Catholic school. "It was the only place I wasn't singled out because I didn't have parents. It was the only place where I wore a uniform. I blended in with the crowd. I was no different than everybody else there. Nobody else had parents living there." Ford credits the trauma of losing her parents for shaping "who I am and why I do what I do. Looking for love in all the wrong places."

Now on her third marriage, Ford details her endless quest for love in her routine.

On her first husband:

He's a psychologist. My first husband. You know the most valuable lesson he taught me? Better than therapy? Revenge. Don't discount it. It's really powerful. We were married seven years. A nice house, a nice dog. I left the house, he had a woman over, spent the night in the house. The next day the dog took a shit right in the middle of the bed. My husband, the psychologist, calls me up, and says, 'Diane, the dog just crapped in the middle of the bed. This is some strange behavior pattern. What do you think I should do?' I said, 'Give her a biscuit. It took me months to train her.' You can go to therapy for years and not feel that good.

On her second husband:

He was a musician this one. Some nights he couldn't hold the drumsticks because he did the drugs better than he did the drums. What do you call a musician without a girlfriend? Homeless.

On her third husband:

Now I'm married again. Successfully I might add. He's employed. The second half of my life is turning out much better than my first half. We live up there in Lake Tahoe, Nevada. He works for Caesars up there. The casino, not the pizza company. I told everyone in my family I was getting married, and they all went, 'Pizza, pizza.' I told my aunt I was getting married again. She said, 'Well, we've enjoyed your other two husbands. . . .'

But it is her first husband whom Ford credits for getting her interested in stand-up comedy when she was twenty-three. "He signed me up for a class in comedy writing. I was in sales at the time. He said, 'You're the funniest person I ever met in my life.' My first routine was about his mother, and then he never thought I was funny again." Ford tells me that her first husband didn't think she would pursue comedy as a profession, only as a hobby, "like Erma Bombeck or something."

Growing up, Ford found that she used her sense of humor to deflect conflict. "My way to avoid [conflict] was to find something funny so there would be no tension. But there was not a lot of tension. We were a very fun-loving family." Ford began writing comedy in stand-up workshops at the University of Southern California, and UCLA. She remembers her first time on stage during open mic

night at the Comedy Store in Los Angeles. “Six women from Texas laughed their asses off.” From that moment she was hooked. “It’s a drug.” Ford says that except for this year, when she suffered writer’s block for three months, she is a disciplined writer who writes two to three hours a day, and finds that she is continually revising her material. “I’m changing everything. The more poignant the pieces are, the better I like them and want them to stay in the show. I like to make the points—the feminism, the anger points. Things that make people think.”

On the subject of feminism, I received an angry response when I mentioned that Margaret Smith does not consider herself to be a feminist comic. “Oh they’re so fuckin’ afraid of it. But they’ll take all the rewards, won’t they? They’ll take equality in their paycheck; fight for other things. They’ll fight for the personal feminist. But they won’t fuckin’ stand up in public and say they’re a feminist.” Without hesitation, Ford admits to being a feminist comedian. “I’d say that political is personal, and I’m the ultimate feminist.”

While fourteen years of stand-up has transformed her into a polished performer, Ford, in a “rap” session with the audience after the show, tells us about an explosion of violence to her feminist material.

The worst gig I ever did . . . I was getting laughs, doing all right on stage. I was in Alabama, and this man actually lifted his wife up by the hair and said, ‘You’re not listening to this,’ and dragged her out of the room. And you know what I was talking about? Men doing fifty percent of the housework. You just know he beat the crap out of her on the way home. And I kept yelling, ‘Somebody stop him!’ But nobody would do anything. That’s our society folks. That was a long time ago. Now I think they would laugh. I think we’ve been empowered by awareness.

Ford’s “Anatomy of a Woman” is in part preparation for a larger, more daring project: an off-Broadway, one-woman show; the ultimate ambition for the professional comedian. Ford believes that audiences should “go through the whole gamut of emotions. Uncomfortable. Anger. Sadness. Laughter.” Her delivery is conversational, friendly, and her material, like many female comics, concerns itself with issues of female sexuality, relationships, and distinctions between men and women.

On PMS:

One woman killed her husband during that time of the month and they used PMS as the defense. ‘She was under too much stress.’ Every woman in here knows what upset her. (In a masculine voice) ‘What’s ‘amatter with ya? Are ya on the

rag?" (Shooting) (In a sing songy voice) 'I'm a little touch-y . . .' Now the NRA has a bumper sticker out saying, 'Woman don't kill people, periods kill people.'

#### On Sexism:

We're obsessed with breasts in this culture. A lot of guys just didn't get enough milk when they were little. They have a restaurant chain named after them: "Hooters." They serve a lot of round food in there. Every time I see that place I want to open up my own restaurant chain called "Wieners." Just hire guys in bicycle shorts with really big dicks. We'd serve a lot of long food in there.

By far, the most common comic subject discussed among comedians during the year of my study was the John and Lorena Bobbit saga. Diane Ford's routine also included a segment about the unfortunate Mr. Bobbit.

Bad name don't you think. Too bad it wasn't John-Trim-A-Little-Off-The-End. In a situation such as this, perspective is very important. Perspective for this situation is that every 15 seconds in this country women are raped and mutilated, but it never makes the back page. One man gets his [penis] bent, and that's all every one can talk about. She has to be crazy. She drove away with it, in her hand. She's driving, she looks down, there's a penis in her hand. So she rolls down the window and throws it out. 'Go wild! Be free!'

She tells me that she is "Everywoman. The Henry Fonda of female comedians," arguing that she represents the majority of women, more so than a comedian like Roseanne. "Because I'm not gay, and I'm not overweight, and I'm not unattractive. I probably represent the average woman better than anybody." In her comedy, I question whether, inadvertently, she is perpetuating stereotypes about women as catty, bitchy, deceptive, and self-absorbed. She is quick to defend her position:

We are! Are you going to ignore it? You're going to deny it. You've never been in on those luncheons? Fuck! I'm just telling you how it is. Does a television show that depicts a robbery, perpetuate a robbery? I don't do anything but tell the truth. I certainly don't lie. Hopefully, stand-up says to women it's okay to be this. As long as we laugh at it. I'm not taking being catty seriously. I'm just saying that we do it. And it's a

pretty funny thing that we do, and if we can't laugh at it, who the fuck can? I'm not saying it in a mean way.

Ford is reflective about her life as a comic, and in some ways, surprisingly, longs for her days as a beef salesperson. "I was the youngest and only woman divisional sales director of a food company when I was twenty-two. I made a lot of money, and if I would have stayed with it, I would have been president of the company by the time I was thirty-five." I find it difficult to believe that she would prefer to sell beef than perform. "Let me tell you something, I would have been very successful. And I'm very successful in this business too, but this is a much harder business. I enjoy it. It's like the priesthood. You know, you're called to it. You don't have any other fuckin' choice."

### Etta May

Look at the men in here, girls. Look around. Look what you drug in tonight. Girls, back me up. Ever see that guy walkin' down the street, and for some reason he just refuses to pull his pants all the way up? And wouldn't we once just love to say, "Hey! Mr. Lowrider! The only crack I want to see is in the sidewalk." And here's a fashion flash: Men, do not attempt to wear these little Speedo swim trunks, if the bulge above the suit is bigger than the bulge in the suit. It's a law! You're scaring the children. Stop it!

"Here she is . . . the sexiest woman in comedy . . . Etta May!" Wearing her colored kerchief, a pink knit sweater pulled over a K-Mart special polyester shirt, and brown stretch pants, which exaggerate her enormous buttocks, Etta May takes the stage. She is only thirty-two, but she appears to be a woman in her late forties. Picture a Southern, larger, angrier, trashier Roseanne, and you have Etta May. Her comedy is folksy, conversational, and her narrative strategy is to use tag questions, which make her far more dialogic than most comedians. She is unafraid to interact with the audience, ask them questions, and pull them into her trailer park world.

You know I'm sick of the whole health craze. I don't want to hear about bran cereal. I don't know about you, but bran cereal gives me the shits. (Etta May looks to a young male, seated in the first row.) I'm gettin' you hot, ain't I Skeeter? I must look pretty good to some kid from Lutz, you know what I mean? (She pants at him) Don't touch what you can't afford. Baby, lovin' me is worse than a Vietnam flashback. Hey, Skeeter, you got yourself a little Barbie (pretty girl) with you, don't you? Girls, I just want to pop off your head. Do you see this

little girl right here? Do me a favor Barbie, stand up for a minute. (The young woman hesitates, but Etta May has the audience chanting "Barbie! Barbie!" and the young woman stands up.) Turn around. I'm gonna beat you up in the parkin' lot. Damn, you're petite Barbie. What size do you wear? (The woman doesn't respond) Barbie? This question tough for you, Barbie? It's not algebra, sweetheart. You're not real smart are you, sweetheart? You know, she's got a good lookin' field, but nobody playin' at anything in it. (The young woman answers that she wears a size 5.) I crap bigger than you. Kiss my ass.

During our interview I ask Etta if she always does her Barbie and Skeeter routine, since there is no guarantee that an attractive woman will be sitting in the front row. "Usually I do it. But if there isn't [an attractive woman], you have to be prepared for that. Any question I ask the audience seems like they can answer me a million different ways, but they can't. They can only answer in a certain way. After doing it awhile, there's no way they can answer you to mess you up."

May's interaction with the audience begins even before she takes the stage. Most headliners come to a club about a half-hour before they have to go on, do their forty-five minute act, and then leave. Etta May arrived at the Comedy Works about a half-hour *before* the show started. She tells me that she likes to take a look at the crowd, get a feel for their mood before she performs. "See them," she says, pointing to table of women in the back. "They're out for a good time. They're laughing and drinking. I'll play to them." Wherever she is performing, she personalizes the routine by making local references. For Tampa, she refers to Lutz as a place where stupid people live, and Hyde Park as a metaphor for Tampa's elite. During my interview, May explains that before she gets on stage:

I ask where do stupid people live? Where do rich people live? That's lower people hitting on authority. They love it when you smash the rich people. My show, as you see, I start off with real basic stuff. Easy stuff. It gives them time. One, they see this woman walk up, and I'm not the normal type of comic. Not normally what they see. And they're a little afraid for me, and so you have to hit 'em with real quick short jokes. And bring them into your world."

On Hyde Park people:

Beverly Hills people are like Hyde Park people. Got any rich people here tonight? (A few clap). Get your rich ass in your Mercedes and go home. Give me white trash night tonight. Hell, if white trash were against the law, half of us would be on death row. Tonya Harding would be our leader.

May uses a great deal of self-deprecating humor in her act, a trend that is no longer in vogue and is more reminiscent of a style employed by the older female comedians like Phyllis Diller and Joan Rivers. Her outfit, in fact, is intentionally unflattering, designed to draw attention to her rather large figure.

It's the first thing that hits you. For fat people, when you walk into a room you kind of have to let everybody know, 'Hey, I know I'm fat, let's move on.' You need to put an audience at ease, and the way to put an audience at ease is to give them authority, and make yourself less than them. And people will warm up to you. Then you can do anything. If you look at my act, towards the end, I start slamming men. At the beginning, I get men on my side. A lot of guys don't want to see a female comic 'cause all they'll do is slam men. I start out with that joke [about women changing when they get married]. One, if you can get the men on your side up front, they'll fall in love with you. And their wives are not sitting there going, 'Oh God, he's hating this.' You know what I mean.

The opening joke May is referring to, goes as follows:

I got married and I looked just like that (pretty girl). Frightening, isn't it guys? Men, women change when they get married, don't they boys? Yes! Guys, putting a ring on a woman's finger is like pulling a rip cord on an inflatable raft. Oh yeah, you marry Cheryl Tiegs, wake up with Shelly Winters. It's a hell of a shock.

At the onset of our interview, I point out that her appearance belies her obvious intelligence, and she is suddenly uncomfortable. In a slow, Southern accent, she tells me that she was a housewife who just became interested in doing comedy. "You get tired of your husband being out of work." As I continue to question her, she becomes more distressed. She hesitates before continuing talking. In an instant, her southern accent has disappeared, and in a moderated, quiet voice she tells me, "I'm an actress. I don't even have a southern accent." She reveals that she is not from Arkansas, but Los Angeles, has never been married, and has never had children. She began performing stand-up because she "needed the work. It's easiest to get work as a comic." May reveals that her persona is a conglomeration of the people she grew up with in Iowa. "Low-class, white-trash people. I have a college degree and everything. I saw wonderful women that just had wisdom, and yet at the same time would say the stupidest things. For example, I'm going down Rod-eo Drive. Just that honesty . . ." She seems, surprisingly, relieved, able to drop her facade and talk seriously about her craft.

I tell her that I overheard women in the bathroom talking about how “honest” she is; how her stories of her husband and children all seem to ring true—a real testament, I now realize, to her acting ability. She acknowledges the unusual rapport she has with her audience.

I had five or six people come up and hug me. I know comics that once they walk off that stage they literally hide from the public. Where I get people who come up and go, ‘I feel like I’ve been sitting in your living room talking. I feel like I know you.’ It’s a little play that I’ve put together.

Admiring performers like Whoopie Goldberg and Lily Tomlin, May began performing in 1987, hoping to use stand-up as a stepping stone to acting opportunities. “I tried to do other characters after this, but other characters couldn’t follow Etta May. It set me apart.”

The commonality of many female comedians is that they’re childless, single, and more often than not, gay. May believes that the enormous traveling one has to do to maintain a career is not conducive, particularly for women, to sustaining long-term relationships.

Women are used to waiting for their men to come back from war, back from prison. We’re trained to wait for our men, and be loyal. Men don’t wait for anything. And you think about it. These average looking guys are gonna get laid this week. They’re up on stage and they’ll pick somebody, if they’re that type of guy. They can. And they can go out to dinner, maybe they’re not going to sleep with them. I couldn’t pick somebody out. I couldn’t go out to dinner. I’ll end up gutted somewhere in Kentucky.

As difficult as stand-up is for a man, May believes that it is far more arduous for a woman, who is less likely to enjoy the life of a road warrior.

It’s different for us to go on the road. A lot of people have asked me during interviews, ‘Isn’t it hard to do stand-up?’ I go, ‘No. It’s the other twenty-three hours of the day I have to deal with.’ I don’t know if you’ve talked to very many other women, this is not a career for somebody, even as much as they try to pamper you, you really better be . . . have a toughness.

May’s “toughness” is reflected in her stage persona. When she feels that the audience is not responding as enthusiastically as she would like, she cajoles them. “That was piss poor, Ladies. Is this your night out or what? Goddamn Hyde-Park bitch. Loosen up a little bit. I’m gonna break my parole just to kick the shit out

of you. You ready? Ready girls?" The women shout back, "Yes!" and May continues with her show. May realizes that her stage character can assert herself in ways that the off-stage Etta May cannot. "I'm like a big walking ventriloquist doll. I can say things that if I said them to somebody I'd get the shit beat out of me, but I can get by with so much. My [persona] is much fuller because I have to believe it."

As a character, Etta May is the exaggerated embodiment of a working-class woman—struggling to pay her bills, raise her children, and contend with a good-hearted, but not too bright, spouse. The audience, I noticed, were more receptive to Etta May than to other comedians. They were more likely to talk back to her, shout enthusiastically, and murmur consensual comments ("She's right!" "Don't I know it!" "It's true!") among their table mates. Etta May attributes this rapport to her appearance.

Waitresses tell me that when I hit the stage, people will start ordering food and start drinking. I bet they sold a lot of beer. People drink a lot more, and they'll order that second plate of nachos, and they'll get that food. Because I'm saying, it's okay. It's okay. We're big, fat, let's live our lives and go on.

It is also May's appearance, her obvious girth, that allows her a certain amount of sexual freedom on stage. In essence, like her heavily built comic predecessors Sophie Tucker and Totie Fields, May camouflages her sexuality behind her weight for humorous impact. Female stand-up comics need to "neuter themselves so they could mock the sexual and not destroy the comic effect by being too seductive themselves" (Cohen 114). While many regard the obese as asexual, Etta May acts the role of coquette. "People have said there is a very sexy quality about Etta May. And my friends tell me that Etta May is so much sexier than I am." May attributes Etta May's surprising sexuality to her brashness. "I know kids who are going up on open mic night who are shitting their pants, and they ask me for advice and I say, "Confidence is a very appealing thing." May, parodying the dichotomy between her appearance and her sexuality, ends her set explosively, in an hysterically funny strip-tease number.

I'd like to do one more thing for you. (An audience member shouts something to her). Buddy, you got anything bigger than your mouth, I might be takin' you out tonight. My husband didn't come in did he? I can't sing worth a damn, but I would like to lip sync a song for you: "You Light Up My Life." If you people feel the urge, just lip sync along with me.

Etta May begins to lip sync the song, which turns into a raunchy, strip-tease number. She brings "Skeeter" up on stage, and starts grinding her enormous frame into him, pulling her pink sweater off, and swaying her fully endowed

buttocks in a suggestive manner. The audience is out of control, laughing uproariously. When it's over, May receives a standing ovation. She was the only performer I saw get such an accolade. She tells me that it is not uncommon for her to get a standing ovation, and that performing is a "mind masturbation."

There are so many senses going on at once. You're feeling the rhythm. It's like being a musician. You're playing this audience. There's the keys to the piano, and you're playing them. If you ever sat in my show, a lot of comics do what I call the comic stare. This is how they talk to the audience. You would never really make contact with them. They look right at your forehead. I look consciously. I'll tell a person a joke. I look at them straight in the eye. It's wonderful to look at a stranger and make them laugh. It's so powerful. Power and joy and you feel like Santa Claus and you're doling out Christmas a minute at a time, a joke at a time. Every once in awhile, I'll stop and see a person laughing. You get used to hearing it, and you kind of get blind to people, but when you see a person laughing and hitting their husbands, God, it's a wonderful feeling. And there are nights I can do the same set and you bite it. That makes you appreciate the times you get the standing ovation.

Even with the standing ovation, May is still baffled about what makes comedy work. "You just pray every night that it's there. You don't know any more the nights you bomb, then the nights you get a standing ovation."

Of course one of the more generic topics that comedians draw on, which everyone has little difficulty relating to, is sex. And Etta May, in her dialogic style, draws her audience to her by asking them to respond.

Let me just take a poll in here. Just us girls. Girls, let's talk about sex. Just the girls though. Now be honest. Especially you, Barbie. Girls, how many of you truly enjoy sex? Raise your hand. (Loud applause) We got hookers workin' the room! I want to know something, and I want you guys to clear it up right now, or we ain't leavin' this room, okay? (Audience shouts "Okay!"). All right. Think about this ladies: These guys can go out and play basketball, pick up a big orange ball, throw it twenty feet off the back board, and do it all day long. Play pool drunk on their ass. Take a stick, tap the ball to the end of the table. Play golf in the hot goddamn sun. *Hot goddamn sun.* Yet, when they come home to make love we have to put it in for 'em. (Howling laughter. May waits a beat for the laughter to trickle and continues) Should we put a little backboard right here? (Places her hands by her crotch).

By pausing, waiting out the audience's laughter before she hits them with the last line, May gives the joke a "punch," and the laughter starts over again. May, like many comedians, uses the beats and pauses between lines to exhaust the most humor from a joke.

Who's never had a baby before? (Loud clapping). Barbie's never had a baby. Barbie, Barbie. (Long pause, then shouting) BARBIE! (laughter) Let me describe what it's like to give birth. Everybody done eatin'? They got this new stuff out now, it's this natural childbirth shit. The doctor just says to the woman, "Just breathe sweetheart, breathe." I say, "Inject, Doctor, inject."

"A lot of people come up to me and say, 'It's not necessarily what you say, but how you say it.' I mean, I get laughs on the stupid things. When I do that whole, Barbie having a baby. I just take my time and you build that anticipation by saying nothing. And then I go, "Barbie!" In essence, the comic pause seems to be an indicator to the audience that the punch line is to follow, and the anticipation seems to intensify the humor. Here is another example:

Remember the kid who got stuck in the hole down in Texas? Down there two and a half days, and the world called it a tragedy. (Pause). Shit, that's what I call a day care center. I'm goin' hell and I'm takin' you people with me!

While May loves to perform and acknowledges that "It's wonderful every night going up and being this woman. It's a wonderful job," she also concedes that the rigors of stand-up comedy are fraught with alcohol and drug addiction.

I live in Los Angeles. I usually go to around one or two. Now, I fly to Tampa, Florida, which puts my clock in at four or five. Now I have radio the next morning at seven. Now, I get two hours sleep. I get back from radio around ten in the morning, and fall asleep. And maybe I don't wake up until four in the afternoon, get something to eat, do a show. Now I'm buzzing. Now I really can't get to sleep. That's why comics get into alcohol and pot. Pot can help you go to sleep. Sleeping pills. Because the bottom line is I got to get up the next morning and do a radio show, and they want you funny. They want you on. You become like a bunny rabbit. A little bunny that the magician takes out of its cage to do its little bit in its magic show, and then you get put back in the cage. And if you're not careful that's what happens. It's not an easy life to maintain.

But even with the hardship of traveling, May is addicted to the laughter and attention. "This is me getting to be a Barbie. This is me getting to be a cheerleader." She asks me if I was a cheerleader in high school. I tell her I wasn't. "If you were just a goddamn average woman . . . life sucks being average."

## Conclusion

Conclusions invariably essentialize the subject of inquiry and reduce it, compartmentalize the knowledge produced into bite-size, palatable portions. But it is the nature of ethnography and of feminine writing, to use Helene Cixous' term *l'écriture Féminine* to resist the Western urge to classify, but instead remain open, receptive, to the knowledge generated through the study of a community. It would be irresponsible for me to conclude that female humor does such and such, and male humor the opposite, since it is obvious that gender lines, like other areas of cultural delineation such as race and class, will always be crossed. But as a quilt contains common threads, so too does the humor exhibited by the comedians in this investigation. Like a fugue, two themes played polyphonically into the comedians comic narrative: 1)the feminine body as discourse, and 2)the establishment of "voice" and identity. In the former, Smith subtly employed this convention by discussing images of women's bodies (shaved legs, a woman's right to control her body in the case of abortion) into her narrative. Diane Ford more forcefully used the feminine form as a structure for her act, and entwined the feminine body to feminist political and social concerns like spousal abuse and sexism. Etta May uses the stereotype of the fat, unattractive woman as a subversive device to not only gain acceptance by the audience (in her words, making yourself "less them"), but by inverting the image of an unattractive woman and making her sexually aggressive and appealing.

Smith, Ford, and May established, or rather, developed their "voices" around their individual personae, and did so at the risk of eschewing female social conventions of public speaking. Apte's anthropological study of humor revealed that cross-culturally, in public domains, "women seem generally not to engage in verbal duels, ritual insults, practical jokes and pranks, all of which reflect the competitive spirit, and the aggressive hostile quality, of men's humor, slapstick, institutionalized clowning" (69). Female comedians have the dual burden of overcoming societal prohibitions against women speaking in public, let alone, performing, and to establish a persona which uses the rhetorical, assertive, *masculine* mechanisms of stand-up, while at the same time subverting the genre by using feminine topics; their comic voices craft a distinctly feminine narrative, addressing political, social, and cultural expectations of women's identity.

## Works Cited

- Alcoff, Linda. "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Feminist Nightmares*. eds. Susan Ostrov Weisser and Jennifer Fleischner. New York, 1994. 285-309.
- Apte, Mahadev L. *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*. Ithaca, 1985.
- Barreca, Regina. *They Used to Call Me Snow White . . . But I Drifted*. New York, 1991.
- Beatts, Anne. "Can a Woman Get a Laugh and a Man Too?" *Mademoiselle* 81 (11) (1975): 184.
- Cameron, Deborah, Fiona McAlinden, & Kathy O'Leary, "Lakoff in Context: The Social and Linguistic Functions of Tag Questions," *Women in Their Speech Communities*. eds. Jennifer Coates & Deborah Cameron. New York, 1988. 74-93.
- Cohen, Sarah Blacher. "The Unkosher Comediennes: From Sophie Tucker to Joan Rivers." *Jewish Wry*. ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen. Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1987. 105-24.
- Fraiberg, Allison. "Between the Laughter: Bridging Feminist Studies through Women's Stand-up Comedy." *Look Who's Laughing: Gender and Comedy*. ed. Gail Finney. Pennsylvania: Gordon and Breach 1994. 315-34.
- Fetterman, David. M. *Ethnography: Step by Step*. Newbury, CA, 1989.
- Greenbaum, Andrea. "Comic Voices: Stand-Up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument—An Ethnographic Perspective." Master's Thesis. University of South Florida, 1994.
- Keough, William. *Punchlines: The Violence of American Humor*. New York, 1990.
- Kramarae, Cheris. *Women and Men Speaking*. Rowley, MA, 1981.
- McGhee, Paul E. *Humor: Its Origin and Development*. San Francisco, 1979.
- Pershing, Linda. "There's a Joker in the Menstrual Hut: A Performance Analysis of Comedian Kate Clinton." *Women's Comic Visions*. ed. June Sochen. Detroit, 1991. 193-236.
- Sochen, June, ed. *Women's Comic Visions*. Detroit, 1991.
- Tannen, Deborah. "The Relativity of Linguistic Strategies: Rethinking Power and Solidarity in Gender and Dominance." *Gender and Conversational Interaction*. ed. Deborah Tannen. Oxford, 1993. 165-88.
- Walker, Nancy. A. *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*. Minneapolis, 1988.
- Zillman, D. & S. Stocking, "Putdown Humor." *Journal of Communication* (1976) 26: 154-163.

\* All interviews for this study were conducted between July 1993 and May 1994 at the Comedy Works, Tampa, Florida.