

Performing the comic side of bodily abjection: a study of
twenty-first century female stand-up comedy in a multi-
cultural and multi-racial Britain

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Abstract

This thesis is a socio-cultural study of the development of female stand-up comedy in the first decade of the twenty-first century within a multi-racial and multi-cultural Britain. It also engages with the theory and practice of performance and asks the question: ‘In what ways can it be said that female stand-up comics perform the comic side of bodily abjection?’ This question is applied to three groups of female case-studies which include: those who came into stand-up comedy in the 1980s; second-generation transnationals who became established at the end of the twentieth century; and twenty-first century newcomers to stand-up comedy. This third group also includes the author of this thesis who uses her own embodied experience as research, and Lynne Parker whose Funny Women organization was set up in 2002 to facilitate female entry into stand-up comedy. Alongside these three groups the subject of females as audience of female stand-up comedy is also explored.

The issue of bodily abjection is explored in relation to seminal works on abjection by Julia Kristeva (1982) and Mary Douglas (1966) and regarding theories of the grotesque as posited by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) and Mary Russo (1995). These texts are used in this thesis to argue that abjection is a significant aspect of both the context and content of contemporary female stand-up comedy and that the orifices, surfaces and processes of the body are still pertinent to twenty-first century female stand-up comedy.

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Performing the comic side of bodily abjection: a study of twenty-first female stand-up comedy in a multi-cultural and multi-racial Britain

Introduction

The question being addressed by this thesis is: ‘In what ways do contemporary female stand-up comics perform the comic side of abjection?’

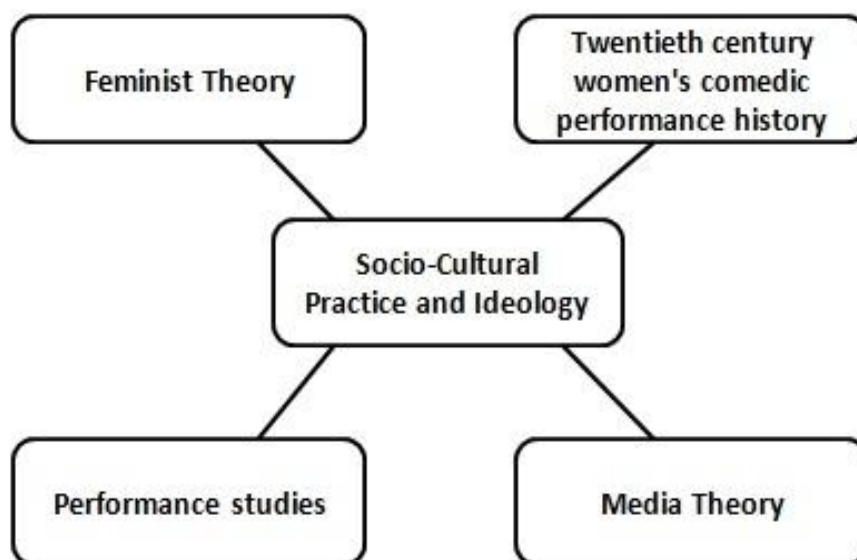
In many ways this research is a continuation of a recent field of study into stand-up comedy begun by Oliver Double, but it begins where he and others have ended in that it offers a specific engagement with female practitioners of stand-up comedy. It also offers an investigation of the ways in which British female stand-up comedy engages with issues relating to the prior marginalizing of white and transnational females within the stand-up comedy arena. The issue of bodily abjection is central to the arguments of this thesis and is explored in terms of both the context and the content of female stand-up comedy and in relation to the ‘joking relations’ between female stand-up comics and the females in their audience.¹

The parameters of the topic

This thesis is above all a socio-cultural investigation which explores the notion of bodily abjection within the relationship between twenty-first century British female stand-up comedy and the prevailing practices and ideologies of a modern multi-cultural and multi-racial Britain. Four other

¹ The term ‘joking relations’ is used to define and explore the relationship between female stand-up comics and the women who come to see their shows.

areas are also explored which interrelate with the main field of inquiry, these include: feminist theory, twentieth century women's comedic performance history, performance studies and media theory. These overlapping areas function as a context for the analysis of the case-studies used within the main body of this thesis and are visually highlighted in the following diagram.



The author's reasons for choosing the above as positioning grounds for this research relate to the newness of stand-up comedy as a field of study. The shortage of literature relating to this subject necessitates a dependence upon other areas to help establish a theoretical and critical framework against which the female case-studies of this thesis can be tested. What is more, an analysis of twentieth century women's comedic performance history suggests that there is a strong and mutual relationship between female stand-up comedy, feminist theory and the British socio-cultural context.

A lack of extensive prior work on female stand-up comedy as performance also necessitates the application of other theatrical

performance studies, alongside engagement with those male practitioners of stand-up comedy who have written on performance matters. The investigation by this thesis of the relationship between female performers of stand-up comedy and the females in their audience has no precedent; it is therefore appropriate to turn to media and theatre audience studies in order to investigate this area, albeit that these studies are often generic. A more detailed consideration of these positioning grounds is given in Chapter One alongside an examination of the key notions of abjection and the grotesque which are to be explored in this thesis.

What this thesis does not do

Firstly, it is important to say that this thesis does not rest its case upon philosophical or psychological studies of comedy. Indeed, where citations occur, they are generally contested. Many books which write on comedy usually begin by referring to the theories of Greek philosophers, although comedy is often conflated with laughter within these theories. Colin P Wilson (1979), Peter L Berger (1997) and Andrew Stott (2005) are cases in point. Robert Provine in his book *Laughter: a Scientific Investigation* notes that the earliest surveyed theory of laughter was by Plato (427-348BC) who was afraid of its power to disrupt the state (2000:12). Aristotle (384-322BC) also wrote on comedy but this treatise was lost. Material gleaned from his other writing shows that whilst he saw a little laughter as being acceptable, he also found that ‘those who go into excess in making fun appear to be buffoons and vulgar’ (ibid, 13).² Aristotle also argued that ‘the laughable is a subdivision of the ugly that does not cause injury or pain’ (ibid, 13). This issue is highly germane to this present thesis which attempts to unravel comedy’s traditional relationship with ugliness with regard to female stand-up comedy and to contemporary notions of female attractiveness.

² This thesis aims to separate comedy from laughter as an investigative strategy.

Some theorists explore the Dionysian festivals of Greece as the basis of comedy with reference to the *komos*, the phallic procession which succeeded the festival theatrical performances. Berger (1997) is a case in point, whilst Wilson (1979) considers the role of the sacred clowns of ancient rituals. Affinities with abjection are to be found within such models, some of which are pertinent to the study of contemporary female stand-up comedy made by this thesis.

Writers such as Wilson (1979), Berger (1997), Stott (2005) and Provine (2000) also engage with seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophical theories of comedy which include the superiority theories of both Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).³ This thesis views these philosophical studies as generic and as having a tendency to conflate comedy and laughter; as such, they are largely unhelpful to an investigation of female comedy and female laughter as two separate, but connected fields of study. One exception to this lies in the incongruity theory posited by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) which argues that laughter (humour) derives from the perceived mismatch between the physical perception and the abstract representation of some person or thing (In Provine, 2000:15). The author of this thesis has appropriated and re-applied this theory to a contemporary socio-cultural context and replaces the word ‘incongruity’ with ‘potentiality’ to upturn Schopenhauer’s theory.

The ‘gap of potentiality’ theory

This thesis suggests that Schopenhauer’s word ‘incongruity’ is replaceable with the word ‘potentiality’ which is seen as being an important aspect relating to female stand-up comedy. This word also relates to a new theory offered by the author which she calls ‘the gap of potentiality’. It argues

³ Robert Provine describes such approaches as the *Road Not Travelled* in his book

that when getting a joke, one not only sees what is incongruous but also that there are many available alternatives to this incongruity. In addition, a number of contradictory alternatives can be seen simultaneously. The notion of potentiality lies within these options. Unlike previous theories of comedy, this theory embraces both plurality and diversity to support the concept that stand-up comedy is not only rooted in the socio-cultural, but has a two-way relationship with it in influencing ideologies and practices.

The psychological approach to comedy

The psychological approach to stand-up comedy is also eschewed by this thesis as being generic, and again some theories are cited merely to be contested. These include Sigmund Freud's theories on the subjects of the sexual joke and the censor which are outlined in his books *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905/1991) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/2001). Freud suggests that the purpose of jokes is to bypass the censor and he argues that 'A cheerful mood ... reduces the inhibiting forces, criticism amongst them, and makes accessible once again sources of pleasure which were under the weight of suppression' (1905/1991:176). This thesis suggests that this is a temporary, contained, safe and constantly repeatable position. In its place the notion of risk is explored in relation to female stand-up comedy and with reference to socio-cultural practice and ideology.

On the other hand, engagement is made with Jacques Lacan's notion of the 'imaginary' body which is investigated through the work of Elizabeth Grosz in her essay 'Transgressive Bodies' from *The Body of Signification* (In Counsell (ed), (2001:14-145), and as seen in the book *Body and Organization* (Hassard et al (eds), 2000:34-35). Such notions are used in this thesis to explore the suggested female relationship between bodily

abjection with reference to the author's concept of 'dysmorphia' which involves the sloughing of body parts which are deemed as unattractive to others.

Key terminology

The following terms are important within this thesis: 'transnational' refers to those living within British diasporic space; whilst the term 'double-consciousness' refers to the perception of 'looking at oneself through the eyes of others' and derives from W.E.B. Dubois (In Watkins, 1994/9:26). The term 'joking relations' is used to explore the relationship between the female as audience and the female as performer and is appropriated from Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's investigation of pre-industrial community relationships (In Wilson, 1979). The notion of 'becoming' encompasses many aspects of continuing change, whilst the terms 'first-generation' and 'second-generation' are used to differentiate between those females who came into stand-up comedy during the 1980s from those who came at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Methodology

The methodology used by this thesis to answer the above question is four-fold: firstly, in relation to the diagram above, theories of abjection and the grotesque are explored as they relate to the relationship between female stand-up comedy, socio-cultural practice and feminist theory. Secondly, analysis is made of live and televised performances of contemporary female comics and female audience reception in relation to the performance history of women's stand-up comedy and to media theory. Thirdly, telephone and email interviews with case-studies are used where

possible to help investigate current practice; and lastly, the author's own embodied practice as performer and audience of stand-up comedy is used as resource material.

Case-studies and performer-audience interchanges are largely, but not exclusively, explored in relation to live shows. Such shows include: Gina Yashere at London's Comedy Camp (2006) and at Colchester Arts Centre (2007). The late Linda Smith (2002) and Shazia Mirza (2004) at Colchester Arts Centre, and Funny Women's *International Women's Day* at the Hammersmith Palais (2007).

Alongside the above, investigation is made of screened performances of female stand-up comedy. These include: Victoria Wood in *Victoria at the Albert* (2001); French and Saunders' farewell tour *Still Alive* (2008), Jo Brand's *Barely Live* show (2003) and Yashere's *Skinny Bitch* show at the Hackney Empire (2008). The stand-up comedy of Andi Osho, Shappi Khorsandi and Debra-Jane Appleby as viewed via YouTube is also discussed, as is Jenny Éclair's performance on *The Live Floor Show* (2006) a televised series of stand-up comedy shows. Other examples of screened material include Meera Syal et al in *Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley* (1999) and *The Kumars at number 42* (2001). Whilst live shows are more agreeable to watch, these screened shows offer a closer study of audience reaction.

Televised interviews are used to supplement the author's own interviews where access to case-studies was not available. These include: Melvyn Bragg's interviews with Victoria Wood (1988) and Meera Syal (2003) for *The South Bank Show* and Dawn French's programme *Girls Who Do Comedy* (2007). Alison Oddey's book *Performing Women* (2005) offers interviews with a number of 'first-generation' stand-up comics examined in this study. Angus Deayton's televised documentary *The History of Alternative Comedy* (1999) is also useful. Websites cited include Funny

Women and Chortle, alongside ‘blogs’ indicating female evaluation of stand-up comedy shows attended.

Alongside the above, the author of this thesis offers herself as a case-study in terms of being a performer of stand-up comedy at Colchester Arts Centre (2003), an audience member of live stand-up comedy shows and a workshop participator. The author’s life experiences are also pertinent to this research in that she grew up amidst the sexual and political revolutions of the 1960s; was involved in the second wave Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s, and participated in socialist politics during the 1980s.⁴

Chapter divisions

Chapter One identifies the key theories of bodily abjection which inform the research question of this thesis. It also examines more closely the positioning areas outlined in the diagram on page two. This is done with the intention of offering a detailed theoretical, historical and socio-cultural context for the ensuing examination of case-studies in the next three chapters. Alongside this, factors hindering, facilitating and influencing female entry into the British stand-up comedy arena are explored, particularly in relation to the prior marginalizing of females within this arena.

Chapter Two examines the work of six ‘first-generation’ female stand-up comics who have been working on the stand-up circuit for the past twenty years. The chapter is based on the hypothesis that these stand-up comics play with personal abjection and engage with the notion of themselves as

⁴ The author of this thesis is aware that using oneself as resource is problematic in terms of being overly subjective. However, her experiences and observations will be seen to be indicative of changing trends.

prior butts of the joke. It particularly argues that female materiality is both personal and political. This chapter also explores the ways in which abjection is interrogated and played with in the stand-up comedy of the following case-studies: Victoria Wood, Linda Smith; Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders; Jo Brand and Jenny Éclair. Although some of these females are considered in other texts such as Frances Gray's *Women and Laughter* (1994), Alison Oddey's *Performing Women* (2005) and Oliver Double's *Getting the Joke* (2005) their work is approached in a different way by this thesis. Firstly, in that it explores the importance of bodily abjection. Secondly, it examines the work of these comics in relation to contemporary socio-cultural practices and feminist theory. Thirdly, it draws attention to the diversity of female approaches to stand-up comedy.

Chapter Three explores the work of 'second-generation' stand-up comics who came onto the circuit at the end of the twentieth century. This group includes females who are also second-generation transnationals in that they were raised in diasporic space. Case-studies used here include: Meera Syal, Shazia Mirza, Gina Yashere and Shappi Khorsandi. This chapter begins with the recognition that it has taken nearly half a century for transnational females to be represented on the stand-up comedy circuit. It also examines how these females use their cultural body within their stand-up comedy to explore matters of identity in relation to diasporic space. This chapter explores the notion that abjection is written on the cultural female body in relation to concepts of 'double-consciousness' and 'split-vision' as defined by W. E. B. Dubois (In Watkins, 1994/9:26-27). Its findings suggest that identity is complex and that the diversity of approaches adopted by these females mitigates against one specific defining assessment of their comedy.

Chapter Four examines notion of abjection in relation to the work of newcomers to stand-up comedy and to significant new developments and new trends relating to females as audience. This is done through an

assessment of Lynne Parker's Funny Women organization (set up in 2002) which offers exclusive performance platforms for female stand-up comics. This chapter explores the hypothesis that twenty-first century female stand-up comedy intersects with a multiplicity of abjections in diverse ways. Consideration of Funny Women's work adds further support to the argument that abjection is to be found in the socio-cultural context of female stand-up comedy. It also considers how the female stand-up comedy arena has become increasingly democratic and politicized. In this chapter, examination is also made of the stand-up comedy of three newcomers: Andi Osho and Debra-Jane Appleby were winners of Funny Women competitions, whilst newcomer Pam Blunden, author of this thesis, performed at the Colchester Arts Centre (2003) after engaging in a twelve-week course of stand-up comedy workshops with comedian Jack Milner.

The second part of this chapter explores new trends regarding the changing role of the audience of stand-up comedy, with particular attention being given to female 'joking relations'. The discussion centres on the matter of audience response for both the live and screened stand-up shows of the case-studies examined in the previous two chapters. In this context, examination is made of female audience response, participation, interaction and laughter; the author's observations and responses as audience of live shows also form part of this section. In addition to the above, the notion of abjection is explored regarding both the context and content of female 'joking relations'. As elsewhere in this thesis, this part of the chapter adopts a feminist and socio-cultural perspective to this study of audiences whilst contextualizing it within twentieth century women's comedic performance history.

Chapter One follows to give a more detailed account of abjection, and of the socio-cultural contexts and other positioning ground to which it relates. This is followed by the application of theoretical hypotheses to the

case-study performances of female stand-up comedy offered in the following three chapters.

Chapter One

Socio-cultural contexts and theories

Introduction

This chapter begins by drawing attention to the elements of bodily abjection that are being addressed in this thesis. It then engages with the historical, socio-cultural and theoretical framework in which the case-studies of the thesis operate. As female stand-up comedy (and indeed stand-up comedy itself) is a new field for scholarly research, it has thus far accrued few studies; it is therefore necessary to look to other areas as a basis for any investigation of the subject. The diagram shown in the introduction highlights five contextual areas which act as positioning grounds for this thesis and its concerns with bodily abjection. These areas comprise: socio-cultural practice, feminist theory, twentieth century women's comedic performance history, performance studies and media theory. The following pages offer critiques of selected key theories relating to these areas.

1.1 Abjection

It is argued in this thesis that abjection is implicated in both the context and the content of female stand-up comedy and that it is interrogated, played with, re-interpreted and rehabilitated in diverse ways via the female comic's body and voice. It is argued further that there is a strong relationship between the bodily abjection highlighted in female stand-up comedy and the British socio-cultural practice of the past fifty years. In order to support such theories, reference is made to seminal books on

abjection such as Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966) and Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982).

Disordered systems

Douglas explores key issues relating to ordered systems and the effects of things being 'out of place'. One notion particularly pertinent to this thesis is her discussion of the temporary placing of the profane or 'dirty' into the context of the holy or sacred. She also explores concepts of anomaly, ambiguity and taboo, purity, and the tabooed individual in relation to systems. The over-riding theme of these elements is the desire for order and the fear of systemic disorder. These concepts are relevant to many of the case-studies examined in this thesis in that they interrogate systems in which they are deemed to be 'out of place'.

The abject

Key elements taken from Kristeva's work have a stronger bearing on the individual and on notions of ambiguity regarding what is 'me and not me'. Her consideration of abject bodily substances such as menstrual fluids and excrement connects with such ambiguity. These elements are relevant to the important question of why the female body with regard to stand-up comedy might be abject. In addition, Kristeva's notion of the corpse as the 'utmost of abjection' is relevant to notions of the ageing body of some female stand-up comics. The ambiguity of the horror and fascination that is attached to Kristeva's notions of abjection is also a key element of the discussions within this thesis.⁵

⁵ John Limon's book *Stand up in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (2000) is also pertinent here in that it acts as a bridge between notions of abjection and notions of the grotesque. His work is not included in the above because it serves as a point of reference with regard to abjection in stand-up comedy, rather than as a base text on the subject of abjection itself.

The female grotesque

The female grotesque is investigated with reference to two other seminal works, one is Mikhail Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and His World* (1984); the other is Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque* (1994). In opposition to Kristeva's book, there is a more positive approach to abject substances and bodily processes in these texts, rather than a fear of them. Bakhtin's theories are pertinent to this thesis in that in his concept of the grotesque he observes a resistance to the notion of the 'ready-made' and a preference for the constantly changing and the chaotic. He sees this as a 'becoming'. The term 'degradation' also implies a sense of change and renewal and is particularly important in its connection to the 'lower material body'. Bakhtin's consideration of the marginal position of the orifices of the body has many correlations within the work of Douglas (1966) and Kristeva (1982) abjection and as such is particularly pertinent to the case-studies of this thesis.

If Bakhtin's ideas move downwards, Mary Russo's tend to move upwards and outwards. Many of her ideas are derived from Bakhtin's theories, but she has given them a contemporary perspective. Her development of the concept of the transgression of norms in relation to the female grotesque is relevant to all the areas of this present thesis. Moreover, she examines the concept of risk in terms of potentiality; this is central to the arguments of this thesis. Her idea of the freak has a more limited application within this thesis, but it serves as a pertinent model for those who conspicuously and hyperbolically deviate from the norm such as Jenny Éclair. A more detailed discussion of the above notions will be given in the second part of this chapter, but it is important to outline the context in which these ideas will be placed.

Socio-cultural practice

This is the area to which all the others relate as is indicated in the diagram on page two of the introduction to this thesis. The key texts selected in relation to British socio-cultural practice are divided into two groups: the first set relates to general situation during the second half of the twentieth century; the second group relates to British diasporic space during the same period.

Micheline Wandor's book *Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics* (1981/6) is important regarding the examination of the ways in which changing socio-cultural practice within the second half of the twentieth century both influenced, and was influenced by the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s. This text is also pertinent because it provides a foundation for investigating female absence and presence in relation to the male-dominated arena of stand-up comedy in the 1980s. Wandor's book particularly draws attention to elements such as the introduction of the pill and increased sexual freedom, whilst also noting changes in the law which were of benefit to females. Such matters are pertinent to this thesis because they indicate a system under pressure. Wandor also notes other important socio-cultural changes and the increasing interrogation of strongly held ideologies.

Socio-cultural practice in diasporic space

Socio-cultural practice is also examined in relation to Britain as a diasporic space. Three of the texts selected as positioning grounds for this examination are pertinent because of their specific engagement with the British diasporic position from a transnational position. These include: Ali Rattansi's article *On Being And Not Being Brown/Black-British* (2000), Ramaswami Harindranath's essay 'Ethnicity, National Culture(s)

and the Interpretation of Television’ (In Cottle (ed), 2000), and Meenakshi Ponnuswami’s more recent essay ‘Citizenship and Gender in Asian-British Performance’ (In Aston and Harris (eds), 2007). Of these three, Rattansi and Harindranath are particularly pertinent to this thesis in terms of their examination of notions of ‘hybridity’ especially since they adopt oppositional stances. Rattansi also strongly addresses the complexity of identity issues relating to this, whilst Ponnuswami’s notion of ‘new citizens’ (ibid, 34) is pertinent to the changing position in Britain. These socio-cultural perspectives have particular relevance to the ‘second-generation’ transnational case-studies examined in Chapter Three of this thesis. It is suggested that these females offer their cultural body as abject in order to explore issues of identity and citizenship in relation to British diasporic space.

The fourth text which has relevance to a discussion of bodily abjection in relation to socio-cultural practice is Mel Watkins’ book *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy* (1994/9). Of particular importance is his examination of the concept of ‘double-consciousness’ which is interpreted as ‘looking at oneself through the eyes of others’ (2000:26). This model is a useful, although limited, tool for investigating the range of diasporic relationships within the content and context of British ‘second-generation’ transnational female stand-up comedy. However, this situation is highly complex.

Feminist theory

The approach of this thesis is necessarily feminist. As such it engages with feminist writings such as Lizbeth Goodman’s book *Feminism and Contemporary Theatre* (1993) and Micheline Wandor’s previously cited book *Carry on Understudies: Theatre and Sexual Politics* (1981/6). These texts help to draw attention to the fluidity of the contextual areas covered

within this thesis in that they examine female theatre performances in relation to feminist theory, socio-cultural practice and political change.

Two other texts discuss feminist theory in relation to contemporary feminist theatre. Dee Heddon's essay 'The Politics of the Personal' reevaluates the role of the personal within female performance (2007:130-149). Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris' introductory essay 'Feminist Futures and the Possibilities of 'We'?' (2007) relates postfeminist theories to the tenets of the second wave feminist movement. Each of the above four texts explores areas which are pertinent to the both the content and context of contemporary female stand-up comedy. They also have salience to the work of Lynne Parker's Funny Women organization which takes a feminist, socio-cultural and political approach to the female performance of stand-up comedy.

Three other texts engage with the notion of the female who 'looks at herself through the eyes of others' and as such are important to this thesis. Anne Hole's article *Performing Identity: Dawn French and the funny fat female body* (2003) examines the relationship between aesthetics, size and performance with particular reference to female stand-up comedy. Liesbet van Zoonen's book *Feminist Media Studies* (1993) examines the media in relation to the notion of the female as spectacle (with reference to the work of Laura Mulvey and the gaze). Joanna Brewis and John Sinclair's essay 'Exploring Embodiment: Women, Biology and Work' (In Hassard et al (eds), 2000) explores the way in which the female body is perceived in the workplace. Many of the points raised by these feminist writers are pertinent to issues concerning female absence and presence in the stand-up comedy arena. They also explore the concepts of female vulnerability and risk which engage with Mary Russo's notion of the female grotesque.

Twentieth century women's comedic performance history

Four texts relating the history of stand-up comedy have particular pertinence to this thesis. These include: Oliver Double's book *Stand-up!* (1997), Angus Deayton's televised programme *The History of Alternative Comedy* (1999) Mel Watkins' book *On the Real Side: a History of African American Comedy* (1994/9) and John Limon's book *Stand-up comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (2000). The first two texts are British, the latter two are North American.

These texts have been written for the most part during the past ten to fifteen years and yet they give comparatively little space to female stand-up comedy. However, Double (1997) is useful to this thesis in that he examines the sexist jokes of early stand-up comedy. Deayton (1999) traces the movement of British stand-up comedy from the nineteen-eighties to the end of the twentieth century. This thesis offers many points of contestation to the (male) approach to stand-up comedy found within these texts. Nevertheless, such studies help to trace the trajectory of female stand-up comedy from the position of females as the object of male jokes to females becoming the subject and producer of their own jokes. In doing so, this area can be seen to overlap with socio-cultural practice and ideology and feminist theory in drawing attention to issues relating to the marginalizing of females within stand-up comedy. Lizbeth Goodman's work is also relevant here in its examination of British black female theatre in the 1970s and 1980s (1993:148-182).

Thus far, there is a shortage of British texts on British transnational female stand-up comics because their entry into this field only began around last decade of the twentieth century. In respect of this, this thesis engages with two North American writers who are pertinent to this area. Watkins (1994/9) explores the development of African American stand-up comedy through minstrelsy and vaudeville to blacks as producers of jokes

on mainstream circuits. He is useful to this thesis in offering a context for examining transnational female absence from the British stand-up comedy circuit. Limon (2000) is closer to this present thesis in his assessment of the relationship between abjection to stand-up comedy, but importantly, both texts have a socio-cultural perspective on black stand-up comedy.

The performance of stand-up comedy

In relation to the subject of performance in female stand-up comedy, three compatible areas are engaged with the verbal art of stand-up, the art of joke making, and the performing body in the theatrical space. For the purposes of this thesis, the literature on performance studies is divided into three groups. The first three texts are written by practitioners of stand-up comedy and include: Oliver Double's books *Stand-up!* (1997) and *Getting the Joke* (2005), Tony Allen's book *Attitude* (2002), and Judy Carter's book *Stand-up: The Book* (1989). These books explore the performance techniques involved in stand-up comedy and suggest ways to perfect performance. They are useful to this thesis in relation to its consideration of ways in which females 'take up vocal space'.

Some texts on the art of joke-making are also relevant, particularly in their exploration of the role of the sacred buffoon within ritual performance. Specific reference is made to C P Wilson's book *Jokes, Form, Content, Use and Function* (1979) and to Jerry Palmer's book *Taking Humour Seriously* (1994).

In terms of the physical aspects of stand-up comedy, three texts are particularly useful in their examination of gestures and movement. These include: Clive Barker's *Theatre Games: A New Approach to Drama Training* (1977/89), Jacques Lecoq's *The Moving Body* (2000) and Stanton B. Garner's *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology in Contemporary*

Drama (1994). Within Garner's book, I M Young's essay 'Throwing like a Girl' offers a feminist perspective on the way in which females take up space (1994). The historical approach of the book *The Body in parts* (Hillman and Mazzio (eds), 1997) is also useful in its examination of the restrictions put on the female's vocal and physical movement. These texts are pertinent to this thesis in their engagement with perceptions of 'embodiment' and 'disembodiment'. They also form an important part of the discussion surrounding the performances of female stand-up comedy.

Media theory

This thesis makes a particular study of female audience reception of female stand-up comedy. As this engagement is very recent, it has been necessary to look to other studies of reception. The term 'joking relations' is appropriated from Alfred Radcliffe-Brown's study of pre-industrial communities as alluded to in the books of C P Wilson (1979) and Jerry Palmer (1994). The term has been adopted in order to explore the relationship between female as performer and female as audience. It is used with a degree of irony in that female relations were left unexamined by Radcliffe-Brown.

M Alison Kibler's article *Gender Conflict and Coercion on A&E's An Evening at the Improv* (1999) is an interesting point of reference in terms of her examination of 'gender power relations', although Kibler's subject is the female audience of male stand-up comedy. Oliver Double's book *Getting the Joke* (2005) also engages with performer-audience relations, but with emphasis on male stand-up comedy. Susan Bennett's book *Theatre Audiences* (2000) is also relevant, although more generic.

The study of female laughter is highly pertinent to 'joking relations' and is explored mainly with reference to North American Robert Provine's book

Laughter: a Scientific Study (2000). Provine is pertinent in being one of the few male writers on laughter who explores female laughter, although he tends to see it only as a response to male humour. Nevertheless, he serves as a useful positioning tool from which to develop other ideas on female laughter. Marcel Gutwirth's book *Laughing Matters* (1993) explores the physicality and vocalization of laughter and is therefore useful in relation to the notion of 'embodiment'. However, his study is generic and thus, of only limited value to this thesis.

Frances Gray's book *Women and Laughter* (1994) explores female laughter, although with specific reference to television sitcoms. Nevertheless, her consideration of the 'good sense of humour' is of value to this thesis. Jo Anna Isaak's book *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (1996) examines female laughter in relation to transformation. Although her study has pertinence to this thesis, Isaak tends to base too much of her argument on the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). Nevertheless, she does offer some interesting points on the subject of female abjection.

This thesis makes an original contribution to the field of stand-up comedy in that, as can be seen from above, its investigation begins where others have ended. The author's contribution is also important because she not only examines the work of hitherto un-represented females within stand-up comedy, but she examines their relationship to bodily abjection in relation to socio-cultural practice. She is also the first writer on stand-up comedy to specifically explore female 'joking relations' from the perspective of both the performer and the audience. The ensuing sections explore the key theories and positioning grounds of this thesis in more detail.

1.2 Theories of Abjection and the grotesque

Abjection and ambiguity

Notions of abjection and the grotesque are important in the stand-up comedy of all of the female case-studies cited in this thesis. The following few sections examine theories of abjection in the work of Julia Kristeva (1982) and Mary Douglas (1966); this is followed by a consideration of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) and Mary Russo (1995) on theories of the grotesque.

Julia Kristeva posits the view that abjection is ‘above all ambiguity’ because ‘while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it - on the contrary abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger’ (1982:9). The paradoxical notion of being apart and yet not apart is frightening and indeed, creates horror. However, she also sees that there is a fascination to this in that ‘Abjection lies there quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire’ (1982:1). This closeness also relates to abject substances which Kristeva sees as causing strong bodily reactions of revulsion:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung.
The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance,
the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away
from defilement, sewage and muck (1982:2).

Substances related to bodily processes are important to the examination of contemporary female stand-up comedy. Indeed, it is argued in this thesis that the cited female comics embrace and play with such elements as they move towards the ambiguity of abjection rather than away from it. In doing this, they confront many important socio-cultural and personal issues. Moreover, the ‘food, waste, a piece of filth, or dung’ that are mentioned by Kristeva, and which immediately cause ‘repugnance’ and

‘retching’, signify substances that many females engage with on a daily basis.

Ambiguity and taboo

Mary Douglas sees ambiguity in terms of the system and its taboos, rather than purely in relation to the individual and she argues that ‘Ambiguous things can be very threatening. Taboo confronts the ambiguous and shunts it into the category of the sacred’ (1966: xi). She sees that ‘Taboo protects the local consensus on how the world is organized. It shores up wavering certainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder’ (1966: xi). The fear of ambiguity highlighted in Douglas’ work seems to lead to a desire to eliminate it in an attempt to avoid ‘social disorder’. This suggests something static, whilst taboo-breaking, by implication, seems to readily embrace disorder. This thesis argues that contemporary female stand-up comedy embraces ambiguity and disorder and interrogates taboos.

The sacred and profane

The relationship between the sacred and profane is explored in depth in Douglas’ book. However, a key element relates to how the profane is welcomed into sacred rituals for as Douglas notes ‘religions often sacralise the very unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence’ (1966:196). She gives further explanation of this in the following:

one of the most abominable or impossible is singled out and put into a very special kind of ritual frame that marks it off from other experience. The frame ensures that categories which the normal avoidances sustain are not threatened or affected in any way (ibid, 203/4).

This thesis suggests that the cited female comics not only draw attention to the ‘unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence’ but they also threaten the ‘ritual frame’ and ‘categories’ which have hitherto been sustained.

The tabooed individual

With further reference to taboos, Douglas notes how ‘it is only specific individuals on specified occasions who can break the rules’ (1966:197). In arguing her case, she cites Robertson Smith (1889) who noted that:

The person under taboo is not regarded as holy, for he is separated from approach to the sanctuary, as well as from contact with men, but his act or condition is somehow associated with supernatural dangers, arising ... from the presence of formidable spirits which are shunned like an infectious disease (1966:13).

This correlates with the role of the sacred buffoon in ancient comedy (historically male) whose main role was that of a temporary taboo-breaker and who represented an intrusion of the unruly into the sacred. He was ambiguous in being simultaneously inside and outside the community; but as such he had to be either expelled or re-assimilated in order to maintain the status quo. Contemporary female stand-up comics are undoubtedly ‘under taboo’ as they aim to ‘break the rules’.

Another text which has relevance here is C P Wilson’s book *Jokes, Form, Content, Use and Function* which draws attention to the way clowns ‘invert conventional standards’ in sacred ceremonies. It is noted that:

In the ceremonies, clowns evoke amusement by Breaking any sexual and aggressive taboos. They flagrantly flout convention by portraying incest, pederasty, bestiality and sadism. They eat the ‘uneatable’, and drink the ‘undrinkable’, play

with excrement and regress to childish perversity.
Sacred and secular authorities are abused and ridiculed ...
(1979:90).

The references to food, excrement and things scatological in the above also occur within contemporary stand-up comedy as does the abuse and ridicule of ‘sacred and secular authorities’. However, this thesis argues that the cited female case-studies are not merely examples of licensed unruliness, but that they play with, and interrogate existing conventions, in order to set up new frameworks in their place.

System and disorder

Douglas also explores the concepts of system and disorder in her work on pre-industrial communities and this is very relevant to this thesis. She observes that ‘Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment’ (1966:2). She also notes that ‘Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements’ (ibid, 44). In this thesis frequent interrogation is made of who is doing the ‘ordering’ and what is being rejected in the process.

Douglas identifies the need for ‘separating, purifying, demarcating’ in order to ‘impose system on an inherently untidy’ situation and for ‘exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created (1966:5).⁶ This has particular relevance to the position of ‘second-generation’ female transnational comics whose work is examined in Chapter Three, in that they interrogate these spatial positions in their

⁶ In Douglas’ book the word ‘above’ is written as ‘about’. This appears to be a typographical error which has been duly amended by the author of this thesis.

stand-up comedy. Moreover, they illustrate that in disturbing the boundary between what is considered to be inside and outside, they are able to offer a multiplicity of new perspectives and potentialities.⁷

Pollution and purification

With regard to notions of purification, Douglas notes that ‘The quest for purity is pursued by rejection’ (1966:199). However, she observes that ‘That which is negated is not thereby removed. The rest of life, which does not tidily fit the accepted categories, is still there and demands attention’ (ibid, 202). She also sees that anomalies can be confronted ‘to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place’ (ibid, 48). These notions have particular relevance to female comics working in an arena which still sees male comedy as having ‘universal’ appeal. In Chapter Four discussion is made of Lynne Parker’s Funny Women organization which works on behalf of females who do ‘not tidily fit into accepted categories’ but are ‘still there and demand attention’.

Pollution is the other side of purification and importantly, Douglas sees that the focus of all pollution symbolism is the body. Indeed, she argues that ‘There is hardly any pollution which does not have some primary physiological reference’ (ibid, 202). Douglas notes that things leaking from orifices are also seen to be polluting, particularly indicating that ‘filth, is held to come from sexual fluids, menstruation and childbirth, as well as from the corpse’ and that ‘All are thought to be both disgusting and dangerous’ (ibid, 217). These perspectives not only have strong correlations with Kristeva’s theory of abject substances, but they also indicate a relationship between abjection and female bodily processes which is pertinent to the arguments posited by this thesis.

⁷ Lynne Parker’s Funny Women organization addresses the notion of boundaries as will

Douglas also observes that purification rituals make ‘order’ out of what is disordered and include ‘Rites of reversing, untying, burying, washing, erasing, fumigating’ (1966:168). On the other hand, Kristeva sees the corpse as ‘the most sickening of wastes ... a border that has encroached upon everything’ (1982:3). It is also ‘the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life’ (ibid, 4). Here the corpse seems almost beyond any purification rituals, including burial. These notions are explored with particular reference to some ‘first-generation’ stand-up comics.

Purification and holiness

Douglas also notes that purity relates to holiness which also means ‘wholeness and completeness’ (1966:63) and order, not confusion (ibid, 67). It is ‘the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise’ and ‘an attempt to force experience into logical categories of non-contradiction’ (ibid, 200). These characteristics are in stark contrast to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnival which always works against the ‘ready-made’ and the ‘immutable’ (1984:10). Such notions also appear at odds with the position of contemporary female stand-up comics who appear to embrace ‘change’, ‘ambiguity’ and ‘contradiction’ within their performances.

It appears that holiness makes exacting demands of females in Douglas’ book in that ‘Women must be ‘purified after childbirth’ and ‘All bodily discharges are defiling and disqualify from approach to the temple’ (ibid, 64). These elements continue the theme of female bodily substances as having dangerous connotations. Indeed, it is precisely these connotations which contemporary female stand-up comics attempt to expunge. Jenny Éclair resists purification with her ‘dirty’ jokes and Jo Brand, Linda Smith and Gina Yashere openly discuss bodily processes and substances in their scatological sets.

be seen in Chapter Four.

Abject substances related to excrement and menstruation

Julia Kristeva argues that two substances in particular have a strong relation to abjection when she notes that:

polluting objects fall, schematically into two types: excremental and menstrual ... Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identify that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death (1982:71).^{8 9}

These notions have connotations with the sacred buffoon of ancient rituals who plays with excrement.¹⁰ Moreover, excrement has frequently formed part of modern male stand-up comedy but seldom within female comedy. However, Linda Smith's sets on the bodily processes of babies and Gina Yashere's scatological set on defecation change that position, although it is important to add that both comics go beyond the singular purpose of transgressing taboos. Interestingly, it appears that excrement has greater value than menstruation in both ancient rituals and stand-up comedy.

Menstruation not only lacks the same sacred significance as excrement, but it seems to represent a perceived female threat and danger. Douglas notes that 'a menstruating woman could not cook for her husband or poke the fire, lest he fall ill' (1966:187). The matter of menstruation is explored in Chapter Two with particular reference to the stand-up comedy of Jo Brand.

Kristeva also refers to body fluids and wastes in terms of 'falling towards death' and she observes that 'Such wastes drop that I might live, until,

⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin welcomes these elements as part of carnival life in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1984) whilst Kristeva shies away from them.

⁹ C P Wilson notes that excrement was used in sacred ceremonies (1979:89-90), but he does not indicate a role for menstruation.

¹⁰ Excrement also has a place within Bakhtin's notion of the 'lower material body' in relation to the carnival grotesque (1984:26).

from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit - *cadere*, cadaver (1982:3). These notions are pertinent to the stand-up comedy of Victoria Wood (2001) and Linda Smith (2002) whose work is explored in Chapter Two, although it will be evident that their perspectives are very different.

Fluids are seen as dangerous, threatening and risky because they belong to the open and unfinished body. Female bodies experience menstruation, lactation and the menopause. Some abject substances are viscous and sticky, thus especially dangerous and threatening, for they suggest both a lack of orderliness and of controllability. However, these processes are the by-products of daily living and are relevant to female stand-up comedy in being part of the open and unfinished body. In the following, abjection is seen from a different perspective.

Mikhail Bakhtin and the notion of the grotesque

Elements of temporary disorder and release from taboos also belonged to the carnivals held during the Middle Ages and attached themselves to the role of the grotesque. Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1984) and Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque* (1994) address these matters.

Bakhtin argues that 'the grotesque body is a body of becoming. It is never finished, never completed' (1984:317). The grotesque body is also *not* separated from the rest of the world, 'It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits' (ibid, 26). Such descriptions interrogate the perceptions of abjection found in the work of Douglas and Kristeva, especially as Bakhtin not only confronts abjection in his theories, but embraces it as a component of carnival.

Another important notion embraced by Bakhtin regarding his concept of

the grotesque is that of ambivalence. He argues that ‘The grotesque remains ambivalent - ugly and monstrous and hideous from the point of view of the ready-made and completed (1994:25). Ambiguity and disorder were seen as being feared in the work of Douglas and Kristeva, but in Bakhtin’s model, they are also embraced, as they are within contemporary female stand-up comedy. The notion of transformation is also important to Bakhtin who saw that carnival was ‘the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed’ (ibid, 10). This thesis suggests that its case-studies interrogate the idea of the ‘ready-made and ‘completed’ within either the personal or the cultural domain.

Other ‘fundamentals of the grotesque style’ include ‘Hyperbolism, excessiveness, exaggeration’ (ibid, 303). These are also important to the performance of stand-up comedy. Indeed, advice is given to comics to engage with ‘abjection’ by exaggerating it, and by pushing it to extremes. In Chapter Two of this thesis discussion is made of the ways in which Jo Brand and Jenny Éclair represent the grotesque style by exaggerating and making them selves ‘excessive’, out of proportion and outrageous in their routines.

Female orifices and profanity

Bakhtin’s theories put importance on the orifices and surfaces of the body. These include ‘the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose’ (1984:26). What is more, these orifices are connected with bodily processes such as ‘childbirth, death, eating and drinking, defecation ...’ (ibid, 26). Attitudes to female orifices and processes are important to both the content and the context of the female stand-up comedy discussed in this thesis, especially in that they are deemed to relate to lower functions of the body.

In relation to this, the notion of degradation is also part of Bakhtin's model and he sees that 'degradation is the essential spirit of grotesque realism. That is lowering all that is high, spiritual, abstract' (ibid, 19). Degradation is also concerned with the 'lower stratum of the body' (ibid, 21). These concepts are not entirely different from those explored by Douglas and Kristeva in relation to the notion of pollution. However, as with other characteristics of the grotesque, they are seen by Bakhtin in their relation to carnival. They are also embraced by the case-studies of this thesis. However, whilst discussion of their work points to Bakhtin, it can be seen to more readily engage with Mary Russo's version of the grotesque.

Mary Russo and the female grotesque

Russo's writing on the grotesque engages with Bakhtin's ideas, but her undertaking has an entirely different perspective in being 'inspired by earlier feminist writing' and art 'which honoured the ordinary, the everyday life in the public and private sphere' (1994:vii). She also notes how the 'reintroduction of the body and categories of the body ... into the realm of the 'political' has been a central concern of feminism (ibid, 54). This relationship is also of central concern to this thesis as it examines the role of the body in female stand-up comedy. In further opposition to Bakhtin, Russo also argues that carnival can be seen 'as a site of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal' (1994:62). This thesis seeks out elements of 'insurgency' within the work of its cited case-studies with reference to a contemporary socio-cultural context and, from a feminist perspective.

Risk, danger and threat

The grotesque for Russo also exemplifies notions of threat, risk, danger and horror because disorderly. Indeed, she sees the female grotesque ‘as a space of risk and abjection’ (1994:12). However, she clarifies her point to argue that ‘Risk is not a bad thing to be avoided, but rather a condition of possibility, produced in effect by the normalization of the body across disciplines in the modern era ... Risk belongs properly to the discourse of probability and ‘error’’ (1994:10/11). Russo also refers to the ‘discourse of risk’ and introduces ‘the grotesque into this space which ‘leaves room for chance’ (1994:11). This element of risk and its connection with the female grotesque is very pertinent to the case-studies discussed in this thesis. Importantly, it is also within Russo’s notions of ‘probability’, ‘error’ and ‘chance’ that one can recognize the key to the concept of ‘becoming’ which applies to the trajectory of contemporary female stand-up comedy.¹¹

Russo also argues that ‘The grotesque, particularly as a bodily category, emerges as a deviation from the norm’ (1994:11). This view again has much relevance to the arguments posited by this present thesis which suggest that female ‘deviations from the norm’ have now become the norm. Russo notes particularly that:

those conditions and attributes which link these types with contemporary and social deviances, and more seemingly ordinary female trouble with processes and body parts; illness, ageing, reproduction ... secretions, lumps, bloating, wigs, scars, make-up, and prosthesis (ibid, 14).

The reference to ‘processes and body parts’, ‘ageing’ and ‘reproduction’ recalls Bakhtin’s interests in the body, but as with this present thesis, in Russo’s model, they have a basis in feminist issues.

¹¹ The concepts of ‘risk’ and ‘becoming’ are central to the author’s theory of ‘the gap of potentiality’ which is also based on the elements of chance and change. The theory is outlined in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Freaks and the female as spectacle

Russo's chapter on freaks argues that 'identity politics' can be traced to the 1960s identification with the freak as a 'distinctly US style of dissent' (1994:75). The issue of 'identity politics' is investigated by this thesis, in relation to both feminist and socio-cultural concerns. Moreover, Russo seeks the freak as 'a mixing of external and internal demands for dramatic visibility' (ibid, 75). The element of performativity was also important to her understanding of the grotesque. She also sees that 'away from the stigmatizing function in the hands of dominant culture' it has a trajectory 'often described as moving from shame to pride' (1994:76). Russo also observes that 'Threatened with invisibility, the professional freak would often prefer the risk and blame associated with an intensely marked body and identity ...' (ibid, 76). In this thesis, the notions of 'risk', 'visibility' and 'shame' are examined frequently with reference to the way in which female stand-up comics bring attention to their seeming imperfections, in order to subvert readings of them. The performances of Jenny Éclair can be seen to particularly address the role of the 'freak'.

Thus, as clearly indicated, many the theories concerning abjection and the grotesque have connections with feminism and socio-cultural practice and ideology. The following detailed discussion of the area of socio-cultural practice and its cognate areas offers a theoretical, historical and theatrical context in which the above are explored within the other three chapters of this thesis.

1.3 Socio-cultural practice

The above gives an outline of the theoretical position of this thesis. The remainder of this chapter gives a more detailed consideration of the points

raised. It also importantly, gives a historical context as a sort of a lineage into which the work of the three groups of case-studies can be slotted.

Firstly, important events and issues of the second half of the twentieth century have an important bearing on female stand-up comedy in the twenty-first century. Britain in the 1960s was in a transitional period when cultural and personal identities were changing; old notions were becoming residual, dominant ones were contested and emergent ideologies were beginning to flourish. The position was changing also for many females, but their roles were still seen as chiefly being wives, mothers and nurturers. Micheline Wandor underscores a number of important issues which point to the ambiguity of the female position when she writes:

The reality was that large numbers of women still worked outside the home, but women's magazines extolled the virtues of feminine wife and mother, and domestic craft skills (1981/6:7).

The idealizing and even 'glamorizing' of domestic roles suggested in the above is problematic in that these roles involved being immersed in the abject elements of dirt, grime and body wastes from food preparation, house-cleaning and care of children and the elderly. As nurturers, women were also involved in the liminal states of birth and death and their attendant disorder. These domestic and nurturing positions are pertinent to the key question of this thesis which is the performance of the 'comic side of bodily abjection'. Here, it is suggested that most women were already doing this in their daily lives. Such matters also hint at reasons why 'women's subjects' might have a valid, but not exclusive, place within contemporary stand-up comedy.¹² Moreover, female engagements with bodily abjection draw attention to issues of female absence from the 'workplace' of stand-up comedy. Such matters are explored in Chapter Two regarding the work of Victoria Wood, Linda Smith and Jo Brand.

¹² Jokes about wives in 1960s 'old' comedy often included some reference to 'domestic crafts' (Double, 1997: 62ff).

They are also brought to the fore again in Chapter Four in relation to Lynne Parker's Funny Women organization which facilitates female entry into stand-up comedy.¹³

In the 1960s and 1970s new laws were facilitating female advancement within the public arena alongside offering greater protection to women in their private lives. Wandor makes reference to the 1967 Abortion Act, the 1969 Divorce Reform Act, and the 1970 Equal Pay Act in her work (1981/6:7). The implications of these Acts are that they gave females increased independence which in turn, made it easier for them to enter and to establish a space for themselves within the workplace.

Greater sexual freedom together with the availability of the pill had an impact on female behaviour, and there were clear indications of a female desire for greater autonomy and responsibility for their own lives beyond being 'in-relation-to' husband and family. Wandor observes how feminists encouraged this resistance to being 'in-relation-to' men' (1981/6:13). The term 'sexism' was also newly coined in that era (ibid, 13).¹⁴ ¹⁵ Matters such as these offer an important context for the topics dealt with in female stand-up comedy, particularly in relation to 'first-generation' comics who would have experienced the immediate results of some of these socio-cultural changes. Importantly, these elements are still pertinent as a backdrop to the stand-up comedy arena in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Change occurred on a number of fronts simultaneously which involved the challenging of existing dominant ideologies. Other significant 1960s milestones were also occurring such as a rising civil rights movement and

¹³ In Chapter Four there is also discussion of the view that even in the first decade of the twenty-first century, domestic and nurturing roles are still implicated in the absence of females from stand-up comedy.

¹⁴ This was alongside the continuation of sexist jokes within the 'old' comedy of the 1960s.

¹⁵ 'Sexism was coined by analogy with the term racism in the American civil rights

the beginning of the women's movement. Wandor makes reference to student groups who argued for the 'politicising' of 'daily life' (ibid, 12). She also indicates that the slogan 'the personal is political' was important to the 1970s Women's Movement (ibid, 14).¹⁶ These two groups also 'attacked' venerated ideologies and were 'anti-hierarchy' in interrogating many socio-cultural taboos, particularly those relating to females and the lower classes. In addition, the Women's Movement also 'laid great stress anti-authoritarian ways of working' (1981/6:15). It appears to be the case that socio-cultural ideologies and practices changed as attitudes changed. The changing attitudes and greater degrees of freedom help to explain how female entry into the male-dominated field of stand-up comedy became facilitated in the 1970s and 1980s, although it is not so easy to see why there were not more females in the arena at this time. However, what is even more difficult to understand is why it took until 2002 for an organization such as Lynne Parker's Funny Women to be set up in order to offer a more systematic facilitation of entry into the stand-up comedy arena. As will be seen regarding the case-studies of this thesis, the answer lies in the fact that a number of the socio-cultural issues of the 1960s still reverberate into the twenty-first century.

An increasingly strong presence of females in the workplace has led to organizational changes alongside those in socio-cultural practice. In their essay 'Embodiment: Women, Biology and Work' Joanna Brewis and John Sinclair examine a system of 'rational organisation' which is under pressure from those whose bodies seem to be 'out of place' in this environment (In Hassard et al (eds), 2000:192-215). A second essay 'The Look of Love': Gender and the Organization of Aesthetics' written by Philip Hancock and Melissa Tyler explores 'the concept of the aesthetic and its recent emergence as a concern within organization theory' (In

movement in the early 1960s' (1981/86:13).

¹⁶ This implications of this for in the twenty-first century are discussed by Dee Heddon in her essay 'The Politics of the Personal: Autobiography in Performance' (2007:130-149).

Hassard et al (eds), 2000:108ff). These essays are important because they examine both the presentation and the implications of the female body in the 'performance' of work. The essays also draw attention to the concepts of embodiment and disembodiment. Moreover, they offer an effective framework for examining the stand-up comedy arena as a 'workplace'.

Identity politics and the notion of 'becoming'

A point of convergence between socio-cultural ideology and feminism is to be found within the notion of the 'politics of identity'. This is an important area because it recognizes the diversity and plurality of identity. It also cuts across race, gender, class and sexuality. A number of positions are cited in the following, and what is particularly interesting is their similarities.

Socio-cultural theory and practice also engage with feminist theory to reveal an awareness of the complexity and fluidity of identity which derive from social interactions. Lizbeth Goodman sees that in identity politics 'everyone has a multiple identity of sorts'. She also sees that this:

can be viewed as resulting from - or at least influenced by - the experience of living in society and interacting with cultural biases of all kinds and with other individuals who can be identified regarding gender, race, class, sex and age (1993:21/22).

The phrase 'interacting with cultural biases of all kinds' has pertinence to the context and content of both 'first-' and 'second-generation' stand-up comedy within this thesis. It is perhaps particularly true of second-generation transnational comics who perform a range of constantly changing positions within their shows to reveal complex and fluid aspects of their own identity and which relate to diasporic space. Goodman's view

also suggests the idea of ‘simultaneous plurality’ in the sense of being able to hold a number of diverse and contradictory positions at the same time.

North American Jill Dolan suggests something similar in her book *Presence and Desire* in referring to ‘Poststructuralist practice’ which sees that race, class, sexuality and gender are ‘constructed within discursive fields and changeable within the flux of history’ (1993:87). A similar approach is also taken by Jackie Stacey in her book *Star-gazing* where she argues that:

Recent cultural theory has demonstrated the ways in which ‘identity’, be it gender, sexuality, nationality or ethnicity, should be seen as partial, provisional and constantly ‘in process’ (1994:226).

These notions of being incomplete and constantly ‘in process’ in the above not only relate to identity, but are key to all aspects of this thesis and its enquiry into bodily abjection. Indeed, bodily processes are explored in the stand-up comedy of many of the case-studies examined in this thesis in relation to theories of pollution as identified by Douglas (1966) and Kristeva (1982) and regarding the concept of the grotesque body as found in the work of Bakhtin (1984) and Russo (1994).

Valerie Smith, a North American black feminist, in eschewing a universal white middle-class view of feminism, sees it as embracing diversity and argues:

If we assume that race, gender, class, and sexuality are mutually constitutive, and therefore pre-empt ideas of a homogenous women’s or black experience, then it should only follow that those constructions also act upon each other within the category of black women itself, thus problematizing easy generalizations about black women’s lives and texts as well (1998:xvii).

The issue of homogeneity is one which is questioned extensively within this thesis within many contexts. What is more, it will be seen in the following chapters that the female body reacts against being inscribed with generalized notions, particularly those relating to ethnicity and gender.

Socio-cultural practice and diasporic space

In terms of offering a theoretical and historical and socio-cultural context for 'second-generation' transnational female stand-up comics, it is also necessary briefly to explore Britain as a diasporic space beginning in the second half of the twentieth century. The migration of black and Asian groups from Africa, the West Indies and the Indian sub-continent, begun in 1950s, gained speed throughout the 1970s and 1980s as Britain moved towards becoming an multi-cultural and multi-racial nation. However, although many diverse groups are now represented in twenty-first-century Britain, such changes did not influence female stand-up comedy until the end of the twentieth century. On the other hand, Lizbeth Goodman refers to the Talawa Theatre Company as a British 'black (African/Caribbean) theatre company' founded in 1985 and directed by Yvonne Brewster (1993:155). The 'stated aims of the company were to use the ancient African ritual and black political experience in order to 'inform, enrich and enlighten' (ibid, 158). The existence of such groups raises the question that if black females have had a significant theatrical presence in British theatre since the 1970s, why did they not move into the arena of stand-up comedy? This thesis engages with this issue in Chapters Three and Four, but at best it can only offer partial answers to such questions, rather than definitive answers. Nevertheless, three social theorists are particularly pertinent to such matters, namely: Ali Rattansi (2000), Meenakshi Ponnuswami (2005) and Ramswami Harindranath (2000). Their perspectives are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Ali Rattansi's essay *On Being and Not Being Brown/Black British* (2000) was based on the 1998 Windrush celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the 'beginning of the post-war immigration' (2000:119). She importantly also asks the question, 'Why, after fifty years of a growing and significant black and Asian presence in Britain, is it still so difficult to be black or Asians and British ...?' (2000:120). Rattansi's question and indeed, her whole essay, offers fertile ground for a discussion of 'second-generation' transnational female stand-up comedy as will be noted in Chapters Three and Four of this thesis.

Establishing identity in diasporic space

The question of identity is also a key aspect relating to diasporic space as was indicated by Valerie Smith (1998). However, not everyone agrees on which terms should be used. Rattansi's article explores 'identificatory couplets such as 'black British/Asian British' (2000:120). She also uses the term 'Brown' instead of 'Asian' to draw attention to what she sees as 'inconsistencies – one based on colour, the other on geographical origin ...' (ibid, 120). On the other hand, Meenakshi Ponnuswami's essay explores the issue of identity within the diaspora space using the term 'new citizens' (In Aston and Harris (eds), 2007:34). She also underscores a desired '... remapping of the received contours of Britishness' (ibid, 37). Thus, both writers interrogate what it means to be Asian and British. These concerns are explored in depth in Chapter Three of this thesis in relation to the performances of second-generation transnational female comics.

In relation to socio-cultural ideologies and practices, and with reference to Britain as diasporic space, Rattansi also sees identity as 'provisional and unfinished' and sees them as being 'riven by contradictions, ambivalences, situational and contextual variations, and unpredictable

individual and group alliances' (2000:122). She further notices fluid identities and 'a continual switching, making and remaking of identifications' (2000:122). These notions of provisionality and fluidity were mentioned earlier also in the context of the work of 'second-generation' transnational female stand-up comics. These females explore the question of identify in relation to their audiences and with reference to the two or more cultures that they, the comics, inhabit.¹⁷ This sense of being provisional is also an important part of imagery of the grotesque and its sense of 'becoming' which is in strong opposition to notions of the 'ready-made' or 'immutable'.

Ponnuswami also importantly notes that 'Second-generation citizens are uniquely positioned to be agents of intercultural communication and exchange ...' (2007:34-35). She adds to this the view that 'Unable to claim the nation's history as her own, the new citizen devises alternative ways to perform citizenship' (ibid, 35). In relation to this, she indicates the need for a 'different set of analytical tools and new modes of self-definition' (2007:36). It could be argued that by doing stand-up comedy before diverse British audiences, transnational females are finding 'new modes of self-definition'. Indeed, Chapter Three examines how these comics explore their position and their identity within British diasporic space and how they engage with the body as the site of cultural abjection.

Ramaswami Harindranath's essay 'Ethnicity, National Cultures and the Interpretation of the Media' interrogates perceptions of racial groups as 'self-enclosed, hermetical communities' and therefore as 'resistant to cross-cultural dialogue' (In Cottle (ed), 2000:152). He wants to undermine the 'error in assuming that all Indians share the same cultural resources' (ibid, 160). He also wants to highlight the 'sheer diversity of the Indian

¹⁷ There are as yet no books or essays written on the 'simultaneously plural' identities of female audiences of British female stand-up comedy, although Gina Yashere does at least identify the different West Indian groups who attend her *Skinny Bitch* show at the Hackney Empire (2008).

nation-state along religious, cultural, linguistic as well as social and economic lines' (ibid 161). The notions of plurality and diversity here are to be found in many aspects of both feminism and socio-cultural theory and are important in the work of the case-studies of this thesis.

Rattansi also stresses similar notions of diversity in suggesting that 'there is no singular 'Muslim' identity in Britain' (2000:130). She does, however, also note that 'The general, historically constituted divisions in global Islam' are 'reproduced in Britain' but observes that they are 'imbricated with a host of other differentiations' (ibid, 130). She also refuses to go along with stereotypes such as 'demonized Muslim women-oppressors' and 'fundamentalists' (ibid, 131). These matters have special relevance to the performances of lapsed Muslim stand-up comic Shazia Mirza, who was accused of offering herself as a stereotype until she explored the individuality of her position.

Racial tension, 'double-consciousness' and disjunctive relations

Another important aspect regarding transnational existence in diasporic space is the issue of the relationship with the indigenous people within that space. Christie Davies' essay 'Stupidity and Rationality: Jokes from the Iron Cage' (In Powell and Paton (eds), 1988) is not specifically related to the diaspora, nor is it necessarily about females, but it does draw attention to the issue of racial tension and disjunctive racial relations.

The notion of collective anxiety seems to apply where there is a perceived threat relating to the blurring of cultural and racial boundaries and it seems to encourage stereotyping as a form of containment. Transnational groups of the early diaspora were seen as threatening by the British indigenous population which might explain why racist jokes were prevalent in mid-twentieth century Britain. Christie Davies explores how one racial group uses another as the butt of its jokes to allay anxiety.

However, he thinks these jokes are less about the objects of the joke than about the 'fear of their own possible stupidity' (In Powell and Paton (eds), 1988:3). The stand-up comedy of Meera Syal, Shazia Mirza and Gina Yashere is particularly effective at examining disjunctive racial relations as is demonstrated in Chapter Three of this thesis.

Mel Watkins is another writer who examines disjunctive relation specifically between North American black and white communities. His work is particularly useful in that he examines white anxiety from an African-American perspective (1994/9). In doing this, he engages with W.E.B. Dubois' notion of 'double-consciousness' which is taken to imply:

this sense of always looking at one's self through
the eyes of others ... One ever feels his twoness -
an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts,
two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals
in one dark body (1994/1999:26).

Watkins uses this theory to explore African-American cultural abjection in terms of their disjunctive relations with white North Americans. He further argues that 'These behavioral adjustments forced many African-Americans to assume dual social roles: one for a hostile white world, the other the natural demeanour they reserved for interactions among themselves' (ibid, 35). This notion of offering of two versions of your self, an official one which conceals those parts of you deemed abject, and the unofficial one where these abject parts are seen merely as signs of difference suggests identity is something one wears. However, it also contains carnivalesque elements which suggest it can be subverted.

Although the demographics are different, it is possible to use Watkins' model to explore the relationship between British female transnational stand-up comedy and socio-cultural practices in a modern multi-cultural and multi-racial Britain in a state of 'becoming'. Important matters such as 'behavioral adjustments', racial tension and stereotyping can readily be

seen within this context. In Chapter Three transnational female stand-up comics can be seen as interrogating, exploring and self-reflexively playing with notions of 'double-consciousness'. They explore notions of racial tension, issues of identity and stereotyping, whilst also offering a range of positionalities and perspectives. Indeed, they draw attention to fractures within social, cultural and racial relations and reveal in diverse ways, their unique relationship with the cultures they inhabit.

Simultaneously plural identities and 'split-vision'

A more appropriate term for the British socio-cultural position might come from what Dubois called 'split vision' - the ability to see the self and others from multiple perspectives although he saw this was 'an enforced burden' (Watkins, 1994/9:27). However, this thesis argues that the term also highlights the notion of 'simultaneous plurality' which is of importance to the work of a number of case-studies. Indeed, it implies a potentiality in holding a number of positions at the same time, that is, in being able to enjoy a variety of perspectives and choose from a variety of positionalities. These concepts are pertinent to the complex argument that second-generation transnational female stand-up comics represent insider and outsider positions concurrently.

The notion of 'simultaneous plurality' also engages with the concept of hybridity. Harindranath draws attention to such a concept (In Cottle (ed), 2000:158). He 'calls into question the tendency within recent audience reception studies to work with a static view of ethnicity and a crude reductionist understanding of cultural differences' (ibid, 26-27). In its place he sees complex and variable interactions at play. Moreover, he explores diversity and the enmeshing of cultures and argues that hybrid cultures have a fluid, complex set of cultural responses in the processes of media reception and identity formations (In Cottle (ed), 2000:26). He

notes how ‘multiple ‘subject positions’ or ‘positionalities’ are ‘discursively mobilized through ‘new ethnicities’ and ‘hybrid cultures’ (ibid, 26).¹⁸ In contrast to these views, whilst Rattansi also points to a ‘period of rapid transformation’ and new ‘so-called hybrid identities’ (2000:120), she resists Harindranath’s positive interpretation to see these ‘identities’ as diluted.

In terms of the concept of plurality in relation to identity, this thesis argues that black and Asian women within British diasporic space have a number of simultaneously overlapping positions: as first- or second generation British transnationals; in having a multiplicity of languages and registers; in having a British identity; and in having memories of other geographic and historical pasts and other cultures. The implications of these positions are explored by most of the transnational female case-studies of this thesis in relation to these seemingly incompatible cultural identities. The relationship between the notion of ‘simultaneous plurality’ and identity is also explored in relation to feminist theory in the next section.

1.4 Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is used in this thesis to explore female absence and presence within stand-up comedy in relation to the female body’s connection with abjection. In deriving from the second-wave Women’s Movement of the mid-twentieth century, it can be seen to have socio-cultural roots. The texts engaged with here also explore feminist theory in relation to theatre practice and socio-cultural practice. Lizbeth Goodman examines feminist theories and theatre practice to see that ‘diversity and

¹⁸ Ramaswami Harindranath’s research (2000) examined the responses of audiences in India and Britain in relation to television documentaries.

difference have created a range of very different forms of feminist theatres and cultural representations of change' (1993:7). That interplay between theatre, feminism and politics highlights issues applicable to female stand-up comedy. As already noted, Micheline Wandor also draws attention to the ways in which second-wave feminism derived from socio-cultural changes in the mid-twentieth century (1981/86). Indeed, this thesis sees that these texts tend to present the female as moving from a position which was predominantly 'in-relation-to' others within domestic and nurturing roles to having a stronger sense of self-agency.

The view is posited by this thesis that female stand-up comedy has a two-way relationship with its socio-cultural conditions, in that it is both influenced by them, whilst also impacting them, as it explores important cultural and political issues. In this, it becomes a potent tool for change, especially for groups who have been previously culturally marginalized or excluded. Lynne Parker's Funny Women organization is important in this respect in that it offers an alternative platform for female performance.

The rise of the second-wave Women's Movement was a socio-cultural development which, rather than being a single historical event, began as a process and is now a 'becoming' in the sense that feminism is now *feminisms*. The original movement facilitated opportunities for females to enter the arena of stand-up comedy and perhaps, into the obligation of dealing with gender issues and perhaps 'women's subjects'.

The personal as political

The notion of the 'personal' is of utmost importance to feminism and to the arguments of this thesis. Micheline Wandor underscores how the slogan the 'personal is political' was adopted by the 1970s Women's Movement to imply that 'there was no aspect of 'personal' experience

which cannot be analysed and understood and changed' (1981/6:14). Moreover, thirty years later, Dee Heddon in her essay 'The Politics of the Personal' asks 'Which personal?' and 'Whose politics?' (In Aston and Harris (eds), 2007:130). She sees that in third wave feminism the personal is political because it *is* personal, and the personal is (a) right (ibid, 131). Importantly, Heddon also explores the idea of the 'taking of agency' with the artist as 'subject and authority in her own work' (ibid, 132). This is especially relevant to female stand-up comics who are now the producers and often, the subject of their own jokes, rather than being the object of male jokes.¹⁹ She argues that:

The fact that women were the subjects of their own art, rather than the objects, was political. The fact that they were re-defining and re-inventing 'woman' was political ... The fact that women were revealing previously hidden or silenced female experiences was political (2007:134).

She continues to argue the point by adding that 'through drawing on personal experiences, women were forging and practising new forms of performance was political' (ibid, 135). This thesis posits the view that the politicizing of the personal helps to rehabilitate things which had been arbitrarily sloughed because deemed abject. More importantly, it is being argued that these personal and abject things generally relate to the female body. This is also made evident in the works of Douglas (1966), Kristeva (1982) and Russo (1994).

The mere fact that females are standing up to do stand-up comedy already highlights socio-cultural and political changes. Purely by standing up and talking about personal and bodily issues, first-generation female comics were facilitating female to female relations, although not necessarily intentionally. This re-connects with second wave feminist issues although

¹⁹ Heddon also notes how what was 'previously considered 'neutral' art was, in fact, equally gendered' and that this revelation was 'political' (2007:134). This interrogation is very pertinent to the debate on the universality of male stand-up comedy which forms part of Chapter Four of this thesis.

as Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris note, ‘In public and academic spheres, postfeminism is usually defined in opposition to ‘second wave’ feminism’ (In Aston and Harris (eds), 2007:2).

The following connects feminism to the arena of stand-up comedy. Firstly, female comedians have been ‘accused’ of being self-indulgent by dealing with ‘women’s subjects’ and by implication, of not engaging with more important cultural matters. Andrew Stott’s book *Comedy* makes reference to the ‘perceived ghettoization of women’s comedy’ and the belief that female comedians only discuss ‘women’s themes’ (2005:99). He also draws attention to the view that ‘male topics are thought to have universal appeal’ (2005:99).²⁰ These opinions are examined in greater depth in Chapter Four of this thesis, particularly in relation to female absence from stand-up comedy, or their marginalized position on the comedy circuit. The notion of ‘ghettoization’ is heavily value-laden also leads to a range of discussions in the same chapter, particularly relevant regarding to the work of Lynne Parker’s Funny Women organization which deliberately and systematically fast-tracks females into the stand-up comedy arena. The over-riding implication of Stott’s observations is that the life experiences of females are easily dismissed, whilst it is assumed that male life experiences are of much importance.

Female friendship

Micheline Wandor’s book again proves to be useful in indicating how friendship between women was seen by second-wave feminism to be ‘important in developing both individual and political self-determination’ (1981/6:14). She notes that ‘Stress was also put on developing ‘solidarity’ and ‘sisterhood’ (ibid, 13) and on encouraging women ‘to resist the assumption that women are only important in terms of their relationships

²⁰ These views represent observations made by Stott (2005) rather than being examples

with men ...' (ibid, 13). It was considered that 'Because many women absorb a view of themselves as inferior ... organising separately enables women to discover their strengths, with each other's support' (ibid, 14). Although such views relate to the 1970s, the notion that 'many women absorb a view of themselves as inferior' has much relevance to the twenty-first century, and thus, to the arguments of this thesis. This will also be seen to connect to other similar notions regarding the 'interiorizing' of the views of others, which includes the concept of 'double-consciousness' as used by Watkins (1994/9) in his study of African-Americans.

This thesis argues that female absence from comedy in the 1970s derived from the socio-cultural specificity of being a wife and a mother and from female domesticity. Whilst some females were finding new identities, many were still contained within male perspectives of what and where a good woman should be, which was generally 'in-relation-to' men and to the home, involved with families and domesticity. Furthermore, it is argued in this thesis that the abject aspects of these roles make females very aware of the 'comic side of bodily abjection'. This abjection relates to areas in which females have been traditionally immersed, such as the caring for babies and the elderly, laying out the dead and generally 'getting their hands dirty'. Importantly, feminist theory and practice are constantly in process, and thus represent a 'becoming'. Such matters are important to this thesis because they engage with the notion of process. There is a connection between Chapters Two and Four in relation to female absence from stand-up comedy and their presence in respect of subject matter and in relation to Lynne Parker's work in facilitating female entrance into stand-up comedy.

Female appearance and the concept of attractiveness

The issue of female appearance and attractiveness is explored in relation to a number of areas including contemporary British socio-cultural practice and its ideals of beauty. This is done also with reference to two feminist writers who relate this subject to comedy. The first is Yvonne Tasker, who in her book *Working Girls* argues that the stand-up comedy of Jo Brand:

extract[s] humour from the conventional expectations and perceptions of the 'feminine' whilst also exploiting the distance between the everyday experience of the world (of the body, of relationships) and the idealised images of women found in forms such as advertising (1998:167).

In relation to the above, it is important to point out that whole industries are based on the notion of female imperfection as the converse of these 'idealised images'. Tasker also examines the relationship between female confidence and fatness and writes of the 'street conspicuity and social dismissability of females who are fat' (1998:167-169). Anne Hole also writes on the matter of attractiveness and fatness in her article *Performing identity: Dawn French and the funny fat female body* (2003). Hole cites Barbara Brook's study (1999) of the belief that women's bodies are 'organized by a heterosexual economy in which 'beauty' is defined as heterosexual attractiveness and women 'interiorise' the surveillance of an imagined male observer' (2003:316). This raises notions of the female spectacle along with the concept of female 'dysmorphia'. It is argued that females abject parts of themselves in seeing themselves 'through the eyes of others'.²¹ Many of Hole's theories apply more readily to Jo Brand and Debra-Jane Appleby than they do the Dawn French as will be seen in Chapters Two and Four. It is also argued in Chapter Four that female

²¹ This view correlates with Laura Mulvey's notion of the gaze (1975) as outlined in Liesbet van Zoonen's book *Feminist Theatre Studies* (1993:87ff) and with Mel Watkins' study of 'double-consciousness' in his book *On the Real Side: a History of African American Comedy* (1994/1999:26ff).

‘joking relations’ disrupt the notion of the female as spectacle.

Hole also notes that ‘The horror, fear, and anxiety’ which are responses to the fat female body is ‘diffused by making a jest about/against the fat woman’ (2003:321). She describes the fat female body as the ‘monstrous-feminine’ because it is ‘a figure of fun and a sign of fear’ (ibid, 327). In this thesis fatness is related to matters of spatiality in terms of being seen as taking up too much space, whilst self-abjection is taking up too little space. Dawn French, Jo Brand and Debra-Jane Appleby self-reflexively draw attention to the size of their bodies as a site of comedy; others diminish theirs. Detailed discussion is made of these areas in Chapters Two and Four. The notion of female attractiveness within stand-up comedy is also explored in the above chapters in relation to fatness and to the seeming traditional relationship between ugliness and ancient comedy. ‘First-generation’ female stand-ups in particular are seen as self-reflexively bringing aspects of their ‘imperfect’ body into their stand-up comedy.

Feminism as a ‘becoming’

An important aspect of feminism as a context for the discussions offered in this thesis is that like female stand-up comedy, it is a ‘becoming’. In their introductory essay ‘Feminist Futures and the Possibilities of ‘We?’’ Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris examine the position of twenty-first century feminism and note that ‘In public and academic spheres, postfeminism is usually defined in opposition to ‘second wave’ feminism’ (2007:2). However, feminists also accept that feminism itself is both plural and diverse and Aston and Harris note that:

... the foregrounding of subjectivity and identity as multiple, artificial and constructed’, and ‘the possibilities of ‘performative’ transformation’, which ‘all seemed to point to theatre and performance as an ideal site for the exploration and embodiment of these ideas: as a space for

not just imagining but actively producing this future' (2007: 9).

The notion of 'performance as an ideal site' for exploration is precisely the point being made by this thesis. Female stand-up comedy is part of these 'possibilities of 'performative' transformation'.

However, in seeming opposition to the above, the feminist movements of the 1990s also have had a strong impact, although Elaine Aston suggests this is at a cost. 'Girl power' was one movement which quickly developed into a 'ladette' culture. In her essay 'Bad Girls' and 'Sick Boys' Aston notes that:

Dubbed by some as the 'feminism' of the 1990s, 'girl power' is more accurately to be understood as an individualistic style of self-promotion: one which encourages girls to believe that self-confidence and sexually aggressive behaviour is a means to getting what you want (In Aston and Harris (eds), 2007:73).

Aston's references to the notions of 'self-confidence' and 'sexually aggressive behaviour' in the above suggest the idea of females 'behaving badly'. However, this thesis argues that some of these characteristics are necessary for the performance of female stand-up comedy. They are also particularly important in containing the implication of going beyond the norms which are usually associated with femininity. However, the case-studies of this thesis cannot be described as 'individualistic' or 'self-promoting' in that they all have strong associations with the other females.

This thesis argues that 'first-generation' comics could be said to 'behave badly' as a form of resistance to existing incongruous values rather than from a Thatcherite self-interest. Linda Smith stood by the striking miners against Margaret Thatcher's 1980s government. However, as the first female leader in a white male-oriented political arena, the 'Iron Lady' Margaret Thatcher was viciously attacked by male comics for her seemingly 'masculine' characteristics of harshness and firmness. This

thesis argues that these attacks were as much sexist as political.

Newcomer stand-up comic, Debra-Jane Appleby seems to embody 1990s 'girl power' by taking an aggressive stance in her comedy, exemplified in the words 'I don't give a shit'; and yet she also 'stands up' for minority groups of females in her work. These waves of feminism are overlapping, rather than linear in their pathways. Indeed, one characteristic of this new movement seems to be an awareness of plurality and diversity related to class, colour, age and sexuality amongst other things.

In the twenty-first century everything seems in a constant movement and flux. Female expectations have changed as has the daily life of families. More females now work. Many geographical borders have been overcome to see a free flow of people and ideas; international news travels faster. There is also greater interaction between nations alongside a clear desire for greater self-determination, alongside global terrorism. It is also the age of the greater visibility of fundamentalist Christian and Islamic groups. It is against this background that the stand-up comedy of the female case-studies of this thesis is explored.

1.5 Twentieth century women's comedic performance history

This thesis situates twenty-first century female stand-up comedy within a time-line which begins with the comic traditions of 'old' male comedy of the early to mid-twentieth century and continues with the rise of Alternative Comedy in the late 1980s. Oliver Double argues in *Getting the Joke* that 'few comics make a study of the lineage of stand-up history' (2005: xiii). It is important for this thesis to do this in order to reveal evidence of gaps, absences, exclusions or marginalized white and

transnational females. However, it must also be noted that the history of women's stand-up comedy is marked more by its absence than its presence. Such matters are addressed in the following three chapters. Comparisons with male stand-up comedy must inevitably be made as the act of tracing the lineage of stand-up comedy back to the mid-twentieth century reveals a heavily male-dominated arena.

There are strong correlations between the paths of North American and British comedy. John Limon suggests that 'There was stand-up before 1966, but that is when the term came into existence' (2000:7). Limon is particularly useful to this thesis in terms of his own study of the role played by abjection in North American stand-up comedy. Mel Watkins' study of the history of African-American stand-up comedy is also useful as a point of comparison between African-American stand-up comedy and British female transnational stand-up comedy. He is also of value in charting the move of black comedy from minstrelsy and vaudeville to a separate black circuit through to a mainstream of black comedy circuits in North America (1994/1999).

Stand-up comedy has been dominated by white males since the 1960s.²² Furthermore, it has been considered that their comedy has 'universal appeal' which is proposed by Andrew Stott in his book *Comedy* (2005). As already noted, this thesis contests this claim. Such views are also countered by M Alison Kibler in her essay *Gender Conflict and Coercion* (1999) which although relating to North American females as audience, is of much value to the discussions of this thesis. Many females have felt that their role was to laugh at male comedy.

The performance history of stand-up comedy reveals much evidence of white females and transnational men as the butts of sexist and racist jokes,

²² This has been the position up to the twenty-first century prior to existence of Lynne Parker's Funny Women organization. However, as Parker notes, the balance is still 'Eight men to every two women' (With Blunden, 2010)

respectively. The movement from females as object of the joke to producers of their own jokes describes precisely the trajectory of this thesis. However, this movement was not straightforward in that sexist and racist jokes continued alongside female stand-up comedy in the 1980s and beyond. Indeed, such jokes are still found within the twenty-first century in the work of Jim Davidson, Chubby Brown and the late Bernard Manning. Double notes the huge popularity enjoyed by these men and their tasteless jokes (1997:112).

British stand-up comedy in the 1960s and 1970s largely rested on the East End and Northern Working Men's clubs which, as the name suggests, were predominantly-male. Moreover, there were few female performers except in burlesque roles. Double observes that 'Strippers are engaged to offer the working men a bit of Sunday lunchtime titillation ...' (1997:107). He also draws attention to the important fact that a third of all working men's club members were women, although it appeared that they were never allowed full membership of the clubs (1997:123). The implication of these two points is that women were probably colluding in jokes about themselves. This important issue is examined in Chapter Four in relation to the work of Andrew Stott (2005) and Kibler's study of the gendered audience (1999).

The comic material which appeared in the Working Men's clubs in the early 1970s was often coarse, racist and blue, seeming to deliberately challenge the multi-racial society Britain had become. Double confirms that much of this type of humour 'occurred within northern working men's clubs' (1997:92). He also draws attention to Alexei Sayle's observations of the 'right wing bigotry' which 'underlies much traditional comedy' (ibid, 169). It is against this background that 'first-generation' female stand-up comics worked in the 1980s and beyond.

Females as the butt of sexist jokes

There is also much evidence of sexist jokes within the stand-up comedy of Bernard Manning, Frank Carson, Jim Davidson and Chubby Brown which has perpetuated into the twenty-first century as is observed by Angus Deayton (1999) and Oliver Double (1997). Within this 'old' stand-up comedy, women as wives, home-makers and mothers-in-law were frequent butts of the sexist joke.

Double indicates how these jokes often originating in Music Hall persisted in the stand-up comedy of the 1960s (1997:64-65). He divides the jokes into categories which include: the bossy wife, the wife who talks to much, the ugly wife, the fat wife, the wife who can't cook, the mother-in-law and the 'old maid' who could not even get a man to marry her (1997:64-71). Women were mocked for their supposed lack of skills, for their looks, and above all, for their perceived inability to stop talking. Even the state of marriage was mocked as Double indicates in his reference to the well-known music hall joke that 'marriages were always made in hell ... There isn't a word for marriage - it's a sentence' (1997:64).²³ Such jokes appear to represent a collective male anxiety rather than any universal female failings.

The notion of the bossy wife is ingrained in many genres of comedy from Aristophanes onwards. The 'fat' wife was also a frequent butt of jokes as Double indicates: 'it's remarkable 'ow far the 'uman skin'll stretch without burstin', and 'er stomach's got no mem'ry' (ibid, 67). Here, fatness is aligned with ugliness as well as with gluttony. These notions are investigated in Chapters Two and Four in relation also to contemporary socio-cultural issues and feminism.²⁴

²³ Marriage was considered the 'end of stage comedy' for Terence, Shakespeare and Moliere, although wives were feared in Aristophanes as potential cuckolders.

²⁴ Ironically, many 'old' stand-up comics such as Bernard Manning and Chubby Brown were also 'ugly'. Moreover, they highlighted perceived flaws and imperfections in females and transnationals, but not in themselves.

Many 'old' jokes also ridiculed women who deviated from what was seen as the perfect model of what a good wife should be (ibid, 68). One cites the wife as 'religious cook' because 'Every thing she sends up is either a sacrifice or a burnt offering (ibid, 67). However, as will be seen within the following chapters, many of these notions are countered within the performances of contemporary female stand-up comics which deviate from the norm, as a norm.

Was there a justification for, or a rationale behind such jokes? They were clearly part of ideological ethos of their time and symptomatic of a collective anxiety felt by men after the Second World War. Female comic Hattie Heyridge, a contributor to Angus Deayton's televised documentary programme *The History of Alternative Comedy* (1999), noted that after the Second World War many married couples had to live with the mother-in-law and therefore, jokes were used to defuse tensions arising from this situation. This would seem to suggest that the sexist jokes of 1960s 'old' stand-up comedy were part of a wider socio-cultural element. However, even beyond the 1980s, comics such as Les Dawson and Brian Conley were telling jokes about inept wives and mothers-in-law as demonstrated by Deayton's documentary.

A second important element relating to the female as the butt of the male joke lies in the popularity and nature of 'blue' jokes (Double, 1997:111-114). In Mark Turnball's television programme *Comedy as Light Entertainment* (2007) the origin of the 'blue joke' was attributed to comedian Max Miller who had a white book for clean jokes and 'blue' book for 'dirty' jokes. Significantly, but unsurprisingly, the 'blue' joke was often at the expense of the female. A particularly unpleasant joke was told by comic Jimmy Jones about a man dating a deaf and dumb girl and then raping her. The ending of the joke said, 'Then 'e broke all 'er fingers so she couldn't tell 'er mum and dad what 'e done' (1997:113). There can be seen degradation, sexism and misogyny within such jokes which makes

it doubly significant that females become the producers of their own jokes.

Female entry into stand-up comedy

The move from outsider to insider for white and transnational females was not straightforward. Oliver Double noted ‘a serious comedienne shortage’ in the 1970s and notes that ‘For many this tended to confirm the sexist assumption that women are just not funny’ (1997:153). The socio-cultural circumstances which were implicated in the absence of females from stand-up comedy were mentioned earlier. This issue is explored in depth in Chapter Four, in relation to an examination of the work of Lynne Parker and her Funny Women organization.

It is also significant that females moved from being the butt of ‘old’ jokes to self-agent and producer of jokes themselves. In 1974, Victoria Wood appeared on a television talent show called *New Faces*, and modern female stand-up comedy began. However, she stood virtually alone until Alternative Comedy took roots in the late 1980s when she was joined by Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders. They were gradually joined by a handful of other female comics including Jo Brand, Jenny Éclair and the late Linda Smith. Nevertheless, their presence was not enough to fully establish female stand-up comedy’s own lineage and it was not until the end of the century that other women, including British transnational females joined the group. Female entrance into stand-up comedy was not systematically facilitated until Lynne Parker’s Funny Women organization was set up in 2002. Moreover, Parker sees that even in the year 2010 ‘men outnumber females eight to two’ (With Blunden, June, 2010)

Transnational stand-up comedy

The scarcity of transnational comics on the British stand-up comedy circuit is also noticeable in Angus Deayton's documentary *The History of Alternative Comedy* (1999) and in Oliver Double's books *Stand-up!* (1997). There is also a dearth of books and essays on those who were doing comedy. However, there seems to have been rather more stand-up comics doing racist comedy. The entertainment programme *The Hundred Best Comics* (2008) indicated that comics such as Chubby Brown, the late Bernard Manning, and Jim Davidson were still making racist jokes to appreciative British audiences in the twenty-first century, fuelling the same fear of change and of otherness which makes some British people vote for the racist British National Party. Manning's joke 'I was in Bradford last week, I felt like a spot on a domino' is a case in point. Deayton's documentary (1999) included no black or Asian females although there were some on the stand-up comedy circuit at this time. Chapter Three examines the issue of those who have been marginalized within stand-up comedy. This is done with reference to the stereotyping of the transnational as the object of racist jokes and in relation to the notions of the 'stupid black man' and the Asian with the 'waggly head'.

Racist jokes were, and were not generic, for whilst the objectification included *all* blacks, men were specifically stereotyped and ridiculed within the jokes, rather than women. Was this because whilst white men feared transnational diasporic men from the West Indies and Africa, women were not considered a threat? However, it appears that Iraqi women were the exception as noted by Double who recalls a joke suggesting that 'Iraqi women are so ugly that they have to get their vibrators drunk before they can use them' (1997:117). This joke clearly had its origins in relation to the Gulf War. However, as with many other jokes about women, it seems that appearance and sex supersede other factors. The work of Shazia Mirza and Shappi Khorsandi is examined in

the light of racist jokes in Chapter Three.

Mel Watkins traces the history of African-American comedy against a background of racial tension in a changing North American culture. He notes how minstrelsy ‘established a parody of African-American style ... the black-faced trickster was both the vehicle for humor and the butt of the joke’ (1994/9:167). However, in contrast, he also refers to the ‘trickster tales that dominated slave humour’ (ibid, 167). These have more positive connotations. In Britain, Lenny Henry, a West Indian comic and one of the few black comics on the Alternative Comedy scene (Comedy Store, 1975), began his career as a reverse stereotype in *The Black and White Minstrel Show* which was broadcast from 1958-1978. Henry’s position was unique as a black man playing a white man playing a black man in a show highlighting white appropriation of black genres. However, he soon moved from this position to become the subject of his own stand-up comedy. In relation to this, Mel Watkins draws attention to the distinction between jokes *about* blacks and those created *by* blacks by citing Dick Gregory as insisting that ‘I’ve got to be a colored funny man, not a funny colored man’ (1994/0:29). The transnational female case-studies of this thesis are clearly the subjects of their own jokes and explorers of their own personal and cultural history. However, they also include a consideration of racist jokes within their stand-up comedy.

Watkins also indicates an alternative black comedy scene in his reference to ‘tent’ or ‘road shows’ which showcased genuine black comedy in contrast to the minstrelsy and vaudeville shows.

These road shows, playing before primarily black audiences, were like a rich underground spring that nurtured a form of black stage comedy more closely aligned to the authentic humor of black folks (1994/9:152).

These ‘road shows’ are important to this thesis because they represent the

first model of a niche space for both black comics and black audiences. Such matters are explored in different parts of Chapter Four, particularly in relation to case-study Andi Osho who points to the existence of a separate British black stand-up comedy circuit.

However, there was a cross-Atlantic flow, especially in terms of music. Watkins notes that ‘By the 1980s, black humor, like black music, had become ... a part of mainstream American culture that it could even be seen on prime-time television sneaker commercials’ (1994:23). Interestingly, there has been a strong African-American influence on British culture and the media over the past twenty years which has included black humour and particularly, black music. In terms of music, the genre of ‘hip hop’ has influenced British youth culture, language and clothes. One can also detect an ‘africanizing’ of British culture, especially among young British blacks.²⁵ The work of transnational comics Shappi Khorsandi and Andi Osho engages with such elements as will be discussed in Chapters Three and Four of this thesis.

In relation to the influence of North American stand-up comedy, in his television documentary *Stand-up America* (2003), Mark Lamarr presents Chris Rock, a popular black comic with a high profile in North America and Britain. Rock interrogates stereotyping by referring to what he sees as a black underclass. He says, ‘Just because I don’t like knuckleheads, doesn’t mean I am a racist or self-loathing. These are the things said quietly behind closed doors.’ Dave Chappelle, another young black comedian said of Rock, ‘That was the most groundbreaking thing I’ve ever seen.’ Others thought it should have been kept just between black people. The interrogation of stereotypes is to be found within the performances of all the female transnational case-studies of this thesis.

In his book *Stand-up comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*, John

²⁵ Ali Rattansi also notes the influence of Asian ‘bhangra’ music in her essay ‘On Being

Limon explores black stand-up comic Richard Pryor's 'self-identification in an abjected race.' Limon argues that Pryor is 'not the sufferer of abjection, he is the abjection, the body that is repudiated yet keeps returning' (2000:5). This is also particularly relevant to the stand-up comedy of British female transnationals in terms of their engagement with issues of racism, alienation, collective anxiety and self-stereotyping.

There is little work written on any black female stand-up comics, but Mel Watkins examines the work of Jackie 'Moms' Mabley (1894-1975) who was the first African-American female stand-up comic. She is however, neglected by both Deayton (1999) and Lamarr (2003). Mabley's stand-up comedy developed in her early twenties when she 'assumed the character of an elderly earth mother' (Watkins, 1995/9:391). She was also the first African-American female to play on both the North American black and white stand-up comedy circuits. Watkins notes that 'Southern racism was a frequent target of her satire' (ibid, 392). Many correlations are apparent with the stand-up comedy of British Nigerian comics Gina Yashere and Andi Osho, although Mabley was not a model for either of them. Moreover, there have been no Afro-Caribbean females on the British stand-up comedy circuit until the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century when Ava Vidal and Miss London came onto the scene.²⁶

Asian transnational female stand-up comics are represented by Meera Syal, Shazia Mirza and Iranian Shappi Khorsandi. In Chapter Three it is argued that abjection is both the context and content of their comedy regarding their simultaneous positioning within two cultures. It is further suggested that their body represents the site of cultural abjection. Chapter Three also explores how they engage with 'double-consciousness' in relation to indigenous and diasporic groups and how they deconstruct stereotypes in their stand-up comedy.

and not Being Brown/Black British' (2000:129).

²⁶ These comics were not sufficiently established at the time of writing, in order to be included as case-studies in this thesis.

The question of why it has taken so long for transnational females to come into British stand-up comedy was mentioned earlier in this thesis. A possible reason for this situation was because Britain was uncertain of its identity or, perhaps because mainstream stand-up comedy, including Alternative Comedy, has been largely dominated by white males who had a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. However, as was noted earlier, Lizbeth Goodman (1993:155ff) discusses a number of British black female theatre companies who used comedy and autobiography in their work. It is therefore surprising that there were not any transnational female stand-up comics at this time.

The nineteen-eighties: Alternative Comedy

This section examines the heritage of 1980s Alternative Comedy with particular reference to female stand-up comics. In doing this it again highlights socio-cultural factors relating to female comics gaining entry into the male-dominated stand-up comedy arena. Oliver Double (1997 and 2005) and Tony Allen (2002) are particularly relevant here. Angus Deayton's *The History of Alternative Comedy* (1999) also reveals some interesting details regarding the origins of Alternative Comedy. Females are generally in the minority in these studies, however, there is evidence of a female angle. Frances Gray in her book *Women and Laughter* notes that in 1972, Mitzi Shore opened the Los Angeles Comedy Store (1994:143). More importantly, Shore also opened the 'Belly Room' as an annexe to the Los Angeles Store 'to provide a sympathetic environment for first-time comedians, and found it extensively used by women' (ibid, 145).²⁷ In Britain, Peter Rosengard and Don Ward (a strip-club owner) opened their own Comedy Club in Soho after Rosengard had seen Shore's club in North America (ibid, 144-145). This strange connection between Alternative comedy and strip clubs also recalls Double's observation that

²⁷ This prepares the way for Lynne Parker's Funny Women organization which offers a

female strippers performed alongside stand-up comics in the Working Men's Clubs (1997:165).²⁸ Thus, it can tentatively be suggested that there was a female connection to stand-up comedy before it became Alternative in Britain.

Alternative Comedy and sexist jokes

Alternative Comedy was aggressive. Oliver Double argues that 'Stand-up became a young person's thing' and 'the first alternative comedians shared the punk's aggressively anarchic approach to performance ...' (1997:167-168). Alternative Comedy was also seemingly socialist but it was often aggressive and abusive as illustrated by Marxist comedian Alexei Sayle who hated 'the 'old' comics, Mrs Thatcher, and those paying to see him' (In Deayton, 1999). Thatcher was a frequent target of Alternative male comics. Was this because of her policies on self-interest or her gender as veiled sexism? Both suggestions could be true. Alexei Sayle saw her as a scapegoat but admitted getting rich from her (ibid, 1999). This exemplifies how stand-up comedy derived from (and in turn, influenced) socio-cultural practice and ideology. Double adds that alternative comics 'did more than just give comedy a conscience, they also made politics a legitimate subject of jokes' (1997:176). Indeed, it would appear that Alternative Comedy was in a constant battle with the Thatcherite Britain of the 1980s. However, the question is asked how far females within Alternative Comedy engaged with its political ideology. This question is answered in Chapter Two. At the inception of Alternative Comedy, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders were among its few females. Victoria Wood and Dawn French admitted that they did not fully grasp the concept of Alternative Comedy. Wood tells French 'I was too

special platform for female comics.

²⁸ In Chapter Four of this thesis a brief consideration is also made of Tony Allen's reference to two female strippers 'who changed careers to do stand-up comedy' (2002:143).

old to be *Alternative*' in an interview for *Girls Who Do Comedy* on BBC 4 (2007) although French insists, 'But you were *Alternative* as I understand the word.'

Double had noted that 'by the 1970s there was a serious comedienne shortage' and that 'For many this tended to confirm the sexist assumption that women are just not funny' (1997:153). There were not that many female comics in the 1980s either. Although anyone could get up to do stand-up comedy, in a new system which prided itself on being non-sexist and non-racist, there were still few women and even fewer transnational comics on the *Alternative Comedy* scene. And yet, this seemed to ignore the political aims of the Women's Movements of the 1970s. This thesis argues that not only did males not overly welcome females into this arena, but that the female comics who were already there, did not make space for new female talent either. Lynne Parker was the first to do that in the twenty-first century with *Funny Women*.

Alternative Comedy and the sexual joke

In contrast to the 'blue' jokes of 'old' comedy, *Alternative Comedy* treated sex differently but more explicitly. Angus Deayton noted that:

Sex has always been a subject which inspired comics but *Alternative Comics* went further than before, filling their acts with sexually explicit material which would have once been the preserve of top shelf magazines (1999).

Jo Brand agreed that now you can say 'vagina' and 'fuck' the things people had not expected before (1999). However, as suggested by the reference to 'top shelf magazines' much of this humour was still anti-female. Female sexual humour is discussed in Chapters Two regarding the work of French and Saunders and Jenny Éclair.

The changing face of stand-up comedy

Perhaps the biggest change that has occurred in stand-up comedy in the last thirty years is the development of Lynne Parker's Funny Women organization. This thesis argues that Parker's success has increasingly feminized the stand-up comedy industry and that it has promoted new ways of looking at women and of women looking at themselves.²⁹ Funny Women has also effected a new politicization of stand-up comedy in the twenty-first century, and it has also helped to raise the profile of the female as audience of female stand-up comedy. Chapter Four examines female participation and interaction within female 'joking relationships' and with regard to female laughter. Gender issues and 'women's subjects' are also pertinent here in that both the Funny Women organization and twenty-first century female stand-up comics engage with the abject position of other females.

1.6 Performance Studies

The third area under consideration relates to the physical performance of stand-up comedy in terms of gesture, movement and spatiality. This thesis is particularly interested in how the female body performs 'the comic side of bodily abjection'. Having been considered as 'matter out of place' how does the female now exist and perform in that theatrical space? What is her relationship with her own body? What can be said of her gestures and movement within that space? These questions will be answered by a close examination of the performances of specific female case-studies. In relation to this, the works of female theatre practitioners such as Elaine Aston et al (2007) and Lizbeth Goodman (1993) are pertinent in terms of

²⁹ Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* also helped to give women new ways of looking at them selves (1998).

their investigation of feminist theatre. Alison Oddey (2005) and Dawn French (BBC4, 2007) also offer a female perspective in their interviews with some 'first-generation' female comics such as Victoria Wood and Jenny Éclair. However, whilst interesting, these interviews tend to offer insights into personal backgrounds rather than performance, thus they have only a limited value to this aspect of female stand-up comedy. Melvyn Bragg's interviews with Victoria Wood and Meera Syal for television's *The South Bank Show* in 1988 and 2003 respectively, tend to offer a socio-cultural slant.

The moving female body

The notion of the female body 'taking up space' is important to the arguments of this thesis both regarding socio-cultural matters and in terms of performance. Here matters of female gestures and facial expressions are explored alongside how the female body stands and moves on stage. The *Body in parts* (Hillman and Mazzio (eds), 1997) is a book which examines how abject female body parts perform, although it also draws attention to medieval stigmas attached to the female body. Stanton B. Garner explores movement and embodiment in his book *Bodied Spaces* (1994). He also cites the essay *Throwing Like a Girl* by I M Young (1990) in which she argues that 'women tend to make less use of their bodies than men' and 'act in a limited space' (In Garner, 1994:201). Young's arguments tend to engage afresh with notions of how females 'take up space' and 'fill their space'. Such considerations are explored in this thesis in many contexts, but specifically in relation to Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders in Chapter Three with reference to their performance of slapstick comedy.

Notions of falling down and recovering are explored here alongside the concept of being pushed down and kept down. Tony Staveacre refers to Vidusaka, a comic servant in classic Hindu epics who engages in an

‘interchange of badinage and body blows’ with his partner (ibid, 11). Staveacre cites Fred Karno’s description of slapstick as ‘visual comedy’ and ‘the comedy of action’ (1987:7). Reference is also made to the ‘slapstick baton’, and to the violence and ‘rough-and-tumble’ of slapstick (ibid, 12). Although aggression of this type is not usually found in female comedy, French and Saunders deconstruct them in an interesting way as is discussed in Chapter Two.

The body in space: embodiment/disembodiment

The notions of absence and presence are also important in relation to performance and involve the ideas of ‘embodiment’ and ‘disembodiment’ in relation to the female. Alongside this lies the concept of ‘dysmorphia’ which also relates to spatiality. It implies a partial disembodiment derived from the psychological loss of female bodily parts through seeing ‘one’s self through the eyes of others.’ In this state the boundaries of the individual body become blurred as it experiences itself as simultaneously present and absent.³⁰ This notion is discussed in Elizabeth Grosz’s essay *Transgressive Bodies* with reference to Jacques Lacan’s notion of the ‘imaginary anatomy’ which is described as a ‘psychical internalised image of the body which represents the subject’s lived experience of its bodily parts and organs’ (In Counsell (ed), 2001:140/41). In the light of this, this thesis argues that the ‘disembodied or ‘dysmorphic’ female interiorizes abjection and thereby alienates parts of herself to fit other people’s notions of how she should be. This appears to lead to a psychological sloughing of body parts. This view is expressed in a number of different ways by theoreticians in other fields as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis. The work of Victoria Wood most specifically engages with such notions as will be seen in Chapter Two.

³⁰ In Chapter Three, a discussion of the work of ‘second-generation’ transnational

John Limon engages with such matters in his description of North American stand-up comic Ellen DeGeneres of whom he argues, she ‘treats her biography as if an encumbrance’ (2000:116). He also observes that stand-up comic Paula Poundstone ‘... wishes to slough her body entirely’ (2000:119). Limon generalizes these cases to argue that ‘When you feel abject, you feel as if there were something miring your life, some skin that cannot be sloughed’ (2000:4). The psychological loss of body parts has much to do with female abjection and with female stand-up comedy. Indeed, Limon suggests that in their stand-up comedy some people ‘search for the bodies their minds had thrown off’ (2000:7-8) and he argues that Jewish comedians went further in that they took the body ‘and turned it into a gag’ (ibid, 7). In British stand-up comedy, Jo Brand and Dawn French try resist this ‘sloughing’ of body parts; whilst Victoria Wood’s early work indicates the search for a lost body. Alongside this, issues related to embodied and disembodied female laughter are explored in Chapter Four with reference to Robert Provine (2000), Marcel Gutwirth (1993) and Helene Cixous (In Parkin, 1997).

It is also important to add to the above that ‘dysmorphia’ can be personal or cultural. It merely demonstrates that the body is always ‘in-relation-to’ others in a socio-cultural sense. This correlates with the notion of ‘double-consciousness’ as explored by Mel Watkins (1994/9:26). Shazia Mirza seems to be seeking to re-own her body against the repressive ideological notions of some zealous Muslim men, whilst Gina Yashere, literally sloughs off parts of her body by losing three stones in weight.

Emotion

In an enlargement of the concepts of the themes of the previous section, this thesis argues that performing ‘the comic side of abjection’ engages

female stand-up comics reveals that such issues also apply to the cultural body

with emotions. Neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio in his book *The Feeling of What Happens* sees emotions as being played out in the theatre of the body, in its 'internal milieu, visceral, vestibular and musculoskeletal systems' (2000:51). Victoria Wood's early stand-up performances would seem to offer a good illustration of this as is shown in Chapter Two. Judy Carter, North American stand-up comic and coach also writes of the importance of emotion in performances of stand-up comedy in her book *Stand-up: The Book* (1989). She says:

Material cannot be emotionally neutral. Your subject matter has to disgust you, pain you, thrill you, because audiences do not respond to words, they respond to feelings (1989:18).

Strong feeling gives energy, presence and conspicuity to performance. Carter also advises comics to 'Exaggerate your feelings' (ibid, 34). This thesis suggests that exaggeration rehabilitates marginalized parts of the body. Such notions connect with Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) and Mary Russo (1994) and their notions of the hyperbolic qualities of the grotesque. M Alison Kibler draws attention to the view that anger might be a legitimate alternative to female laughter (1999:47). The following point argued by John Limon effectively connects notions of abjection, emotion and disembodiment in the body of the stand-up comic

Stand-up itself has the structure of abjection insofar as comedians are not allowed to be either natural or artificial ... All a stand-up's life feels abject to him or her, and stand-ups try to escape it by living it as an act (2000:6).

Whilst Limon's words are interesting, they do not fully describe the case for contemporary British female stand-up comics. It is argued by this thesis that they explore abject aspects of the personal and cultural female body rather than see that their own 'life feels abject'. However, the early work of Victoria Wood does seem to engage with such views as is shown in Chapter Three.

1.7 Media theory

This thesis makes a specific study of females as audience of female stand-up comedy in terms of what the author calls female ‘joking relations’. Because this has not been done before, it is necessary to look to other studies of reception in the media and theatre.

Some of these are generic and some specifically engage with female reception of the media and theatre. Bennett’s book *Theatre Audiences* (1997) and Herbert Blau’s book *The Audience* (1990) explore reception in generic terms. However, this thesis goes beyond reception to examine specific female interactions and participation in relation to female stand-up comedy. Jackie Stacey’s book *Star Gazing* (1994) is useful here in its investigation of the way in which British female audiences responded to Hollywood film heroines of the 1940s. Her work is based on a magazine survey and interviews with British females. Liesbet van Zoonen’s book *Feminist Media Studies* (1994) also has value to this thesis, in view of its consideration of the female as spectacle.

M Alison Kibler in her essay *Gender Conflict and Coercion on A&E’s An Evening at the Improv* (1999) writes on ‘gender power relations’ in relation to male stand-up comedy. Her essay is useful in drawing attention to the notion of ‘shared cultural values’ and the concept of audience homogeneity. These matters are explored in this thesis in relation to female ‘joking relations’ and female laughter.

The idea of female ‘joking relations’ has important connections with socio-cultural practice and feminist theory. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, the term ‘joking relations’ is borrowed from anthropologist, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, whose research was done with pre-industrial societies from Africa, Asia, Oceanic and North Americas in pre-industrial societies of the 1940s and 1950s. The subject of his investigation was

male relations, and male to female relations and he saw these ‘joking relations’ as being ‘simultaneously conjunctive and disjunctive’ (In Wilson, 1979:88). There was also the suggestion of ‘exchanges of witticisms with the pretence of hostility’ but other theorists proposed that ‘gross insult and obscenity were expressed with the pretence of amusement’ (ibid, 89) or abuse was offered as a ‘pretence of hostility and a real friendliness’ (ibid, 88).³¹ Interestingly, he excluded female relations from his study. However, this exclusion is the starting point of this present research and in Chapter Four the term ‘joking relations’ is used to explore the nature of the relationships between the female as audience and the female as performer.

In this present thesis, the notion of disjunction is addressed and female relationships are tested against the practice of heckling, victimization and insulting the audience, noted in much male comedy, but not by female stand-up comics or at least not in the same way. Oliver Double (1997 and 2005) and Tony Allen (2002) see heckling as part of comedy and refer to the audience as ‘victims’ of insults. Heckling is often revealed as abusive, derogatory and one-sided in contemporary male stand-up comedy, but it has its roots in the ancient Greek *komos* where it would have been related to the whole community. However, Double seems to ignore the double-sidedness of the stand-up comedy event, although Allen does not. Chapter Four examines their views in relation to female ‘heckling’ to reveal that the latter is closer to ‘cross-talk’, especially within the ‘joking relations’ of Shazia Mirza and Gina Yashere and their audiences.

Disjunctive relations also have correlations with W. E. B. Dubois’ notion of ‘double-consciousness’ (1994/9:26). However, Watkins largely ignores females as audience, although as previously noted, he does examine ‘tent’ shows which represent an alternative to mainstream white shows and

³¹ Such abuse was part of ancient comedy; it is also in opposition to the real hostility that pervades some contemporary male stand-up comedy.

audiences (1994/1999:151). Transnationals as audience of the media are also examined by Ramaswami Harindranath who argues for ‘a theoretical reevaluation of the relation between the socio-cultural contexts of audiences and their interpretations’ (In Cottle (ed), 2000:161).

The study of female laughter is explored with particular reference to Robert Provine’s book *Laughter: a Scientific Study* which proves to be useful to this thesis in that he addresses female laughter, albeit in relation to male jokes, but not female jokes. He also concludes that ‘Males engage in more laugh-evoking activity than females, a pattern that may be universal’ (2000:29) and that ‘males are the leading jokesters, and females the leading laughers and consumers of humour’ (ibid, 29). These views raise important questions which are explored in Chapter Four: the first relates to the notion of ‘universality’ and the second relates to the notions of ‘females as consumers of male humour’. Provine’s North American study was written during the 1980s and whilst interesting, it neither represents the British situation, nor is it entirely relevant to recent cultural developments. Nevertheless, his views are used as a starting point within this thesis in order to examine female laughter in relation to concepts of embodiment and disembodiment, and in relation to considerations of aberrance and abjection. Julia Kristeva’s consideration of laughter is also briefly examined, but rejected in favour of the views of Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) in the sense that she resists and rejects abjection, whilst Bakhtin embraces it (albeit that this is a temporary act within the confines of carnival). In this present thesis, laughter is explored both as response and as performance and it is argued that laughter is as much a learned cultural response, as it is innate. It is argued that laughter, like stand-up comedy is connected to socio-cultural practice as is the notion of the ‘good sense of humour’.

French feminist, Helene Cixous (In Parkin, 1997) and Jo Anna Isaak in the *Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* (1996) also consider

female laughter. Isaak examines the ‘revolutionary power of women’s laughter’ in relation to contemporary female art. Her work is pertinent to this thesis, although she bases her considerations solely on Bakhtin’s study of carnival laughter in his book *Rabelais and His World* (1984). Isaak argues that those in possession of the most radical humour maybe women and she sees feminist art practice as ‘pluralizing, destabilizing, baffling a centered discourse’. She further asks why women are ‘particularly well-positioned to employ laughter as a revolutionary strategy’ (1996:3). Indeed, in her study she uses laughter ‘as a metaphor for transformation, for thinking about cultural change’ (1996:5). This approach has many similarities to the perspective that is taken by this present thesis, although here laughter is explored specifically with reference to female participation in ‘joking relations’ and in relation to the performance of female stand-up comedy. Frances Gray also explores female laughter in her book *Women and Laughter* (1994) with emphasis on the ‘good sense of humour’ although her interest is mostly in connection with female sitcoms. Nevertheless, her ideas are useful in exploring the notion of gendered laughter.

Furthermore, the joke theorists already cited above are used to explore how jokes are received and decoded, whilst the matter of ‘shared values’ is both examined and refuted in relation to the female audience. Blunden’s theory of the ‘potentiality of the gap’ is explored alongside a highlighting of new theories and trends.³² These include niche venues and audiences. Double (2005), Tony Allen (2002), Judy Carter (1989) and Jay Sankey (1998) have also highlighted some performer-audience interactions. However, the specific consideration of ‘joking relations’ between the female performer of stand-up comedy and her female audience and, indeed among the audience themselves, is peculiar to this thesis. Indeed, it begins where these writers finish in going beyond reception to explore female participation and interaction and in examining female laughter as a

³² This is outlined in the Introduction.

performance itself.

This thesis explores the specificity of female ‘joking relations’ on *particular* nights and at specific venues which are used as case-studies. Such subjective experiences cannot be scientifically measured either on site, or beyond the site of engagement; nor can they offer definitive conclusions. However, they do open the debate and as such, they offer an indication of changing trends; as an investigative awareness of the changing audience and as an indication of the need to see audiences differently. Practices are investigated against theories regarding how audiences decode comedy using different ideological, cultural and personal perspectives.

New female audiences and new behaviours are investigated at these venues. Niche audiences within this investigation include the gay venue Comedy Camp (2006), the predominantly-female audience which were present at the Hammersmith Palais for the *International Women’s Day* (2007), and the predominantly-black audience at the Hackney Empire (2008). Females within mixed-gender audiences and transnationals within predominantly-white audiences are also examined.

Mutual looking

Another important aspect of this thesis relates to the notion of mutual looking. The essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) by Laura Mulvey addresses this matter to argue that ‘The surveyor of woman in herself is male’ (In van Zoonen, 1994:88). This view has close affinities with the notion ‘seeing oneself through the eyes of others’ which was outlined with reference to Anne Hole (2003) and it is discussed in depth within this thesis.³³ However, as van Zoonen notes, Mulvey did not

³³ This has strong correlations with the notion of ‘double-consciousness’ explored by

‘directly address the issue of female pleasure’ (1994:90). This thesis *does* specifically address such matters and moreover, it explores the mutual pleasure to be found in female ‘joking relations’ and in the ‘mutual looking’ between the female as audience and the female as performer.

Mutual looking also relates to ‘discourses of consumption’. Jackie Stacey in her book *Star Gazing* (1994) examines British female spectatorship of Hollywood films in relation to socio-cultural practice. In doing this, she indicates how the issue of ‘consumption’ also impacted upon female life in the mid-twentieth century arguing:

Discourses of consumption addressed women as subjects and encouraged their participation in the ‘public sphere’ which could be seen to have offered new forms of feminine identity in contrast to their roles as wives and mothers (1994:223).

Stacey’s notions of ‘consumption’ and ‘participation in the ‘public sphere’ have relevance to this thesis in that females as audience members could be said to be ‘consumers of female stand-up’. The act of being ‘addressed as subjects’ is an important aspect of female ‘joking relations and is discussed at length in Chapter Four. The reference to ‘new forms of feminine identity’ is also of particular relevance in its implication of a female resistance to being subsumed, coerced, or seen solely ‘in-relation to’ men and family.

This chapter has outlined theories relating to bodily abjection alongside offering a summary of the contexts in which these theories are to be examined in relation to female stand-up comedy. The following three chapters now explore such matters in relation to selected case-studies. Above all, the question being asked is: ‘In what ways do contemporary female stand-up comics perform the comic side of bodily abjection?’

Watkins regarding African-American perceptions (1994/9:26).

Chapter Two

‘First-generation’ female comics and the question of bodily abjection

Introduction

The question of how far female stand-up comics perform the ‘comic side of bodily abjection’ is explored firstly with reference to ‘first-generation’ comics Victoria Wood, Linda Smith, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders, Jo Brand and Jenny Éclair. These females began their comedy work in the 1980s (1974 for Wood) and have been consistently successful on the stand-up comedy circuit for the past twenty years, but it is their twenty-first century work is most pertinent to this thesis.

Consideration of these case-studies is made with specific reference to feminist theory and socio-cultural practice. Attention is given to the impact of changes occurring in the middle and late twentieth century, particularly those associated with the second wave of the Women’s Movement of the 1970s. Bodily abjection is also discussed with reference to the works of Mary Douglas (1966) and Julia Kristeva (1982), and to Mary Russo (1994) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) and their notions of the female grotesque. The performance history of stand-up comedy is also an important contextual reference in that female bodies and practices had been previously denigrated in the sexist jokes of some ‘old’ mid-twentieth century stand-up comics as indicated by Oliver Double in his book *Stand-up!* (1997:68).³⁴

³⁴ The word ‘old’ is used to define those stand-up comics of the 1960s who tended to be

This thesis argues that rather than too much attention having been given to the female body in stand-up comedy, too little attention has been paid to the importance of its materiality as a rich source of material. Most of the females cited in this chapter situate their own body firmly within their stand-up comedy and engage with bodily orifices, crevices, surfaces and processes and with the way the body takes up space or uses gestures and movement.³⁵ With regard to these matters, Craig Pritchard's essay 'The Body Topographies of Education Management' is pertinent to this chapter in examining the 'spatial, physical and verbal 'surfaces' of our materiality' (In Hassard et al (eds), 2000:148). However, Mary Russo goes somewhat further in her book *The Female Grotesque* to engage with feminism in seeing the 'politics of surface' as another opportunity to scapegoat the feminine' (1994:27). Russo's notion also relates to the norms of aesthetics by which females are judged. This draws attention to another important element of this chapter which is the notion of 'looking at oneself through the eyes of others'. For the case-studies of this chapter, engagement with bodily abjection involves underscoring notions of self-agency.

2.1 Victoria Wood

Two important notions relating to the body and bodily abjection are to be found in Victoria Wood's stand-up comedy. The first relates to the female as outsider; the second relates more specifically to body topography in relation to 'women's issues'. As the first contemporary female stand-up comic it is important to demonstrate how Wood's stand-up comedy has

right wing, sexist and racist, and to distinguish them from the later Alternative comics of the 1980s.

³⁵ Smith's own death from ovarian cancer will be seen to be relevant to key issues

developed, thus before examining aspects of Wood's show *Victoria at the Albert* (2001) some exploration is made of salient issues in her earlier work *An Audience With Victoria Wood* (1988).

Wood's early work was influenced by Joyce Grenfell who was 'peopling the stage with nothing but words' (BBC4, 2007).³⁶ Indeed, in an interview with Alison Oddey, Wood says of Grenfell, 'I had seen a woman stand on stage alone, which was a very strong image for me' (2005:237). These words are also a 'very strong image' for this thesis in suggesting both self-agency and the risks and vulnerability of being a female stand-up comic. Wood's desire here also seems to be many-sided in wanting to copy Grenfell's style and to 'stand on stage alone' herself; but perhaps, she also desires the 'support' of those characters she intends to take with her on stage.

In her book *The Female Grotesque* Mary Russo says, 'Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure...' (1994:53). This sense of 'exposure' engages with Wood's difficulties with her body image and further indicates why there is a sense of vulnerability for females standing up to do stand-up comedy.

The female comic and the outsider position

The 'outsider' role belonged to the sacred buffoon of ancient comedy and was ambiguous as C P Wilson (1979) indicates. However, Wood's sense of being an outsider seemingly relates to her personal position rather than to the role of the traditional comic for her aim is *not* to be different, but to conform. She is an outsider trying to get in. She tells Dawn French that at school:

discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis.

³⁶ Wood told Dawn French that she thought she (Wood) was too old and therefore would not have been called an Alternative Comic (BBC4, 2007).

I was outside the gang. I was envious of them.
I tried too hard in that way that never ever works.
I had other lame friends who were also trying - they
had callipers, or plasters on their glasses and I was
fat, so I was in the losers' group. I didn't want to
attract attention but secretly I did. I didn't have that
ability to attract attention and was envious of the girls
who were funny (*Girls Who Do Comedy*, BBC4, 2007).

The words 'outside the gang', 'fat', and 'in the losers' group' effectively reveal Wood's abject position which is intensified by her friendship with 'other lame friends' who 'had callipers or plasters on their glasses'. The phrase 'I tried too hard in the way that never works' is exemplified in the show *An Audience with Victoria Wood* (1988) by Wood's characters Madeleine and Wendy, who work in a department store for the cosmetics company, Sacharelle.

Wood: This is Madeleine speaking ... Wendy, who comes from the Geneva School of sterilized blackhead popping... free, totally free of charge whatsoever ... the makeup comes in all shades of the speculum ... I hope that Wendy's eczema *pause* and Wendy's ringworm *pause* don't flare up at the same time ... (*An Audience with Victoria Wood*, 1988).

There appear to be two sides to Madeleine, accompanied by two voices; the 'real' one and the one who is trying to fit into 'the world that is Sacharelle'. The speed of Wood's delivery becomes accelerated as she moves rapidly between the two accents, so that eventually the false accent slips. The malapropism of the word 'speculum' for 'spectrum' is another example of Madeleine's attempts to 'fit in' by using unfamiliar words. The speculum is also an instrument used specifically for intrusive pelvic examinations of females and perhaps there is the sense in which Wood is suggesting that this company intrudes into female lives. 'Sacharelle' is an organization which is involved with 'improving' female appearance, but Wendy's diploma in 'sterilized blackhead popping' along with her 'eczema' and 'ringworm' mar the image it seeks to create. Wendy is also 'Not the most hygienic' in coming 'fresh from her job in the abattoir'.

Wood is particularly good at offering a range of images here which clearly define these two females as not belonging to this manufactured world.

Wood's depiction of Wendy's unsuitability for her position also becomes increasingly hyperbolic.

Wood: Wendy's been panting to get her mits round someone's chops since four. If one frigging volunteer will drag your bums up please for the pigging world that is Sacharelle (*pause*). Nobody's coming up. Alright I didn't want to do this - Wendy, take your muzzle off. Fetch!
(*An Audience with Victoria Wood*, 1988).

Here the attempted elevated language is spattered with the intensity of more concrete words like 'mits', 'bums', and 'pigging' which tend to indicate that when facing defeat, Madeleine returns to a more authentic language which has a greater affinity with the real and 'unideal' body.

The author of this thesis argues that these females are 'outsiders' trying to fit in. Frances Gray, on the other hand, suggests that Wood's characters are 'often at odds with society' but 'centred, at peace with themselves and their world' (1994:167). It must be agreed that they offer no apologies for themselves. On the other hand, they are prepared to change their identity in order to belong to the glamorous, but artificial and manufactured world of Sacharelle until the realization occurs that this is a false world.

However, these characters also appear to have another role, which is to offer Wood a form of emotional protection, as if replacing the friends she felt she did not have when a child. Wood reveals that she only finds her identity on stage.

Wood: I used to feel that the real me was on the stage and the rest of me was fumbling to catch up ... that when I was onstage I was talking honestly and communicating with people, that I had difficulty doing the rest of the time

(*Girls Who Do Comedy*, BBC4, 2007).

These words reveal Wood's abject position and she seems to want to escape from life into art in feeling that 'the real me was on stage'. John Limon suggests something similar in his book on abjection within North American stand-up comedy when he argues that 'All a stand-up's life feels abject to him or her, and stand-ups to escape it by living it as an act' (2000:6). However, Wood seems to go further than this in only becoming herself on stage where she 'was talking honestly and communicating with people'. This becomes evident in that in her show she seems to talk to the audience as if they are close friends saying 'I've got to tell you - I've got to tell you about this really exciting thing that happened to me in the supermarket' (*An Audience with Victoria Wood*, 1988). She even describes playing at the Albert Hall as being 'like having two and a half thousand friends round and you're the funniest one in the room' (In *Double*, 2005:62). However, her vulnerability returns as she adds, 'If they don't laugh, I feel they don't like you. They are saying 'We didn't like her' (ibid, 63). These words imply that a sense of personal risk is involved in performing stand-up comedy. On the other hand, in her 1988 show, Wood appears to perform *for*, rather than *to*, her audience; she also avoids their gaze and looks above their heads.^{37 38} It would appear that Wood feels better when she is 'communicating with people' on stage because there is distance between her and her audience.

The above underscores Wood's ambivalent feelings of both vulnerability and desire and it draws attention to the earlier words, 'I didn't want to attract attention, but secretly I did'. This ambivalence also exemplifies Julia Kristeva's notion of the deject who 'has a sense of danger ... but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart' (ibid,

³⁷ In *Victoria at the Albert* (2001) Wood can be seen to talking *with* her audience rather than performing *to* them.

³⁸ In the second part of Chapter Four there is further discussion of Wood's feelings about her audience in relation to the concept of audience identity.

8). It would appear that Wood performs the role of the outsider who cannot help desiring and fearing the role of an insider in equal measure.

What is more, it appears that Wood is constantly re-playing her early feelings of being an outsider by performing characters which are also on the outside trying to get in, or by referring to those who invite her envy. This can be explained perhaps with reference to Julia Kristeva, who borrowing from Jacques Lacan's notion of the symptom, suggests that, 'The abject from which he does not cease separating is for him, a *land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered' (ibid, 8). Kristeva further argues that, 'In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control' (1982:11). Thus, it would seem that the symptom takes hold of the body. However, rather than sublimate it, Wood appears to transfer the symptom to her performance on stage where the abjection continues to make its presence felt, but perhaps it is also kept under control by such means.

Identity

Wood has already suggested that she envies those who are sure of their identity with reference to her school days when she say, 'I didn't have that ability to attract attention and was envious of the girls who were funny'. In the following sketch she appears to be the incarnation of her own 'yellow-bereted' and 'orange-coated' Lancashire lass who is in awe of her friend, Kimberly.

Wood: Hello, I'm looking for my friend, Kimberley.
Have you seen her? You can't miss Kimberly because
She's really, really tall and she's got bits of ceiling stuck
in her hair...
We both work in the supermarket
and Kimberly chops meat - like big bits -
she doesn't chop, she just SNAPS them in two.
I'm on pricing. It's quite a responsibility

(*An Audience with Victoria Wood*, 1988).

This set stresses ‘Wood’s’ awareness of Kimberley’s confident sense of identity and her insider position. The hyperbolism of the words ‘she doesn’t chop, she just SNAPS them in two’ is particularly revealing of her admiration for Kimberley’s ‘larger than life’ character. Kimberly is also so tall that she has ‘bits of ceiling stuck in her hair’. Moreover, both her size and identity are implied by her ‘sausage’ earrings which end up on her nipples because the man doing the ear-piercing could not reach her ears. The earrings themselves also demonstrate materially Kimberley’s clear sense of identity in belonging to the supermarket butcher’s space where these substances are readily available.

Vulnerability and risk

The suggestion of awe indicated in relation to Kimberly’s sense of confidence can be seen to be supported by Wood’s own feelings about her own body image in her show *Victoria at the Albert* (2001).

Wood: I used to suffer from an eating disorder so I have no idea of my own body image. I struggle with this body image thing. I had this strange relationship with food (*Victoria at the Albert*, 2001).

The words ‘I have no idea of my body image’ suggest uncertainty about taking up space and a sense of disembodiment. This relates to what the author of this thesis calls ‘dysmorphia’ which implies a sloughing of the physical body in order to comply with the views of others. It implies the sense of ‘looking at oneself through the eyes of others’.³⁹ When writing about the representation of the female body in female art, Jo Anna Isaak

³⁹ In his book *Stand-up comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* John Limon makes reference to North American female stand-up comics, Ellen DeGeneres and Paula

draws attention to such a notion when she cites Freud's notion of 'somatic compliance' as indicating that the 'body complies with the psychological demands by providing the material for the inscription of its signs' (1996:191). Wood's sense of self seems to be almost disembodied in relation to her words 'I have no idea of my own body image'.

Wood also seems to reveal 'somatic compliance' because she feels that her body does not fit what are considered to be the norms of attractiveness. This is perhaps demonstrated by the fact that apart from her head and face, her arms are the only other parts of her body exposed because of the long coat she wears seemingly to conceal the rest of her body. This is particularly in evidence in the Kimberly sketch where the long orange coat she wears is closed up to the neck and which has the collar up. Wood's head is also completely covered by the yellow beret. Moreover, in performance Wood's arms are held close to her chest, bent at the elbows, either in a state of surrender with forearms showing or in upper bodily protection. This is accompanied by the constant, repetitive and almost compulsive ritual of pulling up her sleeves and thus exposing her forearms and revealing her 'funny bone' (humerus). Such actions also convey a seemingly perpetual state of readiness to protect her self. Jacques Lecoq throws some light on this matter in saying, 'Feelings, states and passions are expressed through gestures, attitudes and movements similar to those of physical actions' (2000:71). Wood's feelings of vulnerability are indeed revealed in the way she uses her arms. And yet, as the yellow-bereted friend seeking Kimberly, Wood's persona is careful to keep her elbows out of the way of the audience as she moves through them to find her friend. Perhaps she also wants to protect them.

Marjorie Garber also throws some light on the above in her essay *Out of Joint* when she notes that 'it is the multi-dimensional mobility of the elbow that gives it its comic potentiality' (1997:30). It could certainly be

Poundstone who try to 'slough' parts of their body (2000:116)

argued that as well as being protective, Wood's elbows also seem to be very mobile and to have a 'comic potentiality' in the way they 'speak' her vulnerability and constantly work to protect her chest area. Garber also notes that 'the elbows seem to work - literally and metaphorically - by pushing in, out and around' (ibid, 30). Wood's elbows are very eloquent in her stand-up comedy sets, but she also had to 'elbow' her way into and 'around' the male-dominated arena of British stand-up comedy.

The above has considered Wood's work in the nineteen-eighties to reveal evidence of vulnerability and the notion of being an outsider. The following sections address her twenty-first century stand-up comedy sets which show a marked difference in terms of content and style.

'Women's subjects' and 'seeing oneself through the eyes of others'

Wood's show *Victoria at the Albert* (2001) engages with abjection whilst also drawing attention to contextual elements relating to contemporary feminist theory and socio-cultural practice. Firstly, the content of these sets falls into the category of 'women's subjects' which brings to mind important debates surrounding the stand-up comedy arena. Secondly, Wood's hysterectomy set in this show can be seen to also engage with the notion of 'seeing oneself through the eyes of others' (In Watkins, 1994/9:26). Importantly, the show is performed when Wood is over fifty years of age and it is the ageing female body and related notions of loss of attractiveness which are its subject. Wood comments on such matters when talking with Dawn French for *Girls Who Do Comedy*:

Wood: There is a perception of women not being able to do something after a certain age and because comedy is tied up with attractiveness in some ways, not overly sexy or glamorous. I think fifty is a good time to stop but ... if I want to do it ... bollocks to anybody who thinks I am too old. I am the oldest one so I guess its

up to me (BBC4, 2007).

As the matriarch of female stand-up comedy and an icon, Wood underscores a number of ambivalent female positions in the above. She is perceived as ‘not being able to do something’ because she is beyond ‘a certain age’ and sees that ‘fifty is a good time to stop’. Conversely, she might want to continue; indeed, she is willing to fight those who think she is too old to do so, and finally, she accepts the responsibility of continuing to do stand-up comedy.⁴⁰ There is also a socio-political reason for doing so in that in her 2001 show, Wood is revealing things which are personal. This is important, because as Dee Heddon argues in her essay ‘The Politics of the Personal: The Autobiography of Performance’ ‘the personal is political because *personal*’ (In Aston and Harris (eds), 2007:131). She also suggests that ‘revealing previously hidden or silenced female experiences was political’ (ibid, 134). The ‘personal’ and the ‘hidden’ in Wood’s show relate to her ageing body and more particularly, to her hysterectomy which she discusses very graphically in the next set.

The reference to age and ‘attractiveness’ in Wood’s words above draw attention to the notion of ‘looking at oneself through the eyes of others’.⁴¹ Anne Hole’s essay *Performing identity: Dawn French and the funny fat female body* (2003) pursues this notion further by firstly citing a study by Barbara Brook (1999) which sees female bodies as being ‘organized by a heterosexual economy in which ‘beauty’ is defined as heterosexual attractiveness and women ‘interiorise’ the surveillance of an imagined male observer’ (2003:316). Brook’s words recall Wood’s earlier words about ‘struggling with this body image thing’, whilst Hole insistently argues that the female ‘is almost continually accompanied by her own

⁴⁰ The ageing process is pertinent to those ‘first-generation’ comics who are still performing stand-up comedy because they have been doing stand-up comedy since the 1980s (1974 in Wood’s case). They all explore this to some degree in their twenty-first century stand-up comedy shows.

⁴¹ This notion has correlations with W. E. B. Dubois’ notion of ‘double-consciousness’ as explored by Mel Watkins in his book *On the Real Side: A History of African American*

image of herself' (ibid, 316). This is undeniably the case for Wood and seems to be suggested in the following. However, these sets are complex - and new.

In her show *Victoria at the Albert* (2001) Wood takes risks in exposing herself as an ageing woman with a perceived attendant loss of attractiveness. Her subject is the menopause, which is very decisively a 'woman's subject'. She draws attention to medical aspects of the internal processes and crevices of her own body as she talks of having a 'lump, fibroids and a hysterectomy'. However, she swallows the words as if talking about something 'dirty' and abject.

Wood: I thought it was the menopause. I put every thing down to the menopause - tiredness, irritability, global warming - two hundred lady Eskimos all having a hot flush at the same time. It got so bad that there were only seventeen minutes in a month that anyone could get any sense out of me. The reason Japanese women don't get pmt because they eat soya and tofu (*Victoria at the Albert*, 2001).

The reference to everything being put 'down to the menopause' including 'global warming' engages with the interiorizing of blame mentioned above. This is reinforced by Wood's words 'there were only seventeen minutes in a month when anyone could get any sense out of me'. Indeed, both of these phrases suggest a male perspective. Joanna Brewis and John Sinclair endorse such a view in their essay 'Exploring Embodiment: Women, Biology and Work' in that they note how:

there are attitudinal assumptions which underpin women's relationships with their bodily processes. These interact with the biological components of menstruation, pregnancy and menopause to produce the lived experience of these events (In Hassard et al (eds), 2000:209).

This goes further than Hole's essay in dealing with female 'bodily processes' rather than with body image. Nevertheless, the perception is the same, namely that there are 'attitudinal assumptions' which the female has interiorized. However, it is important to note that Brewis and Sinclair examine female responses to 'menstruation' and 'pregnancy' in their essay, but not to 'the menopause'. The implication is that the older female body is deemed to be beyond either discussion or work.

In the next part of the set Wood appears to have come to terms with the loss of a body part. Moreover, it is interesting that Wood's now defunct uterus, doubly past child-bearing, is being spoken about before a mixed-gender audience.

Wood: Ok, so they take away your uterus. Am I supposed to put something in there like an ornament or something? What happens afterwards? Does your husband's penis say, 'Go back! It's too big!' (*Victoria at the Albert*, 2001).

She partially deflects the seriousness of the having her uterus taken away by her words 'Am I supposed to put something in there like an ornament or something?' Again the issue of size is highlighted but it now relates to the fear of sexual unattractiveness in the relation to her 'husband's penis' and its/his fear of her cavernous vaginal area. (Both the uterus and the penis here seemingly having lives of their own.) Wood's questions engage with observations made in Anne Hole's essay that the post-menopausal woman is 'culturally coded as beyond femininity - de-sexed by her inability to reproduce and her assumed lack of heterosexual attractiveness' (2003:317). As Wood has already indicated that she feels a sense of not being attractive, one would assume that her hysterectomy would make her feel this more, and yet there seems to be again both a fear and a fascination about what is happening.

In the following, Wood draws attention to the ways in which she feels 'de-

sexed by her inability to reproduce' when describing how parts of her body start deteriorating.

Wood: I never knew there were so many ways for women to fall to pieces: bosom, pelvic floors dangling. There's a woman with a cervix in a margarine tub like this: 'I took it out to wash it and I couldn't get it back in' (*Victoria at the Albert*, 2001).

Wood's notion of the many ways 'to fall to pieces' highlight the bodily parts at risk as females age: namely the 'bosom', the 'pelvic floor' and the 'cervix'.⁴² Moreover, the words 'fall to pieces' can be related to Julia Kristeva's idea of '*falling* towards death' as 'falling from the verb '*cadere*, to fall' and its relationship to the corpse (cadaver). 'Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit - *cadere*, cadaver' (1982:3). For the female, the word 'falling' implies a 'falling' out of favour in heterosexual terms. What is more, the notion of 'falling' implied by the specificity of the words 'pelvic floors dangling' offers a stronger sense of a downward movement which leads towards death and that most abject thing, the corpse.

In addition, it is significant that being cut from the body, the uterus 'in the margarine tub' is no longer able to sustain life in terms of reproduction. However, it not only takes on a life of its own in being outside the body but is able to 'stand up' and speak its abjection. In addition to this, the topological connection between uterus and 'margarine' tub is clear in representing female as mother and nurturer, and thus as 'in-relation-to' family. It is pertinent to note that the 'margarine tub' is also a domestic everyday object and container for leftovers or objects that cannot be kept elsewhere and no longer fit into their original container. Wood's uterus is now also a leftover and longer 'fits'. Her images are both absurd and

⁴² Lynne Parker highlights such areas in relation to outlining the aims of her Funny Women organization. This is discussed in greater detail in the first part of Chapter Four.

surreal in this set and yet they clearly belong to a modern socio-cultural context and are familiar to other females.

Dangerous margins

Wood further explores abject aspects of the body by talking in detail about her pubic hair. In this she takes risks of alienating some people because she is dealing with a 'woman's subject' which not generally considered as having 'universal appeal' to a mixed-gender audience (Stott, 2005:99). However, her subject is perhaps more scatological than purely related to the female. It is risky because intimate and abject and 'unfeminine'. Nevertheless, females in the audience can be heard laughing louder than the male audience.⁴³

Wood: No, I normally try to look after it every few weeks. I chop chunks off it now and again, you know, with some nail scissors. Then I don't know what to do with them so put them out of the window and the birds come and take them for their nest
(*Victoria at the Albert*, 2001).

Her vaginal orifice and framing pubic hair have become a work of art in progress, as Wood 'chop[s] chunks off it now and again'. The graphic images of the empty cavernous insides noted earlier are contrasted with the minute cuttings of pubic hair. There is almost a compensatory element in Wood's attempts to 'look after it every few weeks' in that that she intends that her pubic hair will look attractive, even if she is no longer considered attractive. The act of chopping the pubic hair also creates an unusual element of waste which Wood does not 'know what to do with'. Moreover, this waste has multiple connotations of abjection. Firstly, Wood's pubic hair is abject in being attached to the vaginal area which is

⁴³ The question of who is laughing at what, and why, is discussed in greater detail in the second part of Chapter Four where audience perspectives are explored. This is done particularly in relation to the notions of the 'universal appeal' of male comedy and 'shared cultural values' within mixed-gender audiences.

seen by both Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) and Mary Douglas (1966) as being 'marginal'. Douglas notes that:

All margins are dangerous ... Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat (1966:150).

Secondly, Wood's pubic hair falls into Douglas' list of things 'issuing forth' and is doubly marginal in having 'traversed the boundary of the body'. However, these hair cuttings create another danger in Douglas' model in that they also represent 'rejected bits' from the process of imposing order on the external world and will probably go through two stages:

First they are recognisably out of place, a threat to good order ... At this stage they have some identity: they can be seen to be unwanted bits of whatever it is they came from, hair, food, wrappings. This is the stage at which they are also dangerous; their half identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence (Douglas, 1966:197).

Like Wood's uterus, her pubic hair cuttings are also 'unwanted bits of whatever they came from' and as such, they are 'a threat to good order'. Moreover, in Wood's set there is the implication that the 'half-identity' of the pubic hair cuttings 'still clings to them' when they become part of the bird's nest. Moreover, this object identity somehow becomes increasingly bigger so that the 'clarity of the scene' into which they 'obtrude' is 'impaired' whilst the pubic hair cuttings remain clearly distinguishable from other components of the nest. There is certainly no indication that in the end 'all identity is gone'. Indeed, Wood's final words on the subject

suggest a renewed sense of self-confidence:

Wood: I'm so annoyed because my scar comes just above where my pubic hair used to be. I'm having to do so much back-combing in the morning. Luckily, Nicky Clarke does a pubic mousse. Do you want to have a look? (*The lights go off*) (*Victoria at the Albert, 2001*)

Not only does Wood *not* reject this abject aspect of her body, but she gives it a new identity in highlighting its need for 'back-combing' and 'pubic mousse', sanctioned by none other than Nicky Clarke. Only the scar 'just above where my hair used to be' acts as a reminder of loss.

This is a new Wood who explores the 'comic side of bodily abjection' in a way not previously done by female stand-up comics. This is not just abjection, but abjection made art. In personal and performance terms, Wood has moved beyond the female issues raised by Hole (2003) for in highlighting important 'women's subjects' this set is above all, about self-agency. Indeed, Wood seems to have 'found' herself and her missing body, now that the most female part of it (the uterus) has been removed. Furthermore, she seems to have attained the coveted position of being an insider, as one of thousands of women who have had a hysterectomy. She wears this proudly as a badge rather than being apologetic about it.⁴⁴ Interestingly, almost uncontrollable female laughter can be heard during these hysterectomy sets from different places in the auditorium, although there is less laughter from the males in the audience.⁴⁵ What is more, Wood now clearly enjoys engaging with her audience and making eye contact with them which was something she found difficult in her 1988 show.

⁴⁴ In the second part of Chapter Four the female audience reactions to this set will be compared with those for Jasper Carrott's set on hormone replacement therapy in his show *Jasper Carrott on tv* (2007).

⁴⁵ This is discussed with reference to discussion on shared cultural values in the second part of Chapter Four.

2.2 Linda Smith

Smith aligns herself with particular groups of outsiders and she identifies not with named people, as Wood does, but with abject groups. In her stand-up comedy at Colchester Arts Centre (2002) she draws attention to socio-cultural and socio-political issues. Her work also engages with matters relating to domesticity and nurturing where there is engagement with various abject substances and experiences related to babies, children and old people. Smith also draws attention to the abject aspects of 'bodies in process' and in her work she immerses herself in the bodily abjection of others. Joanna Brewis and John Sinclair in their previously cited essay regarding females in the work place, write of a new awareness of the body and underscore the notion that women are intrinsically involved with families 'where so many 'natural' bodily [and therefore] lower functions occur' (In Hassard et al (eds), 2000:193). These 'lower functions' are also pertinent to Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of the carnival, although there they are not specifically related to the female. In his model, the lower stratum of the body is related to degradation (1984:21). Nevertheless, in both cases, the movement is downwards, and thus, towards the abject.

Smith's stand-up comedy also has a strong socio-political aspect which she translates into the personal and the everyday, although the seeming simplicity of her work belies its importance. Jo Brand remarks on this in a forward to the book *The Very Best of Linda Smith* written by Smith's partner Warren Laken in saying, 'Linda turned weighty and unfathomable political topics into something warm, funny and fit for consumption by Joe Public' (2006:ix). The following sets from Smith's show at Colchester Arts Centre (2002) effectively illustrate Brand's point.

The elderly ‘behaving badly’

Some of Smith’s sets at Colchester Arts Centre engage with perceptions and practices relating to elderly. In one set in her show she draws attention to how elderly people are stereotyped as having loose and wrinkling skin, limited, awkward movement and a disembodied voice. Patrick Fuery in his book *New Developments in Film Theory* describes the skin in particular as the ‘defining surface of the body and consequently, the subjectivities; it designates age, race, lifestyle, even class ...’ (2000:77). However, such things can be misread and tend towards stereotyping. The first part of Smith’s set draws attention not the above stereotypical notions of ageing, but to an unruly element in a group of old people ‘behaving badly’. They are frisked by the police before playing a game of bowls, and intimidate and shout abuse at their opponents in saying, ‘You’re going home in a fucking ambulance.’ Importantly, their ‘bad behaviour’ shows them as clearly more alive than dead, thus interrogating the mistaken idea that old people are beyond passion - and beyond misbehaviour.

Smith seemingly reverts to the stereotype herself as she juxtaposes this unruliness with a more abject account of the elderly living in Bexley-on-Sea, a marginal location synonymous in local parlance with the stage of life just before the graveyard. However, the implicit subject of Smith’s joke is not so much the old people as those who are stereotyping them and more to the point, marginalizing them. Nevertheless, Smith’s ‘old people’ *are* in the ‘margins’ between life and death and therefore they represent what is dangerous to the ‘We’ of the joke.

Smith: We’re in an old people’s home and
we’ve paid enough to keep the smell of piss
and cabbage at an acceptable level
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2002).

In the few words ‘smell of piss and cabbage’ Smith has deftly created a strong picture of abjection and degradation here, whilst with the reference

to keeping smell 'at an acceptable level' carries the belief that abjection can be controlled. However, what is being highlighted is the elderly people's proximity to the ultimate abjection of the corpse which according to Julia Kristeva is 'the most sickening of wastes ... a border that has encroached upon everything' (1982:3). Indeed, Kristeva argues that 'The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life' (ibid, 4). In Smith's set the concept of 'the most sickening of wastes' is clearly evident in the 'smells' of this 'old people's home' which are 'infecting life'. Thus, she emphasizes not only the fear of death, but also material indications that it is a pollution which is getting ever closer.

The issue of 'encroachment' of the corpse explains why Bexley-on-Sea is recognised as a place apart - a place which can be shut off and forgotten. Kristeva further sees the corpse as 'the utmost of abjection' and 'as something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself' (1982:4). Nevertheless, in Smith's image there is an attempt at protection from this 'something rejected' in the attempted removal of all the material signs of this abjection to a safe geographical and psychological distance in Bexley-on-Sea.

In the words 'we've paid enough' in the above set there also is the suggestion of the elderly becoming a commodity to be sold off, auctioned to the lowest bidder. In this location even spatiality is diminished as the elderly are auctioned 'out of place' and 'out of sight' and 'out of smell' to a place where even the geographical location has its own sense of abjection as the last stop before death. The 'we' of Smith's set do not want to acknowledge their connection with the elderly and hence their own inevitable relation to mortality. Consequently, those who represent this abjection have been 'sloughed' from normal life and put away in homes, out of the way, in a sort of cultural 'dysmorphia'

These elderly people have a body which is gradually decaying. Money has been paid to temporarily allay this 'pollution' of ageing abjection and its proximity to death and to keep it at 'an acceptable level', but the threat is still there. In relation to this, Julia Kristeva notes how:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious change ... No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live (1982:3).

The notion of the 'one who confronts' the corpse as being 'upset' is also pertinent to the 'we' of Smith's set who are caught in the act of trying to remove those who are getting ever closer to death. They are merely trying to hide the signs of the encroachment of the corpse; trying to 'permanently thrust aside' the corpse 'in order to live'.

This concept of 'falling' towards death has already been considered in relation to Victoria Wood's female body, but here the 'smell of piss' suggests a more striking image of the inability to stop one's body from 'falling apart' or towards death. Smith explores ageing as a signifier of 'the corpse' whose smell is frightening, thus it is to be closeted off and kept away from the sentient body's sensory experiences: from sight, sound and smell. The duty of the old is to become invisible to all the senses.

In her Colchester set (2002) Smith also explores the notion of the elderly as self-abjecting in their own preoccupation with death. Smith points out that, 'More full of *joie de mort*, Betty (an elderly lady) brings her imagined imminent death into every conversation'. There is abject pleasure in the words '*joie de mort*', a sense of secretly enjoying one's symptoms which draws attention to Kristeva's notion of the ambivalence

associated with abjection. 'It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire ...' (1982:1). The death that Betty fears is also what she is 'fascinated' by. There is also a clear sense of inevitability when Betty adds, 'If you go to the shops can you get me some bags? 24 - 12 will see me out - if there's one left -' (Colchester Arts Centre, 2002). This short list of diminishing numbers suggests not only the encroachment of death, but also the sense of a willingness to go towards it, or perhaps more pertinently, a sense of being irrevocably fascinated by it. Indeed, Kristeva notes how 'it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us' (1982:4). This beckoning can also be seen within the hypnotic effect of the reversed order of numbers '24-12-1-'. It seems to draw us in and 'ends up engulfing us' in infinite oblivion.

The montage effect used by Smith is effective in building up a picture of the elderly as abject and although her images are mere sketches, they are drawn with a deft hand. Furthermore, within these sketches, Smith creates empathy for her characters rather than ridicule. The laughs of horror, particularly from females in the audience, can be heard clearly, perhaps revealing their recognition of how Smith's comedy interacts with contemporary British socio-cultural issues. This might be because these females have a close relationship with the liminal aspects of life such as birth and death. In the next set Smith explores the young.

Disordered systems

In another set Smith explores the position of children to highlight an interesting notion relating to Douglas' concept of order and disorder. She does this in relation to a disturbance of the linearity of ageing. The disorderliness highlighted here is more frightening than the encroachment of the corpse because it represents a complete disruption of system.

Smith: I think children are like the new old people. Life's complicated for children

nowadays. For a start I notice how ill children are - they're so ill. When I was a kid, you had one with asthma, two with glasses, and one fat kid and that was it - it's like they were government issue ...
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2002).

In seeing children as the 'new old people', Smith illustrates Douglas' notions of things being out of place and thus anomalous. Douglas observes that 'a rule of avoiding anomalous things affirms and strengthens the definitions to which they do not conform ... anomalous thing may be labelled dangerous' (1966:49). The danger highlighted in Smith's set is that the notion of a group of children as 'the new old people' is anomalous in being not easily classifiable; it does not conform to any definition. The accepted view of ageing is that it is a linear process, a movement from being young to being old. Douglas writes much on of organizing life into categories, however, she not only sees that some things remain outside of neat categories, but that they remain conspicuously so:

That which is negated is not thereby removed.
The rest of life, which does not tidily fit the
accepted categories, is still there and demands
attention (1966:202).

Smith's notion of these 'new old people' can certainly be said to disturb the 'accepted categories' of the orderliness of time and the linear movement of the ageing process. This new category offends by being ambiguous. How can people be simultaneously children and old?⁴⁶ It is the ambiguity of this which is troubling. Julia Kristeva argues on the same issue that, 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (Kristeva, 1982:4). It could be argued that Smith's reference to 'when I was a kid' highlights a time where 'identity, system, order' were not 'ambiguous' but

⁴⁶ There is a childhood disease known as *Progeria* in which children age very rapidly and look like an elderly person.

assured. This is in the sense that the ‘one with asthma, two with glasses’ were more easily categorized in relation to ‘borders, positions, rules’. Moreover, they were regulated by ‘rules’ in the sense that these childhood medical problems were ‘government issue’.

Smith moves from the general to the particular in the following imagined conversation where in the minutiae of everyday matters, the abjection of ‘children as the new old people’ is qualified in greater detail.

Smith: *How are you?*

New old person: Oh I mustn’t grumble. Run about?

No, I couldn’t run about. I got allergies, house mites.

Smith: *Ah dear me. Would you like a biscuit?*

New old person: I chew on a hobnob and I blow up like a ... still every day’s a bonus

(Colchester Arts Centre, 2002).

The words ‘I mustn’t grumble’ and ‘every day’s a bonus’ indicate that the physical decrepitude in Smith’s ‘children’ is now accompanied by the language and mindset of ‘old’ people such as the aforementioned ‘Betty’. Indeed, it appears that the children have become almost indistinguishable from old people in terms of their tone and attitude. This seems to confirm an observation made by Douglas, that anomalies can be ‘confronted ‘to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place’ (1966:48). However, Smith is also highlighting a disturbing aspect of life in twenty-first century Britain where it has often been suggested that some children could die before their parents.

Bodily abjection and horror: scatology

Another of Smith’s sets at Colchester Arts Centre (2002) explores abject bodily processes in relation to babies, with particular reference to the leaking of faecal matter, excrement. The set has two important points of reference, the first is the scatological rituals of clowns noted by Douglas

(1966) and Wilson (1979); the second relates to socio-cultural ideology and practice as noted by Wandor (1981/6). This set is ground-breaking in the way it engages with abjection rather than the more appealing aspects of a baby.⁴⁷

Smith: Well how big is this bloody baby? All of a sudden -
pause - the room seems to be filled with an ungodly stench -
It appears to be coming from the baby. Now you assume
what will happen is that at some point someone will pick
the baby up with tongs, rush it out the back and douse it
down with disinfectant ... Then initiate some vaccination
scheme for the entire area ... no, they unwrap the baby
girl, shrieking now, and you're vomiting ...
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2002).

Smith positions the phrase 'an ungodly stench' as the focal point of the joke and it seems to take on a life of its own to infect not just the 'room' but the whole auditorium, and then life in general. Smith's engagement with abjection here is again olfactory. (This was first demonstrated in her set on old people). Indeed, the audience is not fully aware of this abjection until it 'hits their nose' and forces a reaction of horror. Smith includes herself in this reaction as in the words 'and you're vomiting'. Kristeva also sees vomiting and repugnance as bodily responses to abject substances when she writes:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste or dung.
The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance,
the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away
from defilement, sewage and muck (1982:2).

The 'loathing' that Kristeva highlights, along with the attendant feeling of 'repugnance' has the same olfactory implications which are created in the 'retching' images of Smith's set.⁴⁸ However, for Kristeva, this reaction

⁴⁷ Meera Syal talked of there being new things in comedy that people never knew they could laugh at (With Bragg, 2003).

⁴⁸ Andrew Stott in his book *Comedy* makes reference to Rabelais' Book One and his depiction of how, when Gargantua's mother went into labour, midwives 'feeling underneath found some rather ill-smelling excrescences, which they thought was the child; but it was her fundament slipping out' (Rabelais, 1955:52) (2005:88).

turns her ‘away from defilement ...’ In the case of mothers of babies there is no such turning away; their involvement with abject substances occurs on a daily basis.

Smith effectively creates a connection between horror, laughter and guilt in the set discussed above. In this, she exemplifies advice given to comics by stand-up comic and coach, Judy Carter which suggests that:

Material cannot be emotionally neutral. Your subject has to disgust you, pain you, thrill you, because audiences do not respond to words, they respond to feelings ... (1989:18).

Not only do audiences respond to feelings, but they experience these feelings themselves. Thus, within the sounds of audience laughter and other vocalisations offered in response to the above set, there seem to be elements of ‘pain’, enjoyment, ‘disgust’ and horror.

However, the reference to ‘disinfectant’ rather insistently turns it into a bigger issue. Indeed, in Smith’s hope that ‘someone will pick the baby up with tongs’ she seems to treat the baby as if it carried the plague which is so great that fumigation is a crucial part of its eradication and the hope that someone will ‘initiate some vaccination scheme for the entire area’. This recalls Smith’s first set and the fear of the encroachment of abjection.

In dealing with the matter of this ‘ungodly stench’ of the baby’s faeces, Smith’s set has scatological aspects. Mary Douglas describes how excrement is temporarily located within sacred rituals. She refers to the Nyakyusa, who in their mourning rituals ‘sweep rubbish onto the mourners’ whilst ‘at all other times they avoid faeces and filth’ (1966/2008:218). Joke theoretician, C.P Wilson, also writing on the role of the clown in sacred rituals, notes that:

They eat the uneatable and drink the undrinkable and play with excrement and regress to childish

perversity (1979:90).

However, in Smith's set the excrement is not so much 'out of place' as all-pervading, thus it seemingly lacks the 'sacred' qualities belonging to community rituals and can only to be said to be part of the 'everyday'. Smith is also 'playing' with excrement in her set, but she subverts the role of the sacred clown firstly, by being female and secondly, in dealing with excrement in relation to babies. Her scatological set has socio-cultural implications in that abject substances are part of everyday experience for many females who are mothers, nurses and carers of babies and the elderly and thus, are involved with faecal matter on a daily basis. However, the 'repugnance' felt in such cases cannot completely 'protect' them in a Kristevan sense.

This set is ground-breaking in the way it highlights abjection rather than the agreeable aspects of the baby. The horror comes from an objectifying of the baby and from the need to use tongs to pick it up. In this, the emotions of disgust outweigh any maternal emotions towards the child, making Smith's description of the scene appear 'unfeminine'. The scatological elements of Smith's stand-up comedy set also recall other contemporary ground-breaking female performances relating to the abject substances related to childbirth. Performance artist Bobby Baker uses the physical language of food to explore abject bodily processes in her *Drawing on Mother's Experience* series (1988). She throws bright coloured liquidised food on to a white sheet to explore the abject substances related to giving birth and then rolls her body around in it. Jennifer Saunders' 1990's sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* was also ground-breaking in its depiction of abjection in relation to babies, but it is of a different kind. When noting that Sapphie, Edie's daughter is pregnant, the grotesque Patsy can hardly contain her repugnance.

Patsy: There's a funny stink in here. There's a little musty whiff of fecundity in the air ... In my day that

would have been douched out by morning let me tell
you.
(*Patsy thrusts the address of an abortion clinic to Sapphie.*)
Sapphie: I suppose you know I am twenty-five weeks.
You're too late!
(*Patsy points a knitting needle at Sapphie*)
(*Ab Fab: the story*, 2006).

The words 'the musty whiff of fecundity' evoke the same horror as Smith's baby smells and do have correlations with Kristeva's words. However, the reference here is conceptually applied to all pregnant females. Patsy sees the baby itself as the personification of abjection or pollution; she insists that it 'would have been douched out by morning' in her day. This correlates with Smith's image of the baby being 'doused down with disinfectant'. These two examples serve to reveal the deftness and cleverness with which Smith highlights the abject in her stand-up comedy, whilst simultaneously offering the everyday for reflection. This thesis suggests that such things remain an undeveloped area of stand-up comedy.

2.3 French and Saunders

French and Saunders created the first female double act in stand-up comedy in the 1980s at a time when there were few other females on the circuit. They were among the first females within Alternative Comedy, working at the *Comedy Store* and in *The Comic Strip* which opened in 1982. They also represented a new kind of female 'togetherness' which was deemed an important aspect of the second wave Women's Movement as was indicated by Micheline Wandor where it was considered 'important in developing both individual and political self-determination' (1981/6:14).

The theories exemplified by the stand-up comedy of this female double

act relate to the verbal and physical actions of the sacred clown, the falling body in slapstick. They also explore the notions of labels and categories as applied to the female body to interrogate and deconstruct notions of femininity and the female as spectacle. In this they engage with issues of attractiveness, glamour and fatness in relation to feminist and socio-cultural contexts as they play with the concept of the female body which is 'out of place'. The writings of Mary Douglas (1966), Mary Russo (1995), Anne Hole (2003) and Yvonne Tasker (1998) have particular relevance to the work of French and Saunders. Most references made are to their *Still Alive: the Farewell Tour* (2008) but Jennifer Saunders' sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous* (1990s) and Angus Deayton's television documentary *The History of Alternative Comedy* (1999) are also salient points of reference.

The comic female duo: ritual insults and verbal duels

French and Saunders use cross-talk in their acts in accordance with the traditions of other comic duos, but their act could also be described as an example of 'female joking relations'. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown explored 'joking relations' between different pre-industrial clans. He found that these relationships were ambiguous and 'simultaneously conjunctive and disjunctive' (In Wilson, 1979:88).⁴⁹ Indeed, it was noted that 'They exchanged witticisms with the pretence of hostility, or gross insult and obscenity with the pretence of amusement' (ibid, 89). However, Radcliffe-Brown's interest was in male relationships, or relationships between males and females; it did not include female to female relationships which are the focus of this thesis.

Mahadev Apte's 1985 study is another pertinent work. It also relates to pre-industrial groups but the emphasis is on 'female absence from many

⁴⁹ Alternative Comics generally worked on their own, but there were other comic entertainers who worked in pairs as was the case with Morecombe and Wise, and film comics Laurel and Hardy and Abbot and Costello.

forms of humour' such as 'slapstick, horseplay, verbal duels, ritual insults' that is 'the most aggressive and competitive forms of humour' (In Palmer, 1994:71). This thesis argues that these acts are precisely those used by Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders in the stand-up comedy of their *Still Alive* show (2008), and that as with other aspects of this show, they deconstruct them. Such matters engage with the traditions of stand-up comedy (and comedy per se) and they also draw attention to the difference between male and female physical comedy. They also interrogate views highlighted elsewhere in this thesis that stand-up comedy is too aggressive and boisterous for females (Stott, 2005:99).⁵⁰ They also raise the issue of verbal and physical violence as used against, and by females.

Verbal duels and bodily abjection

The 'verbal duels' highlighted in Apte's study are both 'aggressive' and 'competitive'. Nevertheless, such elements can be seen in the show *Still Alive* (2008) within a sketch discussing Dawn French's family. Both females use the increasingly emphatic repetition of words to block out the other's voice and give themselves greater vocal space as in French's constantly repeated and increasingly loud responses of 'I don't know. I don't know! I don't know!' What is more, these words are shouted over, and block out, the questions being asked by Saunders.

The two females heckle and interrupt each other, although there are frequent reversals of position. There are also verbal threats of violence. Saunders calls for audience support by complaining to them that French 'is showing off more than usual tonight because her family is in the audience'. French angrily replies, 'No, don't talk about my family'.

⁵⁰ Such matters are discussed in relation to the work of Lynne Parker's Funny Women organization in the first part of Chapter Four. This is in terms of exploring reasons for female absence from the stand-up comedy circuit.

Saunders retracts, shrugs her shoulders and pulls faces to enlist further audience sympathy. She then shouts in French's face, 'Your family. Your family! Your family!' and runs away. This 'verbal duel' is more about power and the dominating of 'vocal space' rather than about wit. Indeed, the lack of variation in the words used moves it away from the notion of the aggressive 'playing with words' suggested by Apte's study. Instead, it appears to be an insistent rejection of female solidarity. Micheline Wandor's book on theatre and sexual politics notes how the second wave of feminism put stress on developing 'solidarity' and 'sisterhood' (1981/6:13). Such concepts seem far removed from the above set.

In traditional slapstick invariably the verbal sparing becomes physical. For French and Saunders, the escalating hostility of the above culminates in the performance of a stylized fight, accompanied by verbal depictions of violence as French repeatedly says, 'Kick you. Punch you. Kick you. Punch you'. The two females chase each other back and forth across the stage trying to put these threats into action, but without making real physical contact. French throws herself onto the floor as if pushed there by her opponent, and still she carries on 'fighting'. What are the implications of this distanced stylized fighting which does not faithfully adhere to the slapstick tradition? Perhaps the answer lies in what conspicuously does not happen, that is, that the females do *not* use physical violence against each other. The simplicity of this draws attention to its opposite. They make no attempt to persuade the audience that they are hurting each other. Nevertheless, the argument ends in an escalation of verbal threats which are now made to the intimate orifices of the female body.

French: Don't ever mention my family again
or I'll kick your fanny so hard, it'll end
up in your face - Oh sorry, excuse me,
it already has (*Still Alive*, 2008).

There is a strong degree of aggression in the above and the effect of the

words ‘fanny’ and ‘face’ being connected by the force of the potential violent kick is more shocking, than playful. The threat seems particularly unseemly because coming from one female to another and it also goes against the notion of female togetherness previously mentioned. Threats of violence are unusual in female stand-up comedy, especially against another female.⁵¹ It is funny because we don’t believe their violence and see it as one-up(wo)manship. Female voices in the audience can be heard laughing in horror at French’s words. There is also the further implication of female ugliness in the image of ‘fanny’ which has ‘already’ ended up in Saunders’ ‘face’. The following section explores slapstick in terms of falling down, risk and danger.

The words used by French perhaps by default draw attention to the aggressive and sexual language that some men use to women. This recalls a sexist joke told by ‘old’ comic Max Miller and cited by Oliver Double about a man talking about his wife. ‘Today I did the ironing with her ... Tomorrow, I’m going to do the cooking with her ... Then on Saturday, I’m gonna wipe the floor with her’ (1997:64). The fact that violence has been inserted into a joke about everyday domestic acts is particularly shocking here.

Female slapstick

This female comic duo explore the body in spatial terms within their 2008 show *Still Alive* as they highlight notions of threat, violence and risk to the body in terms of ‘standing up’ and ‘falling down’. They do this by playing with traditional forms of male comedy such as slapstick. The physicality of slapstick is another element from which females were excluded according to Mahadev Apte’s study (1985). Indeed, as with verbal aggression, it is also quite unusual within contemporary female

⁵¹ However, as was indicated in the section on Smith, the sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*

comedy.⁵² However, within the show *Still Alive* (2008) the use of slapstick engages with issues relating to female spatiality, gesture and movement. It also draws attention notions of power, risk, threat and danger.

Slapstick is also about falling down and against things; the body against other bodies or the body against the world. In Stott's exploration of the subject, he suggests that:

... we are presented with the projected body that draws attention to its surface and movements, placed among a world of things over which it cannot claim superiority (2005:93).

The reference to 'the projected body that draws attention to its surfaces and movements' draws attention to the subject of 'body topography' expounded by C Prichard. It is the study of 'body surfaces' in relation to the 'spatial, verbal and ... physical dimensions of bodies' (In Hassard et al (eds), 2000:148). Slapstick potentially damages and spoils the integrity of the surface of the skin with bruises, cuts or scars. In the stylized fight mentioned above, French and Saunders avert any potential danger to their body and skin by ensuring that a distance is kept between them as they punch out or throw themselves on the floor.

Alongside the 'projected body' mentioned above, Stott also argues that slapstick involves an attack through 'bodily revolt or loss of self-control or from an external source that aims to dismantle his dignity' (2005:93). This fear of a 'loss of self-control' has frequently precluded females from such activities because it is considered unfeminine.⁵³ Stott's reference to the 'projected body that draws attention to its surfaces and movements' could certainly be said to be pertinent to the stylized fight which formed part of the previous set. There is also the suggestion that before falling, the

(1992-2001) abounded in graphic examples of verbal violence and threats,

⁵² As indicated on the next page, Jennifer Saunders did slapstick routines in her 1990s *Absolutely Fabulous* sitcom series.

⁵³ Such views have also been applied to female laughter as indicated in the second part

body flies into unknown space and thus takes risks. Mary Russo argues that ‘Stunt flying and similar activities’ are ‘grotesque performances’ and ‘risky activities’ which are associated with ‘high-risk’ groups and ‘risk-control’ (1995:20/1). With reference to the stylized fight which were mentioned earlier, it could be argued that the self-inflicted falls were about taking risks with the female body in action.

For French and Saunders in the show *Still Alive* (2008), falling is intentional and about the ability to recover. In *Ab fab: the story* (2006) the television documentary on the sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*, Saunders points out that her character (Edie) is a very clumsy person anyway, but that her falls are deliberate and are an effective comic device. She says, ‘You hurt yourself the second you get on the set and you’ve got ’em’. By this she means that she hurts herself coming downstairs on scooters or bikes. However, the pain is often real. She adds, ‘I end up hurting myself. I’ve hurt myself a lot.’ She and Joanna Lumley (Patsy) constantly alternate their movements between standing up, falling down, balancing and losing balance; their extremities seemingly out of control as they fall down stairs, into newly dug graves or they just fall down drunk. This certainly fits into Russo’s notion of taking risks, especially in view of the existence of real danger. Slapstick occurs in the next sketch also, but in a different way.

Females taking up space: the bench

Slapstick is also about the battle over space and if the first sketch was about ‘taking vocal space’, this next sketch from the *Still Alive* show (2008) relates to ‘fighting for physical space’. Here, the two comics alternately plead for, deny, steal, beg or refuse to give up space. This short, but important sketch draws attention to traditional models of

slapstick and goes beyond them.⁵⁴ On the bench, Dawn French sits with legs akimbo, in a ‘masculine’ stance, taking up the whole available space. Jennifer Saunders points to a little bit of space she wants to sit in. French responds to this by spreading herself into and over the desired space. Saunders points to the decreased space now available. In response, French takes a more horizontal position for greater coverage of the bench and uses her foot to push Saunders away. Power is exercised by acquiring and holding onto space. Moreover, when French seemingly concedes space as she rises from the bench, this is done only to push with the weight of her whole body in order to take up the remainder of Saunders’ existing space.⁵⁵

This female battle for space has important socio-cultural and feminist implications. Mary Russo makes reference to the female body in terms of ‘weightiness’ (1994:25) and she writes of females reclaiming space as a ‘freedom from oppressive bodily containment’ (ibid, 26). The notion of ‘weightiness’ certainly suggests the idea of being solidly in public space. Moreover, the ‘reclaiming of space’ for females is relevant both performatively and in socio-cultural terms where they are considered as taking up too much space, are denied public space or are permitted too little space to move in. In the above sketch, Dawn French once more can be seen to adopt both a ‘male stance’ and a female one. She does the first by denying space to her female stage partner, but she takes a strong female stance is displaying a whole range of physical movements and by demanding space for herself.

Stand-up comedian and presenter Sandi Toksvig makes some very pertinent points regarding male and female attitudes to spatiality in the following:

⁵⁴ Acts of domestic violence and rape frequently entail females being pushed down.

⁵⁵ The notion of taking up too much space because fat is explored later in this chapter with reference to Jo Brand.

One of the things men are generally able to do, that men are taught to do, is that they take up more space in life ... they take up more space vocally, they take up more space on the bus. Women tend to allow space for other women to come in all the time, and females are terribly generous; there are long pauses that allow people to get in (YouTube interview for *Every Woman* on 21st December, 2007).

The reference to how ‘men are taught’ to ‘take up more space in life’ suggests that space is always gendered. Here, Toksvig is emphasising a comparative position, but in the above sketch French not only aims to take up ‘more’ space, but to physically insist that *all* the space on the bench belongs to her. Toksvig’s second point that women allow space for other women is debatable and not to be reified.⁵⁶ This was not the case in the verbal duels highlighted earlier, although it must be said that French seemingly adopted a male stance in ‘taking up vocal space’. In the above two sketches French has taken far more than her ‘fair share of vocal and physical space’.

Slapstick as fighting over space

This thesis argues that there are many aspects of spatiality which highlight female abjection. There is comic physicality as the female bodies of French and Saunders perform the acts of standing up, balancing, falling down and playing on different planes. However, in the bench scene horizontality supersedes verticality. Moreover, as well as taking up or denying space, there are important references to female movement and gesture. As demonstrated by Mahadev Apte, slapstick is not only seen as relating to the male, but as excluding the female (In Palmer, 1994:71).

⁵⁶ Can it be argued that women allow space for other women? Lynne Parker’s Funny Women organization makes space for females to enter into the stand-up comedy arena as is discussed in part one of Chapter Four. However, some female stand up comics do not readily make space for other females to come into stand-up comedy as Parker also attests.

This implies that females who engage in it are unfeminine and ‘behaving badly’.

French is seemingly being ‘unfeminine’ in opening up the whole expanse of her body in order to keep her space, whilst Saunders behaves in a very ‘feminine’ manner in merely indicating a desire for space without taking it. The issue of female movement is explored by I M Young in her essay *Throwing Like a girl: a phenomenology of feminine body comportment, motility and spatiality in bodied spaces*, cited in Garner (1994). Indeed, her study of the ‘manner in which each sex projects his or her ‘being-in-the-world’ through movement’ (1994:201) tends to lead her to suggest that ‘women make less use of their bodies than men and move their body in an inhibited and discontinuous way and act in a limited physical space’ and ‘project an existential barrier between them and the space beyond them’ (ibid, 201). The words ‘inhibited’ and ‘discontinuous’ clearly do not describe French’s movements on the bench.

The element of gesture is equally important because also gendered. Jill Dolan’s book on female and performance cites Sande Zeig’s work regarding the semiotics of gesture.⁵⁷ As with I M Young’s consideration of movement, Sande Zeig advocates a female resistance to gendered notions of gesture. Zeig argues that women ‘must refuse to adopt the gestures of women, and must create and study other systems of gesture that borrow freely from both genders’ (1993:142). French clearly ‘refuses to adopt the gestures of women’ in the ‘bench sketch’ and uses the whole span of the horizontal plane available to her by opening wide her arms and legs, stretching her body beyond the norms expected of femininity. In this, she seems to exemplify Mary Russo’s notion that ‘The grotesque, particularly as a bodily category, emerges as a deviation from the norm’ (1994:11). It is this very ‘deviation from the norm’ which is of key importance to the work of French and Saunders, and indeed, to all the case-studies of this

⁵⁷ Sande Zeig’s essay ‘The Actor as Activator: Deconstructing Gender through Gesture’

thesis.

Ritual insults

Mahadev Apte (1985) notes that ‘ritual insults’ are another area of female exclusion. Ritual insults have always been part of comedy since ancient times and were used to ward off danger. There is a strong element of victimization in such insults which is often found within slapstick.

They can also be seen in much contemporary male stand-up comedy, although such things are unusual within female comedy. Ritual insults between the characters Patsy and Sapphie are a central part of Jennifer Saunders’ 1990s sitcom *Absolutely Fabulous*. This is highlighted in *Ab fab: the story* (2006) which draws attention to a particularly vitriolic exchange of words is made between Patsy and Sapphie:

Patsy: You little piece of dribble piss, you little bitch troll from hell.

Sapphie: You cesspot from hell, leeching the lifeblood out of everything it can get its filthy suckers into (2006).

This set goes beyond the ritual insults found in both ancient comedy and in contemporary male stand-up comedy, firstly, in being female to female.⁵⁸ The insults used in the *Still Alive show* (2008) are also female to female but they engage more readily with contemporary feminist issues in that initially at least, they seemed to lack the intention to insult. Interestingly, in the following French again adopts a bullying position which has traditionally been adopted by male stand-up comics, rather than females.

can be found in *Women and Performance Journal* 1 no 2 1985.

⁵⁸ The element of coercion in relation to female laughter is discussed in the second part of Chapter Four in relation to M Alison Kibler’s article *Gender Conflict and Coercion on A&E’s An Evening at the Improv* (1999).

In this sketch, French sets herself up as a ‘chocoholic’ and descends to the audience in search of those ‘harbouring’ chocolate. She stops at a group of women to say, ‘You look like a carrier, if you don’t mind my saying’. Her stance from the beginning is aggressive and bullying. She invades the audience space in the auditorium and the ‘personal’ space of one particular female in the audience insisting, ‘You’re not carrying any internally, are you?’ She then snatches the woman’s bag of confectionary and shouts, ‘I can’t believe sisters would betray me like that’. There is aggression, coercion and bullying within this sketch which certainly belies Apte’s observations of female exclusion from aggressive acts of comedy.

She then anatomizes the woman by saying, ‘There is something crawling in your hair. Did you know? It looks as if you have nits’. The female is thus, not only victimised as audience member, but exposed on camera, as ostensibly having things crawling in her hair. French becomes more intrusive as she highlights anatomical parts of the woman. She points to her cleavage, asking, ‘Do you mind if I just look down your front’. When the woman resists French shout, ‘Don’t be silly. Don’t be silly!’ These words are aggressive and coercive with the added insinuation that the female is lacking a ‘good sense of humour’ by not permitting herself to be turned into a spectacle.⁵⁹ As in earlier sketches, this also reveals an escalation of the victimization in that the surfaces of the female body are now being ‘exposed’ to the rest of the audience. When a rodent is shown in the woman’s cleavage on the screen, the woman displays many signs of agitation and embarrassment as she laughs, puts her hands over her face, looks to her friend for support and pulls up her blouse to cover her cleavage. The unwelcome position of a female comic making a spectacle of a female audience member is unusual in female stand-up comedy. French and Saunders are successful in exploring such matters. This set leads smoothly into other considerations of the female as spectacle in the *Still Alive* show (2008).

⁵⁹ The issue of the ‘good sense of humour’ in relation to the female and the female body

Body topography and the female body as spectacle

In the next few sections, the stand-up comedy of French and Saunders is examined in relation to the notion of the surfaces of the female body as spectacle. Firstly, the mere experience of being looked at when standing up alone to do stand-up comedy carries a sense of vulnerability and an element of risk, particularly for the female. In the *Still Alive* gig, French and Saunders explore this situation at the beginning of their show.

French: Look at all their expectant faces.
They're expecting that any minute you might
start to be funny. They can smell your fear.

Saunders: They are all looking at me now.
I don't like it. I don't like it!
I never look through the wall. I never see
their faces. They're all looking at me. I can't do it!

French: They've paid to look at you (*Barely Live*, 2008).

The sense of risk for these performers is heightened by 'the expectation that any minute you might start being funny'. This risk and the anxiety which is associated with it is a challenge for all comics, but it is particularly female-significant. Mary Russo suggests that:

Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure ... For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries (1994:53).

This thesis argues that for the female stand-up comic the vulnerability is greater than for the male comic because making a spectacle of your self risks the danger of exposure to personal criticism relating to one's body and the loss of what is deemed the boundaries of femininity. Saunders confirms her fear of the 'danger' of 'exposure' when she says, 'I never look through the wall. I never see their faces'. Dawn French indicates this

is discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Four.

sense of ‘danger’ further in suggesting to Saunders that the audience ‘can smell your fear’. Stand-up comic Tony Allen also draws attention to the fact that presenting a live performance involves ‘demolishing the fourth wall and acknowledging the audience’ (2002:26). This creates a sense of feeling naked.⁶⁰

Attractiveness and glamour

The notion of the spectacle also relates to being looked at in heterosexual terms which usually entails issues related to notions of attractiveness and glamour. French and Saunders explore such matters by drawing attention to the incongruity between some iconic females and their real, if unidealized, female corporeality. Such matters relate to Laura Mulvey’s notion of the gaze which sees looking as a male activity and being looked at as female ‘passivity’ (In van Zoonen, 1994:89). However, there is potential recovery of the female in the approach of French and Saunders in that it reveals a strong sense of self-agency.

Mary Ann Doane also sees the figure of the woman is ‘aligned with the spectacle, space or image, often in opposition to the linear flow of the plot’ (1987:6). The views of Mulvey and Doane relate specifically to film and therefore have only limited application to stand-up comedy. Indeed, this thesis argues that French and Saunders deliberately and conspicuously move towards such an opposition, aiming precisely to interfere with the ‘linear flow of the plot’. This thesis further argues that the elements of proximity and participation delimit the notion of the female comic as spectacle. Indeed, Margaret Rose in her book on the subject of parody highlights Mikhail Bakhtin’s point that ‘as a distanced image, a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close’

⁶⁰ The relationship between the female performer of stand-up comedy and her audience is explored in greater detail in the second part of Chapter Four.

(1993:157).⁶¹ ⁶² French and Saunders emphatically bring things closer to the audience.

There is a socio-cultural and historical preoccupation with attractiveness within highly specific parameters. Anne Hole (2003) engages with such matters when she explores the female as spectacle in her essay *Performing identity: Dawn French and the funny fat female body* (2003). However, her views are not entirely endorsed by this thesis. French and Saunders embrace risks by interrogating incongruous narratives of the body and by self-reflexively exposing the irregularities of their unidealized bodies which are seen by some as being outside the 'accepted' norms of feminine attractiveness. French also offers her ample body as a medium for comedy in its attractiveness, and thus as an interrogation of norms. Furthermore, both females offer their skin surface as a canvas on which are portrayed many incongruous images. Patrick Fuery in his book *New Developments in Film* notes that the skin is the defining surface of the body and, consequently, their subjectivities; it designates age, race, lifestyle, even class (2000:77).⁶³ However, when applied to French and Saunders this does not seem to be the case for the malleability of their skin as surface means that the audience can never be sure who they are looking at, as their bodies are temporarily 'written upon'. Jennifer Saunders' keaton-esque face is particularly, and infinitely malleable.

In their *Still Alive* show (2008) French and Saunders also play with notions of what constitutes feminine beauty and glamour and a 'normal' female body shape by inserting themselves into iconic and glamorous female film roles where their unidealized body is deemed 'out of place'.

⁶¹ French further disrupts the notion of the spectacle by invading the limited space of the audience in her role as a 'chocoholic' examined earlier.

⁶² Further consideration is made of the notion of the female as spectacle to her female audience in the second part of Chapter Four from the audience perspective. It is there rather than here because that chapter is investigating changing patterns and new trends regarding the female as audience of female stand-up comedy.

⁶³ Fuery's words were also used in connection with Linda Smith's work on elderly people. In both cases, the skin takes a secondary position in relation to other issues.

Such roles include the following parodies of Madonna and Catherine Zeta Jones.

Madonna

When Jennifer Saunders performs a version of Madonna, it is Saunders' bodily inflexibility which is being presented and on display, more so than her 'real' flesh'. She presents a caricature of the singer Madonna which is ungainly, inflexible and unfit, perhaps highlighting movement and spatiality over attractiveness. Her attire is imperfect in that she shows the gusset of her leggings. She also moves clumsily and without rhythm or energy. She falls over when merely removing her tracksuit bottom and hurts her back when trying to get down to the floor. She requires assistance in getting up as French tells her, 'You are too old for this.' Saunders asks, 'How can I be too old when I am the same age as Madonna?' The matter of age was raised earlier in this chapter in relation to Victoria Wood, but here it carries greater significance in its relation to reduced flexibility. However, Saunders needed to be particularly flexible in her own body in order to perform the awkwardness required for this misrepresentation of Madonna.

Saunders continues to play with the notion of spectacle and female movement by also bringing in elements related to the 'lower material body'. When she bends over to loosen her leotard, she farts. Indeed, she farts frequently in performing this Madonna role. What is the significance of this? Joke theorist Christie Davies argues that:

every fart is a tiny revolution ... And a rude reminder of our animal nature and the limits that exist of the degree of social and personal control that can be exercised over the body (1996:291).

'The reminder of our animal nature' is exactly what Saunders is working

towards in the above, in the sense of revealing the real body behind the spectacle. Her act of farting illustrates the fact that bodily functions can readily (or deliberately as in this case) intrude into performance. However, Saunders' final words are not about revolution or performance, but about a loss of personal control as she says, 'I think I've shat my pants'. The elements of 'revolution' and exceeding 'limits of social and personal control' in the above also have correlations with notions of the grotesque. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that 'The grotesque remains ambivalent - ugly and monstrous and hideous from the point of view of the ready-made and completed' (1984:25). Evidently, the creation of such ambivalence is the aim of Saunders in this sketch.

Saunders' parody of Madonna recalls the previous discussion on the subject of disorderly female gestures and movements which seems to be at the heart of much of this *Still Alive* show (2008). Furthermore, the reference to the 'limits' which relate to the 'social or personal control that can be exercised over the body' significantly relate back to the comments made by I M Young (In Garner, 1994) and Sande Zeig (In Dolan, 1993) regarding the need for female bodily movements to go beyond existing and accepted boundaries.⁶⁴

In drawing attention to the intrusion of real bodily functions and processes into performance, Saunders' sketch brings to mind another aspect of Anne Hole's essay with reference to the parodying of icons in relation to the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blonds* (1953) in series three of French and Saunders (2003:322). Hole argues that French and Saunders 'break the cinematic frame, allowing the audience to see both the 'real' fleshy bodies of the performers, and the cinematic trickery involved in presenting them as perfect spectacle' (ibid, 322). Hole also argues that by showing us 'their 'real' flesh squeezed and crushed into such spectacularly unrealistic costumes, they expose the clash between reality and spectacle' (ibid, 322).

⁶⁴ These essays were discussed earlier in this chapter.

The author of this thesis suggests that something more significant is happening in this series in that when French and Saunders assume the roles of these two icons, they successfully replicate their gestures and movement. It would seem that here performance skills outweigh any suggestions of an imperfect appearance. What is perhaps more important is that this film above all highlights the friendship which exists between the characters played by Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield and this supersedes their quests for romance. Thus, glamour cannot be seen as an isolated element.

Fatness

The issue female attractiveness in relation to female stand-up comedy is further explored in relation to Dawn French's size. However, it is significant that in the *Still Alive* tour French makes only brief reference to her fatness as indicated in the following:

Saunders: Are you pregnant?

French: No.

Saunders: What's that?

French: A big fat wobbly tummy
(2008).

The triple emphasis on the tummy's aberrance in the words 'big', 'fat' and 'wobbly' tends to offer a celebratory approach to French's fatness, rather than an abject one. Anne Hole, on the other hand, offers a less festive perspective is suggesting that whilst French:

appears to be at ease in her own fat female body, yet ... there remains an unease, a sense that despite her strong assertions that she is happy and sexy, she somehow feels her own success to be of a lower sort, because she has 'failed' in terms of her body and the 'ideal' (2003:319).

This thesis contests this view to suggest that there is no evidence to support these claims and argues that in *Still Alive* (2008) perception of size is superseded by an engagement with competent physicality. The ensuing consideration of French as another female icon will demonstrate this point.

Catherine Zeta Jones

Dawn French's portrayal of Zeta Jones in the *Still Alive* show (2008) engages with the notion of the spectacle, but it is accent, sexuality and narcissism which are actually keys to the role. An exaggerated Welsh accent slips into an American one and back again as she admits, 'Although I'm half American, I'm a hundred per cent Welsh.' In this, there is an effective deconstruction of the image that Zeta Jones has built up for the public. There is also a sense of assumed 'royalty' in calling her son 'Prince Douglas Thomas Spartacus' which equally effectively interrogates the ambition to become an icon. However, when 'Zeta Jones' talks about sex, she naturally reverts back to her Welsh roots as she uses the colloquialism 'let the dog see the rabbit'. In this sketch French displays not her own inadequacies, but those of the icon she is parodying. Indeed, French seems very glamorous in this role. Anne Hole thinks that the fat woman who tries for glamour 'throws away ... the opportunity to speak her unruliness' (2003:320) and that her ability to 'disrupt conventional feminine stereotypes is undermined' (ibid, 320). However, here French simultaneously exudes glamour and speaks 'unruliness' thus, it is argued that perceptions of fatness are superseded by clever characterization and by sexiness

Sexiness, strumpets and abjection

Hole also argues that ‘the stereotype of the funny fat lady is one with far more potential, and a far stronger voice, than the stereotype of sexy woman ...’ (2003:321). However, French does not fit the ‘stereotype’ of either the ‘funny fat lady’ or of the ‘sexy woman’ in the above, although she clearly associates (her own) female humour with both attractiveness and sexiness as she revealed when being interviewed by Alison Oddey for her book *Performing Women*.

Oddey: *What do you find attractive about a woman who is humorous?*

French: Everything ... I think it’s very sexy to be funny and I absolutely love it (2005:202).

This correlation between female attractiveness, sexiness and being ‘funny’ is highly pertinent in that it engages with female embodiment and taking up space. French’s description of herself as strumpet offers an even stronger image of sexuality and outrageousness.

French: Certainly people still think that if you are loud and a bit of a show-off, it’s very unfeminine. I remember in my teens being the girl who was never afraid of telling rude jokes

I was aware that my role in a group of girls was to be slightly badly behaved ... to use language in a different way, challenging or being a bit cheeky. I’m not all-out brazen, but I see the need to get in touch with the slightly bad girl in me (In Oddey, 2005:204).

The strumpet as ‘loud and a bit of a show-off’ disconnects itself from the feminine and attaches itself to the womanly. Importantly, such words also highlight two versions of taking up too much space, the first, vocally, the second, spatially. These notions are also included within the telling of ‘rude jokes’ and of being ‘slightly badly behaved’. However, there is some tentativeness in the qualifying adjectival words ‘not all-out’ and

‘slightly’ attached to the words ‘brazen’ and ‘bad girl’. This is not the ‘bad girl’ of Elaine Aston’s essay, which seems to be a singular position; here the strumpet enjoys being ‘in-relation-to’ to other women in its reference to ‘my role in a group of girls’. However, it does contain an element of resistance to any attempts at containment. Furthermore, it is conspicuous, transgressive and a catalyst for change as hinted in the words ‘to use language in a different way, challenging or being a bit cheeky’. Such things are readily seen in French’s stand-up comedy. The references to being ‘loud’ and a ‘bit of a show-off’ also suggest the taking up of ‘vocal and physical space’ which is so important in countering suggestions of female ‘disembodiment’.

In direct contrast to the above, the following examples of jokes seem to disregard the positive elements of the female as strumpet to highlight instead a negative female approach to female sexuality.

French: He came to me and he told me about your ...
Saunders: What?
French: Ok, he told me about your - clitoral frigidity.
(In Deayton, 1999)

The discussion of clitoral frigidity with a third party goes beyond the usual sexual or ‘dirty’ joke in relating to a female surface rather than an orifice, such as the vagina. In relation to this, joke theorist Jerry Palmer notes that:

dirty jokes incorporate a vision of women which corresponds to masculinity, for they assert the primacy of coitus, the universal availability of women, the subordination of women’s discourse to that of men, and portray women as an object (1994:72/73).

The above joke on ‘clitoral frigidity’ relates to more than ‘the universal availability of women’ and to more than the idea of the female ‘as an object’. However, it does engage with the notion of the ‘subordination of women’s discourse’ in the sense that it ‘feels’ like an infringement into

the female sense of her private self. In this, it is more shocking than the usual 'dirty' joke and its emphasis on penetration.

The word 'clitoris' was also used negatively by French and Saunders in relation to a Bolton Wanderers' Club show. They had decided to avoid using the word 'clitoris' in this performance because they were told 'it was risky when our entire audience was sixty plus'. French said, 'Old people must have a clitoris as well. What a horrible thought!' (In Deayton, 1999). This is both female censure of other females and an abjecting of the female body rather than the reclamation of an important 'female' word. Moreover, the negativity of this is not mitigated by French saying, 'and we decided that we absolutely had to say it (the word 'cunt'). We fought to say it and we got a bit militant about it.' There seem to be correlations here with the violence of the earlier reference to 'kicking the vagina' rather than with celebration. What is more, the attitudes in the above are antithetical to the highly vocal female audience reclamation of the word 'cunt' in Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1998).

Jennifer Saunders also indicates that she uses the word 'cunt' pejoratively and sees it as, 'the biggest taboo word but the funniest if you want a really big laugh. It's the word to introduce into a Knightsbridge routine' (In Deayton, 1999). Marxist comic Alexei Sayle admits that he used the word 'cunt' with 'relish' and that the more pressure that was put on him to drop it from his act, the more he used it (In Double, 1997:185). Sayle said, 'I became more of a resolute cunt-ist, really' (ibid, 185). This thesis argues that he was not reclaiming the word for females but using it pejoratively.

The stand-up comedy of French and Saunders in their *Still Alive* show (2008) can be seen to explore a number of areas relating to 'bodily abjection' and to the notion of 'embodiment'. Some sketches relate to the notion of females 'taking up vocal and physical space' whilst another interrogates the notion of 'being looked at through the eyes of others'.

2.4 Jo Brand and Jenny Éclair

The stand-up comedy of Jo Brand and Jenny Éclair can be placed within the tradition of the female grotesque as depicted by Mary Russo and Mikhail Bakhtin. Russo suggests that the grotesque has 'strong ties with the outrageous, the hilarious and the comic' (1994:6-7). Mikhail Bakhtin, on the other hand, sees that grotesque images 'remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed' (1984:25). Aesthetics is an important element to be discussed in relation to both Brand and Éclair.

Bakhtin also argues that 'The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, and an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming' (1984:24). This view of the grotesque is very pertinent to the stand-up comedy of Brand and Éclair. They both show aspects of the outrageous, the ambivalent and the contradictory and both deliberately make themselves 'monstrous' and 'hideous'.

The notions of 'Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style' (1984:303). They can also be seen within the stand-up comedy of Brand and Éclair, although they adopt the 'grotesque style' in different ways. Brand self-reflexively enlarges her body, whilst Éclair anatomizes hers to make it grotesque. The two females also transgress conspicuously within their stand-up comedy. They do this by seeming to adopt the style of 'old' comics, whilst actually subverting, or newly scripting these narratives. What is more, they also subvert readings of their stand-up comedy. In short, they 'behave badly' and thus have correlations with Russo's notion of grotesque as the unruly woman who transgresses norms (1994:11). They also break rules with impunity and exceed the limits of supposed female decorum. They further transgress by adopting an aggressive

attitude to everything in their stand-up comedy.

Dawn French applies the transgressive model of the strumpet to both females.

French: I think Jo Brand would be regarded as somebody who was a bit of a strumpet - a bit full of herself - and Jenny Éclair ... They are absolute champions to a lot of women ... However, there have always been those loud, brash, honest women to give us the edges of where we belong, which is great (In Oddey, 2005:204).

The idea of Jo Brand as ‘a bit full of herself’ is important in relating to the idea of the female ‘taking up her space’; whilst references to ‘loud, brash, honest women’ also highlight the taking up of vocal space.⁶⁵ The most significant reference in the above is to these female stand-up comics as ‘champions to a lot of women’ and as those who ‘give us the edges of where we belong’ for in these words the strumpet becomes synonymous with the notion of the grotesque female. The author of this thesis asked Brand about such matters in an email interview.

Blunden: It is thought by others, namely Dawn French and Alison Oddey, that in your comedy you stand up on behalf of other women. Do you do this deliberately or does it happen by default?

Brand: I have no idea. I think as a comic it’s important to be funny first and then slide your politics in afterwards if that is what you want to do. I do think women are worth supporting and they are still pretty marginalised these days in some ways (December, 2010).

Brand’s views will be seen to be echoed by many of the stand-up comic case-studies of this thesis in that being comic does precede being political, however, in practice the two are very closely interconnected. In Chapter One it was noted that alterative comics ‘did more than give comedy a conscience, they also made politics a legitimate subject of jokes’ (Double,

⁶⁵ Reference was made earlier in this chapter to Sandi Toksvig’s suggestions that this is a male characteristic and that spatiality is gendered.

1997:176). At that time it also seemed as if politics was the ‘object’ rather than the ‘subject’ of these jokes. The contemporary stand-up comedy arena offers a more effective political platform, especially for females.

Transgression: Brand’s emasculatory stand-up comedy sets

Brand transgresses conspicuously in the ‘emasculatory jokes’ of her *Barely Live* show in making male testicles the object and butt of her jokes.

Brand: I would recommend men with their testicles out - it would be fucking funny for a start. They would have to have their pants on and have one out on either side and make it look as if it’s attractive. I want to stand there with a woman friend and comment on his testicles. ‘Quite long, aren’t they? A bit hairy for me - very nodular’ (2003).

The above highlights not just elements of the ridiculous as in the phrase ‘have one out on either side’, but it is also humiliating as in the words ‘and make it look as if it’s attractive’. Females can be heard laughing over male laughter and the camera reveals animated female clapping. Such jokes have a precedent as is noted by joke theorist Jerry Palmer who notes that:

... where female groups were studied by female anthropologists (such as Mary Douglas) they saw in woman-only company vigorous satire directed at men, (especially their appearance, sexual behaviour and any specific male rituals or activities); obscene songs and dances (1994:71).

Brand’s set on testicles seems to relate to the notion of ‘vigorous satire’ pointed to in the above, with particular relevance to the words ‘(especially their appearance’. However, she it also goes beyond such matters in a number of significant ways. Firstly, because these jokes are performed not

among a 'women-only' group but before men in a mixed-gender audience, they are particularly risky in their transgression. Moreover, in terms of contemporary comedy, Brand is reversing the practice of male jokes which anatomise and denigrate females. Brand goes further by talking of making a spectacle of these testicles and having them on show like 'page-three' females have their breasts on show.

Brand: Men's testicles - why don't we do something useful to them. You can iron the wrinkles out of them.

There are so many more uses for men's testicles that we haven't come up with yet. My favourite personally, if you can break into a laboratory, is testing anti-wrinkle cream on them. If you can smooth out those buggers, You've got a good product on your hands (*Barely Live*, 2003)

There is a big taboo in the above, especially as the joke is emasculatory rather than sexual, as is revealed in the reference to 'doing something useful with them'. Moreover, the suggestion that 'You can iron the wrinkles in them' or test 'anti-wrinkle cream on them' to smooth them out is an affront to a sense of masculine identity. There is an absence of laughter from the men in the audience but much female laughter can be heard. This is in direct contrast to the hearty male laughter heard when Brand talks about her 'fatness'.

'Women's subjects' and the body in process

The position of 'women's subjects' in female stand-up comedy is an issue which is frequently debated. Dealing with personal subjects of any type entails an element of risk as has already previously been mentioned. Mary Douglas sees that 'risk perception depends on shared culture, not on individual psychology' and that 'risk is like taboo' (1966: xix). Such views are important when applied to Brand's work in relation to feminist theory and indeed, to her own feminist views. She is taking a risk in her

sets by engaging with other females to the exclusion of men.

Brand's stand-up comedy crosses boundaries on many fronts. In her *Barely Live* show (2003) she transgresses by dealing extensively with 'women's subjects' and with the 'female body in process' which are considered as having less importance than men's subjects. In his book *Comedy* Andrew Stott confirms this opinion noting that 'male topics are thought to be unbounded and therefore to have universal appeal' (2005:99). He also notes that women *only* discuss 'women's' themes - relationships, shopping, and menstruation, for example' (ibid, 99). Brand transgresses by doing precisely the things noted by Stott, but by subverting them. However, there are two important aspects to Brand's sets on these subjects: the first relates to the subject of menstruation which seemingly transgresses feminist preoccupations by seeming collusive; the second is that she uses attitude in her determination to deal with 'women's subjects' before a mixed-gender audience.

Brand frequently says, 'I have to talk about periods. It's in my contract.' Is she colluding with 'male-speak' by saying such words and is she thereby, perpetuating female abjection? Or is she being clever in seemingly down-playing the subject in order to explore it further? Both seem to be feasible. The author of this thesis recently encountered the word 'tamponizing' which also seems to be 'male-speak' and has derogatory implications in its trivializing tone. It seems a heavily value-laden word suggesting that females insist in bringing bodily matters into everything.

Menstruation involves the presence of 'abject substances'. Moreover, there is a history of abjection attached to menstruation in the form of taboos and rituals. Julia Kristeva views menstruation as a type of pollution and argues that:

polluting objects fall, schematically into two types: excremental and menstrual ... Menstrual blood ... stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference (1982:71).

The suggestion that menstrual blood is connected with abjection, pollution and danger, makes it an important area for consideration. Mary Douglas goes further than Kristeva in observing that rituals were needed to purify men from the contamination of the menstrual female. In the Lele group for example, she notes that a 'menstruating woman could not cook for her husband, or poke the fire, lest he fall ill' (1966:187). This seems to put the female into the category of the 'unclean'. The fact that menstruation has this specific female association with abjection makes it even more suitable as a subject for female stand-up comedy. However, Douglas also observes that tabooed or polluting elements were temporarily elevated in rituals in that 'religions often sacralise the very unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence' (1966:196).⁶⁶ However, it appears that whilst the 'excremental' finds its way into sacred rituals, the 'menstrual' remains for ever outside, seemingly too strong a taboo to bring into an important community activity.

In relation to these examples, it could be argued that female glibness about exploring the subject of 'periods' within their stand-up comedy suggests collusion with this notion of pollution. On the other hand, by not dealing with it, female comics are perhaps perpetuating the taboo. Jo Brand suggests that subject has been overdone but the author of this thesis argues that in this she is adopting a male perspective. Indeed, the present (male and female) approach to periods still seems to see it as abject, rather than as an important bodily process. Furthermore, there is still evidence of that females feel shame regarding their bodily processes. This is indicated in

⁶⁶ Excrement has been part of male comedy rituals since ancient times as previously indicated in Chapter One with reference to C P Wilson (1979:90).

the essay 'Exploring Embodiment: Women, Biology and Work' by Joanna Brewis and John Sinclair who observe 'a potential clash between women's biology and their public lives ...' (In Hassard et al, 2000:207). In relation to menstruation they refer to a respondent called Rachel told of how her periods started 'with a flood'. Her skirt was 'covered with blood' and she had no way of obtaining tampons. She said she had felt 'dirty, stupid, unclean ... and angry, angry that my body had got in the way ...' The words 'dirty', 'disgusting' and 'shame' are self-abjecting words used by the female respondents in relation to their own body. This sense of shame and dirtiness is highly pertinent to the notion of abjection.

Frances Gray in her book *Women and Laughter* also draws attention to a very pertinent point when she refers to a joke made by Alternative stand-up comedian Ben Elton. He said that 'if men menstruated, they 'would make it a subject for macho boasting' (1994:156). Elton's words raise many important issues relating to both the female body and to female stand-up comedy and these are discussed throughout this thesis. It is here argued that female bodily processes need to be accommodated, and addressed in female stand-up comedy, simply because they exist.

Indeed, this thesis argues that whilst it should not be compulsory for all females to explore menstruation in their stand-up comedy, it is still appropriate to explore its comic potential, particularly before a predominantly-female audience. Brand suggests as much herself when giving an internet interview to the author of this study.

Blunden: Do you think that menstruation and the menopause are now acceptable subjects to be dealt with in female stand-up comedy following Victoria Wood's set on her hysterectomy in 2008?

Brand: I think anything is acceptable to talk about, even though quite a lot of men don't want to hear about that stuff, but they've got male comics to listen to so that's ok (December, 2010).

Brand seems to agree with the few of this thesis that indeed ‘anything is acceptable to talk about’. Her reference to males having ‘male comics to listen to’ also seems to legitimize niche venues as a possibility for female stand-up comics.⁶⁷ The thesis argues that talking about menstruation is perhaps scorned perhaps because it lacks conviction. It is also important to perhaps consider why excrement should exist within comedy or sacred rituals but not menstruation. It would appear that some ‘abject substances’ are more abject than others and that these are the ones attached to the female.

‘Women’s subjects’ and feminist issues

The second aspect of Brand’s stand-up on ‘women’s subjects’ has a very definite feminist viewpoint and plenty of attitude in her *Barely Live* show (2003). Furthermore, she deals with these subjects by making comparisons with male behaviour:

Brand: We women get blamed for provoking
an attack. Contributory negligence. We go out.
We walk down the street. We own vaginas
(*Barely Live*, 2003).

This set also transgresses in dealing with female gynaecological matters before a mixed-gender audience.⁶⁸ She refers to the ‘capnurse’ when talking of female contraception such as the pill, the coil, the ‘sock thing’ - femidon, and the cap.’ She also talks about examining her cervix in the mirror and ending the set by revealing that this examination was performed in a hall of mirrors and in front of children. She also refers to smear tests and how ‘We don’t get to like our downstairs furniture.’ Many

⁶⁷ Lynne Parker’s Funny Women organization offers niche venues for female stand-up comics. The implications of this are discussed in greater detail in parts one and two of Chapter Four.

⁶⁸ This highlights the debate surrounding the notion of separate venues for female stand-up comedy and female audiences. This is discussed in the last chapter of this thesis with

women laugh at these jokes, but few men. Brand is clearly being outrageous here, seemingly aiming to embarrass the males in the audience. In addition, in this set of jokes she is not only exploring 'women's subjects' but also highlighting important issues related to the female body and the early detection of cervical cancer.⁶⁹ Brand's subjects are both personal and socio-politically significant. This position is supported by Dee Heddon's essay 'The Politics of the Personal' (In Aston and Harris (eds), 2007) which argues that 'The fact that, through drawing on personal experience, women were forging and practising new forms of performance was political'(2007:135).

However, with regard to the 'norms' of stand-up comedy, Brand's transgression is vital. In addition, she deals with such subjects to a mixed audience with a muted apology. She begins this set by saying, 'Men, I do hate to bore you with this - but I will.' The word 'bore' is value-laden in relation to gender issues. It suggests that these men will have to go elsewhere to find topics of greater importance - namely, 'male' topics. This seems to be in line with Andrew Stott's citations regarding the difference between male and female stand-up comedy (2005:99). There is also a tone of defiance in Brand's apology. The author of this thesis asked her about the 'outrageous' elements of her work and her desire to shock people.

Blunden: You have said often that you like your work to be outrageous and to shock. Who are the people you still want to shock and why?

Brand: They're the same old group I've always wanted to shock: complacent, right wing, misogynist, small minded, little Englanders, or any combination of the aforementioned (December, 2010).

Brand's work is more complex and contradictory than these words suggest

reference to the work of Lynne Parker's Funny Women organization.

⁶⁹ Funny Women campaigns and gives money to charities which work towards the

and furthermore, transgression often involves taking risks. Mary Russo sees the female grotesque as transgressive in being ‘only recognizable in relation to a norm and that exceeding the norm involves serious risk’ (1994:10). The ‘norm’ referred to by Russo seems to position the female as inactive or as not taking risks and not risking being aerial or vertical. She cites ‘Stunt flying as a ‘grotesque performance’ and one which is included among ‘risky activities’ (1994:20/1). Such an activity is grotesque because it moves the female beyond her usual spatial position.⁷⁰ Jo Brand could be said to offer ‘grotesque performance(s)’.

Child-rearing

Brand continues her discussion of ‘women’s subjects’ in the following. Her references to the problems of childbirth, to raising children and doing domestic chores help to explain why women might be absent from stand-up comedy.⁷¹ Childbirth was also under taboo according to Mary Douglas’ study. In Leviticus it was prescribed that women should be purified after childbirth before entering the temple (1966:64). Brand’s set here has less to do with ritual and much to do with feminism as she refers to watching the *Tweenies* and *Teletubbies*, cleaning up sick and poo, and crying a lot. She refers to the ‘house smelling of poo all the time.’ This does not have the scatological elements of Linda Smith’s work on babies but it does have a strong engagement with socio-cultural matters. Furthermore, as already stated, categorising the above as ‘women’s subjects’ tends to diminish female experience as less important and less universal than ‘men’s subjects’.

As already noted, Brand’s stand-up comedy is done with attitude. She

prevention of female cancers as is indicated in Chapter Four.

⁷⁰ Russo’s perspective moves beyond John Limon’s notion of abjection as verticality which is a purely phallic position (2000:4).

⁷¹ This area is also explored with reference to the work of Lynne Parker in Chapter Four.

applies this to domestic roles when she grumbles that ‘It should not be housewife-stroke-mother, it should be housewife, mother - fucking stroke, shouldn’t it!’ Attitudes such as this, confront taboos and incongruities, making conspicuous the imperfect and unideal. John Limon sees attitude as ‘abjection on a roll, abjection exuberant in its basic exhibitionism’ (2000:76). Limon’s words readily apply to Brand’s use of hyperbolism in the way she draws attention to her relationship with motherhood. Mary Russo also appears to support such ‘attitude’ when she refers to:

the historical association of the grotesque with women’s social movements - the ‘shrieking sisterhood’ of the suffragettes and the ‘bra-burners and harridans of the second wave’ (1994:14).

These perspectives are applicable to Brand’s work in that with reference to the above she could be said to represent both the ‘shrieking sisterhood’ and the ‘harridans’. Indeed, whilst seeming personal, Brand’s work has socio-cultural implications which are relevant to all women. The author raised such matters when interviewing Brand.

Blunden: Your *Barely Live* dvd (2003) clearly dealt with women’s issues. Do you think that feminism still has an important part to play in 21st century female stand-up comedy? If so, why?

Brand: I think feminism ebbs and flows like other areas of comedy. Of course it’s got a part to play although it doesn’t seem to be explicitly stated these days as anyone under the age of forty seems to be too embarrassed to say they are a feminist, because the tabloids have done such a good job of making feminists look ridiculous. All I say to women who seem to eschew feminism is, ‘So you think it’s ok to earn less than a bloke for the same job?’ and they don’t usually say yes (December, 2010).

Brand’s views very aptly connect with essays written by theatre practitioners in Aston and Harris’ book *Feminist Futures?* (2007). Here, a variety of postfeminist approaches is explored in relation to performance and to the original tenets of second wave feminism. In particular, the

essay 'Curious Feminists' by Leslie Hill and Helen Paris comments on how 'a lot of female theatre students state for the record to their classmates that they are NOT feminists' (2007:57). The essay also notes that 'There seems to be some automatic defence mechanism for younger women around saying that they aren't feminists, which is sad, I think' (ibid, 57). Such views suggest that discussions on feminism are far from being finished.

The grotesque

Another aspect which Brand highlights in her work is that the notion of the grotesque is connected to 'ugliness'. Mikhail Bakhtin posits the view that:

grotesque images remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is the aesthetics of the ready-made and completed (1984:25).⁷²

The key notion here is that the grotesque is seen 'ugly ... from the point of view of ... the ready-made and completed'. If reference is made back to Brand's attitude, it is precisely the 'ready-made' that she 'fights' by being as grotesque as possible. Indeed, the introductory material to Brand's *Barely Live* dvd (2003) plays with this notion as close-ups of her face in various 'grotesque' expressions are shown, each highlighting exaggerated red lips representing both the clown and the strumpet. The strumpet is seen as a positive female image but perhaps causing male anxiety. As demonstrated earlier, many of the strumpet's characteristics have correlations with notions of female 'ugliness' and the grotesque.

Brand seems to deliberately make her self grotesque in her *Barely Live* show (2003) by playing with notions of the 'ugly' wife as the butt of

⁷² This also relates to the earlier discussion on aesthetics raised in relation to Dawn French.

sexist jokes. When referring to herself as a 'liberal feminist', she says 'I'm one of these, but I look like one of the others - a radical separatist lesbian feminist'. She constantly aims to bring attention to being perceived as 'grotesque' by saying, 'I know - you're thinking - fat lesbian'. Oliver Double confirms that in the jokes of 'old' comedy 'the joke-wife was also hideously ugly' (1997:66).

She continues to play with the idea of being too ugly to get pregnant in the usual way and to play with the men in the audience by saying, 'It was obviously with a turkey-baster - or you get a gay friend to take you from behind. No, I actually managed to get myself a husband. I got him pissed and paid him a lot of money ...' (*Barely Live*, 2003). The implications are that she is so grotesque that no man would want to have sex with her and thus she must have had babies by artificial means. This contrasts her role as 'strumpet' and has an almost apologetic tone. The words 'fat lesbian' seem to doubly preclude her from receiving any positive heterosexual interest. However, Brand's unruliness derives from playing with such concepts. In this she would seem to comply with Anne Hole's notion that if the 'eye of 'heterosexual attractiveness' cannot bear to look at the fat female body, then the fat woman has a chance at identity-formation that is not based on performance and audience' (2003:316).

Fatness as excess in relation to the grotesque

Brand extends the notion of 'ugliness' to her size and seemingly offers herself at the butt of the joke. However, in her role as female grotesque, she also subverts this. Firstly, she readily fits the character of the carnival grotesque as excessive, gross and hyperbolic in her desire for food. Indeed, Mikhail Bakhtin indicates that 'Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body. The distinctive character of this body is its open unfinished nature, its interaction with the

world' (1984:281). However, this would seem only to apply to the male for Jerry Palmer refers to how Carnival was represented by 'the fat man on a barrel with hams hung around his neck' with Lent as 'a thin woman, seated on a chair, hung with fish' (Palmer 1994:49). Brand inverts and subverts this image by rejecting the role of the Lenten female, and offering a parody of herself by adopting the transvestite role of the 'fat man on a barrel'. In the *Barely Live* show (2003) when talking of being pregnant she says, 'My grandmother said, 'Remember, you're eating for two now.' I said, 'Fuck, I'm not cutting down'.

Many of Anne Hole's points about the 'funny fat female' in her essay on Dawn French seem more pertinent to Brand, who frequently and self-reflexively brings attention to her fatness and frequently thrusts her 'excessive' size out to the audience as a concept, as well as a materiality. This can be seen in the following two jokes. Firstly, Brand reassures three young men in the audience of the *Barely Live* show, 'Don't look so worried, I'm not going to fall on you'. Secondly, she tells the audience, 'I was blinding 14 year old boys, now I'm blinding much taller men' (2003). There is also a sense of potential threat within these two jokes and the implication that she might fall on the audience or blind the 'taller men'.

She also assigns the notion of the grotesque to the size of her breasts when referring to a 'Rigby and Pellow' assistant who 'looked at me and said, 'K2' - at least it wasn't Everest'.⁷³ The audience laugh also to dispel their fear of her and her size. The laughter is the laughter of release. Brand also indicates a self-awareness in her words. Comic actress, Athene Seyler promotes the view that:

In comedy you make yourself as uncomfortable as possible, larger than life or than the original... Comedy does not want to present a balanced whole but an exaggerated part (1943/1990:21).

⁷³ Rigby and Pellow are brassiere specialists.

Seyler's references to being 'larger than life' and 'an exaggerated part' have some correlations with the notions of ugliness posited by Aristotle and Stott (2005) as highlighted earlier in this section. However, Clive Barker gives a more positive image in suggesting that star quality 'is largely a question of taking up space. The star is 'larger than life' and 'the stage lights up when she appears' (1977/1989:142). It is not Brand's size which takes up space in the above, but her sense of embodiment.

Fatness: embodiment or disembodiment

The above quotes suggest that filling up space implies a strong sense of embodiment. However, fatness is also seen as 'taking up too much space', of being conspicuous in violating the boundaries of what is deemed appropriate female space. Yvonne Tasker in her book *Working Girls* notes that fat women are seen to somehow appropriate too much space in that fatness is seen as being 'between unwanted street visibility and social dismissability' (1998:168). Brand is seen to be the conspicuous female body, and her flesh disorderly, but she is not so easily dismissed. Anne Hole also sees that 'The fat female body is that mixture of disparate parts that overflows its allotted space ...' (2003:318). The notion of 'space' in these female views is significant because it raises the question of who allocates space. This matter was explored earlier in this chapter in relation to French and Saunders where according to Sandi Toksvig it is a socio-cultural norm that men are allocated more space than females.⁷⁴ However, Hole offers suggestions of recuperation in arguing that where:

the fat body ceases to exceed its space ... It loses the grotesque realism which its alignment with comedy allows it, and with the powers of the margins and excess (2003:321).

⁷⁴ Sandi Toksvig's views were expounded earlier in relation to French and Saunders.

Brand's body *does* 'exceed its space' as indicated above, and where she engages with the grotesque, she remains fully embodied. Nevertheless, there does appear to be some animosity against the space that Brand fills up. This is perhaps because she also takes up vocal space with her attitude and in the way she 'behaves badly'. Anne Hole sees the fat woman as 'Pseudo-male because she is big like a man, she takes up public space ...' (2003:318). However, Brand also seemingly apologises for her fatness in the following joke from her *Barely Live show*.

Brand: I'll move this out of the way because if I get behind it, you won't be able to see me, will you?
(*She moves the microphone stand.*)
I've got a psychological problem because I look in the mirror and think I'm anorexic. Anorexic people look in the mirror and think they look fat - so do I (2003).

Brand is seemingly self-abjecting in the above, especially in the words 'I look in the mirror and think I'm anorexic'. However, there is an ironic tone to her words. What is more, she is employing an effective comic device here in allowing men to laugh at her fatness before reversing the process and getting females to laugh at them in her emasculatory jokes.

Fatness and heckling

Brand seemingly uses the 'fat' joke to fight against the tradition of the fat female as the 'butt' of the joke. Oliver Double draws attention to some 'old' jokes about the fat female. These included: 'It's remarkable 'ow far the 'uman skin'll stretch without burstin'' and ''er stomach's got no mem'ry' (1997:67). Unfortunately, in the following, Brand reveals that such jokes have not disappeared from stand-up comedy:

Brand: I don't often do gigs in London because of the critics. No, it's ok if you like them saying

you've got a double chin and a rucksack on your back which turns out to be skin (*Barely Live*, 2003).

The reference to the 'rucksack' which turns out to be 'skin' is more subtle than the jokes Double cites, but more insidious. Many men can be heard laughing loudly at these words, although as noted earlier, their laughter diminishes when she anatomizes *them*. Brand certainly feels hurt and angry, but as has been noted, she also uses her size as a weapon against male heckling. In an interview for *The Independent on Sunday*, she said:

I knew as soon as I stepped on stage that my weight would be the issue, so in a way I had to have some armour to protect me. I think my comedy, the put-downs I do to hecklers are the accumulated bitterness of years of people feeling that it's perfectly acceptable to make a comment on your appearance when they don't even know you (May 29th 2009).

Brand's reference to 'some armour to protect me' highlights again the risks attached to females standing up doing comedy, especially where they do not fit the socio-cultural norm of how a female should look. The references to 'accumulated bitterness' suggests both vulnerability and anger regarding those who 'comment on your appearance'. Brand's answer to this is to use 'put-downs' but she gives further explanation of her position in the interview with the *Independent on Sunday*:

I just accepted that I had to take the flak from various arenas because of what I was doing – just try going on stage at a comedy club and being very, very fat ... but for other women as well ... I opted to go into a very male-dominated arena - but to attract all that viciousness, all that cruelty (29th May, 2009).

It appears that male heckling about her size is the risk that Brand takes to do stand-up comedy. This notion of risk occurs often in this thesis regarding aspects of the female body. Brand must talk about fatness because it is both a personal and a socio-cultural issue. Should she move beyond her own body's fatness? In answer, reference is made to an interview for Arts East where the interviewer says, 'You and Dawn

French have encouraged larger ladies to feel good about them selves' (2002:5). Thus, in spite of some male perceptions of Brand's size, she clearly exemplifies Mary Russo's notion of the 'visually and acoustically excessive body' of the female grotesque (1994:16).

The quality of Brand's stand-up comedy belies the simplicity of her sets, and yet she covers a wide spectrum of important bodily issues. She also offers her own body as part of her performance of the 'comic side of bodily abjection'.

1.5 Jenny Éclair: freak and ageing sexual grotesque

Jenny Éclair's style can be also be traced to the female grotesque as outlined in the iconic writings of Mary Russo (1994) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). Éclair transgresses self-reflexively by not only bringing attention to her orifices and protuberances, but in 'debasement' them in making them profane. In Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, orifices are seen as representing a two-way relationship between the body and the world. These include 'the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus the potbelly, the nose' (1984:26). In addition, Bakhtin argues that:

The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body, or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world (ibid, 26).

The references to 'open' 'apertures' as 'parts through which the body goes to meet the world' are particularly relevant to Éclair. However, by her own admission her orifices are 'dirty' - she has a 'dirty' mouth, tells 'dirty' jokes and clearly has a 'dirty' laugh.

Éclair: I've always had a bit of a dirty mouth ...
I hate it when men say we shouldn't drink.
Fuck, if we didn't get pissed then most of you
Would never get a shag (*Top Bitch* in Deayton, 1999).

Éclair seems proud of her 'bit of a dirty mouth' and there is attitude in her use of the words 'I hate it' regarding male approbation of female drinking in that she turns the attack on the males. The positioning of the word 'Fuck' is in defiant response to the suggestion of male control over female behaviour. Furthermore, the suggested need to 'get pissed' in order to have a 'shag' attacks male sexual prowess. This single joke offers a range of references to the orifices of the mouth and vagina and to speaking, being drunk and having sex.

The 'dirtiness' or 'profanity' of Éclair's set is found not merely in talking of such acts but in degrading them with the words 'fuck', 'pissed' and 'shagged'. Bakhtin argues that 'Degradation is the essential spirit of grotesque realism. That is lowering all that is high, spiritual, abstract' (1984:19). Éclair engages further with the notion of degradation in the following:

Éclair: The biggest criticism of female comedy is that we ghettoise our material - we're all very genitalia oriented and that sort of thing, because - let's face it - we are ruled by our hormones, so you tend to have tunnel vision down to your fanny, really (In Oddey, 2005:40).

Her point regarding accusations of being 'genitalia-oriented' is interesting when compared with the abundant male comedy which is oriented towards male genitalia as demonstrated in two television programmes on stand-up comedy, namely, Angus Deayton's *The History of Alternative Comedy* (1999) and *Britain's 100 Greatest Comedians* (2008). The implication that females were obsessed with sex is highlighted in her second joke about females being 'genitalia-oriented' and having a 'tunnel vision down to your fanny'. However, the key words in this joke are

actually the words, ‘because - let’s fact it we are ruled by hormones.’ This gives a different perspective on the joke, perhaps a more feminist perspective. Bakhtin’s term ‘degradation’ also means ‘to bury, to sow, to kill simultaneously, in order to bring something forth, something more and better’ (1984:21). The last part of this quote has correlations with the notion of ‘rehabilitation’ which seems to be at the centre of Éclair’s sets on the ‘profane’. As Victoria Wood demonstrated in her stand-up comedy, many things can go wrong for women around the pelvic area. In life these include: cervical cancer, hysterectomy, a prolapsed womb, bladder incontinence and excess bleeding. Therefore it is necessary for the female to be vigilant. This is the ‘less-than-comic side of bodily abjection’. Furthermore, where female stand-up comics are accused of supposedly ghettoising their material, it could be said that they are offering a resistance to disembodiment. Éclair openly brings attention to repudiated sexual female body parts, giving them a life of their own.

‘Dirty’ jokes often belong to the category of smut. Oliver Double in his book *Stand-up!* notes that ‘smutty jokes both dodged the censor and relied on censorship for their effect’ (1997:84). However, feminist, Helene Cixous goes further than this to suggest that that Freud saw obscene humour as being targeted by men at an absent woman (In Parkin, 1997:248). Cixous then seemingly counters this view by suggesting that ‘obscenity introduces the carnivalesque because vulgarity and impropriety are among the counter-norms of carnival’ (ibid, 249). Nevertheless, Éclair seems to adopt this carnivalesque attitude in her jokes which seem perhaps more like bawdy in having a more social and female aspect. Bawdy jokes interrogate the notion of ‘smut’ in that they seemingly embrace obscenity for its own sake, not as a tool for attacks on females. James Davidson, writing on the ancient Greek *hetaerae* in his book *Courtesans and Fishcakes* notes that ‘Collections of obscene witticisms by hetaera’ became ‘almost a subgenre of literature’ (1997:93). This would suggest that there is a precedent for the female to enjoy using obscenity herself,

rather than being the object of the obscene or rather ‘smutty’ jokes of others. However, although fragments of this collection exist, it is not clear if these females are the subject or object of these jokes.

Can it be said that this is how Éclair uses her jokes? This thesis argues that her references to the vagina and female sexuality are necessary in order to compensate for its connections with dirtiness in a misogynistic sense. Mary Russo suggests that ‘The female psyche may well identify with misogynistic revulsion against the female body and attempt to erase signs that mark her physically as feminine’ (1994:2). This is why Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (1998) continues to be important in rehabilitating the word ‘cunt’.

In being aligned with the profane, female sexuality is seen as shameful. The female mouth and vagina have been extensively censored as being the organs of pollution and abjection. This helps to explain why Jenny Éclair’s ‘dirty’ mouth, ‘dirty’ jokes and ‘dirty’ laugh are so important. John Limon cites Freud’s theory of civilization as being ‘based on a hatred of body smells as hatred of the abject, traceable to women’s sexuality. It begins with shame but proceeds in guilt’ (2000:97). Elements of shame and guilt were highlighted regarding Jo Brand’s work on menstruation. In the following, Vern and Bonnie Bullough draw attention to the notion of shame within Christian ideology in arguing that:

Christianity adopted almost intact the sex-hostile attitudes of the neo-Pythagoreans and the neo-Platonists. In sum, Christianity turned out to be a male-centred, sex-negative religion, with strong misogynistic tendencies and suspicions of female sexuality (1987:71).

It is clear from this that the smutty joke is both sex-negative and has ‘strong misogynistic tendencies’. Éclair’s jokes, on the other hand, are far from being ‘sex-negative’ but engage with her relationship with her body. Jenny Éclair’s ‘dirty’ laugh has similarities to her ‘dirty’ mouth and the

‘dirtiness’ of her jokes. Like female sexuality, female laughter also is associated with abject characteristics, but as suggested above, when the female is the subject of her own jokes, she counters the negativity of the term ‘dirtiness’. Having said that, it appears that in the following joke, Éclair quickly disconnects laughter from sexuality whilst simultaneously connecting the two together.

Éclair: The last thing I want in bed is a good laugh. If I want to laugh and come at the same time I’ll toss myself off with a glove puppet (*Top Bitch* in Deayton, 1999).

The connecting of laughter with a ‘glove puppet’ is quite straightforward, however, the notion that Éclair will get a laugh only by ‘tossing’ herself off with it has stronger implications of self-agency. In contrast, clearly her vagina does not laugh in the following where Éclair rants, ‘My daughter resents me. She resents me after what she did to my vagina. (*Pause*) Labia like spaniel’s ears’ (ibid, 1999). She conspiratorially leans over to the audience to say the last words. This is the ‘maternal’ vagina which rants more than it laughs.⁷⁵

Éclair as fishwife

Another important side of Éclair’s work involves both attitude and transgression in that her ‘dirty’ mouth spews profanities exemplifying the fishwife. However, in this she is also aligned with the grotesque in that Bakhtin sees oaths and curses as ‘a source of considerable importance for the grotesque concept of the body’ (1984:353). In addition, following the model of the fishwife, Éclair’s use of ‘billingsgate’ language like ‘pissed’ and ‘shag’ draw attention to Bakhtin’s view that ‘Profanities and oaths ... were excluded from the sphere of official speech because they broke its

⁷⁵ This brings to mind Eve Ensler’s show *The Vagina Monologues* where the vagina is given a character and the question is asked ‘If your vagina got dressed, what would it

norms; they were therefore transferred to the familiar sphere of the marketplace' (1984:17). The marketplace more than 'the sphere of official speech' creates a strong sense of community and the breaking of norms is important to the female grotesque.

The harridan

Éclair highlights a different sort of profanity and attitude as she adopts the role of the harridan. In this respect, Éclair's 'dirty' mouth and her use of profanities express her rage. Helene Cixous thinks 'the linking of humour and rage is strong among feminists' (In Parkin, 1997:259). Rage is an appropriate symbol for suppressed aggression grown large and taking up space, but it is difficult to know if it is collective or personal for Éclair.

In her *Top Bitch* performance Éclair reveals that somewhere along the line she transformed into this 'sort of raging harridan'. However, she also strongly suggests that this is a performance.

Éclair: Jenny Éclair is not totally me because
I'd be dead now if I lived by her rules 24 hours
a day (In Deayton, 1999).

People often don't know that there's a difference
between that person and myself, because they expect
me to be badly behaved all the time, which is rather
exhausting (In Deayton, 1999).

However, there is the hint that Éclair's rage has personal overtones. In one set of jokes she presents the harridan as she rants about the attractiveness of young women who don't need make-up. Firstly, she imitates them, then she berates them and finally, she tries to be like them, but with the aid of make-up.

wear?' (1998:15).

Young woman: I don't wear foundation, I just use a tinted moisturizer.

Another young woman: Oh, I don't wear mascara. I just use a little bit of Vaseline on the end of my lashes.

Éclair: Vaseline is for sex, you idiot child ... I like makeup. I like the way it makes my face look ten years younger than my neck
(*The Live Floor Show*, 2006).

Éclair's emotions here are turned outward rather than inward. She contorts her mouth and spits out her words as her rage is turned against younger females who don't need to wear make-up to look attractive and by implication, to attract men.

Éclair's rage splits off and is held in different parts of her body and she wears it like a symptom. Moreover, it becomes conspicuous through exaggerated and contorted bodily gestures. Her mouth is pulled into many grotesque shapes as words are spat out. She moves from her pelvis and bends in grotesque and disjointed ways which emanate from the hips and knees. She also exaggerates the movement of her mouth and moves in a jagged fashion, moving awkwardly as she delineates the grotesque content of her comedy. Her movements are aberrant and her body is distorted into abject shapes: when bending over to conspire with the audience, she twists her spine awkwardly. Her arms and hands are often held in positions of rigid deformity and her movements are jerky. This is the body consumed by rage. However, the second part of this set begins to hint at the reasons behind this rage - envy at lost youthfulness, depicted in the ageing neck and the need for make-up. Her rant is continued in the next joke where Éclair speaks to an imaginary boyfriend:

Éclair: What happened to your ex-girlfriend?

Man: She was too beautiful and sophisticated for me.

Éclair: Too beautiful was she? Too sophisticated?
(*ibid*, 2006).

Éclair flaps her arms like wings, laughs in a 'cackling' way and screws up

her face. Women can be seen and heard to laugh after Éclair's repetition of the word 'sophisticated'. Her jokes are both image-laden and compact. She talks in a high-pitched voice and contorts her face into grimaces of bitterness. Each of these gestures and movements has a 'jagged' aspect to them, but there is also the sense in which they represent a resistance to becoming invisible. However, it would appear that Éclair's rage is not that of the grotesque female on behalf of all females, but is about a lost youth and sense of attractiveness. This loss is explained by her words to Dawn French for *Girls Who Do Comedy*:

Éclair: When younger I looked in the mirror and thought I don't have to be funny, I can be one of those sexy girls for a bit. I've always had two sides to my personality, one is quite plain and funny, the other is a sex vixen. I realized that I didn't always have to be funny, I could be sexy for a while (2007).

Unlike Dawn French, Éclair disassociates the notion of being 'funny' from being 'one of those sexy girls'. It is also significant that this would only be for 'a bit' or 'for a while'. Furthermore, the reference to being 'plain and funny' correlates with traditional notions of female comics and it appears that for Éclair stand-up comedy is merely a compensation for losing this sense of being a 'sex vixen'. Anne Hole cites French as saying something similar: 'If I was alive [in Rubens' time] I wouldn't have to be a comedian to earn a living, I'd be celebrated as a fabulous model' (2003:320). Hole argues that 'The clear implication is that being a model is 'better' than being a comedian, an understanding that reinforces the contemporary notion of female success as dependent on physical/sexual desirability' (2003:320).⁷⁶ Éclair seems to exemplify both positions.

⁷⁶ This issue is discussed in greater detail in part one of Chapter Four in relation to Andi Osho, one of the new 'second-generation' stand-up comics.

The freak

To pursue points made regarding the loss of attractiveness, this thesis argues that Éclair can be seen to align herself with Russo's notion of the 'freak' when, as an older woman she self-reflexively draws attention to the protrusions on her ageing body. Russo notes that:

what is now called the freak moves from shame to pride: threatened with invisibility, the professional freak would often prefer the risk and blame associated with an intensely marked body and identity than be disregarded ... (1994:76).

These notions seem to apply to Éclair in terms of her transgression and the attitude with which she presents her body to her audience. The following seems to engage with a fear of 'invisibility'. Éclair tells her audience, 'I am 42. I am far too old for all of this. Look at the state of me.' She holds onto the microphone stand and leans forward conspiratorially as she brings attention to her ageing 'irregular' body. Her gestures are exaggerated. Russo also notes that 'Self-designated freaks pointed at themselves' (1994:75). This also seems to be applicable to Éclair in the following:

Éclair: I am thinking of having something done with these babies because they have started letting me down. The traitors. I call them Brutus and Judas. I think I'm getting a new set. Wouldn't it be fantastic to have really big knockers? 'Cos then when you take your bra off, right, your tits would fall down to your knees and take all the wrinkles out of your face (*The Live Floor Show*, 2006).

Within this set the words 'they have started letting me down' highlight the abjection of ageing which for the female takes her beyond heterosexual desirability. However, as Éclair points to each breast and names them 'Brutus' and 'Judas', she is essentially reversing Bakhtin's idea of debasement to elevate the importance of her breasts. This concept of elevation seems more in keeping with Russo's approach to the grotesque. Moreover, Mary Russo argues that '... the irregular and often incomplete

body of the freak resists the ordering of classical architecture as bodily metaphor ...' (1994:99). In the above joke, Éclair not only embraces such notions but proceeds to turn her breasts in freakish, but comic art.

Éclair: You see with age comes cunning. Everybody is having their boobs done ... Everyone's having silicon implants. Oh, they're a bit boring, aren't they, silicon implants. They're all vaguely the same breast-shape. Just for once they should make silicon implants the way they make those novelty jelly moulds. Then you could have a couple of rabbits running across your chest (*The Live Floor Show*, 2006).

There is a sense of the freak in wanting 'silicon implants' that are not 'breast-shape' but which look like 'a couple of rabbits running across your chest.' Indeed if technology is a tool, why not be playful when using it? Moreover, the playfulness here stops the breast from being connected either with motherhood or sexuality, but make them grotesque signs of female self-agency. Éclair becomes increasingly hyperbolic and excessive as she explores other aspects of female ageing, almost as if her breasts have a life of their own beyond being Éclair's bodily protuberances.

The following also highlights notions of Éclair as freak and grotesque. It is a review of Éclair's recent show *Because I forgot to get a pension* which explores female ageing. The reviewer Steve Bennett suggests that:

Éclair tackles (her advancing age) with the subtlety of a pantomime dame ... a loud, in-your-face grotesque, gurning, shrieking and overacting her way through one shrill observation after the next. Éclair has become a caricature of her already exaggerated self, a bleached-blonde pterodactyl squawking away. You're always aware she's performing, rather than just talking to you. (Chortle, downloaded 6.9).

Whilst it appears that Bennett meant the words 'loud' and 'in-your-face grotesque' to sound derogatory, they clearly highlight Éclair's elements of hyperbolicism and excess. In contrast, the words 'shrieking', 'shrill' and 'squawking' relate back to the notion of the harridan, and also to the

‘spectre of monstrous morality’ referred to by Carla Mazzio (In Hillman and Mazzio (eds), 1997:65). Such words also tend to depict the female as ‘unfeminine’ and by implication ‘out of place’. However, they are also words used by Mary Russo to describe the relationship between the grotesque and feminism and were previously applied to Jo Brand. Thus, inadvertently, Bennett has effectively offered a good summing up of the qualities Éclair performs as a contemporary female stand-up comic.

The case-studies of this chapter have demonstrated in their diversity how the numerous aspects of bodily abjection are performable as comic art. For the most part, it is the personal body which is being highlighted. However, in all cases, it is the socio-cultural and feminist implications of this which are of paramount importance. These ‘first-generation’ stand-up comics interrogate the notions of embodiment and disembodiment. Above all, they explore what it means to ‘look at themselves through the eyes of others’.

Chapter Three

British Transnational ‘Second-generation’ Female Stand-up comedy

Introduction

This chapter examines the twenty-first century work of ‘second-generation’ stand-up comics, who are also representatives of second-generation transnationals or ‘new citizens’ to use a term coined by Meenakshi Ponnuswami to describe those who were raised in diasporic space (2007:34). The group comprises: Meera Syal, Shazia Mirza, Gina Yashere and Shappi Khorsandi. Identificatory racial positional titles have not been offered in relation to these females because pre-fixing with the word ‘British’ or ‘Asian’ to them would be problematic. This is done with deference to Ali Rattansi’s article *On Being and Not Being Brown/Black-British* (2000) which highlights the complexities of identity that exist within British diasporic space. Thus, the cited case-studies of this chapter, each of whom came onto the stand-up comedy circuit at the end of the twentieth century, inevitably highlight a closer relationship with what it means to be British in a twenty-first century multi-racial and multi-cultural Britain. The specificity of this is discussed alongside their exploration of, and challenges to, socio-cultural practices and ideologies as seen within their performances of stand-up comedy. They will be left to identify their own position in relation to Britain, to their British audiences, and to the notion of ‘Britishness’.

Shazia Mirza was seen live at Colchester Arts Centre (2004) and in relation to on-line ‘blogs’ reviewing Mirza’s stand-up comedy. Gina Yashere was seen at live shows both at Colchester (2007) and at London’s Comedy Camp (2006). Use is also made of a digital recording of

Yashere's *Skinny Bitch* show. The stand-up comedy of Meera Syal (1999 and 2001) and Shappi Khorsandi (2007) work is seen via video and Youtube respectively. The work of these transnational female stand-up comics interrogates notions of cultural identity and belonging. In relation to this key issues discussed in this chapter include identity, integration and alienation along with notions of blurred cultural and racial boundaries.

If 'first-generation' female stand-up comics can be said to represent the body taking up *personal* space, 'second-generation' British transnational females represent the body taking up *cultural* space. Indeed, this thesis suggests that these females do not merely explore bodily abjection, but *are* the abject body which remembers and recounts collective abjection. Notions of bodily abjection are also explored with reference to the work of Mary Douglas (1966) and Julia Kristeva (1982). This position is explored also with specific reference to W.E.B. Dubois' notions of 'double-consciousness' and 'split vision' as expounded by Mel Watkins in his book *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy* (1994/9:26-27).

Before engaging with the stand-up comedy of the cited case-studies, it is important to ask why it has taken nearly fifty years for females from transnational groups to be represented in British stand-up comedy. The author of this thesis put this question to British Nigerian stand-up comic Andi Osho whose stand-up comedy is examined in Chapter Four.

Blunden: Are there many hidden reasons why there has been a fifty year absence of black female comics in Britain?

Osho: I don't think it's like an absence, maybe we just didn't know it was there (July, 2010).

The words 'maybe we just didn't know it was there' raises important issues which are also highlighted by Mel Watkins. He writes of alternative African-American black stand-up comedy which was to be found within

the 'tent' shows or 'black road' shows which existed as far back as the minstrelsy and vaudeville shows (1994/9:152). He also explores both the more recent alternative black circuit and contemporary black mainstream stand-up comedy of North America. Andi Osho also identifies a twenty-first century alternative black circuit in British stand-up comedy which is discussed in Chapter Four. Blunden put the question more specifically to Lynn Parker, the originator of the Funny Women organization.

Blunden: It seems as if there is a lack of British Afro-Caribbean female stand-up comics whilst Gina Yashere and Andi Osho represent British Nigerian female comics. Why is there this discrepancy?

Parker: It is related to demographics - there were black females in North America but our demographics were different in Britain. Culturally very different as closer to their African roots here in the UK - more distant in the US, so more culturally assimilated. Black women are still grappling with their identity in public life here in the UK (June, 2010).

Parker's observation that 'Black women are still grappling with their identity in public life here in the UK' is very pertinent to the discussions on identity offered in this thesis. It also has correlations with a very important question raised by Rattansi in her article, which is: 'Why, after fifty years of a growing and significant black and Asian presence in Britain, is it still so difficult to be black or Asian and British?' (2000:120). This thesis also seeks to address this question in relation to female stand-up comedy, both in this chapter and in Chapter Four. The above issues are explored with reference to the four following case-studies.

3.1 Meera Syal

Technically, Syal belongs to the group of 'first-generation' female comics in that she entered into stand-up comedy in the 1980s when great changes were occurring within British comedy and culture. However, she is a

‘second-generation’ transnational and the first British transnational female to perform on the contemporary stand-up arena. She was not part of the Alternative Comedy scene although she was engaging with the multi-racial and multi-cultural aspects of British society when other female comics were doing little on such themes. She was also spokesperson at the Funny Women’s *International Women’s Day* at the Hammersmith Palais (2007), almost holding the position of a ‘grand dame’.

In the following, reference is made to the televised show *Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley* (1999) written by Meera Syal, Richard Pinto, Sanjeev Basker and directed by Anil Gupta. This show was performed before a predominantly Asian audience. In addition, an examination is made of Syal’s character ‘Ummie’ from the show *The Kumars at number 42* (2001). These are explored in order to examine how Syal engages with the issue of bodily abjection in relation to diasporic space. In relation to this other important elements are examined which include: identity and stereotyping; the question of ‘hybridity’, and the relationship between multiple identities and the cultural female body.

Identity and the interrogation of stereotypes

The first important point relating to identity is highlighted by the show *Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley* (1999) which deconstructs the notion of the Asian transnational as a stereotype and butt of racist jokes to reveal the diversity of Indian identity and culture. On this matter, Meera Syal tells Angus Deayton in his television documentary *The History of Alternative Comedy*, ‘We wanted to tackle clichés about funny Indians with waggly heads quite early’ (1999). Such images had been prevalent for some time within British culture and were perpetuated by the mid-twentieth century British television sitcom *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum*. This programme ‘provided the novelty of stereotyped images of 1940s India’

where ‘the main Indian protagonist’ was being ‘played by a blacked-up Englishman’ (Husband in Powell and Paton (eds), 1988:160). It is misrepresentations highlighted by sitcoms such as this one which are being deconstructed in much of Syal’s performance work.

In relation to the above, another example of how the team interrogates stereotyping in *Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley* (1999) is found within the sketch *Going for an English*. This is more complex than the above example and explores how a nation’s identity is often defined by its food. This sketch has come to define the work of the *Goodness Gracious Me* team and its exploration of what it means to be a British Indian. Its purpose is to parody the British habit of ‘going for a curry’ and as such it engages with issues of assimilation, alienation and appropriation. Meera Syal tells Melvyn Bragg when interviewed for *The South Bank Show* that the piece became a classic.

It was so simple and so clever and we were so unapologetic.
It was another vein of comedy that had not been mined before ...
The British Asian public and general audience had whole new
stuff they could laugh at, that they didn’t know they could
laugh at (2003).

Syal’s words importantly counter the concerns that Watkins identifies surrounding the notion of ‘double-consciousness’ (1994/9:26). Indeed, there is self-confidence in the notion of being ‘unapologetic’ for offering a parody of what had become itself a parody, namely, ‘going for a curry’. The ‘butt’ of the joke has become the producer of the joke.

The above sketch is set in the ‘Mountbatten restaurant in downtown Mumbai’, the location itself indicating the ambivalence of the eating experience. Nina Wadia asks for a ‘toad in my hole’. There is laughter at her Freudian, and cultural slip since she meant to ask for the traditional British dish of sausages cooked in batter which is known as ‘toad-in-the-hole’ (1999). Syal stares at Wadia and then at the menu, repeatedly trying

to find this interesting new dish, whilst Sanjeev Basker exploits language as an unstable signifier by playing with the *double entendre* and repeating the request for a 'toad in *her* hole' and for them to 'make it extra large'. In another part of the sketch, the problem of ingesting something alien - and English, arises when Syal asks about a component of the meal.

Syal: What is your 'broosel sprouts'?

Jah-mes, the waiter: They're sprouts boiled until they're totally devoid of flavour or mineral content.

Syal: Ooh, I don't think my rectum can take that.

Nina Wadia: What about the steak and kidney pie?

Syal: Are you crazy? I had that once and it blocked me up for a week

(*Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley*, 1999).

In the above parody, Syal and Wadia are critiquing the English response to 'hot and spicy' foods and their effect on the digestive system. It would appear that the blandness of these typically English foods, which are 'boiled until they're totally devoid of flavour and mineral content', causes problems for the digestive systems of the Indian diners. Abjection here is about what goes into the body, as well as what issues from it. In his essay *Fables of the Belly in Early Modern England*, Michael Schoenfeldt writes of the stomach as 'the organ of assimilation and purgation' (1997:244). He notes that 'when dead animal and vegetable matter is ingested to sustain life' and 'when something alien is brought into the self and something alien is excreted' (ibid, 244). This sense of 'something alien brought into the self' is felt by Syal's body. Moreover, the problem is that the 'something alien' is seemingly not 'excreted'. The stomach as the organ of 'assimilation and purgation' here can be seen symbolically to represent socio-cultural concerns. The implication of this is that there is a bodily rejection by the (British) Indian body of that which represents white Britishness. In terms of performance, the gestures of dismissal and tones of disgust shown by Syal and Wadia are the outward manifestation

of this bodily repulsion and rejection.

In addition to the above, this sketch explores the appropriation of the food of what is seen as an abject people. Inherent in the act of 'going for a curry' is the unvoiced notion of a British acceptance of Indian food but not necessarily of Indian people. Christie Davies in his book *Ethnic Humour Around the World* highlights how food is used to abject others in that the eating habits of the other are seen as 'different, tabooed or inferior' (1996:276). However, there is the converse of Davies' point here in that the British version of the curry suggested in the above, is a generalised food, lacking the individuality of food from the different regions of Indian. It has become the essence, the stereotype, a facsimile of the original offered to British culture whilst the original maintains its integrity and variety. Indeed, the implication is that it is the English food which is inferior.

The sketch *Going for an English* also implies that the boundaries have already been breached and the curry assimilated into British culture. Indeed, the Indian curry has also become further 'adulterated' or rather 'hybridised' in having a new identity within what is called 'fusion' food. Meenakshi Ponnuswami in her essay on citizenship in relation to Asian-British performance refers to the 'remapping of the received contours of Britishness' (In Aston and Harris, 2007:36). In the cited sketch, food becomes one of those 'contours' which has been 'remapped'. Indeed, the curry is now recognized as a favourite British fayre along with 'fish and chips' and 'beef and Yorkshire pudding'. This was revealed at a banquet on June 19th 2009 celebrating British food for those returning from Iraq, when curried fish was offered as the second course. However, the British version of the curry as in 'going for a curry' would probably be unrecognizable to most Indian or Asian people, not least because it is often so 'anglicized' and as such lacks the individual culinary practices and traditions of different regions in India. The above would seem to

relate to the notion of ‘double-consciousness’ as explored by Watkins (1994/9:26). However, what is being revealed is not the ‘looking at oneself through the eyes of others’ but looking at their looking.

‘Hybridity’ and ‘split-vision’

The matter of identity is not straightforward for Meera Syal either, nor does it constitute an insurmountable problem, for she firmly establishes her position as a British Indian. In this, she seems to embrace the plurality of her position and therefore, could be said to go beyond Dubois’ notion of ‘double-consciousness’ to engage instead with his concept of ‘split vision’ as ‘the ability to see oneself and others from multiple perspectives’ (In Watkins 1994/9:27).⁷⁷ This position has correlations with the concept of ‘hybridity’ as expressed by Ramaswami Harindranath (In Cottle (ed), 2000:149ff). He argues that, ‘A simple, ethnically based British-Indian dichotomy will be unable to reflect this complexity ...’ (ibid, 161). Clearly, the overall concept of ‘hybridity’ is more than the sum of its parts.

This can be put to the test with reference to the *Punjabi Suit* sketch (In *Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley*, 1999) where Syal adopts the role of a British telephone sex-operator whilst being dressed in a Punjabi suit. In a Birmingham accent she tells her caller, ‘This is the first Punjabi adult pleasure line. You naughty boy!’ She also tells him that she is dressed in a ‘g-string’ and two bits of tinsel’. However, it is not until she reveals that she is wearing a Punjabi suit that the caller shows any sexual interest in her, going into ecstasy when she describes in detail its ‘panels’ and the polyester it is made from. Her performance also offers a range of diverse cultural semiotic signals in that she is able to create an image with her appearance, another with her voice and yet another with her actions. She

⁷⁷ It must be said that Dubois saw this as a negative state, but in this thesis it is seen as a

flicks over the pages of a magazine, picks her ears and wipes her fingers on Punjabi suit, whilst whispering ‘naughtily’ to her caller about the material of her outfit. Here, Syal displays not just a mix of British and Asian cultural aspects, but types within those cultures.

She also changes her accent and tone when adopting the role of a more subservient Indian woman, using a soft voice and deferential language. However, when the caller asks her if she has been cooking, she loses the some of the deference to say ‘Of course, I’ve been cooking. What else has a woman got to do all day? ... I’ve been cooking all your favourites.’ The members of this predominantly-Asian audience of this show laugh at the stereotypical image being portrayed here.⁷⁸ In this performance, Syal, is clearly adept both vocally and physically at exploring the numerous implications of inhabiting two cultures simultaneously

Syal firmly establishes her position when being interviewed by Melvyn Bragg for *The South Bank Show* in saying:

The back end of one culture was dying
And here was the birth of a new one of
which I was representative, you did
have this amazing mesh (2003).

The idea of the ‘birth’ of a new culture as a ‘mesh’ implies the ‘multiple ‘subject positions’ or ‘positional ties’ which Harindranath argues are ‘discursively mobilized through ‘new ethnicities’ and ‘hybrid cultures’ (In Cottle (ed), 2000:26). Indeed, he suggests that there is a ‘third culture’ which is a ‘hybrid between two national cultures’ (ibid, 27). Syal’s use of the qualifying word ‘amazing’ when attached to the word ‘mesh’ also seems to suggest that she is more than comfortable with this concept of a ‘third culture’. However, she does not see this as the diluting of either of

positive position of strength gained from being able to see from multiple perspectives.

⁷⁸ The notion of the ‘willing’ female cook has correlations with Debbie Isitt’s play *The Woman Who Cooked Her Husband* where the two wives compete to offer food to their husband in order to get his sexual attention.

the other two cultures, but as the ability to move freely among them, and between them.

In this Syal also represents one of Ponnuswami's 'new citizens' (In Aston and Harris (eds), 2007:34) who 'devises alternative ways to perform citizenship' (ibid, 35). However, this state is not without a sense of loss as Syal tells Melvyn Bragg:

Syal: I recognized that my path is not going to be my mother's. I love and admire her but we have to take steps in different directions; but there is a sense of loss in that. I see myself as a British Indian (2003).

Although she has established her citizenship position as a 'British Indian', Syal nevertheless feels a sense of loss at the path not chosen, and she clearly retains attachments to her familial place of origin. She further draws attention to the complexity of her position when talking to Bragg by referring to her father:

singing in a language I couldn't recognize but felt I could speak it in my sleep, in my dreams ... it was evocative of a country I had never visited but which sounded like the only home I had ever known. The songs made me realize that there was a corner of me that would not be forever England (2003).

The reference to 'a language I couldn't recognize' and a 'country I had never visited' suggests that her attachment to being Indian was less about geography and time, and more about memory and a sense of belonging to one's ancestry. This is confirmed by these images becoming part of her in her 'sleep and dreams'. Furthermore, there is a double sensual emphasis on this space which *sounded* like 'the only home I had ever known'. This is accompanied by a gap in her new sense of citizenship which was 'a corner of me that would not be forever England'.

Ali Rattansi notes a similar process of having multiple 'subject positions'

but goes further than Syal in equating England with ‘whiteness’ when she writes:

All evidence points to the desire on the part of young Asians to retain a variety of vestiges of their cultures of origin as a positive mark of difference, a refusal never to attempt to merge invisibly into a nebulous blob of ill-defined Britishness, and certainly not *Englishness*, which is definitely seen as forever a ‘white thing’ (2000:130).

Rattansi seems to see the characteristics of Britishness, Englishness, and whiteness as undesirable in the above. Moreover, her notion of merging ‘into a nebulous blob of ill-defined Britishness’ is a long way from what Harindranath and Syal see as ‘hybridity’. Indeed, her view suggests a seeking to hold onto a fragile identity, whilst Syal maintains a strong self-confidence in her identity which is able to accommodate both the cultures she inhabits. This can be detected in the following sections.

The female body: feminist theory, cultural and racial identity and sexuality

In the following, Syal’s work engages with the Asian/Indian female body from three different perspectives: as young and sexually attractive, as a cultural commodity and as ageing. Here she ranges between notions of traditional conservatism, youthful ‘hybridity’ and a new and seemingly, unlikely perspective of the ageing Asian female who finds a new and stronger personal identity within diasporic space.

In the first set taken from *Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley* (1999), Syal and Nina Wadia perform as a female double act adopting the personae of two young Asian females talking about their sexual attractiveness. In fact, they are British-Asian or Asian-British and the two females are dressed in westernized clothes. However, the sketch ‘borrows’

its contents from both cultures.

Syal: You see all them guys in the first forty-eight rows?
Yeah - all of them gagging for it, they are - in your dreams,
buddy.

Wadia: Well, you see all them blokes in the circle up there -
well they all winked at me at the same time.

Syal: In your dreams, high-up buddies.

Wadia: Yeah, our delicious bodies are not playthings for
your sordid minds

(Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley, 1999).

The two females are playing with the males in the audience whilst indicating, and performing, a high degree of confidence in their own sexual attractiveness. They see the men in the theatre as ‘gagging for it’ and by implication, for them. The colloquial phraseology used suggesting both an ease with the English language, and a reversal of the male and female positions. However, just as in a Bollywood film, the two females accept that the men are tempted by their ‘delicious bodies’ but do not invite them touch. The following dialogue continues this theme of being highly desirable.

Syal: Anyway, blokes are all the same.
They are like an octopus on Viagra.

Wadia: Well what is Viagra then?

Syal: Well, basically, the effect we
have on men in a little pill.

Wadia: Sometimes, I wish I was even
slightly ugly ... us gorgeous Asian babes
and our delicious bodies

(Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley, 1999).

There is a sense of knowingness here and an enjoyment of their female attractiveness. Their effect on men can be put into a ‘little pill’ of Viagra. There is great confidence in the words ‘I wish I was even slightly ugly’ and ‘us gorgeous Asian babes and our delicious bodies.’ The females flick their hair and keep looking at the audience to see who is looking at them. The pleasure in sexuality is also seen in the reference to ‘blokes being like an octopus on Viagra’ which seems to be welcomed as a means of

demonstrating their sexual appeal. This contrasts with the references to female sexuality explored by ‘first-generation’ stand-up comics examined in Chapter Two. Indeed, the positive view of female sexuality in the above sets has greater resonance with Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (1998). Here, Syal and Wadia portray two young females who are ‘hybridized’ in the sense of having the clothes and mannerisms of young British females, whilst having clear sense of being ‘gorgeous Asian babes’ who enjoy heterosexual attention but do not ‘interiorize’ male views. This recalls a citation in Anne Hole’s essay which argues that ‘beauty is defined as heterosexual attractiveness and women ‘interiorise’ the surveillance of an imagined male observer’ (2003:316).⁷⁹ However, it appears that in this case the young female characters played by Syal and Wadia are the ones who are imposing their sense of ‘gorgeousness’ onto their male audience.

Mothers

A contrasting position is shown in another set where the female duo perform as two Indian mothers who are competing with each other. The subject is their sons’ arranged marriage where the future wife is seen as a commodity which the ‘most extreme bidder’ acquires.

Syal: So, I see that your son is going to marry a white girl! (*She spits in disgust*).

Wadia: No, no, no, no. You shouldn’t believe all the gossip you hear down the pub.

Syal: My son has asked us to arrange a marriage to an Indian girl, from the same caste, from India. We’ve asked for a signed certificate of her virginity from her gynaecologist.

Wadia: My son is to marry a girl from her grandfather’s village in India, where the only man in a two hundred

⁷⁹ This quote was previously cited in relation to negative body image held by Victoria Wood. The ‘Asian babes’ of the set in question in the above clearly have a positive body image.

mile radius is a ninety-five year old leper and she must
send a signed photograph of her hymen
(*Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley*, 1999).

This sketch sends up the competition between these mothers as an example of a ridiculous cultural stereotype. The comedy derives from the escalation of desire for one-up(wo)manship. It represents a classic example of hyperbolism, exaggeration and excess which were seen by Mikhail Bakhtin as ‘fundamentals of the grotesque style’ (1984:303).

However, the sketch also draws attention to the notion of female complicity in the commodification of other females.⁸⁰ The reference to the hymen is comic, but it also indicates that this most fragile of female surfaces is no longer personal, but has enormous socio-cultural implications. Here, it is being written on and photographed as a doubly vouchsafed sign of ownership, both of the female and her reproductive powers.⁸¹ The notion of wanting to keep a separate Indian identity is apparent here, along with a desire to avoid diluting this identity by marriage. This highlights the resistance to Harindranath’s notion of ‘hybridity’ that Syal reveals in some of the characters in her film *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993). The following offers yet another contrasting picture of the Asian female.

The new ageing Asian female in diasporic space

Syal also examines the position of older Asian females when she adopts the character of Ummie in the television sitcom *The Kumars at no 42* (2001). Although Ummie is part of this space, her role corresponds more that of a comic in that she is there to disrupt the action. In this role, Syal plays with a triple abjection of the body, in being female, in being of

⁸⁰ Eve Ensler’s show *The Vagina Monologues* draws attention to various unpleasant practices done to female vaginas (1998).

⁸¹ Clitoral mutilation is another extreme ‘attack’ made on the female vaginal area.

ethnic origin and in being old. However, there is also a triple-vision in this role which permits potentiality. Although she is beyond marriage and beyond the practice of sexuality, Ummie manages to interrogate the notion of ageing sexuality. She is the ageing grandmother who does not appear to know that she *is*, or *should be*, beyond sexuality. Indeed, she resists such labelling which is revealed in the following. When television chat show host Michael Parkinson is being interviewed by Sanjeev Basker, Ummie continually interrupts the interview to speak to Parkinson as indicated in the following:

Ummie: Can you see anything sparkly down there?
It's a pleasure to have you on the show ...
You'll never know how much pleasure it is ...
I can make you feel more at home
(*The Kumars at number 42*, 2001).

Ummie's responses play with notions of politeness, ambiguity and sexual pleasure. The words 'I can make you feel more at home' are both welcoming and sexual. The invitation to Parkinson to look more closely at her body transgresses some more rigid dichotomies of old and young, and of male pursuit and female compliance. Ummie represents, and subverts, many of the aspects of the strumpet which Syal explores when being interviewed by Alison Oddey. The strumpet relates to both the confident sexual female and the wise, experienced older female.

Syal: I like the word, [strumpet] because it suggests a woman, who is not afraid of her dark side, whereas men think she is a bit sleazy, outspoken or flirty. I know it's used as an insult, but it is one of those words that has probably been reclaimed ... It is somebody who does not give a toss about how she is seen, and it's hard to do that. It's like 'witch' that was used of healers and midwives, or women that didn't marry so you can reclaim all these female insults if you go back far enough (In Oddey, 2005:86).

The male perspective is countered in the words 'men think she is a bit

sleazy, outspoken or flirty’ and how they use such words to ‘insult’. However, the strumpet also represents one who is ‘not afraid of her dark side.’ This is qualified in describing her as ‘somebody who does not give a toss about how she is seen’ certainly seems to be about self-agency with a rejection of the vulnerability and risk that goes with ‘making a spectacle of oneself’ that was highlighted by Mary Russo (1995:53). Syal speaks of the ‘strumpet’ as ‘one of those words being ‘reclaimed’ and associates it with the word ‘witch’. She also applies it to female ‘healers, midwives and women who didn’t marry’. Each of these images suggests an older woman who is wise and independent and who engages confidently with other women.

However, as already noted, Ummie subverts even the usual positive stereotypes of female ageing in that she does not represent the strumpet as a ‘healer’, but as someone who ‘behaves badly’ and who is ‘a bit sleazy, outspoken or flirty’. This is shown in a continuation of her conversation with Michael Parkinson in the following:

Ummie: You’re from Grimethorpe: the soot from the local mine clinging to your taut adolescent body - I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten what I was going to ask
(*The Kumars at number 42*, 2001).

Ummie plays with the ambiguity of language and ambivalence of the ageing body inviting sexual engagement. The words the ‘soot from the local mine clinging to your taut adolescent body’ highlight notions of masculine sensuality whilst also foregrounding Michael Parkinson as an ageing man with a less than taut body. This interrogates the notion of gender, sexuality and ageing by reversing the roles.

The character of Ummie has clearly derived from Syal’s awareness of ageing Indian that she has known as she indicates in the following:

Syal: I have always been attracted to older Indian women. I noticed grannies not just sitting in a corner waiting to get old but they had strengths, sense of humour, their own characters. They have this extraordinary wickedness. These women had been somebody's daughter, and mother and then as widows and then for the first time they can be themselves, that is as a rude funny matriarch and they fill their space. And boy they grab it. I am hugely attracted to them (With Bragg, 2003).⁸²

A strong sense of embodiment is interwoven into the new identity which Syal sees as being available to the 'older Indian woman'. Firstly, there is the image of 'older Indian women' as 'grannies' who are 'not just sitting in the corner waiting to get old'. Furthermore, Syal highlights their 'extraordinary wickedness'; this is partially revealed in the set involving Michael Parkinson, where Ummie seems to be 'toying' with him sexually. The words 'for the first time they can be themselves' are also important, for this role is beyond being in-relation-to others as wife, 'daughter' or 'mother' which are implicitly roles of duty and care. Here, there is a sense of freedom from constraint and of being able to now choose one's own identity. Such notions have correlations with the tenets of the Women's Liberation Movement and its encouragement for women '... to resist the assumption that women are only important in terms of their relationship with men ...' (In Wandor, 1981/6:13). However, it must be noted that elderly women were not so much excluded from the Women's Movement, as not notably included.

The new role portrayed by Syal as 'a rude funny matriarch' has the implications of wisdom and self-agency, alongside the sense of being freed from familial constraints. However, perhaps two of the most pertinent aspects in relation to this thesis include the fact that 'they fill up their space' and 'Boy, they grab it'. This certainly fit Syal's notion of the

⁸² This contrasts with issues about female ageing raised by Victoria Wood, Linda Smith and Jenny Éclair in Chapter Two.

strumpet and recalls discussions on females ‘taking up space’ in Chapter Two in relation to the work of Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders. Thus, Syal’s comic performances have drawn attention to some important elements in relation to cultural and bodily abjection. The work of Shazia Mirza in the next section creates a very different angle to the female as cultural body.

3.2 Shazia Mirza

Shazia Mirza is the first Muslim female to work on the British stand-up comedy circuit and her work clearly interrelates with twenty-first century socio-cultural practices and ideologies, both within diasporic and indigenous communities. However, she engages less with the geographical parameters of her position either regarding her distant familial home of Pakistan, or her British domain in Birmingham. She also only occasionally engages with notions of being ‘Asian’ or ‘brown’.⁸³ However, she does engage implicitly with the terms ‘British’ and ‘whiteness’ which Ali Rattansi argues are not seen as synonymous by other transnationals within British diasporic space (2000:130). This was also previously noted with regard to the work of Meera Syal.

The stand-up comedy sets analysed in this chapter reveal the complexity of her position as a British Muslim and a Muslim female within diasporic space where her body is the site of a contestation of ideology between two worlds. Both the content and the context of her work relate to bodily abjection in their relation to socio-cultural practice and ideology within a twenty-first century multi-cultural and multi-racial Britain.

⁸³ The reference to colour here highlights Ali Rattansi’s discussion of being Asian in her article *On Being and Not Being Brown/Black British* (2000).

Mirza is 'the already-inscribed' cultural body and as such she explores the bodily surfaces and orifices of this body. In doing this, her stand-up comedy reveals both the 'comic side of bodily abjection' and its 'not-so-comic' side. Resources used include Mirza's show at The Colchester Arts Centre (2004) together with various interviews and some 'blogged' reviews of her work taken from the Chortle comedy website.

'Double-consciousness' and an interrogation of racism

Mirza's stand-up comedy decidedly engages directly with the socio-cultural practices and ideologies of a twenty-first century multi-racial Britain and she uses her body as the focus of her jokes. She demonstrates that being a Pakistani Muslim female in Britain is problematic in that she must seek to satisfy two seemingly contradictory cultural ideologies and practices, those of the British indigenous population and those of various Muslim communities. As such, she engages in an interesting way with W. E. B. Dubois' notion of 'double-consciousness' as 'the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others' (In Watkins, 1994/9:26). Mirza offers herself as being 'abject' in both the British and Muslim cultures: the first is in being Muslim, the second is in being female. Indeed, as already noted, she plays with both the duality of her identity as a Pakistani Muslim female and as a British Muslim and with the implications of this in terms of relationships and with regard to notions of spatiality. However, her position is different from Meera Syal's in that Mirza's comedy interrogates the ideology and practices of both the cultures she inhabits. Indeed, she highlights her position as being not just within British society, but among British whites. In this, her work engages with a number of arguments offered by Ali Rattansi (2000) as will be seen in the following.

The complexity of her position is demonstrated in the following sets on

racism. In the following joke she explores the notion of being an Asian woman within British society when she refers to having been invited to Buckingham palace to celebrate her work.

Mirza: They've never seen an Asian women go to Buckingham Palace without a mop and bucket in their hand (Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

Here, Mirza effectively highlights how racism is interwoven with sexism. The reference to the 'mop and bucket in their hand' is important in that what women have in their hands potentially defines them as both domestic and subservient. This becomes both sexist and racist when related to 'an Asian woman'. Here, Mirza interrogates not the notion of 'seeing oneself through the eyes of others' (Watkins, 1994/9:26) but the actual 'looking' of these 'others' itself. In Chapter One it was noted that transnational females were not particularly singled out as the object of 'old' racist jokes although they were implicated in their generic racism. Oliver Double gives examples of racist jokes in his book on stand-up comedy (1997). Most of these jokes are generic and do not deal with the female as butt of racist jokes. However, one joke is the exception in that its subject is 'Iraqi women' who are deemed to be 'so ugly they have to get their vibrator drunk before they can use it (ibid, 117). This is a strong attack which not only insults Iraqi women culturally, but denigrates them by making the joke sexual. Equally importantly, the originator of the joke would undoubtedly, have little knowledge of Iraqi females, either with or without the traditional burqa.

In Mirza's joke, it is particularly interesting that the object of this joke is not so much the 'Asian woman with a 'mop and bucket in their hand' but the young Asian woman who has slipped beyond this category to the position of being invited into Buckingham Palace for her achievements. In a continuation of the above set, Mirza 'recalls' a conversation between herself and Prince Philip.

Prince Philip: Do you have any funny stories?

Mirza: No, but I have a few racist jokes. Let's have a competition (Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).⁸⁴

The reference to Prince Philip and to Buckingham Palace as the 'highest echelon of the British class system' gives the clearest example of British conservatism. This part of the joke suggests that British racism is woven into the fabric of society from the 'top' downwards. Christie Davies writing on ethnic humour indicates how racial anxiety causes different groups to make jokes about others whom they fear. He notes how, 'People can place this despised and feared quality at a distance and gain reassurance they are members of their own group and not themselves stupid or irrational' (In Powell and Paton, 1988:3). Do the words used by Davies' apply to Prince Philip or does his joke confirm the notion of irrationality? Certainly, the Prince has been reported as allegedly making racist comments. Furthermore, the implied criticism of the Queen's consort and the invitation to 'have a competition' suggests a transgression of hierarchical boundaries but Mirza is not afraid to take such risks, indeed, she takes many within her set at Colchester. With regard to performance, the idea of the competition between the Asian cleaner and Prince Philip as the Queen's husband has much potential but needs more visual imagery for it to be more effective.

Mirza explores racism from different perspectives when she says, 'As we know all white women are nothing more than filthy whores' (ibid, 2004). This joke seems to be taking both a transnational and a male perspective and is unusual in being told by a female about other females. However, it is not what it seems. The words 'all white women' and 'filthy whores' are hyperbolic and draw attention the racism inherent in classifying all people within one stereotype. However, as with other examples of Mirza's work,

⁸⁴ This has correlations with African American 'Moms' Mabley's joke about being at the White House and talking to Ike Eisenhower. 'I was standin' on the White House lawn, talking to Ike the other day ... I asked a simple question. I said, 'Listen, boy ...'

the ‘insult’ in this joke is complex and relates to the traditions of comedy rather than to socio-cultural perspectives. As discussed in Chapter Two, insults belong to ancient comic traditions but are seldom used by the case-studies of this thesis.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, this joke is used before a white audience at Colchester Arts Centre. Are such jokes received badly? No. In fact, the author of this thesis was audience to this live show, and can verify that no-one took offence. However, ‘blogged’ responses to her shows on Mirza’s website highlight accusations of racism. The respondent called ‘Marie’ suggests of Mirza that ‘her contempt for the all-white audience was barely contained, and her whole act was viewed by her cold attitude’ (2.5.05). The author of this thesis suggests that such ‘blogs’ have perhaps missed the point that Mirza here is exploring the notion that racist comments tend to generalize, categorize and catastrophize.

The complexity of the above joke is strengthened by being immediately juxtaposed with a parallel attack on Muslim women.

Mirza: The women who wore burqas all shared the same bus pass. They wear burqas because men are attached to hair. I talk to a Muslim woman through the letter box to see how she likes it (Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

Some interesting elements are revealed here: firstly, this attack on Muslim females is by another Muslim female. The joke also seems to adopt a ‘white’ British position as in the words ‘to see how she likes it’. This is in contrast to the earlier distancing of herself from the white women who were ‘all whores’.⁸⁶ Moreover, the notion of being able to ‘share the same bus pass’ suggests that the burqa can hide identity. Even though this joke was made in 2004, it seems to pre-empt more recent political issues regarding the wearing of the burqa within British (and western society). As noted earlier, the racist jokes of ‘old’ comedy were generic and did not

(Unterbrink, 1987:393).

⁸⁵ The work of Jo Brand, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders as discussed in Chapter Two would suggest otherwise.

specify the female as the butt of the joke. However, here Mirza's two jokes indicate a female attack on other females. The above joke also has correlations with the one cited about Iraqi females noted by Oliver Double (1997:117). The implication deriving from this is that Muslim women's attire became part of racist jokes as a result of Britain's engagement in the Gulf war as a visual symbol of difference. However, Mirza's jokes help to resist stereotyping by offering a number of different positions.

These positions are spatially significant. Indeed, there is an element of distancing in the words 'I talk to a Muslim woman through the letter box'. Indeed spatiality is highlighted in all three jokes and particularly relates to diasporic space. The above jokes also suggest that Mirza constantly shifts her position in that she explores issues from the diasporic position in one joke and then she moves to examine the indigenous position in the next. This has resonance with Meenakshi Ponnuswami's essay on 'Asian-British' performance where she supports Avtar Brah's understanding that, 'The diasporic space is the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native*' (2007:34). It also engages with Dubois' notion of 'split vision' as 'the ability ... to see oneself and others from multiple perspectives' (In Watkins, 2000:27). However, these concepts have more negative implications in Mirza's stand-up comedy than was the case for Meera Syal. Mirza *is* seen 'through the eyes of others' as previously indicated, in having a simultaneously multiple cultural identity. Moreover, she never fully reveals her own individual position, seeming only to adopt these multiple seemingly incongruous viewpoints.

The above set is interesting, although not particularly funny in its present state. Mirza admits herself that she is not always funny and her words often seem rude and abusive. One unnamed 'blogger' confirms this when writing:

⁸⁶ Mirza is herself called a prostitute as indicated later in this section.

Her much-vaunted status as Britain's first female Muslim comic gives her a unique standpoint ... But it's all barked out with an aloof, contemptuous air with no warmth towards the audience, no natural rhythm of joke or storytelling, and little sense of fun ... Material-wise, she's evolving past reliance on stereotypes and jokes about burkhas to explore ideas more personal to her, though she still feels uncomfortable opening up (Chortle website: downloaded 3rd April, 2006).

Whilst there is some truth to the above 'blog' in its reference to the lack of 'storytelling' in Mirza's jokes, it also appears to misconstrue Mirza's ability to compact so much into so few words. The reference to 'past reliance on stereotypes and jokes about burkhas' indicates that the Muslim culture is an evolving one. However, Mirza is not so much highlighting stereotypes in the above jokes as engaging with a variety of attitudes which clearly she sees as still prevalent in British society. Ali Rattansi confirms such matters when she argues that:

There is no shortage of derogatory comment on Islam and British Muslims by influential public figures in the UK ... Such attitudes rarely recognize that there is no singular 'Muslim' identity in Britain (2000:130).

As often highlighted within this thesis, the case-studies attempt to open up debate and to suggest plurality and diversity in place of monolithic perspectives. Moreover, Mirza's jokes have a tendency to engage with 'big' subjects and concepts, although it is frequently difficult to know what represents her personal opinion and what she is 'sending up' in her work. Interestingly, she was in danger of offering herself as an example of a stereotype until she changed her approach. Oliver Double refers to Mirza's change in his book *Getting the Joke*.

Mirza: now I feel as though there's so much in my life that I could talk about, and the way to do it is not by telling gags, but by telling my experiences (2005:71).

Nevertheless, Mirza's sets thus far do not appear to be personal but rather they seem to explore a range of ideological positions. The following draws attention to what appears to be racism within a familial situation in terms of the desire for racial purity within marriage.

Mirza: Mum said 'if you ever go out with a black man, I'll burn you'

Mirza: Good then I'll be black
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

Is this merely a 'send-up' or does it highlight the extremes the mother would go to prevent a mixed-race relationship for her daughter? This joke goes beyond the Pakistani-white dichotomy, to include Pakistani anxiety about other transnational groups. It seemingly highlights an issue which is particularly relevant to transnational groups in diasporic space because of their fear of losing their own identity. Sustaining racial identity in the diasporic space is at the heart of this, for there is a fear of loss of boundaries. Karen Ross raises a similar point in her essay 'In Whose Image? Tv Criticism and Black Minority Viewers' when she writes:

Members of the Hindu and Sikh groups in the study were especially critical of the way in which the boundaries between different South Asian cultures was constantly blurred if not rendered completely invisible (In Cottle (ed), 2000:144).

Ross' study relates to televised representations of the named groups, but the implication is that such views as those indicated above have more widespread application in relation to the issue of diversity. Mirza's jokes constantly seem to 'send up' a lack of understanding in relation to the importance of diversity. Such thoughts also recall Rattansi's reference to the desire of many transnationals to marry within their original cultural groupings, although this relates to young black women, who 'would prefer to have black partners' (2000:126). This point is interesting statistically

but its application might be limited with regard to Pakistani Muslims where religion would seem to supersede other racial factors of difference.

Alongside this, Mirza sends up stereotypical views of Islam and erroneous readings of the position of Muslim females. This approach has obvious correlations with Rattansi's essay where she dispels the myth of a universal Muslim to refer to 'differentiations 'deriving from Indian and Pakistani regional, caste and descent group affiliations ... and a complexity in relation to contemporary global Islamic politics (2000:130). Mirza does not give much detail about her origins in her stand-up comedy, except to reveal that she is of Pakistani descent. However, she does inhabit a number of positions from which she can interrogate both the British white culture and the British Pakistani Muslim culture and from which to send up cultural misconceptions. One of the strengths of her stand-up comedy is that she constantly shifts perspectives. Nevertheless, the term 'simultaneously plural' is perhaps less applicable to her positioning than it was to Meera Syal. Indeed, Mirza seems to find herself 'caught between two cultures' in being 'Muslim' to the white British culture and 'female' to the British Muslim (male) culture. She might be trying to indicate to both that there are multiple female and cultural positions available, whilst repeatedly dealing with the 'limited' range of looking done by others.

Pollution and purification

Alongside exploring her role as a second-generation Pakistani Muslim living in British diasporic space, Mirza also self-reflexively highlights her persona's role as a Muslim female living within the dictates of male interpretations of the tenets of Islam. Her position as taboo-breaker is explored with reference to Mary Douglas's work on taboos in *Purity and Danger* (1966) particularly to indicate how restrictions become intensified

under certain diasporic circumstances. In one set at Colchester Arts Centre, Mirza speaks of arranged marriage, although it is difficult to know how she feels about this because of the density of her ideas. However, a number of perspectives are simultaneously evident in what follows:

Mirza: We deal with them. We just go
and murder them. Muslim men don't
really want to marry me because I speak
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

As with other jokes, whilst there is clearly a send-up of an extreme position in this joke, there are also some important issues raised. The reference to 'murder' highlights a fear of racial and cultural 'pollution' and the willingness to go to great lengths to ensure conformity to strongly held cultural ideologies. Mary Douglas explores such notions in her book *Purity and Danger* where she notes that:

... ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating
and punishing transgression have as their main
function to impose system on an inherently untidy
experience (1966:5).

Mirza's 'transgression' derives from the fact that her 'speaking' damages the integrity of religious and cultural ideology and practice. Her punishment is to be excluded from marriage so that boundaries can continue to be clearly 'demarcated' and so that 'system' can be imposed on an 'inherently untidy experience'.

Moreover, Mirza's reference to the female voice and to the voicing of opinions which are both implied in the words 'because I speak' has important ramifications in relation to the issue of how females take up vocal and physical space. The seemingly incomplete sentence offered by Mirza does not relate to a matter of degree as in the 'old' jokes about females talking excessively as indicated by Oliver Double (1997:66). However, it can be seen to have some correlations with the 'urinary trope' identified by Andrew Stott in his book on comedy which 'draws together

a number of patriarchal assumptions about female vocal, sexual and physical ‘incontinence’ that locate cultural views of femininity in medical discourse’. In this framework, gossips are seen as ‘leaking women’ (2005:100). The connection between sexual and vocal ‘incontinence’ in Stott’s words has pertinence to accusations made to Mirza about being a prostitute because she performs stand-up comedy.⁸⁷

Female speaking was also thought to ‘dirty the mouth’ in Medieval times. Carla Mazzio’s essay *The Sins of the Tongue* also refers to the fluidity of the tongue and its imagined capacity of defiling the whole body (1997:56). The mouth represents disorder and threat and the ‘spectre of monstrous morality’ (1997:65). These views offer a much darker picture than the one presented by Stott in relation to the community. Indeed, there are suggestions of taboo about the female mouth in Mirza’s short joke which engage with misogynistic, rather than sexist perspectives, especially as the word ‘speak’ in Mirza’s set above has no adverbial qualification such as to ‘speak too much’ or ‘speak of taboo subjects’, but seems to suggest a desired curtailment of all female opinions. Mazzio especially notes that ‘Fantasies of the tongue’s mobility were often explicitly linked to disturbances of social and political order’ (1997:57). This seems to be the implication regarding Mirza’s ‘speaking’. There is much depth in Mirza’s joke, although stylistically, there is a lack of build up and of imagery which weakens the joke, even though it contains many complex elements.

In contrast to the above, Mirza appears to be offering a very different perspective on marriage in the following:

Mirza: My parents were very strict. I wanted to be like my friends with herpes and chlamydia. My mum said, ‘Wait until you are married then you will get them’ (Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

⁸⁷ These are discussed further on in this section.

In the above, a wealth of images and interrogations are packed into a few lines. This joke plays with Muslim traditions of parental influence and strictness. It also highlights an implied reference to the sexual laxity of some modern British white females in the words ‘friends with herpes and clamidia’. This recalls the earlier joke that ‘all white women are whores’. Mirza is either underscoring female sexual laxity here or her joke is a critique of the double standards found within some Muslim marriages.

Taboos

Mirza’s stand-up comedy plays with taboos in a number of ways. She has already suggested that her body is seen as tabooed within both her British and Muslim cultural experiences. She also now engages with taboo in terms of her Muslim female body which is revealed in the following jokes as not fully belonging to her.

Mary Douglas notes that ‘Taboos depend on a form of community-wide complicity’ (1966: xii).⁸⁸ The implication in these words is that where there is not complicity, there is coercion and punishment. Douglas argues that this is because ‘Feared contagion extends the danger of a broken taboo to the whole community’ (ibid, xiii). This has similar connotations to Mazzio’s point on the previous page regarding ‘disturbances to social and political order’. There are clearly strong references to taboos and to the notion of suppression in the following sets where socio-cultural ideologies are translated onto the body and become enforceable practices. Here, as in Jenny Éclair’s stand-up comedy, there is a self-reflexive drawing of attention to orifices, especially the mouth and vagina. Interestingly, however, Mirza’s ‘arse’ appears to be the only subversive

⁸⁸ This has correlations with the assumed shared community values held by audiences for stand-up comedy. This is discussed further in the second part of Chapter Four.

body part which escapes being written on by the ideology of others.⁸⁹

Mirza: I've never had alcohol in my life because it's against my religion. What isn't? But I've taken it up the arse. I do these anal jokes because I am repressed (Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

As elsewhere Mirza has covered a vast area within a few words. The notion that alcohol is 'against my religion' followed by the rhetorical question 'What isn't?' is a move from a seemingly reasonable position to an extreme one. It is as if 'her' religion is solely proscriptive. In relation to such proscriptions, Mary Douglas argues that:

The study of taboo impinges inevitably upon the philosophy of belief. The taboo-maintained rules will be as repressive as leading members of the society want them to be ... Criticism will be suppressed, whole areas of life become unspeakable and, in consequence, unthinkable (1966: xiii).

The phrases 'Criticism will be suppressed' and 'whole areas of life become unspeakable' again recall Mirza's earlier joke about 'speaking'. The reference to 'taboo-maintained rules' being as 'repressive as leading members of the society want them to be' also suggests coercion. More significantly, the 'taboo-maintained rules' of Mirza's set are inscribed on the body; in this case, the female body. She revolts by finding the one part of her body which is not inscribed, namely the 'arse'. However, she quickly moves away from taking risks in relation to talking about the individual female body to speak of doing more generalized and therefore less risky 'anal jokes'. Nevertheless, the inscription of the body as female becomes more pronounced in the next joke.

Mirza: I was told it was wrong to go to concerts

⁸⁹ When considering the stand-up comedy of Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders in Chapter Two, reference was made to the 'arse' and the subversive nature of its ability to fart.

and move your body. It's a sin. My thing is sitting
at home bouncing pennies on my hymen
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

This joke represents one of Mirza's few strong bodily images. However, the breaking of taboos her is implicated in the words 'go to concerts' and 'move your body' go beyond the communal threat of 'specific dangers if the code is not respected' as highlighted by Douglas (1966:xiii). Indeed, they take on the added intensity of becoming a 'sin' with particular prohibition made to the female moving *her* body. Thus the female in the public space is deemed wrong; her place is 'sitting at home'. In Chapter Two, a number of points were raised about female movement; there the causes were socio-cultural, but here, despite the reference to religious ideology, the causes seem to relate to gender.⁹⁰ More to the point, Mirza's reference designates the hymen as a key female surface on which is inscribed by the ideology of others. For some, it is always already culturally inscribed as noted in Meera Syal's joke about sending 'a signed photograph of the hymen' (In *Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley*, 1999).

For others, the intrusion on the body is more insidious. Jo Anna Isaak in her book on *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Female Laughter* cites Jenny Holzer's 1989 installation which indicates how 'We walk *through* the language, it is printed on our body'; words are written onto the skin of the spectators such as 'accounts of violence - when they are on white paper they are dispassionate' (1996:39). The concepts of language and 'accounts of violence' being 'printed on our body' are very appropriate to Mirza's comedy. Indeed, the above joke again signifies important female and socio-cultural issues about who 'owns' the female body and who writes on it. This represents a more extreme version of 'double-consciousness' which goes beyond merely 'looking at oneself through the eyes of others' (1994/9:26). Nevertheless, the image of 'bouncing pennies on the hymen' is both comic and effective

⁹⁰ Later in this section reference is made to accusations that Mirza is committing a sin in

in demonstrating a novel way to subvert some of the ideology which has been ‘printed on the body’.

The suppression highlighted in the previous jokes is now moved into the familial situation to indicate again how ideology is woven into the fabric of society.

Mirza: My parents said ‘This life is not for having fun. You’ll have fun in the next life with God.’
I gave up the vagina - didn’t use it.
No, I waited for the after-life
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

This joke highlights a seeming acceptance of female disembodiment; the everydayness of lived life is rejected in anticipation of an after-life. Is Mirza sending up Muslim interpretations of Islam here or British perceptions of Islamic practice? Or is she highlighting merely that religions tend to be proscriptive? As always, with regard to Mirza’s show at Colchester, the answer could be any, or all of the above. Jerry Palmer notes how ‘for the Middle Ages all things to do with this world represented vanity’ and in particular ‘arrant worldliness was regarded as a sin’ (1994:43). This was however, waved during carnival and other feast day celebrations. In the above ‘fun’ in this life is also related to the ‘vagina’, the female body part ‘already’ inscribed in the two previous jokes, but here ‘sloughed off’ or disembodied as Mirza says ‘I gave up the vagina - didn’t use it’.⁹¹

doing stand-up comedy.

⁹¹ Such matters have correlations with the author’s own stand-up comedy on the topic of Christianity which is explored in part one of Chapter Four. This set was also performed at Colchester Arts Centre in 2003. The author’s response to Mirza’s jokes is also explored in the second part of Chapter Four.

Taboo-breaking and risk: threat and danger

Taboo-breaking is risky and dangerous as was indicated in the earlier reference to points made by Mary Douglas (1966) earlier. Meera Syal sees Mirza's stand-up comedy as dangerous in being like 'a loaded gun' and like a 'testing ground' with 'a huge responsibility' (With Bragg, 2003). Mirza is indeed a 'testing ground' in offering things for people to laugh at which have not been seen before. This goes beyond Syal's original reference to laughing at subversive jokes; here the issue is real threat and danger. Is Mirza a threat or danger to herself, to British white or Muslim men, or to other Muslim women? The answer to the question is perhaps all, or most of these in different ways as is indicated in the following.

In one set Mirza self-reflexively points to herself as the inscribed body of Pakistani (lapsed) Muslim and thus as a perceived threat regarding British fears of terrorist activity.

Mirza: It's funny being here in church on Easter. Are there any Christians here? I don't know why people are scared. I'm not going to blow you up (Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

By asking if there are Christians in the audience and juxtaposing that with the promise that 'I'm not going to blow you up', Mirza draws attention to the issue of cultural anxiety surrounding British Muslims. Rattansi's article on diasporic space suggests that 'something like 'Islamophobia' exists in Britain' (2000:130) and she makes brief reference to the Gulf War as one of two 'gulfanizing events' (ibid, 130). Indeed, the placement of the word 'scared' draws attention to the embedded suggestion that *all* Muslims are perceived as potential terrorists, even though she is distancing herself from that group. However, Mirza does potentially risk hostility from a predominantly-white audience in the garrison town of Colchester, because her body is already inscribed as Muslim and by implication to prejudiced minds, she must be a threat. Mary Douglas'

observations of pre-industrial communities uncovered the belief that ‘that which is not with it, part of it and subject to its laws, is potentially against it’ (1966:5). This would seem to be implied in Mirza’s joke.

The reference to ‘blow you up’ in the above recalls how readily bodily surfaces and organs are written on by the ideology of others, even though its context in the joke negates it. (This notion has already been noted regarding Mirza’s own body.) Mirza’s joke is told within the context of the terrorist attack on New York’s twin trade centres on the 11th September, 2001, when nearly 3000 people died; although not in relation to the bomb explosions in London on the 7th July, 2005, when fifty-two people died. In these attacks, ideology was irrevocably and violently written on other living bodies, although no longer merely as ‘accounts of violence’. Nancy Spero throws light on this point effectively when she intimates that in war ‘bombs defecate bodies ... Women’s torsos erupt into a fountain of heads and multiple breasts’ (In Isaak, 1996:24). This is decidedly not the ‘comic side of bodily abjection’ and Mirza takes risks in exploring such subjects, however tentatively.

Mirza seemingly takes the extreme position in the above joke in order to de-familiarise and thereby to encourage her audience to interrogate stereotypes. Frances Gray in *Women and Laughter* considers that ‘it is possible that the joke may shatter our view of accepted reality, suddenly de-familiarising a political or social system for us to see flaws and the incongruent but to let us re-enter’ (1994:32). As elsewhere in the design of Mirza’s jokes, she deliberately and frequently adopts contrary positions to ‘shatter our view of accepted reality’. In contrast in the next joke she takes a different sort of risk in reflecting on the ideology behind acts of terrorism by suicide bombers.

Mirza: These suicide bombers are going to be so disappointed about virgins - in the Qoran it was ‘raisins’. I’ll be looking like a raisin by the time anyone fucks me.

Why aren't you laughing? Is it too much?
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

Mirza has moved rapidly between references to a Christian church to speaking of the Qoran. Furthermore, by juxtaposing references to 'suicide bombers', 'virgins', the 'Qoran' and 'being fucked', Mirza risks being accused of blasphemy which carries the risk of real danger in relation to some fundamentalist Islamic perceptions. Mirza's position is unique in modern female stand-up comedy, so often considered by some as 'less boisterous' and 'universally significant' than male comedy' as was highlighted by Andrew Stott in his book *Comedy* (2005:99).⁹² Mirza's reference to 'looking like a raisin before anyone fucks me' is another example of the few highly visual images in her set and effectively creates the notion of un-lived life. It is also well-placed in the joke. The questions at the end of this joke are again 'explosive' in the sense that Meera Syal described of Mirza's stand-up comedy being like a 'loaded gun'. Mirza provokes her audiences into thinking about important issues, and particularly by putting herself 'in the line of fire'.

Dangerous orifices and threatened surfaces: the tabooed female

Does Mirza take personal risks in her stand-up comedy? Death threats to her suggest she does. In the following, she is not only the tabooed female, but deals with taboo subjects when talking about death threats she has received. Judy Carter warns of the risks of dealing with such subjects. However, writing in 1989, and before the previously mentioned bomb attacks inflicted on New York and London, Carter could not have anticipated stand-up comedy such as Mirza's. Indeed, Mirza's sets on the threats she has received are far from comic. She has been grabbed by the neck, threatened with being glassed in the mouth and with being beheaded to stop her tongue from talking. With reference to the first threat of

⁹² Oliver Double cites a similar situation for stand-up comedian Billy Connolly in the

violence, Meera Syal revealed to Melvyn Bragg that:

Shazia told how three Asian guys at Brick Lane grabbed her by the neck on the stairs and said she should not be doing this; it was an insult to her sex and her religion (Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

These men want to write their ideological positions onto Mirza's throat. They connect 'sex' and 'religion' and indicate that what she is doing is an insult to *their* beliefs. Such threats indicate that Mirza is *in* danger because deemed *dangerous*. This has correlations with earlier references to sin. As a cultural body, hers is now a transgressive body.⁹³ Mary Douglas notes that the cultural body seems to have greater significance than the 'personal' body when she argues that:

Culture, in the sense of public, standardised values of a community, mediates the experience of individuals ... But its public character makes its categories more rigid, a private person may revise his pattern of assumptions or not. Cultural categories are not so easily subject to revision, but they cannot neglect the challenge of aberrant forms ... except at the risk of forfeiting confidence (1966:48).

Mirza interrogates the certitude of those who see her conspicuous vocalisations and visibility as threatening to their ideologies, but as indicated above 'cultural categories are not so easily subject to revision'. Douglas also indicates that challenges to them cannot be completely ignored 'without the risk of forfeiting confidence'. However, as indicated in the following, some people choose to deal with the 'challenge of aberrant forms' differently. At Colchester Arts Centre (2004) Mirza read out some threatening emails she had received from some conservative Muslim men who objected to her stand-up comedy. One was a warning of physical violence which came from someone who called himself a 'messenger from Allah'. The message said:

1970s when it was thought his comedy was blasphemous (1997:151).

⁹³ Females as actresses have traditionally been associated with prostitutes.

You do comedy, this is a sin. You are a prostitute
of the white man, a prostitute of the West. I want
to be there so I can glass you in the mouth
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2004).

The above suggests that Mirza's stand-up comedy is indeed one of those 'aberrant forms' referred to by Douglas, which challenge 'standardised values'. However, the notion of being 'glasses in the mouth' has a double bodily implication: firstly, it means to be scarred and made ugly and then to be stopped from talking or telling jokes. There are also other significant implications in the 'joke' in that Mirza's mouth and vagina take on a synonymy within accusations of being 'a prostitute' for doing stand-up comedy. Moreover, the word 'prostitute' is repeatedly hyperbolised to emphasize the enormity of the threat Mirza represents. She is seen not just as *a* 'prostitute' but as 'a prostitute of the *white* man'. This position becomes iconic as its points of reference are further expanded to include the notion of being 'a prostitute of *the West*'. The strong images suggest that Mirza not only engages with, and interrogates taboos in her stand-up comedy - but she becomes the tabooed female body and is put in danger because thought dangerous. A woman in the audience dissipates a little of the intensity of this set by asking 'What time of day was it'? Was her interruption timely or did it not recognise the seriousness of the subject? Perhaps the answer is both.

Another man told Mirza, 'Do you realise that if we were still in Pakistan, you would be beheaded?' (Hari, 2005). It would appear from these words that death is the final ideological weapon for the headless body cannot interrogate for being beheaded silences both speech and independent thought. Death is also the final bodily abjection as Kristeva suggests, 'The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection' (1982:4). Furthermore, Mirza's skin signifies gender and youthfulness, and as such, she represents a sacrificable female. Unquestionably, risk, threat and danger are implied in the reference to

being beheaded. This is no longer merely a symbolic silencing but a real threat to the body, to having head and body separated. Such is the power of the female body and voice that their owner must be permanently removed because her disorderliness cannot be tolerated. This is an extreme version of comic as outsider who was either assimilated or expelled.

In being seen as being 'out of place' in doing stand-up comedy, Mirza's position is different from that of 'first-generation' female stand-up comics. It is still male-related, but far more dangerous. Her stand-up comedy is seen as polluting (subversive) by some conservative Muslim males; she is seen as being 'out of place' and as someone who is not only deemed to be creating disorder, but is doing so conspicuously. As previously indicated her female presence on a stand-up comedy stage creates anxiety and potential threat because it disrupts the strongly held ideological positions of these men. The price of female transgression is paid by the body. Mary Douglas notes something similar in terms of community rituals when she argues that:

a challenge to the established classification is brought under control by some theory of attendant harm. How often is one threatened with danger for failing to conform to someone else's standards? (1966: xi).

By standing up to do stand-up comedy on tabooed subjects, Mirza becomes the 'tabooed' female who is deemed out of control, and therefore to be 'threatened with danger'. In relation to the notion of not conforming to 'someone else's standards', it could also be argued that Mirza experiences a number of different *listening*, including ideological listening which implies hearing what is not there. Herbert Blau writes on the subject of hearing in relation to theatre audiences and his views have some relevance to Mirza's position here. Firstly, he draws attention to Jacques Lacan's notion of having ears 'in order not to hear' (1990:131). He then

uses this to argue that ‘As a critical organ the ear ... can easily be delinquent’ and moreover, ‘It may ... simply [be] hearing by default’ (ibid, 131). It would appear that many of Mirza’s detractors have either heard her stand-up comedy wrongly, have had a ‘delinquent’ ear, or have not heard it at all.

Following on from the above, and with further reference to Mary Douglas (1966), Mirza’s stand-up comedy could be seen to represent a pollution which interferes with what some see as the cultural integrity of the Muslim community. Douglas notes that:

When the community is attacked from outside at least the external danger fosters solidarity within. When it is attacked from within by wanton individuals, they can be punished and the structure publicly reaffirmed (1966:173).

Mirza’s stand-up comedy has not been sanctioned by either of the communities she inhabits. Indeed, it is seen as dangerous by both and the aberrant must be contained or expelled. This exemplifies the role of the ancient sacred buffoon. In Chapter One Douglas (1966) and C P Wilson (1979) were cited as noting how the sacred buffoon plays with profanity and abjection from within the religious community where he is allowed as a temporary aberration before being expelled, after which the borders of the sacred are once more made intact. This is not the case with Mirza (or with other female stand-up comics); for whilst her sets might be contained by a night’s performance; her ideas and potential influence go beyond these confines because they have important socio-cultural implications.

Indeed, it is clear that Mirza’s comedy tends to explore the ideological and the socio-cultural rather than the autobiographical. Hers is the cultural body. It is therefore important that when she stands up, she stands up *for*, and *in for*, and *alongside* other females; she is carving a space for herself and for other transnational females within the arena of stand-up comedy,

especially Muslim females. Some young Muslim female 'bloggers' writing on Mirza's website appreciate the quality within Mirza's performances.

Pareesa: I think Shazia is brilliant, have seen her many times ... recently saw her two-hour show in Sweden. I laughed non-stop for two hours and her material was about everything, she didn't mention religion at all (18.2.06).

Naeem: Having previously saw her in Birmingham two years ago I much prefer her newer chattier friendlier style to her old colder scripted delivery - a great act with a solid future ahead of her (30.12.05).

These views seem to indicate an appreciation of Mirza's style of comedy. The first blogger's reference to the absence of religion in Mirza's work might indicate that this is a good thing, or it might indicate that still be a place for such considerations.

The stand-up comedy of Mirza explored above deals with bodily abjection in relation to both ideology and to cultural assumptions. Her greatest strengths lie in the way she presents her own body as the focus of these issues and the way in which she frequently changes position to create a kaleidoscope of perspectives. There is a density to her images which are not always sufficiently graphic, but which are worth unravelling.

3.3 British black female comedy: Gina Yashere

Yashere is British African, or more specifically, British Nigerian or, in view of Rattansi's aforementioned distrust of prefixed identities, she is Nigerian. Like Shazia Mirza and Meera Syal, she represents the cultural body regarding her simultaneously plural positionality as Nigerian and British. Until the twenty-first century, she was the only black female

comic on the British stand-up comedy circuit, until joined by Andi Osho, and more recently by Ava Vidal and Miss London. Such absence was partially explained by Andi Osho and Lynne Parker at the beginning of this chapter. However, in Lizbeth Goodman study of feminist theatre, it was noted that British Afro-Caribbean females had been setting up theatre companies since the 1970s. Goodman makes particular reference to the Talawa theatre company set up by Yvonne Brewster (1993:155).

In her stand-up comedy sets, Yashere engages with the 'comic side of bodily abjection' in terms of both the cultural body and the personal body. She plays with the insider/outsider position which was characteristic of the sacred buffoon. Moreover, she also engages with the insider/outsider position in socio-cultural terms regarding notions of racial anxiety and 'double-consciousness'. She constantly moves spatially between the distant and proximal within the domains of the socio-cultural, the familial and the personal to highlight contrasting and conflicting practices and ideologies. Her exploration of bodily processes and scatological elements engages with theories suggested by C P Wilson (1979), Mary Douglas (1966) and Julia Kristeva (1982). She also engages with aspects of degradation as found in Mikhail Bakhtin and relating to the 'lower material body' (1984:21).

Yashere's stand-up comedy is interestingly, examined with reference to three different audiences at three separate venues: one was at the Comedy Camp (2006) at London's Soho Barcode before a predominantly-gay audience, (mostly male), the second was at Colchester Arts Centre (2007) before a predominantly-white audience, and the third was Yashere's *Skinny Bitch* show performed at the Hackney Empire (2008) before a predominantly-black audience and is viewed by the author of this thesis on dvd. In these shows issues abjection is explored regarding both Yashere as a cultural body and in relation to changes in her physical body. Her stand-up comedy deals with abjection directly and she can be seen to

play with it and with her audience in a carnivalesque way.

Racial anxiety and the outsider position

An important aspect of Yashere's work lies in the ways in which she explores simultaneously the notions of British racial anxiety and British racism. As outlined in Chapter One demographic changes in Britain since the 1950s have led to the development of Britain as a multi-racial society but this has also led to some racial anxiety and tension. In the following sets Yashere draws attention to racial anxiety as relating to both the cultural body and the personal female body simultaneously. Yashere does this firstly, by offering herself as outsider to the predominantly-white audiences at Colchester Arts Centre (2007) and the Comedy Camp (2006). Then, she self-reflexively identifies herself as a black person, and a potential source of discomfort to some white British people. However, this is not so much about superiority as about the fear of difference. She begins her Colchester set by saying:

Yashere: Embrace the truth, Colchester. Embrace the truth. Most people do not like to sit next to us black people. Have you ever had a black woman that close? (2007).

This set highlights anxiety in terms of spatiality; the words 'sit next to' and their implication of unwanted proximity is negatively attached to 'Most people', whilst the phrase 'us black people' contains the whole concept of blackness exemplified, not just in one body but in the many, of which group, Yashere is one. The suggested fear of proximity is reiterated as she moves from speaking of 'us black people' to playing with the audience when asking the question 'Have you ever had a black woman that close?' There is also a sense of playful threat within the emphasis on the words '*that close*'.

There is further suggestion of threat in the same set when Yashere offers two grotesque female images when she says, 'I'm not Medusa. Spend an evening with a mad black woman'. And yet in the use of the word 'not', Yashere offers herself as the negative of what Jo Anna Isaak calls the 'hideous' female, to become instead the 'laughing Medusa' who 'is not deadly' (Isaak, 1996:26). The notion of the 'mad black woman' also has ambiguous connotations as both threatening and playful. What causes anxiety is the fact that one cannot be sure which of these states is in play. However, in the light of the previous joke it would appear that Yashere self-reflexively embodies the darker meanings as if belonging to an 'abject race'. This position has correlations with the position of North American black comic Richard Pryor and his 'self-identity in an abjected race' (Limon, 2000:5) John Limon in his book on abjection in North American stand-up comedy argues that 'He (Pryor) *is* the abjection. He is the body that is repudiated yet keeps returning' (2000:5). Certainly, Yashere's jokes are suggestive of such concepts.

Also within this set, Yashere moves spatially and conceptually closer to her audience as she compares herself to two black female celebrities.

I know what you're thinking - Beyonce

(She addresses a woman in the second row)

You know who I am? You sure? I'm not Trisha
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2007).

The implication is that these are the only black females encountered by Colchester people and that they are only encountered via tele-visual means rather than close up. (There is the further possible implication that at that distance they are less threatening.) Beyonce is a highly successful North American black female singer, whilst Trisha is a successful black female presenter in British television. Thus, Yashere has moved rapidly from offering negative images of black females to positive ones.

At Colchester Arts Centre (2007) Yashere descends from the stage to engage with members of this predominantly-white audience and thus, she takes both the notion, and the embodiment of a black woman, closer to them. In taking this action, she aligns herself with those bodies in that space; as one of them.⁹⁴ She also speaks with the small group of black people in the audience. She has already established that there are few black people living in Colchester (although many transnationals live in Ipswich, a nearby town). In this she is including them in the event, rather than highlighting separation.

Yashere also seems to force her Colchester audience to face their possible prejudices and thus, potentially to re-pattern their thinking with regard to the above. She is seemingly addressing them as ‘white’ and as having little knowledge or experience of black culture. The author of this thesis is a member of this audience. How do we respond? We laugh, but not necessarily all from the same position. Indeed, there is a difference between the author and her companion in that the former has worked with multi-racial communities in London, Birmingham and Leicester, whilst her companion has no personal experience of such communities.

At London’s Comedy Camp Yashere goes further in reinforcing the notion of ‘us blacks’ and in highlighting her position as outsider and even an intruder when speaking to a young man who works at Heathrow airport.

Yashere: You let us blacks in.

A woman in the audience: He’s a fed.⁹⁵

Yashere: I’m not racist. I even vote for BNP. They want blacks out and Asians out and then everyone

⁹⁴ She also engages with the few whites in the predominantly-black audience at Hackney Empire (2008). This engagement is discussed in part two of Chapter Four.

⁹⁵ This audience interruption is discussed in greater detail in relation to female ‘joking relations’ in part two of Chapter Four. It is situated there in order to highlight changing trends regarding the female as audience of stand-up comedy.

from Dagenham out (2006).

Yashere faces racial issues directly in the words ‘You let us blacks in’, but here, she also goes further than in her previous use of ‘us black people’ in implying invitation. The joke is quite complex in its spatial references to being ‘in’ and ‘out’. Yashere’s joke creates a confusion of boundaries relating to Britain as a country in transition changing socio-cultural conditions and practices. Such confusion can create fear. Mary Douglas’s implies the notion of disorder is inherent in ambivalent spatial positions when she writes:

It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a sense of order is created (1966:5).⁹⁶

The political party BNP (British National Party) cited earlier by Yashere seems to exemplify the above idea of ‘order’ in wanting to have English whites ‘within’ Britain and transnational blacks from Commonwealth countries, ‘without’. Yashere emphasizes her point with other spatial references which are increasingly all-encompassing of transnational groups as in ‘blacks out and Asians out’. The words ‘everyone in Dagenham out’ suggests that the ‘to-be-excluded’ group now includes other transnational in that Dagenham is an area rich in racial and cultural representation. What is more, in identifying with Dagenham, Yashere reveals herself as an insider, as a Londoner, and as a ‘new citizen’ of a new multi-cultural Britain.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ The word ‘above’ is written as ‘about’ in the text of the book *Purity and Danger* (1966), but this appears to be a typographical error.

⁹⁷ The term ‘new citizen’ is highlighted because it recalls Meenakshi Ponnuswami’s notion of those who are finding new ways to ‘perform citizenship’ (2007:34).

'Double-consciousness'

W. E. B. Dubois' notion of 'double-consciousness' as 'looking at oneself through the eyes of others' (In Watkins, 1994/9:26) has some pertinence to Yashere's stand-up comedy, although she illustrates it differently from Shazia Mirza. Mel Watkins suggests that blacks see themselves differently when with blacks or whites in arguing that:

behavioral adjustments forced many African-Americans to assume dual social roles: one for a hostile white world, the other the natural demeanour they reserved for interactions among themselves (1994/9:35).

However, such notions are subverted by Yashere in that she offers a multiplicity of comic perspectives on 'double-consciousness' which are explored in relation to her audiences at the three cited venues. Moreover, she openly talks about issues of racial anxiety and 'double-consciousness'. Above all, she is a popular insider at these venues and the audience has come specifically to see her perform her stand-up comedy. Furthermore, this thesis argues that the stand-up comedy of Yashere contests the notion of 'double-consciousness' as a clear and single theory when applied to the British position. This is because her audiences are not hostile, even though in the sets examined above she presents herself as an outsider. However, as is indicated in the following she does deal with different subjects when performing to a predominantly-black audience.

In her *Skinny Bitch* show at the Hackney Empire (2008) Yashere offers herself as an insider, aligned with the predominant transnational nature of this audience within this multi-racial and multi-cultural district of London. When introducing herself she says, 'Hello, black people, white people and other people.' She then draws further attention the diversity of the transnational position of her audience when she asks, 'Have we got Trinidadians, Barbadians, Antiguan, Jamaicans?' In one sweep she has indicated the complexity and diversity of modern Britain's West Indian

population. After the reference to ‘Jamaicans’ there is a big cheer. Yashere adds the observation that, ‘They are always the loudest ... Show-offs, Jamaicans - big island, but You’re like a small island. Barbados, a small island. Antigua ... Take Jamaica and put it in Nigeria - it’ll be like Peckham Rye’ (2008). This disjointed consideration of the different groups plays with assumed characteristics and the issue of size to suggest a sort of competitiveness between the groups.

Karen Ross writing on ethnic representation in the media, notes how African respondents disliked the way in which ‘black was increasingly taken to mean Caribbean and that Africa was only ever invoked in the context of disaster, corruption or killing’ (In Cottle (ed), 2000:44-45). Furthermore, she notes that they ‘did not want to be associated with Jamaica and Yardie culture’ (ibid, 145). In applying this to Yashere’s set, it can be seen that she has very effectively recognised the diversity of her audience, whilst also pulling them closer together by addressing the groups individually, by name. She is particularly good at engaging her audiences and unlike Victoria Wood she can be seen to enjoy talking directly to them.

Yashere also shares her sense of alienation with this audience, not regarding Britishness per se, but with reference to the British media. She talks of now living in Los Angeles because she perceived there was insufficient opportunity for black people within the British television industry. She suggests that BAFTA (The British Advertising, Television and Theatre Awards) actually stands for ‘Black Actors Fuck off to Africa’.⁹⁸ These reflections summon up her previous reference to Trisha as one of the few successful black females in British television. She continues to talk about the media.

⁹⁸ A discussion of such issues is raised in part one of Chapter Four with reference to the work of Lynne Parker and Andi Osho.

Yashere: When a black person gets his own television show, the rest of us say alright, that means for the next thirty years we're all waiting for Lenny Henry to die ...We don't get shit. That's why I left (*Skinny Bitch*, 2008).

This joke draws attention to issues of cultural spatiality which here refers to the limited space available in the British media for black comics. The notion of 'all black actors and comics waiting for Lenny Henry to die so they can take his place' has a strong sense of abjection about it. This tends to underscore the points made about transnational absence at the top of this chapter. As shown in Chapter One, Lenny Henry was one of the very few representatives of black stand-up comedy for many years. However, as was indicated earlier with reference to the work of Lizbeth Goodman (1993), there have been strong black female theatre groups since the 1970s. Moreover, they were using comedy to explore socio-cultural and persona issues. The question is why did some of the females within these groups not then venture into stand-up comedy? Perhaps they felt it was not a strong enough platform on which to explore important issues. Yashere's sets prove that this is far from being the case. Or perhaps they felt that they would not be taken seriously

Yashere has put herself spatially at a distance from the institutional racism she refers to in the media by moving to Los Angeles. However, she demonstrates awareness of the racial issues that exist there as she plays with cultural assumptions in her joke about an encounter with Los Angeles police. She performs a 'Moms' Mabley type joke.⁹⁹

Yashere: I am the only black person in America who is not afraid of the police. My accent confuses them. In fact, I call them over.

⁹⁹ Mabley's joke was as follows: **Policeman:** Hey woman, don't you know you went through a red light? **Mabley:** Yeah, I know I went through a red light. **Policeman:** What did you do that for? **Mabley:** 'Cause I seen all you white folks going on a green light... I thought the red light was for us! (Unterbrink, 1987:392).

Yashere: Officer, you've been following me for eight miles.'
Officer: I'm sorry, ma'am. I thought you were black
(*Skinny Bitch*, 2008).

This joke subverts Watkins' version of 'double-consciousness' in that in Yashere's case accent confuses perception of her colour. Moreover, the hyperbolic suggestion that she is the 'only black person in America' who is not afraid of the police indicates a strong level of self-confidence in her own identity.

The black as 'butt' of the joke and stereotype

Yashere also plays with the notion of 'double-consciousness' in engaging with the issue of blacks as the butt of British white jokes. Mel Watkins explores this in relation to the American-African. He also notes two sorts of black jokes: jokes told against them and jokes told *by* them. He observes that 'Black humour most often satirizes the demeaning view of non-blacks, celebrates the unique attributes of black community life, or focuses on outwitting the oppressor ...' (1994/9:29). Such notions are to be seen in the following, where Yashere plays with, and subverts the notion of being the butt of the joke. Here, she also identifies herself not just as black, or African, but as Nigerian, (although not seemingly as British Nigerian, except by implication). In the first joke to her predominantly-white audience, she draws attention to those Nigerians who self-stereotype and make themselves the butt of the joke by their computer, house, and financial scams.

Yashere: I am Nigerian. Nigerians go to the Internet and sell other people's houses. It's very bad, but it's genius. Yes, Nigerians have a bad reputation (Colchester Arts Centre, 2007).

Yashere's self-identification as Nigerian, implies a connection to those

Nigerians ‘who sell other people’s houses’.¹⁰⁰ However, this is not a self-abjecting identification, because Yashere goes beyond the notion of the ‘butt’ to makes Nigerians simultaneously the joke’s object and its subject. Indeed, in the words ‘it’s very bad, but it’s genius’ she subverts the normal transgressive nature of the joke and engages with the Nigerian as trickster. In this he can be seen to have correlations with Mel Watkins account of the tricksters in African American comic traditions who were ‘among the most popular and commonly expressed varieties of slave folklore ...’ (1994/9:70). Judy S J Stone also writes of the role of the trickster and refers to Jamaican pantomimes as being ‘based on the Anancy (or Anansi) cycle of stories which came originally from Africa. Anancy is the spiderman is trickster: ‘The weakest creature in the forest, he survives by nimbleness of wit’ (1994:74). Stone also sees that West Indians empathize with, and admire ‘his imaginative guile with which the small spider outwits those more powerful than he’ (ibid, 74).

Elements of ‘guile’ and the ability to ‘outwit’ can be seen within Yashere’s joke. Indeed, the reiterative point that ‘Nigerians have a bad reputation’ is affected by the preceding word ‘genius’ and also by the word ‘Yes’. In the invitation to the audience to laugh at the outrageousness of this scam, the ‘bad reputation’ of *these* ‘Nigerians’ is diminished. Moreover, the notoriety inherent in the joke firmly establishes the trickster element within Yashere’s stand-up comedy.

Yashere also includes the Nigerian female ‘trickster’ in her jokes as she explores another Nigerian scam of pretending to have lots of children in order to get a house in Britain. The Nigerian woman imagined by Yashere wants a four-bedroom house but is told she can only have one if she has three children. Her solution is to invent another one.

Woman: I’ve got a baby.

¹⁰⁰ In Chapter One, reference is made to North American male stand-up comic Chris Rock who highlighted an underclass of blacks which was considered groundbreaking.

Official: That's funny you didn't have one when you came a fortnight ago.
Woman: I will see you next Tuesday
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2007).

The comedy derives from the speed of seemingly acquiring more children. The final salutation shows a spatial and temporal moving away in order to regroup for the next 'attack'. (It also engages with a colloquial way of using the word 'cunt' in a derogatory sense.) In the above, Yashere draws further attention to white anxieties in relation to Nigerians, effectively interrogating racial issues without alienating her audience.

Strict mothers

In contrast to the above, in the following jokes, Yashere seems to move from the general to the particular and from the distant to the proximal, as she makes specific reference to 'her' Nigerian mother. The set becomes increasingly specific as she describes the mother as being critical, over-demanding and over-protective.

Yashere: My mum had no sympathy; she's a Nigerian mum and believes in authority; others have fun. My mum got her fun in hitting her kids
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2007).

This joke does not depict the Nigerian trickster highlighted in earlier sets, but an important cultural figure and one who demands to be heard. In the following, there is also an implied criticism of the less demanding white British mother. Yashere speaks of how she had said 'shut up' to her mother because she had seen a white girl telling her mother to get out of the room. Yashere adds, 'I lay in a coma for six months' (2007). In a third joke, when 'on the bus' and being rebuked by an adult, Yashere tells her school friend, 'You'd better shut up, Talisha. She might know your mum'(ibid). The punishing Nigerian mother is all-powerful, even when

out-of-sight and at a distance. As was the case with Shazia Mirza, it is difficult to gauge Yashere's view here in that Nigerian parents are seen by their children as demanding hard work and success for them and from them. The simplicity of Yashere's jokes belies the important areas she is addressing regarding cultural stereotypes. She is also good at changing from one accent to another.

Yashere is skilful in creating rapport with her audience because she begins from where her audience is. The author of this thesis asked Yashere about her work in an email interview with her:

Blunden: Do you have certain personas that you adopt or is your stage persona a heightened version of yourself?

Yashere: On stage, I'm basically a heightened version of my self ... Stand-up to me is the truest form of art (2009).

Yashere's suggestion that she is a heightened version of herself in her art is completely different from Victoria Wood's sense of only being herself when on stage. Also, unlike Wood, she makes frequent engagement with individuals in her audience, whilst in her early work in particular, Wood was reluctant to even see her audience as people.

Scatology: bodily orifices, surfaces and processes

Another important aspect of Yashere's stand-up comedy is her exploration of her own bodily processes in a scatological style as was associated with the sacred buffoon as indicated with reference to C P Wilson (1979), Jerry Palmer (1994) and Mary Douglas (1966) in Chapter One, but she cannot be said to be truly scatological as will be seen.

The following sets explore the subjects of defecation and faeces. This is

an unusual topic for a female stand-up comic, however, in her engagement with the above two models she continues to interrogate contemporary socio-cultural practices and ideology. She begins this set by offering an impression of going to the toilet, then disowning her waste by walking away from it with her head in the air. She proceeds to the audience in what seem to be merely fanciful musings over her bodily functions.

Yashere: You know, a poo so large it could flush itself. I used to be like you. Blacks are proud of their poos. I can't imagine pushing out a nine-pounder, you can't exactly stop and cut it in bits (Comedy Camp, 2006).

Some members of the audience groan and gyrate in laughter at Yashere's words. However, this set is more than just playing with excrement in a scatological sense for a number of reasons. Firstly, the 'poos' being addressed cannot be said to represent 'excrement' in that they still have some connection to the body. What is more, Yashere talks proudly of her 'poo' which is 'so large it could flush itself', as if it has a life of its own beyond her body, like Victoria Wood's defunct uterus. The reference to 'pushing out a nine-pounder' connects the pushing involved in defecation with giving birth; the implication is that something important has just occurred. These 'poos' are still intact in terms of identity, although abject in being reminders of bodily processes. They are also ambiguous in being seen as still belonging to the person and indeed, to a group, and not separated from them. Mary Douglas' work on polluting objects notes when abject substances have left the margins of the body 'This is the stage at which they are also dangerous; their half identity still clings to them' (1966:197). However, Douglas' words are not entirely appropriate to Yashere's set since these 'poos' of which 'Blacks are proud' seem to have a new identity in their ambiguity. This recalls Victoria Wood's set on her pubic hair; however, this set was personal, whilst Yashere's relates to cultural issues. Indeed, Yashere's observation that 'Blacks are proud of their poos' has important socio-cultural ramifications with regard to the issue of diasporic identity.

In dealing with excremental matters, Yashere can also be associated with ancient sacred rituals and clowns. Alfred Radcliffe-Brown notes clowns using excrement as mock irreverence in sacred rituals (In Wilson, 1979:88). However, this was both temporary and contained. As noted already, for Yashere the 'poos' to which she refers, no longer represent pollution, or taboo, but belong strongly to the group and to identity.

Yashere: You wait until everyone has gone.
I'm starting a pooers' club ...
Be like blokes; they are proud of their poos
(Comedy Camp, 2006).

This is not abjection, nor shame; it is pride. Yashere's intention to 'start a pooers club' again suggests a revalidation of bodily processes and as such it goes beyond the notions of excremental pollution and abjection which are highlighted by Douglas (1966) and Wilson (1979). Is this subversive? It is, in the same way that Jennifer Saunter's farts were 'a tiny revolution' her 'Madonna' performance as was indicated in Chapter Two. It could also be said to be subversive in the sense that Yashere is encouraging the female audience to 'Be like blokes'.

Scatology two

In her *Skinny Bitch* show at the Hackney Empire (2008) Yashere does another set on scatological elements but goes into far greater detail exploring abject substances coming from the body, including drawing attention to their smells. However, whilst undoubtedly scatological, the following set also goes beyond this into the realm of the medical and the socio-cultural.

Yashere explores the world of colonic irrigation which she encountered after being diagnosed with lupus and going on a weight-loss regime in Thailand. She addresses a woman in the audience when asking, 'Have you

ever tried to put a pipe up your arse - self-administered - I can tell you have. The stuff that comes out! Alien shit!' She stresses the final 't' of the word 'shit' as if relishing talking about such abject substances. This reference to 'alien shit' recalls Michael Schoenfeldt's reference to alien substances 'something alien comes into the self and something alien is excreted by the self' (In Hillman and Mazzio, (eds) 1997:244).¹⁰¹ In Yashere's joke, the implication is that this colonically irrigated 'shit' is more abject than the usual substances defecated by the body.

Yashere continues with the theme of 'shit', telling her audience, 'Every person is carrying twenty pounds of waste. Do you know what that means? It means 'You are full of shit.' This goes further to confuse the boundaries of inside and out in that this waste is hyperbolically still 'inside the body'. The words 'You are full of shit' are also comic because they combine the physical with the verbal and thus create an added layer of ambiguity. Such phrases are used colloquially to someone whose views are being strongly rejected. However, here the 'shit' is inside the body in a viscous and abject sense, because one is unable to separate from it to call up Kristeva's notion of the abject. It has violated the sense of border. It is the 'in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (1982:4). There is also a sense of fascination and revulsion here (1982:5). The 'shit' that Yashere is speaking of, technically still belongs to the person whilst it is being colonically irrigated.

Stand-up comedian Billy Connolly did a set on the life cycle of excrement produced by airline passengers where, as Oliver Double writes, 'every stage of his crazed reasoning got a big laugh climaxing with tumultuous applause' (1997:149). A similar thing happens in Yashere's set, except that her words have more important socio-cultural referents than Connolly's had. In this, Yashere takes risks with the subjects she explores in her stand-up comedy, although these are different to those

¹⁰¹ Reference was previously made to this quote in relation to Meera Syal's sketch *Going*

taken by Shazia Mirza.

In an 'internet' interview, the author of this thesis asked Yashere about taking risks.

Blunden: Do you think you take risks in your comedy?
Do you try to break taboos and violate boundaries? If so,
in what ways?

Yashere: I do take risks in my comedy, but it's not a deliberate action. I just talk about what I want to talk about. If something inspires passion in me and I can make it funny, then I will. That is my criteria. I don't consider myself political, or controversial - I consider myself an entertainer (2009).

There are many correlations between Connolly's style and Yashere's in the sense that the risks taken are about pushing the boundaries of stand-up comedy. Yashere's words 'if something inspires passion in me and I can make it funny' are what make her a good stand-up comic. It is also what turns abjection into art.

In her *Skinny Bitch* show at the Hackney Empire theatre (2008), Yashere is now the Lenten female as and she self-reflexively and constantly draws attention to her newly changed body. It was anticipated by the author of this thesis that she would be less funny but she has fine-tuned her act along with her body. Yashere holds herself up as spectacle as she stands next to her poster and narcissistically invites comments. She has lost four stone in weight, not from vanity but because she has lupus, an autoimmune disease which attacks the joints. She talks of the pain and lack of movement. This goes beyond notions of appearance and the female as spectacle to engage with female physicality.

Having lost weight, Yashere can now perform physical comedy more easily. This is revealed when she refers to the length of the tube collecting

for an English from the Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley show (1999).

her waste during her colonic irrigation and says, ‘in reality it was this much, but it felt like this.’ She then proceeds to present a well-controlled physical performance, moving backwards across the stage, feeding the microphone lead through her hands whilst merely looking at the audience and using only her eye movements to punctuate the piece.

On her website Yashere now proudly calls herself ‘skinny bitch’. She is seen standing next to her own poster in Hackney, telling people, ‘I’m not air-brushed. I actually do look that good.’ It was anticipated by the author of this thesis that she would not be as funny having lost weight but that was far from the case. Does Yashere take up as much space now that she has lost weight? The answer to this is that her strong stage presence is not size-related. She takes up space and brings others into it as a competent stand-up comic. Dympna Callery in her book *Through the Body* notes that ‘When an actor has presence, it can make us feel that we’re standing very close to them wherever in the theatre we’re sitting’ (2000:84-5). These words very effectively describe Gina Yashere in both her presence and in terms of her performance style. She works hard to include different sections of the audience in her jokes, and comes down from the stage to engage with individuals in the audience. She is not threatening in the sense that Dawn French was as revealed in Chapter Two, but she clearly wants to invite others to participate in the carnival atmosphere she seems to create.

3.4 Shappi Khorsandi

Khorsandi has much in common with Shazia Mirza in terms of the content of her work, whilst her style has similarities to that of Victoria Wood and Gina Yashere. Khorsandi’s stand-up comedy plays with issues relating to transnational identity within British diasporic space. In this, her work has

correlations with concepts explored by Meenakshi Ponnuswami (In Aston and Harris (eds), 2007), Mel Watkins (1994/9), and Annabelle Sreberny (In Cottle (ed), 2000) who pays particular attention to the position of Iranians living in London. Above all, Khorsandi's comedy seems to particularly exemplify important points raised by Ali Rattansi's article 'On Being and not Being Brown/Black British' (2000). In a number of her sets, Khorsandi identifies herself as an outsider and engages self-reflexively with aspects of alienation. However, as will be seen, in practice she reveals very signs of being highly integrated into British society which includes having had a mixed-race marriage with a British white. Her stand-up comedy sets are taken from *Shappi Khorsandi Live at the Apollo* (2008).

Identity

Firstly, Khorsandi's position could be identified as ambiguous in that she sees herself as living within diasporic space, but not completely of it: existing in one place physically and another psychically. Her frequent use of the words 'refugee', 'alienated' and 'adopted home' in the following sets tend to corroborate this observation. This has some correlations with W.E.B. Dubois' notion of 'double-consciousness' with particular reference to his notion that:

One ever feels his twoness ... two souls,
two thoughts, two unrecognised strivings,
two warring ideals in one dark body'
(In Watkins, 1994/9:26).

Watkins used this notion to explore disjunctive relations between African Americans and white North Americans, but as a model it can be applied in a different way here in that Khorsandi is of Iranian origins but living in exile in Britain. However, she avoids one element of ambiguity by clarifying her identity from the start of her set, 'I am Iranian'. Ambiguity

is further avoided because there is no *British* prefix attached to these words and as such they avoid engaging with Rattansi's notion of the 'fierce struggles around the essentialisms that such hyphenated identities have often implied' (2000:119). Throughout her sets, Khorsandi continues to resist the notion of being 'prefixed'. Her sense of 'twoness' is personal as much as it is cultural and she constantly takes steps to establish her separateness.

She opens her set at the Apollo by subtly establishing difference in saying to the audience, 'Lovely to see you - this is like one of my family weddings only a slightly different colour.' The last phrase 'a slightly different colour' offers a qualifying element which makes the point more strongly that she perceives herself as 'different' from her audience. The word 'slightly' also suggest that Khorsandi could pass as 'white'. This is to align it with the use of the term 'black' to represent being Afro-Caribbean.

Khorsandi also establishes both her identity and her sense of being different in the following joke.

I am from the Middle East - a lot of Americans
Don't know the difference between Iran and Iraq
and I have to explain - we're the ones *with* weapons
of mass destruction
(*Live at the Apollo*, 2008).

In the opening words 'I am from the Middle East', Khorsandi identifies herself both in terms of her origins and as 'alien' rather than belonging to the British diasporic space she has inhabited since 1976. This is where Dubois' 'two warring ideals' has some application in the sense that psychically and physically, Khorsandi is torn. To further strengthen this point spatially, she is hailing 'from over there', rather than from 'here'. She further establishes her position by distancing herself culturally from Iraq. An element of pride can also be detected in the words 'we are the

ones *with* weapons of mass destruction'. The phrase 'we are the ones' also substantiate her sense of identity whilst her stress on the word '*with*' almost defiantly engages with notions of alienation. There would seem to be an ambivalent relationship between the personal, the socio-political and the global here in the satirical reference to 'weapons of mass destruction'. She also unequivocally sets herself apart in the following.

Humour is such a huge part of my family culture -
I was praised more for making people laugh
than for good grades ... Still, I did grow up with
a strong sense of feeling isolated from mainstream
British society. Iranian culture was everywhere in
our home, the only place for me that was English
was school
(Iranian diaspora: Shappi Khorsandi: news.bbc.co.uk).

The reference to 'growing up with a strong sense of being isolated from mainstream British society' strongly exemplifies Ali Rattansi's question, 'Why, after fifty years of a growing and significant black and Asian presence in Britain, is it still so difficult to be black or Asian and British' (2000:120). Khorsandi's suggestion that Englishness was only relevant at school would seem to partially illustrate Rattansi's notion that '*Englishness* ... is definitely seen forever as a 'white thing' (2000:130). And yet, that is not the case here because as later jokes suggest, the school attended by Khorsandi is a multi-cultural London school.

However, Khorsandi seems only hesitantly to accept British diasporic space as a 'new homeland' to quote Ponnuswami (2007:34) when she says:

I feel that Britain is my adoptive parent. If I say,
'I feel Iranian', it does not mean I don't love the UK.
It's just that no matter how much you feel part of an
adopted family you know you are from somewhere else
(Iranian diaspora: Shappi Khorsandi: news.bbc.co.uk).

Here, Khorsandi again qualifies her identity, not as British or even as

British Iranian, but as Iranian with an embodied sense of certainty as shown in the words ‘*I feel Iranian*’. Her identity here is also not so much multiple as it is adaptive. Furthermore, the reference to ‘Britain as an adoptive parent’ alongside the words ‘you know you are from somewhere else’ highlights a sense of both cultural and personal dejection that Dubois was describing in his notion of ‘double-consciousness’ in that ‘One ever feels his sense of twoness’ (In Watkins, 1994/9:26).

Khorsandi’s images have again have a spatial quality to them and the notion of looking both ways in the sense of being *here*, but looking *there*, or being in the present, but looking to the past (or perhaps the future). The notion of being ‘from somewhere else’ also has correlations with Annabelle Sreberny’s essay ‘Media and diasporic consciousness: an exploration among Iranians in London’ which notes:

how work which focuses on racism, xenophobia
and the dynamics of exclusion in western societies
often overlooks the importance of cultural memories
and attachments to other spaces and places that
ethnic communities often hold dear (In Cottle (ed), 2000:27).

These thesis argues that Khorsandi’s work both explores ‘the dynamics of exclusion’ alongside ‘attachments to other spaces and places’ in her work.¹⁰² Khorsandi came to Britain with her family from Iran in 1976. The implications here are again spatial in emphasizing movement *from* Iran rather than *to* Britain. Moreover, she sees her position as liminal in that, although she is a second-generation British transnational, she is also a refugee who cannot return to her homeland and who must constantly and repeatedly adapt to living in diasporic space.

In the next set of jokes, Khorsandi continues to establish her heritage alongside engaging with a number of other important socio-political issues which also have spatial dimensions.

¹⁰² Such views also recall Meera Syal’s words that ‘there will always be a part of me that

Khorsandi: I was actually born in Iran - but I'm legal.
I sometimes wonder how I would have been if I had
grown up in Iran because women aren't allowed -
pause - they're just not - *pause* - unless -they are
covered from head to toes which would be great -
I'd never have to lose weight again
(*Live at the Apollo*, 2008).

Khorsandi again feels compelled to confirm her roots as Iranian, this time by virtue of being 'born' there. However, the complexity of this joke also strengthens the element of spatial liminality. Firstly, the brief reference to being 'legal' draws attention to the uncertainty of moving from one geographic space to another. On the other hand, her speculations on 'how I would have been if I had grown up in Iran' strengthen the impossibility of going back. The references to being 'covered from head to foot' are also spatial but ambivalent in suggesting both absence and presence.

The words 'women aren't allowed' followed by a pause and 'they're just not' also recalls Mirza's joke about no Muslim man wanting to marry her 'because I speak'. The seemingly incomplete sentences are also important in being in the passive, rather than the active voice. Would Khorsandi's comedy be seen as dangerous in Iran and would she be in danger for doing it? The above joke seems to affirm both questions and confirms that her stand-up comedy is more socio-political than feminist.

Alienation or integration

In the stand-up comedy sets explored so far, Khorsandi has fully immersed herself in the role of the outsider and in notion of alienation. However, other aspects of her sets offer a different picture in that they reveal not so much a sense of belonging, as a feeling of knowing what it is like to be British. In the following sets, she also seems to fit Rattansi's

will be forever *not* England' (With Bragg, 2003),

notion that:

Young black and Asian people become adept at identity switching, combining various forms of Asianness, Britishness ... as they become more at home with not being at home ... (2000:130).

This act of 'identity switching' is exemplified with reference to school which Khorsandi saw as epitomizing 'Englishness'. This set effectively suggests that Khorsandi is indeed, adept at separating the different worlds she inhabits within diasporic space.

Khorsandi: I went to a big London comprehensive for my teenage high school years. It was the sort of school where I couldn't get eye contact with the popular girls. Because it was like, 'What? What? What you looking at?' And they thought they weren't my friend because I was a posh snob. I tried to say to them, 'Look. I'm not a snob. I'm an outsider like you - for goodness sake. Look. My parents are immigrants. They can't read or write English, just like yours' (*Live at the Apollo*, 2008).

Khorsandi highlights herself as outsider even at school, as a recurring motif of her work, and a variation on a theme. However, in the above, there is an echo of Victoria Wood's sense of being 'outside the gang' in the words 'couldn't get eye contact with the popular girls'. There is also the suggestion that Khorsandi wanted to be one of these 'popular girls'. Moreover, again as with Wood, her words 'I'm an outsider like you' in the above, actually makes her an insider. The term 'posh snob' places her more specifically within the middle-class, whilst those who reject her are seen as working class as is suggested by notion that their parents 'can't read and write English'. In terms of performance, Khorsandi is effective at conveying a lot of information in some seemingly innocuous phrases. The London school cited seems to represent a micro diasporic space which is set apart from the bigger notion of 'Britishness'.

Integration

The following two sets move away from the notion of alienation to offer examples of integration and a sense of attachment to something which is British, but which does not represent Britishness. Rattansi's essay is of particular pertinence to this section in that she observes that:

Loyalties to different British locales may now play a more important role as young blacks, in some contexts sees themselves as coming from particular parts of London or Birmingham and draw distinct black boundaries (2000:123).

In this first joke, Khorsandi moves performatively between speaking in the style of a middle-class English woman and using the words and attitude of her younger sister who is immersed in London's imported African-American hip hop culture.

Khorsandi: I have a little sister who is one of those who goes 'What?' and says, 'Shut up, man, 'cos I got friends who would take a bullet for me.' Take a bullet for me! She works in an old people's home on Saturday! (*Live at the Apollo*, 2008).

Here, the sister who is 'brown' is trying to move in the other direction and show a 'commitment to *blackness*'. However, Khorsandi's repetition of the phrase 'Take a bullet for me' mockingly deflates the pretentiousness attributed to her 'little sister'. Moreover, the reference to a Saturday job situates the sister as being very much at home within the Britain's 'middle-class'.

Rattansi notes that 'Aspirations to *middle-classness* are often seen as heralding a weakness of commitment to '*blackness*' (2000:124), but she also observes that the 'use of patois and standard English serve as markers for both types of identification' (ibid, 124). It is very apparent that both

the 'little sister' and Khorsandi have an understanding of both of these cultures, alongside their own Iranian culture which exists in two separate countries - Iran and Britain. Moreover, she displays an ability for 'identity switching' in performance terms here.

Rattansi also refers to the 'black dominated mixture of cockney and patois' in certain parts of the metropolis such as 'safe' (good, OK, certain), 'innit' (isn't it) and 'wicked' (really good) ... the last two being also particularly widespread among working-class Asians' (2000:127). The phrase 'take a bullet for me' has the connotation of these types of phrase, together with the added notion of 'brotherhood' and an acceptance of the cultural presence of youth violence. In contrast, Khorsandi uses the words, tone and movement of mainstream British culture, whilst also situating herself at a distance from it. The Saturday job 'in an old people's home' also belies the assumed persona of the younger sister to reveal a middle-class British white position.

Khorsandi also performs the street movements of young blacks by flicking and clicking her fingers. She then smiles disarmingly as she moves into the 'street' voice of London's black 'hip-hop' youth culture.

Khorsandi: You shouldn't have bopped
my sister, that was a bit disrespectful,
but I shouldn't have gone down on
your dad (*Live at the Apollo*, 2008).

The words 'bopped' and 'gone down on' have a street credibility, whilst the reference to being 'a bit disrespectful' highlights a strong attitude of the disaffected young seeking a place in British society. This set signifies a linguistic attachment not to *Britishness*, but to London's young blacks. What is interesting here is that Khorsandi not only knows the British way of life but she also knows the way in which youth culture has become influenced by African-American hip-hop culture. Indeed, Khorsandi here seems to reject 'Englishness' and even 'Britishness' in favour of

identifying herself with British young black and Asian cultures found in the locales of major British cities. In many ways it could be described as going beyond national boundaries to create global relationships. Rattansi refers to ‘cultural borrowings from black and white youth subcultures’ regarding music and identity (2000:129). There seems to be the suggestion that Khorsandi’s ‘sister’ is more assimilated in this culture than she is. However, in this Khorsandi is revealing a good sense of being able to switch performance styles. She verbally sites herself in an oppositional place within the British diasporic space whilst much of her work reveals a stronger picture of integration.

Racism

The issue of racism was discussed with regard to the previous three case-studies of this chapter, here, yet another perspective is given. It is argued that in Khorsandi’s stand-up sets explored in this chapter she tends to instigate a separation, however she also draws attention to examples of British racism. Khorsandi highlights the confusion of racists in the following joke:

Khorsandi: My favourite immigrants are Polish people because they properly confuse old-fashioned racists. Have you seen them? ‘What do we do? What do we say? They’re immigrants but they’re white.’ I heard one bloke say, ‘Bloody Poles coming over here with their *work ethic*’ (*Live at the Apollo*, 2008).

The reference to ‘Bloody Poles’ and ‘their *work ethic*’ is significant in suggesting an element of stupidity in ‘old-fashioned racists’. The above has correlations with Christie Davies’ points about racial anxiety and racial inferiority in his essay ‘Jokes from the Iron Cage’ (In Powell and Paton, 1988). He refers to the ‘need to be reassured that they are not really stupid and that real stupidity is safely restricted to the ranks of the Poles

...’ (ibid, 4). The confusion surrounding the skin colour of Polish immigrants is also very effectively highlighted in the questions ‘What do we do?’ and ‘What do we say?’ To be ‘immigrant and white’ is to be ambiguous to ‘old-fashioned racists’, who clearly, are justified in feeling anxiety about their stupidity. The performance history of stand-up comedy shows that racist jokes were a regular part of ‘old’ twentieth century comedy. Furthermore, it has been perpetuated into the twenty-first century by comics such as Bernard Manning, Jim Davidson and Chubby Brown.

The next joke suggests a more insidious form of racism in that it is woven into the fabric of relationships.

Khorsandi: But a bit of friendly racism is ok.
When I used to visit my friend, Katie, every time
her dad opened the door, he’d say,
‘Hello, Shappi. Been on holiday? Ha, ha, ha’
(*Live at the Apollo*, 2008).

Khorsandi’s critique of her friend’s dad has a double ‘sting’ in the words ‘a bit of friendly racism is ok.’ This recalls Yashere’s words ‘I even vote BNP.’ Again the qualifying words ‘a bit’ have significance in suggesting the opposite of what is being said. Here is evidence of embedded racism. The following goes further to draw attention to institutionalized racism and clearly exacerbates Khorsandi’s sense of and embodied alienation in its attack on her name, colour and region of origin.

Khorsandi: I went to a Christian school and wanted
to play an angel in the nativity play, but my teacher says,
‘Shittaback, little blond girls play angels, little
brown girls play the whores of Babylon’
(*Live at the Apollo*, 2008).

Khorsandi’s misrepresented name derives from the fact that the teacher is unable to pronounce her full Iranian name which is Shaparak. The mispronunciation of names is an conspicuous signifier of personal and

cultural alienation and the sense of not belonging. Institutional racism is hinted at in the reference to 'my teacher', and this is exacerbated because the school in question is a primary school. The following joke is less potent but it also highlights the notion of skin colour as a 'badge' of identity as Khorsandi says:

I went to Brownies as well but my parents sent me there because they thought it was an after-school club for Asian kids (*Live at the Apollo*, 2008).

Thus far, she has established her identity in terms of geographical space but here she addresses the matter of skin colour. Ali Rattansi observes that whilst blacks are defined by colour, Asians are defined (and stereotyped) by geography. She prefers to describe Asians as brown (2000:120). It would certainly appear that the reference to 'little brown girls' playing 'the whores of Babylon' has more impact than if the word Asian had been inserted.

Khorsandi is not afraid of self-revelation as she ranges over different types of racism and includes herself in the groups. She cites an occasion when performing at The Comedy Club, she asked two black men sitting in the front row 'How do you know each other?' One of men replied, 'We don't!' Khorsandi tells her present Apollo Theatre audience, 'I might as well have had NF (National Front) written on my forehead.' The inference being made here is that very few blacks would attend a theatre. Gina Yashere makes a similar joke when talking to three white men in the audience at her show at the Hackney Empire (2008) but her joke is more explicit and menacing when she says, 'There is safety in numbers'.

Khorsandi punctuates her comedy with much laughter. She is good at leaving spaces within the joke for her audience to laugh and she frequently allows them to get the joke before it is finished. C P Wilson talks of the 'etcetera' principle where 'you leave things unsaid, but assumed, presupposed, implied' (1979:162). As noted elsewhere,

Khorsandi has sufficient skill with different English idioms to be able to assess what will be ‘assumed’ or ‘presupposed’ by her British audience. Her style has similarities to the style of Victoria Wood and Gina Yashere in that she demonstrates good observational skills. Khorsandi’s gestures, expression and tone offer a counterpoint to the issues she explores within her work. A ‘blogger’ on Shazia Mirza’s website also noted such skills, although she mistakenly compared them erroneously with Mirza’s own skills.

Layla: If the only thing that defines Shazia Mirza is her religion then I feel pretty sorry for her ... She needs to take a leaf out of Shappi Khorsandi’s book. Now there is a stand-up who is engaging, brilliant with delivery, and totally hilarious and not a one-trick pony that relies on her status as an “ethnic minority” for laughs-unlike Shazia (23.3.05).

It must be agreed that Khorsandi is ‘brilliant with delivery’, however, the reference to suggestion that she is ‘not a one-trick pony that relies on her status as an “ethnic minority” must be disputed with regard to this 2009 show at the Apollo. Shappi Khorsandi’s stand-up comedy decidedly engages with notions of ‘double-consciousness’ and ‘split vision’ (In Watkins, 1994/9:26-27). However, like other transnational female comics, she appears to subvert both notions to engage with ‘double-vision’ in that she is the one looking at the indigenous population within this diasporic space, rather than looking at her self ‘through their eyes’. Khorsandi also enjoys being able to play with identity and in this she exemplifies Rattansi’s reference to ‘the skilfulness with which they’, namely young Asian people ‘are juggling with a whole spectrum of identities and bringing off brilliantly staged performative acts ...’ (2000:130). Khorsandi has merely translated this to the stand-up comedy arena.

This chapter has indicated that the performance of the ‘comic side of bodily abjection’ for transnational case-studies comes in many diverse

forms. It has also indicated that as 'second-generation' transnationals, they have also engaged with trying to find new ways to be British and, via their stand-up comedy they encourage their audience to do the same.

Chapter Four

New developments, new stand-up comics, new audiences

Introduction

This chapter examines new trends relating to British female stand-up comedy in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The investigation applies to females as performers and audience members and engages strongly with feminist theory as well as with elements of socio-cultural practice. The relationship between these new trends and the performance history of female stand-up comedy holds important keys to this chapter in that it addresses anew the issues of female being absent or marginal within stand-up comedy. Also in this chapter, new developments are highlighted alongside new footings and the forging of new traditions within female stand-up comedy. A stronger female presence is indicated and a state of becoming, rich in potentiality. As elsewhere the key question of this chapter is how far the case-studies cited can be said to engage with, or perform, the comic side of bodily abjection. In answering this question, important issues explored here include: notions of embodiment and disembodiment, risk and vulnerability; and the concept of ‘looking at oneself through the eyes of others’.

Part One of the chapter examines the work of four female case-studies who have become involved in the field of stand-up comedy during this first decade of the twenty-first century: these include Lynne Parker, the originator of the Funny Women organization and facilitator of female entrance onto the stand-up comedy circuit; Debra-Jane Appleby (2006) and Andi Osho (2007) two winners of Funny Women stand-up comedy competitions; and Pam Blunden, the author of this thesis and erstwhile performer of stand-up comedy. Source material regarding Lynne Parker

comes from the Funny Women website and from a telephone interview with Pam Blunden (June, 2010). The work of Appleby and Osho is examined as viewed on YouTube. Osho also participated in a telephone interview with Blunden (July, 2010). Blunden's own embodied practice includes participation in a twelve-week stand-up comedy workshop, the performance of stand-up comedy at the Colchester Arts Centre (2003) and herself as audience.

Part Two engages with Media Theory and Audience Studies and puts the female as audience at the centre of the discussion in order to further examine female 'joking relations', female laughter, new female audiences and new levels of participation. These areas are addressed with reference to Colchester Arts Centre (2004 and 2007), Comedy Camp at Soho's Barcode Club (2006) and the Funny Women's *International Women's Day* which was held at the Hammersmith Palais (2007). Live televised performances previously cited in Chapters Two and Three are also used, along with details of 'blogged' reviews taken from the Chortle website.

4.1.1 Case-study: Lynne Parker

This first section explores a development in the arena of stand-up comedy which is decidedly significant. It centres on the work of Lynne Parker who set up the *Funny Women* organization in 2002 in order to address the scarcity of white and transnational females on the stand-up comedy circuit, and to facilitate their entry into this domain. In doing this, she has changed the face of the history of British stand-up comedy as much as Peter Rosengard and Don Ward did in facilitating Alternative Comedy in the 1980s. The ethos of Parker's organization is inevitably feminist in intention, with a strong commitment to change. It also promotes female 'solidarity' in that it engages with other notable women's groups. As a

facilitator, she cannot be said to *perform* the comic side of bodily abjection herself, however, she unquestionably addresses the subject in her work on a number of fronts. She engages with the same important issues which have been already explored within this thesis.

Taking up space

The first important area relates to the important element of the female body taking up space. When Parker set up Funny Women in 2002, her aim was to change the system within stand-up comedy. In a telephone interview, she told the author of this thesis, ‘I set out to give women the opportunity to perform in the same space as men and on an equal footing in terms of billing, pay etc’ (June, 2010). Parker’s references to ‘the same space’ and ‘equal footing’ point to the important concept of embodiment which have been frequently addressed within this thesis in terms of females ‘taking up space’ and ‘owning that space’. Parker offers many ways for this to happen in that her Funny Women website states that:

Founded in 2002 by Lynne Parker, former journalist, broadcaster and marketing consultant, Funny Women has become a leading industry player, exclusively discovering and developing new female talent through live events, workshops, training programmes and our very own national competition, the Funny Women Awards, now run in association with leading beauty brand NIVEA (26.11.8).

Important developments are highlighted in the above including a systematic attention to workshops and training programmes for females seeking to perform stand-up comedy.¹⁰³ Moreover, the reference to Parker as ‘a leading industry player’ confirms the influence that her work has had on the stand-up comedy arena. Change is also seen in that Funny Women

¹⁰³ These are addressed later in this section.

is about *exclusively* ‘discovering and developing new female talent’.¹⁰⁴ This exclusivity was not available to the ‘first-’ and ‘second-generation’ females case-studies discussed in Chapters Two and Three. Indeed, they had no support network and had to ‘elbow’ their way onto the male-dominated stand-up comedy circuit.

Female absence

A key issue engaged with at the inception of Funny Women in 2002 was the way in which females had previously been marginalized in the stand-up comedy arena. As both Mary Douglas (1966) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) have suggested, marginal elements are threatening. Douglas goes as far as to say that ‘*All margins are dangerous*’ (1966:150). Here the issue of being marginalized is raised as a general question which is ‘Why have there been so relatively few females in stand-up comedy since its modern inception in the mid-1960s?’ This question clearly engaged Parker as is shown in the following interview for *Every Woman* (a website concerned with female issues) Parker said:

When I asked why they never booked any women for the club, I was told that there were very few good women who could do stand-up ... For minority ethnic women, the biases are twofold (21st December, 2007).

This notion of a perceived lack of funniness in females is at the core of such comments. This is also demonstrated by an article by Julie Bindel of *The Guardian* which printed a remark made by Christopher Hitchens in *Vanity Fair* where he asks:

Why are women, who have the whole male world at their mercy, not funny? There are some impressive ladies out there, but that they tend to be hefty or dykey

¹⁰⁴ The author’s use of italics in this sentence is to stress the particular attention that is being now paid to female stand-up comics.

or Jewish, or some combo of the three
(6th July, 2007).

Hitchen's words reveal that not only are females thought *not* to be funny, but when they are, they are seen as deviant. Such views are not new. The sexism, homophobia and racism in the words 'hefty or dykey or Jewish' have precedents in the jokes of 'old' comedy of the mid-twentieth century.

Andrew Stott's book *Comedy* also draws attention to other reasons why females are not thought to be suited to stand-up as he cites the 'often repeated opinion that women are not as naturally funny as men due to the belief that comedy is boisterous and aggressive and therefore temperamentally unsuited to women' (2005:99). This would also appear to be an outmoded point of view; however, the next few paragraphs offer some interesting perspectives which engage with Stott's observations.

The following comments are taken from a telephone interview with Funny Women winner (2007) Andi Osho, who seemingly agree with Stott:

Osho: I think that there are more men in comedy because that is how they communicate - through banter- but women have more of an emotional exchange ... It takes a set of more masculine skills to stand up on stage in front of people and make them laugh, but it's not naturally how women communicate (With Blunden, July, 2010).

Osho's points are interesting, but they do not represent the view taken by Lynne Parker, nor by the author of this thesis. Nevertheless, some important points are raised in them. Firstly, the reference to women having 'more of an emotional exchange' seems to automatically exclude them from doing stand-up comedy in Osho's view. Moreover, in daily life there is the commonly held view that female emotions are to blame for their limitations (and for everything else that goes wrong). This concept was first suggested in Chapter Two in relation to Victoria Wood's set on

the menopause where she said, 'I put everything down to the menopause - tiredness, irritability, global warming'. However, an effective challenge to Osho's views can be seen in Judy Carter's book *Stand-up Comedy: the Book* which argues that audiences respond to emotions. She advises stand-up comics to talk about things which they feel 'angry, worried, frightened or proud about' and to 'exaggerate your feelings' (1989:34). The reference to audience response is particularly significant here.

Osho's suggestion that 'It takes a set of more masculine skills' to do stand-up comedy hints at the notions of 'vulnerability' and 'risk' which have been highlighted throughout this thesis. Indeed, such matters arose when Blunden referred Osho back to a previous interview in which she (Osho) said, 'I didn't go into comedy before because I didn't have the balls'. Blunden said 'that seems to illustrate the masculine aspect you talk about'. Osho's words suggest that is not so much the activity of doing stand-up comedy which needs 'masculine skills' because observations it is 'boisterous' or 'aggressive' but rather, it is the responses from the (male) audience which frequently contain such elements.

Shazia Mirza also discusses the notion of risk in an *Every Woman* interview when she comments on the fact that 'there are more women in the competitions but less on the circuits'. Mirza says:

To survive, I'm turning into a bloke. It's not only that I am growing a moustache and beard, but I am turning into a man, more aggressive, I do what the men do. I just get on (21st December, 2007).

Mirza's use of the words 'survive' and 'turning into a bloke' seem to suggest the potential intimidation that a female comic can receive from a male audience. On the other hand her words 'turning into a man', and becoming 'more aggressive' seem to endorse Osho's perception. These views would also seem to support Parker's decision to offer exclusive stand-up comedy platforms for females to hone their skills.

Absence and a hidden presence

In her interview with Lynne Parker, the author of this thesis discusses the question of the 'hidden presence' of females able to perform stand-up comedy and possible reasons for the prior absence from this domain.

Blunden: Do you think there are many reasons why females were hitherto missing from stand-up comedy?

Parker: The comment made by the man about female absence from comedy was the catalyst. I said, 'I don't agree with you, they are out there' (June, 2010).

Parker's words 'they are out there' exemplify Mary Douglas' notion that 'That which is negated is not thereby removed. The rest of life, which does not tidily fit the accepted categories is still there and demands attention' (1966:202). This awareness that something 'is still there and demands attention' was the catalyst for Parker to actively set out to encourage females to enter stand-up comedy workshops and competitions. Moreover, she offers these opportunities within the 'safety' of niche events, which are exclusively for female talent. One such event included an Asian Women's Night on (June, 2010).

Parker: We did this to attract more women from the Pan Asian community to take part as, again, culturally, it is not usual for Muslim or Hindu women to flaunt themselves. All we have done is to offer them a chance to perform (June, 2010).

Parker recognizes that all women need the opportunity to make other women laugh. Moreover, she ensures that there is accommodation of anything which might inhibit these opportunities. Other examples of important issues which might keep females away from participating in stand-up are to be found in the following:

Parker: ... because it is an anti-social life,

poorly paid and a boys' club. It might involve long times away from home. Pressure - for example if you leave to have a baby as Kathryn Ryan has done - because it is quite hard to get back in, not withstanding child-care. It is hard to work around children anyway – for anybody (With Blunden, June, 2010).

The issues of 'an anti-social life', the 'long times away from home' and child-care' as reasons for female absence recall similar references to the relationship between domestic issues and female absence from the public arena. Micheline Wandor pointed towards the ambivalence surrounding such matters during the 1950s and 1960s when she noted how 'large numbers of women still worked outside the home, but women's magazines extolled the virtues of feminine wife and mother, and domestic craft skills' (1981/86:7). Such matters are explored in the essay 'Exploring Embodiment: Women, Biology and Work' by Joanna Brewis and John Sinclair. These writers note that the structure of the modern organization 'operates in such a way as to (attempt to) foreclose the possibility that 'lower order' bodily behaviours might 'impinge' on the cool rationality ... demanded in the modern workplace' (2000:193). The fact that such issues are still pertinent in the twenty-first century is worrying, although clearly they are being addressed by Parker's organization.

The notion of a 'boys' club' was also suggested in Chapter One where it was revealed that both 'old' comedy and Alternative Comedy were heavily dominated by men as revealed in Angus Deayton's documentary *The History of Alternative Comedy* (1999). As also demonstrated there has been limited female presence in the short history of British stand-up comedy. Oliver Double particularly notes the shortage of female stand-up comics in the 1970s (1997:153). Moreover, as previously shown, few white females joined this group even in the nineteen-eighties, and no transnational females until the 1990s. Victoria Wood tells Dawn French for *Girls Who Do Comedy* (2007) that there must be some sociological

reason because there is nothing to stop them. The reasons are clearly the ones highlighted by Parker.

Parker also speaks to Blunden of the ‘lucky few women’ who had got into comedy such as Wood, Brand, Éclair and French and Saunders and how ‘the drawbridge was then drawn up for new acts coming through’.

Parker: Maybe this reflects the fact that it was so hard for them to get there in the first place, they didn’t want to share the stage with any other women. Jenny Éclair is on record as saying, ‘I like being the only woman in stand-up comedy’... Now she has to compete with all the new female talent coming through (June, 2010).

The implications of the above are that female stand-up comics were not hitherto overly supportive of other females trying to enter into stand-up comedy. This is surprising in view of the fact that many of these ‘first-generation’ stand-up comics would have been influenced by the second wave Women’s Movement. However, Parker indicated that Jo Brand is very supportive of Funny Women and new female comics generally (June, 2010). She (Brand) was the headliner for Funny Women’s *International Women’s Day* at the Hammersmith Palais (2007). If the above has been concerned with the marginalized position of females in relation to the stand-up comedy arena, the following explores a stronger relationship between Funny Women and female abjection.

A new engagement with female bodily abjection:

The case-studies of this thesis have highlighted female bodily abjection in a number of different ways. However, Parker’s organization moves beyond both ideology and performance, to practically engage with females experiencing female abjection. She does by ensuring that some of the proceeds from female stand-up comedy shows go to organizations

fighting on behalf of women. This is done in a number of ways as is shown in the following sections.

Firstly, the *Funny Women Stand Up: International Women's Day 8th March, 2007 (V-Day)* had a political agenda to develop awareness of global female issues.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, reference was made to the group Actionaid which is financially supported by Funny Women and which 'helps women in the developing world fight discrimination and lift themselves out of poverty' (March 8th, 2007). In this, Funny Women reveals its strong political and feminist agenda which engages with the notions of 'solidarity' and sisterhood' which were key tenets of second wave feminism as indicated by Wandor (1981/6:13).

Of equal importance is the fact similar perspectives on global issues are held by many third-wave feminists who are involved in the practice of performance. Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris in their essay 'Feminist Futures and the Possibilities of 'We'?' note that 'it is no longer possible to overlook the connections between the local and the 'global' regarding violence, injustice and inequalities' (2007:3). Meenakshi Ponnuswami's essay on citizenship, gender and Asian-British performance also begins with the premise that:

... a radical and utopian rethinking of the idea of globalization must be the promise and goal of feminism, its future; and that theatre and other performative arts have a key role to play in visualizing the international, making it possible to imagine bodies in transnational and transcultural interplay (2007:34).

The notions of 'visualizing the international' and imagining 'bodies in transnational and transcultural interplay' in the above draw attention to the way in which feminist ideologies and practices are becoming increasingly

¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, the title of the event recalls Micheline Wandor's reference to 'a march through London to celebrate International Women's Day' which had taken place nearly forty years earlier in 1971 (1981/6:114).

expansive in the twenty-first century. Moreover, as was indicated with reference to Lizbeth Goodman (1993) and Micheline Wandor (1981/6) in Chapter One, female performance has invariably existed within the framework of feminist and political ideology.

The ‘not so comic side of female bodily abjection’

A second important area of concern to Parker and her organization relates to the bodily abjections of female cancers and violence against women. The Funny Women website says:

Part of Funny Women’s ethos is to raise funds for causes relating to women - from charities that conduct research into female-specific cancers to organizations that work towards combating violence against women (downloaded, 24.10.08).

‘Female specific cancers’ and ‘violence against women’ are indisputably examples of female bodily abjection. In her leaflet relating to the V-Day event, Parker writes, ‘V-Day reminds us that the bodies and minds of all women, across all cultures, need to be celebrated, protected and respected’. As already noted, such views were strong among second-wave feminists, but postfeminists Aston and Harris also see ‘an enduring ‘attachment’ to certain ideals as remaining important and necessary to improving the social and cultural welfare of ‘women’s lives’ (2007:3). Whilst Mary Russo argues how ‘the reintroduction of the body and categories of the body ... into the realm of the ‘political’ has been a central concern of feminism’ (1995:54). These views certainly endorse the work in which Funny Women is engaged and demonstrate that its aims are not unique among feminist groups.

Orifices, surfaces and crevices of the body

Orifices are connected with both the carnival grotesque and with female bodily abjection and have been explored extensively within the stand-up comedy of the case-studies of this thesis. Mikhail Bakhtin sees ‘the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts’ represent the body which is not a ‘closed completed unit, it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits’ (1984:26). This draws attention to the potentiality of the body within carnival mode. The Funny Women organization also pays close attention to these aspects of the body, but here, they are implicated in female cancers as is indicated in the following:

In memory of the late Linda Smith, one of our beneficiary charities for 2007 is Ovarian Cancer Action ... the charity funds research into the prevention, detection, treatment and cure of ovarian cancer ... and gives a voice to women with ovarian cancer to combat the view that this is a silent killer. 12 women die every day, 4th common cancer in women. (www.funnywomen.com. downloaded 24.10.08).

The words ‘gives a voice to women’ have been important to this thesis throughout and here highlights two more important points. Firstly, Funny Women is able to ‘give a voice to women’ on a number of fronts, whilst acknowledging that many females still do not have ‘vocal space’. Secondly, as indicated in the above, conditions relating to bodily orifices, surfaces and processes such as hysterectomies and ovarian cancer are more than just ‘women’s subjects’, they are ‘universal female health issues’.¹⁰⁶ Thus, there is still a need to address ‘women’s issues’ in female stand-up comedy for female ‘bodily abjection’ still exists. Gina Yashere does comic sets on her lupus (2008) Victoria Wood discusses her hysterectomy in her sets (2001), Jo Brand does a set on checking the health of her cervix (2003), whilst Shazia Mirza jokes about receiving death threats for doing stand-up comedy (2004). Parker’s organisation

¹⁰⁶ This interrogates the notion that male comedy has ‘universal’ appeal whilst female

reveals that female stand-up comedy is clearly neither light relief nor an escape from the world, but an engagement with female (and feminist) issues.¹⁰⁷

The sex industry

A third aspect of female bodily abjection with which Funny Women engages relates to supporting organizations which work with those who are forced to use their body as a sexual object. This has some correlations with the notion of the female as butt of the sexual joke, although it is much darker. Sexual jokes abound within male stand-up comedy and joke theorist Jerry Palmer suggests that (male) dirty jokes ‘... assert the primacy of coitus, the universal availability of women ... and portray women as an object’ (1994:72/3).¹⁰⁸ However, such matters are not a joke to some women as Parker indicates with reference to OBJECT which is another important charity partner for Funny Women. This group is ‘an award-winning human rights organization that address the challenging issues of the pornography and sex industries and their increasing normalisation’. Some of its successes are highlighted in the following:

Most recently it has seen an end to the licensing of lap dancing clubs as cafes and new laws to protect women who are pimped, trafficked or otherwise coerced into prostitution. We are proud and delighted that we can support and raise money for their campaigns (August 10th, 2010).

The importance of the above successes can best be understood in terms of the word ‘normalisation’ which represents an encroachment of abjection. Julia Kristeva sees the corpse as ‘... a border that has encroached upon

comedy does not; this is discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁰⁷ Male comedy also highlights important issues, but a full discussion of male comedy is beyond the remit of this thesis.

¹⁰⁸ Palmer’s views were previously discussed in relation to the sexual jokes of Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders in Chapter Two.

everything ... (1982:3). It is the 'utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life' (ibid, 4). The fact that there are 'new laws to protect women' reveals exactly how far 'normalisation' of abjection had encroached

The above examples also draw attention to the fact that Parker's work with *Funny Women* juxtaposes the performance of female stand-up comedy with the 'not-so-comic side' of female bodily abjection. Bringing the serious into comedy is both threatening and shocking - a violation of comedy's boundaries. Peter L Berger in his book on the 'comic dimension of life' argues that the serious and comic exclude each other (1997: xiv). However, as with many other aspects of female stand-up comedy, there is a breaking of the rules, and an exceeding of the supposed norms of what can be done within this arena.

As noted throughout this thesis, even within the content of female stand-up comedy, there is the juxtaposition of the serious and the comic. Victoria Wood, Gina Yashere and Andi Osho describe their stand-up comedy as merely entertainment. However, all three females actually demonstrate the opposite within their stand-up comedy sets by dealing with important feminist or diasporic issues. In this sense it could be said that 'the serious and the comic' do *not* 'exclude each other'. This thesis argues that female stand-up comedy *is* and *should be* entertainment, but that there it will almost inevitably contain an interrogation of abjection and socio-cultural and political incongruity.

Gender issues and 'women's subjects'

In relation to the above female issues, and to prior considerations of the place of 'women's subjects' in the performance of female stand-up comedy, the author of this thesis asked Parker for her views on the contents of female stand-up comic routines.

Blunden: How far would you say the newcomers deal with gender issues and/or 'women's subjects'?

Parker: Sneered at - so typical of middle-class men. When I say what I do, I more often than not get a cynical reaction. 'Funny? Women? That's an oxymoron.'
'Who's the moron here?' I ask (June, 2010).

Whilst clearly somewhat cryptic and highly condensed, Parker's reply nevertheless, makes a number of very important points regarding male responses to female comics. It also demonstrates the skill of a stand-up comic in the pithiness of the phrase 'Who's the moron here?' to the suggestion that funny women represent an 'oxymoron'. Above all, Parker seems to be saying that the 'middle-class men' referred to have little idea about female stand-up comedy, and even less interest as is revealed in the words 'Sneered at'. The fact that Parker does not go further to specifically answer the question might suggest that there is a block to females doing comedy on anything of importance to them because of the 'cynical reactions' which still surface from some men.

'Women's subjects' must be seen within the context of the performance history of stand-up comedy. Firstly, as demonstrated in Chapter One, with particular reference to Oliver Double (1997) et al, females were seen as the butt of numerous 'old' comedy jokes. Indeed, Double makes reference to what he called 'joke-wives' which includes the bossy wife, the ugly wife or the wife who was a 'religious cook' because, 'Everything she sends up is either a sacrifice or a burnt offering' (ibid, 67). In short, the female body and female domesticity were seen as easy targets for male jokes (1997:64-65). However, this chapter follows the trajectory of females away from being the butt of the joke, to becoming producers of jokes themselves. It therefore seems obvious that they would then deal with the incongruities of their earlier positions.

Andrew Stott in his book *Comedy* notes that 'Women have been

systematically denied the power to be funny for a number of cultural reasons' (2005:99). He also refers to the 'perceived ghettoization of women's comedy' and points to 'the belief that female comedians only discuss 'women's' themes - relationships, shopping, and menstruation' (ibid, 99). These issues have been explored before within this thesis. However, Stott's observation that women are being 'systematically denied the power to be funny' is very pertinent to Parker's work with Funny Women. Moreover, it must also be said that Parker is not ghettoizing, but giving space to females on the stand-up comedy circuit in a way that has not been done so systematically before. In the same section of his book, Stott draws attention to the view that 'male topics are thought to be unbounded and therefore to have universal appeal' (ibid, 99). It is perceptions such as these that Parker's organization is attempting to redress, although this is problematic in the sense that this view is widely held by women as well as men.¹⁰⁹ Alison Oddey discusses this matter with Jo Brand in her book *Performing Women*.

Oddey: *Can you imagine a new wave of women stand-ups in the 21st century, who have developed a kind of distanced, deadpan, slightly impersonal style?*

Brand: No, I can't imagine that ever happening until women truly have equality with men, and that's not going to happen in the next 100 years. I don't think it will ever happen (2005:146).

Oddey's question implies that the alleged '*distanced, deadpan, slightly impersonal style*' of male stand-up comedy should be the standard set for all comics. However, male comics such as Jason Manford and Michael McIntyre are neither 'deadpan' nor 'impersonal'. There is also the further inference made that female stand-up comedy is *personal* and thus less valid than male comedy which echoes Stott's observations above. However, Parker contradicts Oddey's view to almost suggest that female

¹⁰⁹ There is further discussion on this matter in the second part of this chapter in relation to notions of 'homogeneity' and 'shared cultural values'.

stand-up comedy is now the new norm.

Parker: Women's comedy is just as diverse as men's, it is often broader and more creative, more sociologically biased ... Michael McIntyre and Jason Manford are in touch with their feminine side. These men are not far removed from the females in stand-up ... (June, 2010).

Parker's words suggest that she sees female stand-up comics as having moved from a marginal position with the stand-up comedy arena to almost taking centre-stage. The references to McIntyre and Manford as examples of 'new' men in this newly 'feminized' arena, offer an endorsement of this position. This seems to invalidate the following conversation where Alison Oddey asks Jo Brand about the subject matter of female stand-up comedy.

Oddey: *Is there a particular problem for the female stand-up entering the twenty-first century?*

Brand: Yes - having the confidence to move into more general areas of comedy rather than sticking to exclusively female concerns. Confidence to do politics, to do engineering or whatever (2005:147).

Ironically, Brand's words are at odds with her actual stand-up comedy which as shown in Chapter Three of this thesis, engages with both feminist and political issues in relation to female bodily abjection. Moreover, Parker's new female comics do not need to 'move into general areas of comedy' because they base their comedy on their own lives.¹¹⁰

Parker: In comedy women should perform as themselves unless they choose to assume a character, whatever that is - they might be sophisticated, or wear vintage clothes, or have bravado, or be slightly sexy, or be a lesbian. Don't conform. Don't be 'a black'. This essentially means be who you are and do not try to

¹¹⁰ Stand-up comic and coach Judy Carter also stresses the importance of using your own life as material in her book *Stand-up: the Book* (1989).

be someone else. Find your own style (and do comedy about who you are!) (With Blunden, June, 2010).

The notion of being oneself in stand-up comedy is very important, especially for females, who have frequently ‘looked at themselves through the eyes of others’. Being yourself literally means being anything you want to be. A salient point is made by practitioner Tony Allen who, in his book on attitude in stand-up comedy, refers to two females who have made the transition from stripper to stand-up comedian. Jane Janovic, and ‘Annie Smith, a stripper from the club downstairs, appeared as a comic several times but did not show ‘fashionable anger when heckled’ (2002:104/5).¹¹¹ Allen argues that ‘Strippers were perfect casting as comedians. They already had a basic grasp of performance and a wealth of unexpressed things to say, especially about sexploitation ...’ (2002:65). There is a suggestion of bodily confidence in the above, which is an issue discussed frequently in this thesis in relation to females ‘taking up of physical and vocal space’.

Parker’s work with Funny Women would seem to address a range of issues related to the ‘not-so-funny side’ of female bodily abjection. Nevertheless, there is an element of carnival in the changes she has brought about and in that sense her work seems to epitomize Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnival as ‘... a feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed’ (1984:10).

Stand-up comedy workshops and the element of risk

The following explores another new aspect of a newly ‘feminized’ stand-

¹¹¹ As indicated in Chapter One of this thesis, both ‘old’ stand-up comedy and Alternative Comedy, had associations with female strippers. The first in terms of strippers sharing the stage with male comics in Working Men’s clubs, and the second in

up comedy arena which is the systematic fast-tracking of females onto the circuit. One of the key means that Funny Women uses to facilitate female entry into stand-up comedy is via workshops. This next section examines stand-up comedy workshops as a new trend which involves females in the stand-up comedy arena. Both Andi Osho and Pam Blunden, author of this thesis, have attended workshops, but it is Blunden's experiences which are investigated in the following. Blunden is not the product of Funny Women workshops, but of a twelve-week workshop organized by comedian Jack Milner at the Colchester Arts Centre (2003). This course was not specifically designed for females, indeed, only six of the fifteen students were female and of those, only three, including the author, completed the course. Already this area engages with the question raised at the top of this chapter, namely, why did females drop out? Was this because of family responsibilities, vulnerability, a feeling of embarrassment in doing comedy before a group of men (however supportive) or the fear of just standing up on a stage alone? The answers to these questions are not known, but they nevertheless, draw attention to earlier discussions raised by Parker on domestic matters, risk and fear of heckling, and of standing up alone on stage.

As noted on many occasions within this thesis, there is a sense of vulnerability in standing up alone on stage. Stand-up comic and coach, Judy Carter reveals of her own performances that 'I still get vicious anxiety attacks' (1989:11). Nevertheless she advises budding stand-up comics that 'To be good you have to take risks and that will increase your chance of bombing' *ibid*, 132).¹¹² This element of risk has been discussed a number of times within this thesis. Stand-up is particularly risky where heckling is both sexist and aggressive. As Jo Brand demonstrated in Chapter Two, and Shazia Mirza in Chapter Three, male to female heckling still exists and women need to learn how to 'stand up' against this.

that Don Ward offered his strip club as a venue for the first Alternative stand-up comedy.
¹¹² The term 'bombing' means to fail to make a connection with the audience. It is addressed in greater depth in the second half of this chapter.

Frances Gray in her book *Women and Laughter* refers to female comedians having to deal with the cries ‘Show us yer tits!’ and ‘Are you a lesbian?’ (1994:146). This also recalls the discussion of the female as spectacle which was explored in Chapter Two with regard to the stand-up comedy of French and Saunders. The implication is that standing up to perform comedy strips away any protective barriers one might have and makes one vulnerable.

Stand-up comedy workshops are good places to test and improve the quality of your writing and the presentation of your material in a safe environment. Is it better for women if these workshops are all-female? Lynne Parker told Pam Blunden in a telephone interview that she thinks that it is better. Moreover, she has introduced workshops and training into Funny Women’s programme specifically to develop the confidence and skills of new female stand-up comics.

Parker: There will always be people who don’t think they need training for anything. If by doing a course you get your confidence or discover an aptitude for something, that’s wonderful ... I think everyone has the ability to be funny. For some people this ability needs to be developed via training or workshops etc. Yes, being funny does come naturally to some people and there are those who have great funny thoughts and ideas but find it difficult to communicate them ... (June, 2010).

The above engages with the comments made at the top of this chapter regarding why there were not more females performing stand-up comedy and why it was thought those who were, are not funny. Stand-up is risky because you do not know if the audience will accept you.¹¹³ Parker told Blunden, ‘If you can perform five minutes of stand up in front of an audience you can do anything! Stand-up is a stand-out card’ (June, 2010). She added, ‘Now ... women are more accepted on the circuit and less intimidated by the boys’ club atmosphere, although men still outnumber

¹¹³ This issues of risk and fear was discussed with reference to Victoria Wood in Chapter

women eight to two' (June, 2010). Parker's words here clearly confirm her belief in the taking of risks. This recalls Mary Russo's view that 'Risk is not a bad thing to be avoided, but rather a condition of possibility ...' (1994:10/11). The notion of a 'condition of possibility' is certainly at the heart of Parker's organization and in her decision to offer female-only stand-up comedy workshops.

The author of this thesis attended a mixed-gender workshop with Jack Milner in Colchester (2003). At these workshops everyone prepared and performed a weekly mini set before the class. In terms of performance, Milner advised the group to talk to the audience as if they were friends.¹¹⁴ He said, 'You have to believe you are funny. Build up the laugh. Give the audience what they want: a big laugh every thirty seconds' (26.3.3). It is important to learn how to work with your audience and interpret their responses. The words 'You have to believe that you are funny' suggest the need for confidence. This belief can be developed. Jack Milner also believes that originality is as important as funniness. His views endorse Parker's words about being yourself in your stand-up comedy. You also have to experiment in order to find your own voice which is why workshops are so valuable.

In its consideration of the notion of female stand-up comedy as the performance of the 'comic side of bodily abjection' this thesis suggests that you have to get to the heart of abjection to be truly effective as a stand-up comic. Most contemporary stand-up comics write their own material. Julia Kristeva argues that 'Writing implies an ability to imagine the abject, that is, to see oneself in its place and to thrust it aside only by means of the displacement of verbal play' (1982:16). That not only seems to be the true of the case-studies of this thesis but it also seems to be illustrated when Milner offered a 'Rant and Rave' exercise and advised

Two.

¹¹⁴ In Chapter Two it was indicated that Victoria Wood spoke of seeing her audience as if they were friends.

the group to pick a subject which annoyed them and an emotion to rant in. He thought negative emotions were best, and suggested hate, loathing, bitterness or jealousy. This is good advice for dealing with abject subjects and recalls the attitude applied to their comic sets by Jo Brand and Jenny Éclair as outlined in Chapter Three. It also repeats Judy Carter's advice to exaggerate the emotions.

Blunden's rant was about drivers, especially female drivers.

... old women like crabs, slowly moving sideways as they build up to overtake whilst female learners are like regurgitating birds or jerking woodpeckers. Mums on the school run are the nightmares of the road. They are like a herd of ransacking female elephants, so intent in getting to their young that they decimate everything in their tracks, bollards, parking meters, other cars. And as for parking - they are not averse to parking three cars high (Colchester Arts Centre, 2003).

This could easily be mistaken for a male comic's depiction of female parking skills and spatial awareness. Was this subject taken because the workshop audience predominantly consisted of men? No, it is merely a subject of irritation for the author and the longer version included other drivers as well. The set was graphic in its images of incompetence and decimation. However, the set was not entirely successful for it required physicality and hand gestures to be fully effective, but adding these involved the element of risk.

A similar exercise exploring the hyperbolic and going to extremes was Milner's 'No, it's worse than that' exercise which was effective practice also in using negative emotions. The goal was to move from 'normality' via the surreal to the abject (5.3.3). Blunden's set on 'violence against food' was influenced by Bobby Baker use of the 'language of food'. Baker was the first modern female performance artist to explore bodily abjection in performance and saw 'The kitchen as the theatre of many emotions' (With Blunden, 2003). Debbie Isitt's play *The Woman Who*

Cooked Her Husband (2006) also suggests that food has symbolic connections with bigger socio-cultural issues. In this play, Hilary, one of the two wives sees the kitchen as a murderer's paradise in that 'saucepans crack, knives chop, scissors stab' and she asks, 'what would it be like to mince his flesh'. The change in her perception of the kitchen arises from the pain of being rejected by her husband. She screams, 'How dare he think he can dump me after all the cooking I've done for him - I'll split open his head, I'll crack and rip and tear and split - I'll crunch him and chop him and hack him to pieces.' Blunden's set lacked both the emotional and socio-cultural elements of the above as she:

scrambled eggs, battered the fish, poked the eyes
out of potatoes, whipped the cream, beat the eggs,
skinned the tomatoes, peeled the flesh off and
smothered the cake with icing
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2003).

What she offered was merely an exercise in being fanciful and playing with words. Yet again, there would have been an element of risk in going into the truly abject as both Baker and Isitt had done. However, another set of Blunden's did engage with the more serious subject of politics which was earlier recommended by Jo Brand as a more important subject for females to explore. The following is not a rant, but it does contain some stylistic allusions to the work of Linda Smith in the sense of using the everyday to tackle 'big' subjects.

Blunden: Three year old Bush and two year old Saddam
are having temper tantrums. Bush keeps poking other children
in the eye. Two year old Tony just follows Bush around sucking
his thumb, looking vacant. Saddam keeps burying his head
in the sand and getting into tight corners. George keeps
blowing up his own plane, and Tony tells fairy stories
(Colchester Arts Centre, 2003).

The above examples indicate the range of possibilities that any stand-up comic has in terms of material. Furthermore, they illustrate that any topic

is acceptable, but that they all demand some element of risk.

This section has addressed the areas of risk and potentiality for females newly entering into the stand-up comedy domain. The following three sections analyse the sets of three female performers of stand-up comedy from the first decade of the twenty-first century. The first are two winners of Funny Women competitions, namely, Debra Jane Appleby (2006) and Andi Osho (2007). The third case study is Pam Blunden, author of this thesis.

4.2 Case-study: Debra-Jane Appleby

Appleby was a winner of the Funny Women competition in 2005 (but the set discussed in the following comes from her performance at the Comedy Store in 2006, and was downloaded from YouTube 3.6.9). She performs the ‘comic side of bodily abjection’ by examining appearance, movement, gestures, orifices, surfaces, crevices, body process and the body in space. Above all, her stand-up comedy exemplifies Lynne Parker’s advice ‘Don’t conform, women should perform as themselves’ and ‘find your own style’. Judy Carter offers a similar opinion in her book *Stand-up Comedy: the Book* suggesting that ‘It’s better to watch people struggling with his or her problems ... the more miserable your life, the better your act’ (1989:5). Carter adds, ‘The trick is to be willing to expose yourself as much as you can without getting arrested’ (ibid, 5). These views illustrate the elements of vulnerability and risk involved in performing stand-up comedy, particularly for the female. Appleby follows this advice in introducing herself as belonging to the minority groups of those who are ‘fat, lesbian Northerner’. In this self-identification she goes further than Linda Smith who also *stood up for* ‘minority’ groups.

Self-reflexivity

Appleby also self-reflexively uses her own body as the key to her work and begins her set by drawing attention to her body size and shape. In this she is pertinent to the debate on fatness previously explored with reference to Dawn French and Jo Brand, although she is clearly different from either of them. Moreover, she does *not* seem to be engaging with the notion of 'seeing oneself through the eyes of others', but reveals a full acceptance of her self.

Appleby: I look in the mirror and I see a fat person.
I understand I'm not anorexic - I'm fat.
Pause. It's not a mental condition, it's physics,
people - it's just the light beams reflecting
on a corpulent body. You don't have to get pc.
'Are you portly, Debra?'
'No, Southampton's portly. I'm fat and I'm
fine with it' (Comedy Store, 2006).

The words 'I look in the mirror and I see a fat person' echo Jo Brand's words in her *Barely Live* set (2008) where she compares herself to the anorexic who also saw herself as fat. However, there is no evidence of the seeming self-abjection of Brand's pretence not to be fat; Appleby emphatically attests 'I understand I am not anorexic - I am fat'. There is an acceptance of her position accompanied by an aura of self-confidence. In this she has a greater affinity with Dawn French's response to her fatness revealed in Chapter Two.

Anne Hole in her article *Performing Identity: Dawn French and the funny fat female body* notes the long traditions of the fat female body as the butt of a joke and the fat body's 'supposed innate funniness' (2003:315). Oliver Double confirms this when he refers to jokes such as 'Her enormous size was related to the unladylike propensity to shovel food down her neck' accompanied by the notion that 'er stomach's got no mem'ry' (1997: 67). These comments suggest a double element of bodily

abjection in being the butt of the joke and being seen as ugly because fat. In contrast, Appleby is both the producer and subject of her jokes and seems to enjoy the comic aspects of her size as indicated in the words ‘No, Southampton’s portly. I’m fat’. It is clear that she feels at home in her body, as did Dawn French. She even becomes lyrical about it. In this she exemplifies Hole’s argument that ‘the stereotype of the funny fat lady is one with far more potential, and a far stronger voice, than the stereotype of sexy woman ...’ (2003:321). It would appear that Appleby unleashes some of that potential in the above. She goes even further to exemplify Hole’s perspective in the following joke:

Appleby: I eat like a pig and I don’t give
a shit. I’ve sweated like a pig all this summer
as well, and if I could fuck like a pig,
I’d have the full set (Comedy Store, 2006).

The compactness and rhythm of the above has similarities to the highly condensed language and images used by Victoria Wood, Linda Smith, Shazia Mirza and Gina Yashere to convey bodily abjection. Here, the build up of the comparison between herself and a pig engages more with Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of degradation which is concerned with ‘the lower stratum of the body’ (1984:21). So, not only is Appleby offering what Hole sees as a ‘far stronger voice’ in being the ‘funny fat lady’ but she is also happy to immerse herself in the traditions of the degradation in her references to eating, sweating and fucking ‘like a pig’.

Appleby’s joke also recalls a similar engagement with images of degradation in the work of contemporary artist Nancy Spero. Jo Anna Isaak notes that Spero’s picture *Sheela-na-Gig* ‘smiles wryly at the viewer as she reaches behind her legs to display an enormous vagina’ (1996:27). Isaak describes this art as ‘shocking, irreverent ... rowdy, unseemly, embarrassing’ (ibid, 27). These words could equally be applied to Appleby. Clearly, both Appleby and Spero’s work contain elements of the grotesque in their hyperbolic references to bodily surfaces, orifices and

processes to fit Bakhtin's notion that 'Hyperbolism, excessiveness, exaggeration are the fundamentals of the grotesque style' (1984:303).

In comparison with the grotesque elements also of Jo Brand's work, Appleby's attitude is strong in constantly signifying 'defiance' and a rejection of accepted norms. In feminist and socio-cultural terms, there is an element of the 'ladette' in her words 'I don't give a shit' which has correlations with Elaine Aston's perceptions of 'girl power' as found in her essay "'Bad Girls' and 'Sick Boys': New Women Playwrights and the Future of Feminism'. Aston sees this as relating to females who are 'badly behaved' and aggressively confident (2007:71ff). Such attitudes certainly have application to Appleby. However, they are also deflected since Appleby has already identified herself with minority groups and in doing so, she offers a social perspective to her work, rather than a singular one.

Bodily abjection

Appleby deals further with elements of degradation and bodily abjection as she 'examines' her body in the process of ageing. She rants about having reached the age of forty but says, 'I don't look it. It's the fat - it pushes the wrinkles out - I can recommend it. You should see my arse! It's like a picture of Dorian Gray.' This recalls Jenny Éclair's joke about having her breasts enlarged so that when she removes her bra, they would fall down to her knees and iron out the wrinkles in her face. Whilst wrinkly skin is a signifier for age, such indications can be unstable, for it can also represent bodily abuse from smoking and sun-bathing.

In a continued examination of her ageing body, Appleby talks of a tooth that fell out when she was thirty-nine and performs a Victoria Wood-like set of the female body falling apart, when she says, 'Am I going to get out of the bath next Monday and my left arm's going to fall off, for fuck's

sake?’ The asking of rhetorical questions brings her audience into a closer contemplation of her bodily abjection. In addition, the specificity of the time and location also adds to the joke, whilst the words ‘for fuck’s sake’ are indicative of Appleby’s hyperbolism.

She also explores medical issues within her comedy when she talks of having to lose weight or risk getting Type 2 diabetes. The notion of dying as a result of fatness and diabetes has relevance to Funny Women’s concerns regarding the health of the female body, although neither fatness, nor diabetes are particularly gender-related. This set also echoes Victoria Wood’s set on her hysterectomy and Gina Yashere’s set on her lupus. The risk here is to life.

Appleby: I don’t want to die - one weak gene in my artery and that’s me gone, just to cheer you fuckers up. It’s pop - gone - just flat on the stage - Tommy Cooper all over again. (*Pause*) Froth coming out of my mouth and then, when I’m dead, people saying, ‘What’s her name?’ ‘I don’t know. Some Northerner, seventeen stone ... She was asking for it’ (Comedy Store, 2006).

The references to an envisaged death are funny as in the words ‘pop - gone. Me flat on the stage.’ Her inclusion of a reference to Tommy Cooper’s death on stage in this joke also creates a sort of lineage of stand-up comedy, which perpetuates itself, through diversification.

This set also contains a hint of slapstick in terms of falling down, except that here there is no recovery. The above does not seem to represent the fear of falling towards death highlighted by Victoria Wood’s set on her hysterectomy, but it does bring to mind Kristeva’s concept of abjection as ‘I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself myself*’ (1982:3). Appleby certainly seems to be expelling, spitting and abjecting herself in this set especially in the references to ‘froth coming out of my mouth’ and to the ignobility of being quickly forgotten. Moreover, as with other aspects of

Kristeva's notion of abjection, Appleby demonstrates a sense that '... the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject' (ibid, 5). Appleby seems to both welcome and fear the public death she envisages for herself. She welcomes it in the sense of being as famous as Tommy Cooper, in having her comic 'performance' of dying being talked for years afterwards. On the other hand, she does not welcome the comments such as 'she was asking for it' which lay the blame firmly on the 'seventeen stone' she is carrying. Above all, she does not welcome the notion of expelling so much of her self in her abjection, that no-one can even recall her existence.

Appleby's attitude is clearly a key part of her stand-up comedy. Indeed, her skill in creating rhythm and tension within her language also draws attention to her frequent use of such phrases as 'for fuck's sake' and 'you fuckers' which are used strategically and effectively to highlight the strength of feelings. In this, her work goes further than Brand's attitudinal comedy. Appleby's attitude seems to suggest that she is against the world in general, and against her audience in particular, as in the words 'just to cheer you fuckers up'. However, there is also a sort of camaraderie in these words that did not exist in Brand's sets; it is as if Appleby is saying to her audience, this is your future as well as mine. In addition, using the word 'you' and attributing an attitude to the audience makes them more willing to engage with Appleby. This also tends to make the audience more aware of their own attitudes to fatness, for example. Appleby's stand-up comedy is refreshing in that she happily mocks the audience along with herself, whilst simultaneously, finding close rapport with them. She engages with many important aspects within her set and certainly can be seen to perform 'the comic side of bodily abjection' in a dynamic way.

4.3 Case-study: Andi Osho

Andi Osho is another winner of Funny Women Awards in 2007. She is a young (British) Nigerian female living in a multi-racial and multi-cultural part of London, which she describes as ‘depressed’. Osho sees herself as British and talks of her experiences of living in London. Her stand-up comedy has many correlations with the group of ‘second-generation’ transnational female stand-up comics examined in Chapter Three, but there are also many differences. She has been separated from this group for a number of reasons: firstly, because she has connections with Lynne Parker’s organization and secondly, because her work highlights a number of important points regarding ‘new’ stand-up comedy and ‘new’ audiences and thirdly, because she is a ‘new’ woman who has already carved out a career for herself in the three years she has been involved in stand-up comedy. Thus, unlike Gina Yashere, Osho is not ‘waiting for Lenny Henry to die’ so she ‘can take his place’.¹¹⁵ Nor is she engaging with Dubois’ concept of ‘double-consciousness’ (In Watkins, 1994/9:26). Indeed, she seems to clearly identify her position on all fronts. However, her work does engage with the historical trajectory of stand-up comedy in the references to an alternative British black comedy circuit. Furthermore, as a new female stand-up comic, Osho also embodies a new perspective on the issue of female attractiveness. Alongside examination of her stand-up comedy, downloaded from Youtube (March, 2009), details are taken from Pam Blunden’s telephone interview with Osho (July, 2010).

The socio-cultural

Osho follows advice given by Lynne Parker and Judy Carter to do stand-up comedy on things relating to yourself and your life, but for Osho this

¹¹⁵ In Chapter Three, discussion was made of Yashere’s point about the difficulty of black people progressing in the media.

tends to be about socio-cultural matters rather than personal ones. As with the ‘second-generation’ transnational comics addressed in Chapter Three, Osho examines the cultural body; however, for her this includes the body of both Nigerians and whites. If there is a ‘personal’ element to the following sets, it relates to Osho’s experiences of living in Stratford, East London.

Osho: I was on the local bus, bendy bus, free bus, that’s how we all know it. Right. And the bus was crawling along and a girl shouted out, and I guess she was trying to help, ‘Oy, driver, some of us have gotta go to court!’ I’m guessing she’s not the judge. What do you think? ‘Chantelle (QC)’? (Funny Women, 2007).

In the above, important elements are highlighted here regarding socio-cultural practices and systems. Osho moves from the socio-cultural into the socio-political in jumping from considering ‘the free bus’ to imitating Chantelle’s voice and commenting on her court appearance. This is accompanied by the suggestion that coming from a poor area of London, Chantelle is more likely to be involved in crime than being a barrister, however, it is not made clear if the girl is white or black. Ali Rattansi writes of females in education and notes how ‘young black women are out-performing young black men, already giving rise to a media discourse of the black superwoman (2000:126). Might Chantelle have had the opportunity to be one of these superwomen? In terms of performance, Osho effectively starts from the specific and the everyday in her reference to the ‘bendy bus’ and its occupants and moves by subtle degrees to the bigger issues. Her colloquial style and the question seemingly addressed to the audience make the seriousness of her subject more surprising.

In her telephone interview with Osho, Blunden asks her to explain her perspective and style.

Blunden: Does your work deal with important issues that touches on modern living?

Osho: I think I talk about silly things or perhaps I do silly things about important issues. I talk about the depressed area of London where I live. Most comics talk about their family, work and living conditions, and as you develop you branch out (July, 2010).

In this conversation, Osho moves quickly considering she deals with ‘silly things’ to thinking it might be ‘silly things about important issues’ as if there is a sudden realisation that this is what she does within her stand-up comedy. She also confirms the difference between her comedy and that of other comics which was suggested at the beginning of this section. However, she clarifies her position by not only referring to area of London in which she lives, but that it is a ‘depressed area of London’. This is not Ali Rattansi’s point about how:

Loyalties to different British locales may now play a more important role as young blacks, in some contexts, see themselves as coming from particular parts of London and Birmingham ... (2000:123).

The only ‘boundaries’ of London with which Osho interacts are those relating to deprivation and poverty. Her ‘loyalties’ tend to lie merely with the people who live around her, rather than with the symbolism of a specific ‘postcode’. It appears that Osho has already ‘branched out’ from what she saw as talking about ‘silly things’ in her work.

The socio-political

Not only does Osho explore the socio-cultural in her sets, but she also ventures into the socio-political such as in her considerations of the justice system. In a continuation of the above set, she performs a rap about Chantelle’s court case:

Osho: You’ll get five years for mugging that old lady but if you’re good and if you’re lucky,

then just maybe, you'll be out in two weeks
'cos the system's crazy (Funny Women, 2007).

Whilst this rap draws attention to the inadequacies of the British justice system, there also seems to be an interrogation of personal responsibility. Is Osho's empathy here with Chantelle or with 'that old lady'? Perhaps the answer is with both, since they both represent culturally neglected groups. Is she exploring local life or systems? These questions are difficult to answer, however, Osho is not dealing with racism in the 'system' as one might expect from the use of the rap within this set. This is in contrast to Ali Rattansis article which strongly suggests that there is 'Racism in the police force, criminal justice system, the legal profession' (2000:121). In her set, Osho engages with the individual examples of what is 'crazy' in such systems. It also appears that her rap was simply a dramatic device to indicate to the audience that she has experience of a range of cultures. She also uses the rap to bring audience engagement in her work.

Osho: Aw stop, don't patronize me. It's easy to impress whites with skits like that ... honestly, it's just talking fast - I did it at one black gig and a woman at the back said, 'My satnav can mc better than that' (Funny Women, 2007).

Interestingly, in the above, once the audience has applauded the rap, Osho distances herself from them as a group to situate herself against these 'whites'. Do her words 'Aw stop, don't patronize me' suggest that the audience been manipulated to position themselves as 'white' and thus as opposed to 'black'? It would appear to be the case, as she then draws attention to the differences between black audiences and white ones, who are 'easy to impress', although interestingly, she is making these comments to a predominantly-white audience.¹¹⁶ Osho finishes the set by explaining that black audiences 'don't laugh and boo at the same time,

¹¹⁶ This matter is discussed in the second half of this chapter with reference to Richard Pryor and Chris Rock and black audiences.

they just boo if they get a bit offended.’¹¹⁷ The comment about the satnav is unusual in being from female to female, but its wit overrides its negativity as an example of heckling.

Black comedy circuits

The above raises an interesting point about alternatives to the white mainstream stand-up comedy circuit. Blunden asks Osho about this when interviewing her.

Blunden: You got an award from BECA (Black Entertainment Comedy Awards).

Osho: Yes, nomination for newcomer. I didn’t get it ... I don’t think there is a BECA circuit, but there certainly is a black comedy circuit ... I don’t do the black circuit very much. Every now and then I get invited to do a gig but I’m not really a black circuit comic - a lot of stuff I do is not about the things they want to hear. They say, ‘That’s funny’ but they are not particularly bothered about it. There are certain comics who just kill on the black circuit because they have honed their comedy in front of a black audience so their comedy is specifically for them and it really works (July, 2010).

Osho’s words ‘but I’m not really a black circuit comic’ suggest that she might represent one of Meenakshmi Ponnuswami’s ‘new citizens’ who is ‘finding new ways to be British’ (In Aston and Harris, 2000:34). Osho’s words ‘a lot of stuff I do is not about things they want to hear’ also suggest that she sees herself as more at home within what is currently the mainstream stand-up comedy. This position is confirmed by the rest of the set.

However, she also seems to indicate in the above that the black circuit has established itself firmly as a new niche area. This reference to an

¹¹⁷ There is a more detailed discussion of transnational niche audiences in the second

alternative black circuit recalls Mel Watkins' investigation of the trajectory of black comedy in North America from 'tent' and 'road' shows to the establishment of black mainstream stand-up comedy (1994/9:152). Mark Lamarr also spoke of sell-out performances of black stand-up comics at Madison Square Gardens (2003). However, it seems that Osho might be suggesting that there is some movement towards a separate British black circuit. Blunden pushes the point a step further with Osho.

Blunden: What are your views on niche audiences and venues?

Osho: I think niche gigs served a purpose in the 60s and 70s where black, Asian and gay didn't feel able to go to regular things and be a victim. They just wanted somewhere to go where the colour of their skin was not an issue. I think sometimes people want to laugh about things that relate to their own culture. Now more Asian and black comics are moving out into the mainstream circuit because they can see there is a limit to how far they can go (July, 2010).

Whilst Osho engages with the nature of black stand-up comedy in the above, the most telling words appear to be that 'there is a limit ho how far they can go'. This seems to suggest a view of stand-up comedy as now being an industry. This recalls Gina Yashere's comments about the media industry as indicated in Chapter Two. Osho is a *career* stand-up comedian.

Another important element of Osho's stand-up comedy and her position as a Nigerian comic relates to being asked to be involved with 'black' issues. In 2006 she was short-listed to be a writer-in-residence for Parliament's Commemoration of the Abolition of the Slave Trade. (October 30th 2008). Osho said she was very proud to be invited to perform for Amnesty International this weekend at their *Stand Up For Comedy* event in Belfast. Blunden asked about this.

Blunden: You do seem to have an interest in political and cultural issues, for example, you were involved with Amnesty International and with an event on the Abolition of the Slave Trade.

Osho: I was short-listed. I was asked to do them. You get asked to do Charity events - it's just one night you are doing. It's thought stand-up comics were a good draw for an audience (July, 2010).

This engages with the ethos of Funny Women and its involvement in political issues and human rights. It also draws attention to the increasing connection which is being made between the serious and the comic. However, it must be said that Osho honestly indicates here that her interest in her career comes before international issues.

Stereotyping

In contrast to the above explorations of positive black images, Osho's work engages with the subject of stereotyping. However, in comparison with the four 'second-generation' transnational case-studies investigated in Chapter Three, Osho's approach is more negative.

Osho: Any Nigerians in? All I'm saying is I hope you are all parked appropriately - 'cos that's all I'm saying.

There are two types of Nigerian one is the 'Bushwoman' they love to haggle. At the other end of the scale is the 'Princess'. If she were to meet the queen - the queen should curtsy to her (Funny Women, 2007).

Osho is seemingly making Nigerians the butt of the joke here; her words have some affection for the two types of female but she still tends to polarise their positions. In Chapter Three discussion was made of Gina Yashere's jokes about Nigerian scams where the characters are self-stereotyping. However, the Nigerian types she addressed were the subjects not the butts of her jokes; importantly, these jokes also revealed a trickster

element, rather than an abject one. That does not seem to be the case with Osho's joke. Blunden asked Osho if she thought she was stereotyping Nigerian women in her 'Bushwoman and Princess' sets.

Osho: Yeah, I probably was. You have to remember that I was new ... I had just done a competition and was cocky - and I don't do those jokes any more. I think everyone does that - ie I am doing so well, people want to take pictures of you, to interview you and to talk to you - I am obviously doing things right (July, 2010).

Osho further says of the set that she would hate 'to be accused of just using Nigerian people for comic gain but naturally uses the community that's most familiar to her. However, generally, the case-studies of this thesis resist such a thing and fight against all forms of restricted identity. Osho reveals to Blunden that she has learned from her mistakes.

Osho: I've learned about my limitations - learned about what I can improve ... You need to be aware of what you're saying and what that says to an audience about how you feel about the world - that what you are saying is acceptable about the world. I can't always hear that objectively (July, 2010).

Osho's acceptance of her position very importantly draws attention to the notion of stand-up comedy as a process. It also highlights the element of risk in standing up to perform work that one has created oneself.

Aesthetics

Another interesting aspect relating to Osho's her stand-up comedy lies in issues surrounding the relationship between aesthetics and female stand-up comedy. Such matters were previously explored in Chapter Two with reference to Dawn French and Jo Brand and in relation to the concept of the 'funny fat lady'. Andi Osho highlights three other perspectives. The first engages with the way in which attractive young females doing stand-

up comedy interrogates the very traditions on which comedy is based. The second relates to female confidence and the third relates to the issue of attractiveness and professionalism in the workplace.

Is ugliness a key element of comedy? There is certainly a traditional relationship between the two. Aristotle (384-322BC) saw ‘the laughable is a sub-division of the ugly that does not cause injury or pain ... The comic mask is distorted and ugly but it is not pain-inducing’ (In Provine, 2000:13-14). Furthermore, Andrew Stott in his book *Comedy* also notes with reference to Plato and Aristotle’s notions of beauty that:

An ideal of physicality must exist against which the comedian can be found to be lacking, thereby reassuring an audience that comic substance will be found in departure from those ideals (2005:84).

The notion of being ‘found to be lacking’ in the above definition seems to support the many existing superiority theories of comedy. There is also the implied suggestion that the comic is the object and butt of his own jokes, even before opening his mouth, in that he appears to fall short of some designated ideals. On the same lines, Stott also cites contemporary stand-up comic Jerry Seinfeld’s belief that ‘conventionally attractive people do not make good stand-up comedians, as the audience ‘distrusts beauty in comedy and wants their clowns to be imperfect’ (2005:84). This is a big statement and a bigger issue which is challenged by this thesis. When it is applied specifically to the female comic, this view would suggest that attractiveness confuses boundaries: for if comic, she should be ‘ugly’; but if pretty, she is more likely to eschew comedy and choose sexy or glamorous roles.¹¹⁸ Andi Osho can be said to confound such boundaries.

In addition, this thesis contests the male views found in Provine and Stott

¹¹⁸ In Chapter Two, this matter was discussed in relation to Jenny Éclair had a perspective such as this.

to suggest that a strong precedent for the sexy and attractive female ‘stand-up’ comic is to be found in the Greek *hetaerae* or what the author of this thesis calls the ‘joking’ *hetaerae* precisely because they offered wit alongside sex to their ‘clients’. This is demonstrated with reference to the book *Courtesans and Fishcakes*, in which James Davidson notes that ‘the symposium was the place where beautiful and witty girls exchanged jokes and double-entendres with artists and politicians ...’ (1997:93). He even refers to collections of the *hetaerae*’s ‘obscene witticisms’ although Davidson hesitates to assign these witticisms fully to the *hetaerae*.

The second point of argument suggests that some new stand-up female comics like Andi Osho might be physically and sexually more confident because of 1990s ‘girl power’? (Lynne Parker’s organization aims to develop such characteristics.) Elaine Aston’s views were cited in relation to Debra-Jane Appleby, but they are also applicable here with reference to the matter of appearance. Aston refers to:

the idea that girls can readily access power through a sexualised feminine. Dubbed by some as the ‘feminism’ of the 1990s, ‘girl power’ ... encourages girls to believe that self-confidence and sexually aggressive behaviour is a means to empowerment (In Aston and Harris (eds), 2007:73).

Although Aston questions the attitudes of ‘girl power’ against the values of second-wave feminism in her essay, in terms of stand-up comedy this ‘self-confidence’ and ‘sexually aggressive behaviour’ should make these ‘girls’ very suited to this field. Female attractiveness and sexiness were certainly once viewed as incompatible with stand-up comedy if one accepts the words of Jenny Éclair as noted in Chapter Two.¹¹⁹ However, her own work was full of ‘self-confidence’ and ‘sexually aggressive behaviour’.

The idea of female attractiveness in the workplace is explored with

¹¹⁹ In Chapter Three reference is made to Shazia Mirza being called a ‘prostitute of the West’ for doing stand-up comedy.

reference to the essay *The Look of Love: Gender and the Organization of Aesthetics* by Phillip Hancock and Melissa Tyler. They argue that ‘From steelworkers to waitresses, nurses to flight attendants, the presumed inter-relationship between the aesthetic and the feminine is inexorable’ (In Hassard et al (eds), 2000:115). The notion of obligation is implied here, alongside the suggestion of female coercion and the issue of the ‘female as spectacle’.¹²⁰

Funny Women is sponsored by Nivea, who make products to enhance the skin; however, such a relationship seems to counter the very values Funny Women seeks to promote. On the other hand, it could be seen as a means of reaching thousands of women; or as an encouragement for them to look after their body. It could also be argued that it encourages women to conform to a stereotype, although this seems far from the aims of Parker. It could even encourage attractive females to go into stand-up comedy themselves. As Osho reveals, some young attractive females in the twenty-first century are choosing stand-up comedy over other entertainment genres like film, pop and even modelling. This interrogates Jenny Éclair’s point about ‘being able to choose to be sexy for a while and not have to be funny’ which was discussed in Chapter Two. As is suggested here, the subject of female attractiveness in relation to stand-up comedy is more complex than at first appears.

Ali Rattansi offers yet another socio-cultural perspective when she draws attention to research into the ‘ambivalences of young black British women faced with pressures of white norms of beauty and sexual attractiveness as well as the ambiguities of mixed race embodiment’ (2000:126). Osho seems to eschew such notions to follow her own individual path, although it must be argued that the photograph of her above readily fits ‘white norms of beauty’. Above all, she sees that professionalism is related to

¹²⁰ The notion of the female as spectacle is explored in the second part of this chapter with reference to female ‘joking relation’ and the potential for mutual looking between females.

looking one's best. Osho told Blunden, 'I feel strongly that dressing up is good for comedy. You like to be professional and see stand-up comedy as a good career option' (July, 2010). This question of the relationship between attractiveness and career options for young females in stand-up comedy was also raised with Lynne Parker. Blunden asked if stand-up comedy was becoming a viable career option for women and an alternative to more glamorous careers.

Parker: I would prefer to see women doing comedy than doing pole - dancing. Let's get women out of these objectifying jobs where their appearance is corrupted and it leads to other things. Women should be women for what they are, not what they look like and comedy is the perfect example – all that matters is that you can make people laugh. You can do this if you're attractive or if you're butt ugly! (June, 2010).

Parker's point about wanting to 'get women out of these objectifying jobs' fits in closely with the other aspects associated with her organization. Moreover, the word 'objectifying' itself is one which has been closely associated with abjection throughout this thesis and it has clear connections with the female as the butt of 'old' male jokes. Parker's words also point to the female as the authority in her own life - and their own jokes. As Dee Heddon's essay 'The Politics of the Personal' argues that 'The fact that women were the subjects of their own art, rather than the objects, was political (In Aston and Harris (eds), 2007:134).

Osho's stand-up comedy has been shown to be performed with professionalism as she engages with socio-cultural issues. It is also valuable to this thesis in drawing attention to a wide range of issues relating to female and transnational stand-up comedy.

4.4 Case-study four: Pam Blunden

Pam Blunden's stand-up comedy is particularly relevant to the discussions raised in this chapter in being a product of comedy workshops and because her work highlights a number of key aspects regarding the inscribed body. All references relate to Colchester Arts Centre (April, 2003). Moreover, Blunden takes a risk in doing stand-up comedy because she is an older female. However, In Blunden's interview with Parker, the latter said:

Funny Women competitions attract women in their late 20s -30s and either side of that, but that age is no barrier. In the final there were women from their 20s -56. It doesn't matter how old you are. Absolutely – in comedy age isn't a barrier. You just have to be FUNNY! (June, 2010).

Joan Rivers has certainly indicated that 'age isn't a barrier' for a female to do stand-up comedy in that she is still performing in her seventies. Victoria Wood performed her show *Victoria at the Albert* (2001) when she was over fifty, but this was as the comeback of an established comic, not as a novice. It is certainly harder to go into stand-up comedy as an older female. Nevertheless, as shown in the subjects chosen within the workshops, Blunden's sets tend to engage with serious socio-cultural issues, rather than with specifically feminist ones. This seemingly contradicts the view posited by Judy Carter, a North American stand-up performer and coach who argues that 'The new school of comedy is personal comedy. Your act is about you: your gut issues, your body, your marriage, your divorce' (1989:3). However, Blunden's set is also personal in being about the way in which the ideologies of others can impinge on a body, especially a female body. This was also discussed in Chapter Three in relation to Shazia Mirza, although Blunden steers away from her personal body whilst Mirza engages with it in her stand-up work.

Disembodiment

Blunden's set here derives from early encounters with fundamentalist Christianity and the experience of her body being inscribed by religious ideology and prohibitions. Having said that, she was clearly not willing to risk dealing with more personal issues; nevertheless, her stand-up comedy does take some risks in its engagement with particular aspects of religion. Her experience can be partially explained with reference to Julia Kristeva, who refers to the 'interiorization of abjection' and sees that:

An essential trait of those evangelical attitudes or narratives is that abjection is no longer exterior. It is permanent and comes from within. Threatening, it is not cut off but is reabsorbed into speech (1982:113).

Firstly, it is important to note that Kristeva's perspective has correlations with other views on 'interiorization' that have been raised already within this thesis, particularly in relation to the work of Anne Hole (2003) and Mel Watkins (1994/199).

In the following it would appear that by becoming an atheist, Blunden has resisted such things. However, if Kristeva is right in arguing that the 'interiorizing' of 'abjection' is 'permanent' and 'reabsorbed into speech', it is a matter for concern. The set begins by Blunden acknowledging the space she shares with her audience, then leading from that into her key themes.

Blunden: It's nice to be here in this converted church.
I was converted (*pause*) to atheism. But even though
I don't go to church I still wonder about this after-life
business. Don't get me wrong. It's not that I mind dying.
It's just that you feel so bloody stiff the next day. But when
I do die, I'll be a dead atheist - all dressed up with nowhere
to go (Colchester Arts Centre, 2003).

The routine interrogates religions preference for postponement and life after death over enjoyment of life lived in the moment. Christian practice

and ideology are questioned here rather than its practitioners. This set has some similarities to Shazia Mirza's stand-up sets on life after death as indicated in Chapter Three; but it was difficult to know Mirza's own perspective. The reference to being an atheist in the above offers an acceptance of death as the end, with the implication to live life to the full because there is no after-life. Julia Kristeva sees that 'The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection' (1982:4). This has pertinence to being an atheist in the sense that one fights the encroachment of death as extinction. Bodily pleasure in the here and now is also important to the author's theories on bodily abjection. At a number of points within this thesis the notion of abjection or dejection has been related to the imposition of living within the ideological boundaries set by others or in 'seeing one's self through their eyes' (Watkins, 1994/9:26). It is notions such as these that Blunden is attacking in her stand-up comedy set here.

There is also a personal sense of disillusionment in that her experience of Christianity involved a required element of disembodiment and separateness from more enjoyable aspects of life. Mary Douglas notes that 'The root of 'holiness' means to set apart ...' (1966:62). It also means 'wholeness and completeness' (ibid, 63). It is precisely such notions of 'completeness' and 'order' that Blunden is interrogating and in this, her work has more correlation with Mikhail Bakhtin's resistance to what he sees as the 'completed' and the 'ready-made' (1984:10).

Resisting the encroachment of the corpse

In the following, Blunden appears to be resisting Kristeva's notion of abjection of the corpse mentioned above, in suggesting whimsically, that death does not exist or it can be over-ridden. In this piece there are absurd and surreal elements deriving from Jack Milner's advice to push ideas to

the extreme.

Blunden: When I was younger I was into criogenics because I wanted to be one of God's frozen people, but now I think I'll just leave my body to Science Fiction. I think death is psychosomatic anyway and dead people are hypochondriacs; they only die because they see others doing it (Colchester Arts Centre, 2003).

Notions of un-lived life, postponement of death are juxtaposed with the importance of being engaged with this life. This has similarities to Shazia Mirza's set on postponement. Some of the above are clearly adaptations of clichéd jokes as with 'one of God's frozen people' but the adaptation is effective in its engagement with the new science of criogenics. The set then seemingly goes into flights of fancy in the words 'giving my body to Science Fiction.' The references to 'psychosomatic' and 'hypochondria' in relation to dying also have some scientific basis also. Blunden uses the pronoun 'I' but, like Shazia Mirza, she gives very little personal information, preferring to work with 'big' subjects or perhaps too fearful to take the risk of being personal.

Blunden continues to explore the notion of life after death, but puts this into concrete, if surreal terms, in her juxtaposition of references to other planets, to politicians and to 'lost airline luggage'.

Blunden: But this heaven business is funny isn't it? Like where is it? Maybe we are some other planet's heaven - or hell. Is our heaven on another planet? It can't be on the Moon; we've been up here and there was no one there apart from Saddam and Bin Ladin, trying to hide from Bush. It can't be on the sun either, 'cos that's too bloody hot ... and it can't be on Saturn, 'cos that's made up entirely of lost airline baggage (Colchester Arts Centre, 2003).

Blunden addresses taboo subjects, but as noted before, without taking too many personal risks herself. Nevertheless, she does challenge important

religious concepts which tried to write themselves on her body. She wants to question the relationship between pleasure and sin which wanted her to 'slough' parts of her material body in Limonian terms (2000:4). Here, as in other parts of this thesis, there is the suggestion that the ideology of others interferes with the body's lived life. Moreover, as indicated by Shazia Mirza, it appears that sinfulness has been too readily aligned with the female. To reiterate a previously made case regarding Jenny Éclair, the following helps to explain Blunden's position. According to Bullough and Bullough, 'Christianity turned out to be a male-centred, sex-negative religion, with strong misogynistic tendencies and suspicions of female sexuality' (1987:71). It is these 'misogynistic tendencies' that Blunden is essentially addressing, although with taking too personal many risks.

A similar case of de-familiarizing Christian ideology is shown when North American stand-up comic Jane Anderson interrogates the grand narratives of religion by re-instating females into them in a form of comic revisionism. In the following, she creates the character of Shirley of Nazareth who has:

an excruciating case of sibling rivalry with her
older brother and tries to make some money
writing a best seller about him, written from
a woman's perspective (In Unterbrink, 1987:210).

In the seeming simplicity of this joke, Anderson is offering a comic feminist re-writing of religious history. However, Blunden's perspective on religion is more socio-cultural than feminist.

Blunden's style and approach has some correlations with the work of Billy Connolly and Dave Allen. Oliver Double describes Connolly's religious anecdotes of the 1970s as dangerous and notes how his routine on the crucifixion led to protests from the Church and street demonstrations from religious protestors (1997:149-150). Blunden had intended to do some jokes on the virgin birth associated with Christianity

but was advised against this by her mentor Jack Milner, for fear of alienating the audience.

Blunden : Have you ever thought where Christianity would be if Jesus had got 5-8 years, with time off for good behaviour - and crucifixion for a second offence? But whilst Jesus was in prison, apart from doing a few miracles, I expect he'd do 6 GCSEs and an Open University degree and set up a carpentry business when he came out (Colchester Arts Centre, 2003).

This last part echoes Linda Smith's style in the sense of bringing the high down to the level of the mundane whilst also giving it a political slant. It also again highlights the preference for lived life over the after-life. This stand-up comedy set questions the certitude of Christian practice and ideology and in this refers back to Mary Douglas' notions of holiness as 'order, not confusion' (1966:67). A key part of this thesis is that confusion is necessary in order that systems are forced to consider change and transformation.

The following de-familiarizes accepted and unchallenged Christian narratives and beliefs, especially with regard to the notion of death as its central motif. Such a model certainly seems to fit Kristeva's notion of the abjection that is at the heart of religious beliefs.

Blunden: But how can you have a religion without someone dying? Jesus could go on hunger strike, get found hanging in his cell or be kicked to death whilst in police custody - But as they say in religious circles, 'If you get them by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow' - I'm talking rubbish now, so I'd better leave God and get on with life, that ever-dwindling time between abortion and euthanasia (Colchester Arts Centre, 2003).

This last set has an aspect of irreverence in its speculations. Moreover, the questioning of police action in the phrases 'going on hunger strike', 'being found hanging in his cell' and 'being kicked to death whilst in police

custody' introduce contemporary socio-political overtones into the set which are reminiscent of Alternative Comedy. To insert controversial elements into the middle of seemingly fanciful speculations is effective in adding the sort of surprise element to the joke recommended by Oliver Double in his words 'Establish, reinforce, surprise' (2005:207).

Blunden's words 'I'd better leave God and get on with life' in their emphasis on the notion of disparity between religion and life, have a simplicity that echoes Shazia Mirza's jokes on religion as discussed in Chapter Two. The final reference to the 'ever-dwindling time between abortion and euthanasia' is complex in positioning important religious and socio-cultural issues within the colloquial turn of phrase which suggests a finishing of what one is doing in order to get on with the next 'job' on the list.

Overall, Blunden's work clearly attempts to cover big subjects using the 'minutiae' of everyday life. Evidence of the influence of Smith, Wood and Brand can be seen in her sets, especially in terms of the dismissive elements found also within Linda Smith's stand-up comedy. Blunden's tone in her sets is personal, but only implicitly so. There is clearly room to take more risks.

The case-studies of this part of Chapter Four all indicate newness. This is firstly, in the real sense that the four case-studies came into the stand-up comedy arena in the twenty-first century, but also in the sense of doing something new, or doing something in a different way. Each explores different aspects of bodily abjection.

Chapter Four: part two

Female ‘joking relations’

Introduction

Part two of this chapter investigates new trends regarding British white and transnational females as audience of stand-up comedy. As indicated in Chapter One, the study of audiences per se is a comparatively new field of research, and more closely related to the media than theatre, but with increased research in both areas. The key elements under investigation here are female ‘joking-relations’ and female laughter. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, the term ‘joking-relations’ is borrowed, and appropriated, from Alfred Radcliffe-Brown’s notion of conjunctive and disjunctive relations with reference to pre-industrial communities and clans (In Wilson, 1979:88). Not surprisingly, female to female relations were excluded from his study.¹²¹ However, they are at the centre of this part of this thesis and are explored in terms of responses, interactions and participation in relation to female stand-up comedy. Female laughter is particularly explored in terms of embodiment and disembodiment and with reference to taking up vocal and physical space. Issues relating to assumed norms and their transgression are also examined in relation to specific case-studies, and with reference to the concept of universality. The marginal position of the white and transnational female as audience is also explored. This part of the chapter particularly explores responses to bodily abjection, but it is also argued robustly that females as audience also have bodily matters and issues which intrude into their audience experience.

¹²¹ In Chapter Two, reference was made to Mahadev Apte’s study of all-female gatherings (In Palmer1994:71). However, it is important to note that he saw the subject of ‘men’ as being at the centre of the mocking rituals in which these gatherings engaged.

These matters are positioned collectively within this section, rather than being explored in-depth within each chapter in order to highlight the new patterns and trends being suggested. Many points raised here engage with notions of bodily abjection and with issues already explored in part one of this chapter relating to feminist theory, socio-cultural practice and the performance history of stand-up comedy. Comparison is made between males and females as audience and between mixed gender and niche audiences. The author of this thesis also examines her own position as audience at these venues.

All discussions relate to the live and screened case-study shows previously examined in the rest of this thesis which will be identified as appropriate. In these televised shows, the camera presents itself as a valuable tool for examining audience behaviour, laughter, interaction and participation, although it is also problematic or 'delinquent' in that its viewing cannot be called entirely objective. The investigation of this thesis is also necessarily subjective although informed by contemporary research in media theory and studies of audiences and spectatorship. Indeed, it must be firmly stated that all conclusions reached are used merely to indicate new trends and are not offered in any way as scientific evidence. This section divides its examination of female 'joking-relations' into two parts: the first part examines mixed-gender audiences, whilst the second part uses niche audiences which are predominantly-gay, predominantly-female, or predominantly-transnational as case-studies.

4.5.1 The mixed-gender audience for female stand-up comedy

In this section the following areas are discussed in relation to females within mixed-gender audiences for female stand-up comedy: 'shared

cultural values', collusion, coercion and the notion of the 'good sense of humour'. These are assessed with reference to M Alison Kibler's article *Gender, Conflict and Coercion on A&E's An Evening at the Improv* which investigates gender power relations with regard to male stand-up comedy and 'misogynistic routines at the Improv' (1999:45). The case-studies examined here include the recorded shows of Jo Brand (2003), Victoria Wood (2001) and Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders (2008).

This exploration of the female 'joking-relations' found in female stand-up comedy begins with an examination of mixed-gender audiences and the notion of shared cultural values. Kibler argues that 'the few scholarly definitions of stand-up comedy' emphasise 'a comedian's (implicitly a male comedian's) power to elicit community values' (1999:46). There is a double exclusion of the female here, firstly, in the assumption that most stand-up comics are male, and secondly, in the implication that 'community values' are indisputable. Kibler augments her point by citing Lawrence Mintz's view of the (male) stand-up comic as 'one who leads us in a celebration of a community of shared culture, of homogeneous understanding ...' (1999:46). In some agreement with Kibler, the author of this thesis interrogates the notion that there can be shared cultural values and 'homogenous understanding' within a mixed-gender audience. Indeed, it would appear that the notion of 'shared cultural values' is like that of '*socio-reality*' - an 'ideological-based reality ... continually asserted as if it is part of the first order of objects and the everyday' (Fuery, 2000:125). This assertion is one which has been constantly interrogated throughout this thesis. Moreover, the notions of 'eliciting' and 'leading' are also seen by this thesis as value-laden and furthermore, they discount the unique importance of the audience to stand-up comedy.

Case-study: The mixed-gender audience and Jo Brand's *Barely Live* show (2003)

The above notions can be tested against the mixed-gender audience responses to Jo Brand's recorded show *Barely Live* (2003) where a comparison of male and female responses and laughter can easily be made. Interestingly, Jo Brand told Alison Oddey that to her, the audience:

just seems like a big lump of people. They almost have a character to them, so you can find out in the first two minutes what that character is, either a grump, tired or a drunk person - and you approach them in that way really (In Oddey, 2005:140).

These words terms imply the 'shared cultural values' and 'homogenous understanding' cited in Kibler's essay; they also imply that audience laughter will also be homogenous and contagious. As shown in the following, this is contradicted by the self-positioning of the audience. Kibler suggests that 'Although men and women may be laughing together, they may in fact be experiencing jokes differently' (1999:54). However, with regard to Jo Brand's stand-up comedy males and females are clearly not laughing together. Importantly, female laughter can be heard as increasingly prominent during Brand's set on 'women's subjects' and feminist issues such as female contraceptives. This seemingly 'gives permission' for female laughter. Furthermore, this laughter is in response to jokes which represent females as self-agents and not as the butt of the joke.

Female laughter is also detected as prominent during Brand's emasculatory set on 'male testicles' although it has almost a subversive tone to it; male laughter in comparison seems to audibly and proportionately diminish as Brand warms to her theme. It almost seems a written taboo that females do not laugh about the size or shape of male sexual organs in mixed-company. On the other hand men are detected as

laughing more loudly than females at Brand's self-abjecting jokes about being fat. In a further point of contrast, when Jasper Carrott offers a list of euphemisms for the penis in his show *Jasper Carrott on tv* (2007) male laughter, claps and cheers become louder as the list unfolds. It includes words such as 'lunchbox, cigar, pocket rocket, giggling stick, the bald headed hermit, Spirt Reynolds, love truncheon and joystick.' These all appear to be celebratory words and thus offer an entirely different perspective to Brand's descriptions of male testicles. These illustrations of contrasting responses would seem to refute both the notion of 'shared cultural values' and the suggestion that the audience is homogenous in its understanding or response.

The issue of homogeneity is also raised by two theoreticians on spectatorship in relation to theatre audiences. Annie Ubersfeld posits the view that within theatre audiences laughter's 'contagiousness is necessary for everyone's pleasure' (In Bennett, 1997:72). On the other hand, Susan Bennett argues that laughter depends 'on the disposition of the individual spectator' so 'is deprived of its collective nature' (1997:46). These views are both generic but Bennett's argument more fittingly describes audience responses for Jo Brand's show, whilst Ubersfeld's words seem almost too generalized to be of value. Furthermore, the 'disposition' of the spectator appears to be affected by what Antonio Damasio (a neuroscientist) calls 'background emotions' which include being 'tense' or 'edgy' or 'down' or 'cheerful' (2000:52). These are the emotions that audience members bring from 'real' life into the 'fictional' space of the theatre or stand-up arena. According to Damasio these emotions are detected by 'subtle details of body posture, speed and contour of movements ... and in the degree of contraction of facial muscles' (2000:52). Such 'subtle details' do not seemingly lend themselves to Ubersfeld's notion of contagion if the auditorium is dark, or if there is a wide variety of 'dispositions' within a given audience..

If Brand's perspective of the audience having a 'character' is correct, it begs the question of where this character originates because, clearly, as Antonio Damasio's notion of 'background emotions' suggests, not everyone feels the same thing at the same time. This thesis suggests that if the audience has a seeming 'collective' identity, this might derive from the dominant individuals or groups in the audience, who have traditionally been men. Indeed, Kibler's essay also contains the suggestion that 'community is often defined by the powerful at the expense of subordinated groups and that laughter does not always express agreement with the dominant definition of community' (1999:47). This has correlations with the notion of 'laugh-leaders' which is a theory expounded by the author of this thesis to explain why laughter might appear cohesive without actually be so. Appropriating Jacques Lecoq's notion of the chorus, this thesis tentatively suggests that potential audience identity might be determined by dominant individuals in the audience as 'laugh-leaders'. These were previously male but the case-studies of this thesis suggest that they now include females. Lecoq argues that 'Extravagant behaviour forces others to join forces to create a chorus as a reaction' (2000:131). However, importantly, his 'chorus' is not a homogenous group, but rather a collection of individuals forming small groups each with its own leader (ibid, 131). In Brand's mixed-gender audience neither male laughter nor female laughter could be described as homogenous or contagious but is detectable as coming from individuals or 'choruses'.

Case-study: Coercion and Collusion: *Victoria at the Albert* (2001) and *Jasper Carrott on tv* (2008/9)

The following section offers a comparison of the stand-up comedy of a female and a male stand-up comic in order to explore notions of coercion and collusion. Annie Ubersfeld suggests that within theatre audiences 'an individual is unlikely to swim against the current of his/her neighbour's

reception' (1997:71). This view implies a tendency towards a surrendering of individual agency and following the reactions of others but this implies a degree of either collusion or coercion. The notion of resistance to norms is an important element of this thesis and clearly, applies as much to the female as audience as to the female as performer of stand-up comedy. The female in the audience at Jo Brand's *Barely Live* show (2003) seem not to be governed by traditional norms of reception, but by their own inclinations.

In exploring matters of coercion, Victoria Wood's show *Victoria at the Albert* (2001) is a pertinent case-study. However, as has been the case with Brand, Wood's own words tend to suggest a picture of the audience which is different from the one which it presents itself. Interestingly, Wood also goes further than Brand in seeing her audience as a completely anonymous collective.

Wood: I don't see them. I specifically have lights at the back so that I can't see them and they are a black mass ...
If I can see them it destroys my own idea of them, that they are individual people. I don't want to see them sitting with their coats in their laps, I just want them as spirits connecting with me (In Oddey, 2005:234).

The notion of the audience as 'a black mass' and as 'spirits connecting with me' does not seemingly engage with the issue of shared cultural values in its suggestion of passive reception. However, the audience for Wood's hysterectomy set identify themselves by their laughter as highly embodied and vocal individuals or groups of females. (It cannot be argued that their laughter is homogenous, however). Male laughter can also be detected, but this decreases whilst female laughter becomes louder and more conspicuous as Wood develops her theme. These women have found 'new things they can laugh at' to recall Meera Syal's words.

An interesting and pertinent comparison can be made between the above

reaction to Wood's hysterectomy set and responses given to Jasper Carrott's exploration of 'women's subjects' in his television programme *Jasper Carrott on Tv* (2007). Carrott talks of the strangeness of females when affected by their hormones. He talks of men's clothes being neatly packed on the lawn and of vacuum cleaners being used as weapons. In contrast to Wood's show, responses to Carrott's jokes on pre-menstrual tension, the menopause and Hormone Replacement Therapy are met with a high degree of male laughter and little, or reluctant, female laughter. This is because, although the subject matter of Carrott's set relates to females, the jokes are addressed to the males in the audience, making the female content the butt of the joke, and not its subject. This exemplifies Kibler's point that male comics 'address women and discuss women's experiences mainly as a means of bonding with men, against women' (1999:49).¹²² Thus, the female has been marginalized three times over, once as the butt of the joke, a second time as not being addressed, and a third time in either having to fake some form of laugh or be accused of not having a sense of humour.¹²³ In the case of Brand and Wood's shows, females are the subject of their sets and thus offer the potential for bonding with the females in the audience, and perhaps even *between* the females as audience.

What is equally interesting, is that prior to the above set in Carrott's 2007 show, he offers a number of euphemisms for female breasts which include 'bristols, dumplings, pears, bazookas, wobblies, jelly bangs, melons, coconuts, hooters and fun bags'. These terms can clearly be seen to be male-relational and heavily value-laden. Carrott's euphemisms for breasts and those used for the penis, highlighted earlier with regard to Jo Brand's show, indicate that in both cases the perspective relates to male pleasure. Some female laughter can be heard, but it is spasmodic and short-lived.

¹²² Jo Brand reverses this in her emasculatory jokes but, is she creating female bonding or antipathy to men? Presumably, both positions are available to females in the audience.

¹²³ The issue of the sense of humour in relation to females is discussed in the next section.

This sort of response would seem to exemplify Tina Modleski's point as cited in Kibler that 'to laugh at jokes told at their expense, females must be laughing masochistically, or laughing as men' (1999:47). Furthermore, it suggests that the only choices open to females in the audience are between self-abjection and collusion, with the added implication again that not laughing means lacking a 'sense of humour'.

Kibler argues with regard to her case-study that female laughter is coerced in relation to male 'misogynistic routines' (1999:50). However, an examination of the audiences for both Brand and Wood would suggest that in the first decade of the twenty-first century, British females within mixed-gender audiences are not so easy to coerce, especially in relation to female stand-up comedy. This does not appear to be true with regard to Dawn French's 'ritual insults' sketch which is discussed in the following paragraph. This recalls Lynne Parker's view noted in the first half of this chapter, that female stand-up comics are no longer quite so intimidated by male comics and hecklers as they previously had been. Kibler also notes that 'The unruly women are still absent from the television screen' (1999:51). This is also true of the shows of Jo Brand and Victoria Wood, however, the lack of a visual representation of the females in the mixed-gender audience cannot block the audible evidence of boisterous female laughter.

Case-study: Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders *Still Alive* show (2008) and the 'good sense of humour'

As already suggested, female responses to the sets of Brand, Wood and Carrott above relate to the question of what constitutes a 'good sense of humour'. This thesis posits the view that the 'good sense of humour' is not only gendered but that it also engages with notions of coercion and collusion. Frances Gray in her book *Women and Laughter* applies the term to the receiver of (sexist) jokes. She notes that the female lack of a sense

of humour is equated with frigidity (1994:8). She qualifies this by saying that 'women's objections to specific jokes ... invokes 'the spectre of a thin-lipped and humourless prude averse to any form of spontaneity, life or joy' (1994:8). 'No wonder that it hurts - as it does - to be told you have no sense of humour' (ibid, 5). The words 'thin-lipped' and 'prude' have bodily and sexual connotations which are 'in-relation-to' heterosexuality. Moreover, they strongly link to the interiorized male perspectives discussed by Anne Hole (2003) and as such they hint at notions of disembodied laughter. Moreover, the words 'frigidity' and 'thin-lipped' draw attention to female orifices and surfaces which are noted as being made abject in many parts of this thesis.

The question of having a 'good sense of humour' is raised with regard to the 'ritual insults' sketch in French and Saunders show *Still Alive* (2008). However, when French descends from the stage to the auditorium, both she and the camera anatomize and make a spectacle of a female who is singled out from the audience. French seemingly forces this female into compliance in shouting 'Don't be silly! Don't be silly' as the female tries to resist her verbal and physical intrusions into her personal bodily space. The embarrassed laughter of this female cannot be said to represent a 'good sense of humour'; indeed in clearly being coerced. The female tries to hide her face and looks to her friend for assistance; she covers her eyes and her mouth in order to avoid connection with her 'tormentor'. Other females can be heard laughing when this female is 'victimized' and thus, could be said to be colluding in her 'victimization'. Anger would have seemed an appropriate response on this occasion, even though it would 'spoil' the show and add the label of 'killjoy' to the one of having 'no sense of humour'.

The butt of the sexist joke who does not laugh is deemed to lack a 'good sense of humour'. The choice here is between colluding and being seen as unable to take a joke at 'one's own expense'. This is often gendered.

Frances Gray also alludes to something more sinister in noting that ‘To object to a specific joke, in a specific context, is to be perceived an enemy of laughter in general’ (1994:4). This suggests that lack of a ‘good sense of humour’ strongly correlates with the assumed lack of female funniness addressed by Lynne Parker in part one of this chapter. And yet the males who did not laugh at Brand’s emasculatory jokes would not be regarded as lacking a ‘sense of humour’. The author of this thesis argues that having a ‘good sense of humour’ and ‘getting the joke’ means being *included* in the joke as addressee and as self-agent rather than object of the joke.

4.5.2 The mixed-gender audience: female ‘joking relations’

Most studies of audience explore reception rather than interaction as do some books on stand-up comedy. John Limon in his book on abjection in North American stand-up comedy sees that ‘Stand-up is uniquely audience-dependent for its value because joking is, essentially ... a social phenomenon’ (2000:12) This refers to reception rather than interaction or participation in that Limon also argues that ‘the audience has assembled for the sake of laughing’ and that its laughter turns the comic’s joke into a joke (ibid, 13). Female audiences of the cited female stand-up comedy of this thesis do more than look, listen and laugh. They participate in other ways. Some also take their ‘joking relations’ further by interacting with the comic. This is more in keeping with communal aspects of stand-up comedy which is closer to participative ritual than other arts and more like carnival or like ancient comedy which involved elements of communal ritual.

The interactions highlighted in the following case-studies are inspired by the female stand-up comics, but initiated by female audience members. They technically fall within the category of ‘heckling’ which has a

tendency to create disjunctive, rather than conjunctive ‘joking relations’. Practitioner and theorist, Oliver Double offers details of highly disjunctive male relationships in his books on stand-up comedy. In *Stand-up!* he describes the Tunnel Club in Greenwich as the ‘comic’s notorious graveyard’ where ‘hecklers took centre stage’ (1997:194). He also cites the Glasgow Empire as the ‘centre of the heckling universe’ and the ‘graveyard of English comics’ (ibid, 37). The references to ‘graveyard’ in the above have dark connotations and almost suggest a fight to the death between the comic and his audience.

In his later book *Getting the Joke* (2005) Double is still making references to ‘power struggles’, ‘hostility’ and ‘battles of wit’ when referring to the relationship between the (male) comic and his audience (2005:199). He also implies a ‘power struggle’ in noting that ‘If a heckler gets a bigger laugh than anything the comedian has got all evening, the comic’s authority will often be badly dented ...’ (2005:198). Lynne Parker corroborates Double’s observations in noting that at a stand-up gig ‘Men pace around and postulate as if they are going into the lion’s den! More competitive’ (With Blunden, 2010). Whilst the above is interesting it is somewhat different from male heckling of females which is often both aggressive and overtly sexual as is noted by Frances Gray’s example of ‘Show us yer tits!’ (1994:146). There is no sense of a ‘battle of wits’ here or even of a ‘power struggle’; these words objectify and denigrate the female body to the point of dismissal.

It appears that there is a traditional link between heckling and stand-up comedy. However, this thesis suggests that the personal aggression which is outlined by Double in the above is remote from the heckling used to ward off danger in ancient comedy, mostly because in Double’s examples are personal and have lost their communal qualities. In contrast, the female ‘heckling’ examined in the following sections appears to be part of the appeal of the event. Furthermore, the term ‘heckling’ does not

accurately describe the female interactions examined within this chapter which seem less like disjunctive power struggles and more related to conjunctive ‘joking relations’.

Case-study: audience interaction for Shazia Mirza at Colchester Arts Centre (2004)

At Colchester Arts Centre (2004) with a predominantly-white mixed-gender audience Shazia Mirza asks about people’s religions and asks a white man with a Sikh girlfriend, ‘Have your parents tried to kill you?’ This is a rhetorical question. However, it is responded to by two females in the audience who develop a joke between themselves. The first woman asks of the couple, ‘Are you having sex?’ The second woman answers, ‘They are - but not with each other’. These comments are well-placed and well-timed. A woman near Blunden claps in appreciation of the audience intervention. Later, Mirza chastises the first woman for continuing to engage her in conversation, ‘You keep talking to me’. Nevertheless, Mirza also continues the engagement throughout her set.

The above also highlights the notion of ‘spritzing’ which stand-up comic and coach Jay Sankey argues, ‘brings the comic and crowd closer through the funny things they find together’. It relates to this audience on this particular night (1998:158/9). The term ‘spritzing’ as used here refers to performer improvisations with the audience. This thesis argues that the term also effectively describes female audience improvisations. Audience interruption ‘happens between jokes’ to create ‘joking relations’ between audience member and performer. However, it is important to note that ‘heckling’ and ‘spritzing’ are also risky because they are improvised. Nevertheless, they could be said to represent interruptions of the ‘ready-made’ aspect of the event and as such to have the potential to take the set in a completely different direction.

Simple audience responses can also take the stand-up comedy set in another direction. John Limon argues that the rhythm of audience laughter influences the comedian's timing and his direction (2000:13). Dario Fo in his book *Red Notes* concurs with this view in saying, 'it's the audience that gives you the idea of the rhythm, and you have to accelerate or slow down accordingly' (1983:26). These views imply audience homogeneity, but Dymphna Callery suggests a more individual encounter in arguing that 'The smallest reaction, movement, laugh, or single word from the audience lets you go in another direction' (2000:147). This is why it is important for females as audience to fully 'take up their space'. The following case-studies examine the 'joking relationship' between female performers and female audience members in greater detail.

Case-study: Gina Yashere and mixed-gender audiences

Colchester Arts Centre (2007)

The following encounter between Yashere and a female audience member clearly confirm Callery's point above. Moreover, it offers a very good example of female to female 'joking relations'. Yashere's set at Colchester Arts Centre (2007) is interrupted by a female 'heckler' when the stand-up comic does a set about Nigerian-style discipline and hitting. A white woman interrupts the set to share her own experiences of being punished in a similar fashion as a child. Yashere says, 'Are we talking black people smacks? Shoes? Belts?' The woman shouts back 'Clogs!' The audience and Yashere laugh whilst the woman clarifies what happened with the clog in saying, 'My mother said, 'I'll throw my shoe at you if you carry on'. I did, she did, and I got the clog on my head.' Yashere continues the joke by taking up the role of this woman's mother to say, 'I didn't think it would hurt when it hit her' (Colchester Arts

Centre, 2007). She clearly, has sufficient confidence in her ability and material to be able to let dialogue run. There are cheers and laughs from other members of the audience during this improvised dialogue. This sort of interaction is different from the 'heckling' to which Double refers; and perhaps more important, it is more inclusive of the whole community of the audience. The male heckling cited earlier tends to victimize, ostracize and force an inevitable polarization of the audience.

Comedy Camp (2006)

At London's Comedy Club (2006) another type of female 'heckling' or 'spritzing' adds to the audience enjoyment of the show. When Gina Yashere asks a man in the audience about his job at Heathrow airport, she says, 'You let us blacks in!' At that point a woman behind Blunden shouts out, 'He's a fed.' She continues to interrupt whilst Yashere is talking to other people and adds 'ah' and 'oh' and 'ooh' in response to other audience replies. Furthermore, she speaks for these people, or she adds a running commentary on Yashere's interactions. She has effectively taken on the roles of commentator, interpreter and participator in ritual. Her interruptions are comic to other members of the audience because pertinent. They also exemplify Judy Carter's point that 'The funny' is 'often what happens in between the jokes' (1989:130). Such a continued interruption such as this is unusual for females and suggests a new level of audience confidence.

On the other hand, Oliver Double cites those who dislike interruptions to their sets in saying, 'If you're trying to take someone into a world of your own ... it kind of breaks the moment' (2005:199). This seems to deny any significant role for the audience of stand-up comedy except a response of laughter. Stand-up comic Tony Allen offers a different perspective in his reference to an altercation between a heckler and an artiste at a stand-up

show.

The Heckler: Get off! You're full of shit! ...

The Artiste: Look there are some people who came here to listen to the show. Not listen to you.

The Heckler: But I'm part of the live inter-action. See the irony of it, for fuck's sake (2002:132).

The Artiste's words illustrate the 'ready-made' aspect of the show and how this undervalues the importance of audience interaction. This is particularly evident in the words 'Not listen to you'. However, the heckler insists that he is 'part of the live inter-action'. This exchange is very pertinent to the female commentator at Yashere's Comedy Camp show in that she also goes beyond mere interruption to become an integral part of the event. Yashere accepts her input and in doing so suggests that she has a good rapport with her audience.

Disjunctive female 'joking relations': females refusing to laugh at other females:

Some females withhold their laughter from female stand-up comics. What is the cause of this and what are its implications? One cause might be the prior lack of female stand-up comics. Some females might see stand-up comedy as a male domain as Andi Osho suggested in part one of this chapter. The suggestion that men are funnier than women was addressed at the beginning of this chapter. Some females are seemingly happy to laugh at sexist and misogynistic jokes. There seems to be more female confidence in male stand-up comics, seemingly despite the content of their jokes; and yet these females have more to laugh at in female stand-up comedy.

Some explanation of why females might withhold their laughter from other females but give it to male stand-up comics might also be found in

Robert Provine's observations that men as 'the leading jokesters' and females as the 'leading laughers and consumers of humor' (2000:29). (That is of male humour). He goes further to suggest that 'Males engage in more laugh-evoking activity than females, a pattern that may be universal' (2000:29). Provine qualifies this further by saying that 'men may revel in the chuckles of a female companion, as a measure of her pleasure and recognition of his acceptance and status' (2000:34). Provine offers a perception of laughter which is 'in-relation-to' male perspectives and positions.¹²⁴ This appears to have a sociological and a biological basis in relation to heterosexuality. However, it raises the question of whether female laughter always relates to heterosexual desire or socio-cultural security as Provine suggests. This is not the case in the female case-studies already cited. However, also in his study female humorous comments received only reserved nods and smiles, but not laughs (2000:25-26). The implication here is that female laughter is heavily influenced by heterosexuality. However, this does not take into account lesbian laughter unless desire is more pertinent than heterosexuality.

There are, however, other female views to support the above. Jo Brand said she thought that audience expectations of women were so low they had to work twice as hard. Indeed, in the toilets at the Comedy Store she heard two women talking 'Oh, there's a woman on next, she'll be crap' (In Deayton, 1999). Blunden also raised this matter with Lynne Parker.

Blunden: Have you noticed how female audiences react to newcomer females?

Parker: The worst critics of women are other women ... A room full of women - that's the hardest gig you'll ever do as a female comic ... Women are very judgemental (June, 2010).

The views expressed by Parker seem to contradict the notion of

¹²⁴ This is also seemingly supported by those females who laugh at male stand-up comedy but think female stand-up comics would be 'crap' as Jo Brand and Lynne Parker

conjunctive 'joking relations' that is argued in other parts of this chapter, but what might be the reasons behind them? One important possibility might be the relative newness of the female as an integral part of the audience for stand-up comedy. The implication is that there is not yet sufficient confidence in females doing stand-up. This is precisely what is being addressed by Lynne Parker's Funny Women organization.

Case-study: Colchester Arts Centre (2004) - Shazia Mirza

Laughter was withheld from Shazia Mirza during her show at Colchester Arts Centre (2004), although this was not specifically female-related. Mirza accuses the audience of being repressed. She also says, 'People in this country are so scared to laugh.' Mirza sent us for an early break because we were not laughing enough. There are loud laughs at that. At the end of the show Mirza thanked the people at the bar saying, 'If it wasn't for them there might not have been any laughter in the second half.' Were we withholding laughter from inhibition, displeasure or strategy or because we were insufficiently stimulated? Often the reason was because Mirza's jokes were too densely packed and therefore difficult to grasp immediately.

It could be argued that Mirza 'bombed' and thereby created disjunctive 'joking relations'. Judy Carter sees that '*Bombing* is losing connection with the audience' (1989:133). She also argues that 'To be good you need to take risks, and that will increase your chances of bombing. But bombing will help you to realize what doesn't work and your act can only get better' (1989:132). As noted in Chapter Two, Mirza certainly does take many risks in her stand-up comedy. Jay Sankey, another stand-up comic and coach, refers to the action of 'calling the situation' as a means of 'acknowledging verbally that the crowd are hard to please' (1998:155).

Were we hard to please for Mirza because we felt insulted or because we were treated collectively as ‘white’? Perhaps it was because her jokes were quite dense at times as suggested in Chapter Two. The suggestion made by Sankey that the ‘crowd are hard to please’ seems to indicate a general poor reading of the relationship between performer and audience but there are many reasons for the lack of laughter and some of these derive from the comic. At Mirza’s show I sometimes withheld my laughter simply because I was noticing other things such as Mirza’s engagement with her audience. A female blogger on Mirza’s website saw the lack of laughter as being Miza’s fault.

Layla: I saw Mirza at Edinburgh and by the end of her performance the audience were just embarrassed for her and could no longer feign laughter (downloaded, 23.3.05).

This suggests again that Mirza’s jokes did not engage strongly enough with her audience. Another possible explanation for a lack of laughter was given by Mirza herself when she asked our Colchester audience ‘Why aren’t you laughing? Is it too much?’ I certainly found it difficult to laugh when Mirza was reading out the death threats she had received. However, I could hear a group of women laughing at the back of the auditorium, although that laughter sounded disembodied. Perhaps this was also a shocked reaction.

There is also another straightforward reason for a lack of laughter which is highlighted by Carter who says simply, ‘Know that you can’t please everyone’ (1989:133). Oliver Double explores this position in more detail in the following:

Laughter is infectious, but when there’s only a handful of people in the room, the chances of cross-infection are that much smaller. Nobody notices if three or four people Aren’t laughing in an audience of two hundred, but if there’s only eight people in the room, that means half the audience

isn't laughing (1997:158).

Double refers to the infectiousness of laughter in the above, whilst actually indicating the opposite. However, with regard to females as audience of male misogynistic stand-up comedy, Double's 'three or four people' who are not laughing are likely to include many more. However, a more pertinent question might be, 'Who are the females who are not laughing and why?' This question was partially answered earlier regarding those who do not share the values of the stand-up comic, and those who do not feel included in the joke, who might be the same. This question might also in part be answered with reference to Damasio's theory of background emotions highlighted earlier (2000:58). The implication is that one did not 'feel' like laughing on this occasion. M Alison Kibler's essay offers yet another possibility, namely, that anger might be an alternative to laughter (1999:47).

Female 'joking relations' and decoding

A consideration of decoding is particularly relevant to the explorations of this chapter because one's ability to decode influences one's decision to laugh or to withhold laughter. Nevertheless, it is difficult to explore the subject except in generic or personal terms.¹²⁵ Decoding depends on the audience getting the joke, and on the performer being able to read the audience. It is also influenced by how the audience is addressed in terms of expectations, each person's emotional disposition and its cultural experiences. Gina Yashere addressed her audience at Colchester Arts Centre (2007) as white. This is revealed in her question 'Have you ever had a black woman that close?' It is also revealed in her references to Trisha and Beyonce as examples of two well-known black females.

¹²⁵ With reference to the phrase 'one's decision to laugh', this thesis suggests that it *is* ultimately a decision because, whilst decoding may only take a split second, it still

There is the assumption in the words of the lack of cultural experience in the audience regarding black people with the implication that this predominantly-white audience must share the same cultural values and therefore all decode in the same way. However, that could not be said to be the case. The author of this thesis has had extensive experience of working with diasporic communities in Birmingham and Leicester, whilst her companion has lived most of her life in the predominantly 'white' town of Colchester. Thus, our decoding and perhaps our enjoyment of the show would be different.

Decoding then seems to involve both cultural and personal elements. H-G Gadamer, cited by Ramswami Harindranath in his essay 'Ethnicity, National Culture(s) and the Interpretation of Television' offers a definition of decoding which suggests that it exists in the space between the past and the present and between the personal and the socio-cultural. Gadamer suggests that understanding is 'anticipation of meaning, based on prior knowledge. We constantly revise our cultural resources as we encounter new experiences' (In Cottle (ed), 2000:155ff). This revision of 'cultural resources' in relation to 'new experiences' is fundamental to the arguments posited by this thesis and engages with notions of potentiality.

Decoding also accepts that there are gaps in people's understanding of each other. The psychiatrist R. D Laing observes that we cannot know each other's experiences and that 'Contact depends on our continually filling in the central gaps in our experience' (In Counsell (ed), 2001:180). This view is relevant to Shazia Mirza's show at Colchester (2003) where as demonstrated in Chapter Two, she addressed such gaps by offering a constant alternating of position regarding her subject of the Muslim female. She thereby offered a kaleidoscope of view for the audience to choose from to fill in the gaps of their experience. In my position as audience, I responded as much to Mirza's skill as to the funniness of her

intervenes between the joke and one's response to the joke.

sets.

Blunden's 'gap of potentiality' theory

The views offered by Gadamer and Laing above have some bearing on the author's notion of a 'gap of potentiality' in relation to white and transnational female stand-up comedy in particular, and with reference to the stand-up comedy of the female case-studies of this thesis. Moreover, this notion relates to discussions made in the first part of this chapter where it was suggested that female stand-up comedy serves as a feminist and political platform offering the possibility of change within socio-cultural practices.¹²⁶

The 'gap of potentiality' theory suggests that in the pauses within, and between jokes, there exists not just decoding and laughter, but the possibility and even the probability of new insights. The audience laughs in the pause of the joke when that which was once familiar, becomes de-familiarized. The duration of the pause unbalances us and permits us to go in a number of directions simultaneously until one new way is chosen as a resting point. This state underscores the sense of uncertainty and risk and leads forward to a new potentiality. However, this is not just about 'getting the joke' and laughing, nor is it merely about noting incongruity and laughing as was suggested by Schopenhauer's theory of comedy, mentioned in the introduction of this thesis. In relation to female stand-up comedy, it is about transformation. Mary Russo sees that risk 'is not a bad thing to be avoided, but rather a condition of possibility' (1994:10-11). She further sees that it 'belongs properly to the discourse of probability and error' (ibid, 11). These views have been readily and frequently applied to the female as performer in this thesis; they are now applied to

¹²⁶ This is not to imply that male stand-up comedy does not also offer the potential for change; it is simply to underscore the fact that many of the female case-studies highlighted in this thesis, either deliberately or inadvertently deal with important socio-political issues.

the female audience of female stand-up comedy.

This theory can be further explained with reference to Frances Gray. She considers that 'it is possible that the joke may shatter our view of accepted reality, suddenly de-familiarising a political or social system for us to see flaws and the incongruent but to let us re-enter' (1994:32). This thesis suggests that this is an extension of the incongruity theory, and argues that the 'desire for re-entry' is impossible because both the situation and one's engagement with it have changed. The theory of the 'gap of potentiality' is about taking the risk of being 'outside' a social system in order to allow the potential for a new perspective.

Mutual looking

The author of this thesis argues that mutual female looking contests the notion of the female as spectacle for a number of reasons. Firstly, it has the chance to bypass the male gaze and to resist the internalised male voices indicated by Anne Hole (2003) et al. Frances Gray suggests that 'like most women she has been brought up to adopt the male gaze and utter the male laugh' (1994:15). She also argues that 'Comedy positions the woman not simply as the object of the male gaze but of male laughter - not just to-be looked-at but to-be-laughed-at - doubly removed from creativity' (1994:9). Such views seem to echo views held by Kibler (1999) and Hole (2003). However, this thesis suggests that a new mutual female looking and laughing has arisen within the realms of female stand-up comedy and female 'joking relations' which has far-reaching implications.

Jackie Stacey argues in her book *Star Gazing* that 'one's own identity is transformed through the process of spectatorship' (1994:126). This is written with reference to British female reception of glamorous 1940s Hollywood film stars who 'were envied for their confidence and their

capabilities in the fictional worlds of Hollywood cinema' (ibid, 158). This could also be said of Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders in their parodies of contemporary film stars, except that in this case, the application is to the real world. In a similar vein, Oliver Double refers to fans who can recite whole sketches from the shows of Victoria Wood or French and Saunders (1997:153). This suggests more than mere adulation, it implies that looking (and listening) lead to action.

Another pertinent consideration of looking is made by Peter Handke cited in Stanton B Garner's book *Bodied Spaces* (1994). *Handke* argues that speakers reverse the positions of watcher and watched and 'make the audience the play's centre' so that 'because we speak to you, you become conscious of yourself' (1994:154). This seems to be more relevant to audiences of stand-up comedy than to other performing arts. It is also important for the female as audience in terms of being included in the 'space' of stand-up comedy.

The camera looks at screened stand-up comedy and mediates the viewers look, but this is not mutual looking. The camera might have a 'delinquent' lens and give an inaccurate reading of the situation. M Alison Kibler notes that the camera often gives close ups of heterosexual 'laughing couples' but it avoids close ups of unruly females (1999:54).

Choosing to sit close to the stage suggests a desire to be looked at both by the performer and by the rest of the audience, but it also suggests a desire to participate and interact. Some chose this option at the Comedy Camp (2006) and were not only noticed by Yashere, but interacted with her. However, desiring not to be looked at is another matter. My companion and I were amongst a handful of heterosexuals as a 'minority' within this predominantly-gay audience although we did not admit it for 'fear' of being singled out from the crowd.¹²⁷ The fear of being conspicuous and

¹²⁷ As noted elsewhere, the master of ceremonies Simon Happily asked the audience to

thus ‘victimized’ was also evident as we tried to leave before the end of the show, but brought attention to ourselves by breaking a glass. Gina Yashere called out, ‘Where are you going, ladies?’ We stood frozen in the doorway and explained why we had to leave. I felt the desire to say something funny back, but was insufficiently prepared, and thus felt foolish, rather than clever.

4.5.3 Gendered laughter

In the above, much has been written about the circumstances under which females as audience have laughed, but the nature of that laughter has not yet been considered. It is important to examine female laughter more closely for two reasons: firstly, because studies on laughter have tended to be generic and secondly, because laughter itself is gendered.¹²⁸ As with other aspects of the comedy, female laughter has been overlooked within generic studies on the subject. Furthermore, in many earlier studies laughter was conflated with comedy, humour or joke-telling. Most studies also explore laughter only as response. This is why it is important to examine female laughter in relation to female stand-up comedy.¹²⁹

Robert Provine’s book *Laughter: a Scientific Study* explores female laughter, and even validates it, albeit that it remains gendered. Firstly, he argues that ‘Women’s laughter usually has a higher fundamental frequency (~502 hz) than men’s laughter (~276 hz)’ (2000:59/61). However, this thesis suggest that the higher ‘frequency’ might be as much gendered as biological, and suggests that vocal registers can be altered.

identify themselves as gay or lesbian by raising their hands. Ninety-eight per cent came within these two categories.

¹²⁸ Later in this chapter a discussion of the predominantly-transnational audience indicates that laughter has also been racialized.

¹²⁹ This was partially argued in Chapter Three in relation to stand-up comic Jenny Éclair’s ‘dirty’ laugh.

It would also appear that female laughter is often performed in ways which are false either because it is coerced or is colluding in misogynistic jokes. This seemed to be the case that M Alison Kibler was arguing in her essay (1999). This thesis argues that gendered laughter is always *already* performed in that it appears to have a limited vocabulary which includes: the ‘giggle’, the ‘horse’ laugh’ and the ‘cackle’ and the ‘hysterical’ laugh.¹³⁰ The ‘giggle’ is seen as girlish, coquettish and submissive, but not womanly. The ‘horse’ laugh is deep and defines the female using it as having masculine characteristics and therefore as deviant. The ‘cackle’ is seen as grotesque and ‘witch-like’, whilst the hysterical laugh is always deemed and implies being emotionally out of control.¹³¹

Apart from the giggle, these female laughs are also generally seen as too loud, conspicuous and deviant. As such, they are scorned by males as indicated by stand-up comic Phil Jupitas who says:

Drunk girls on hen nights, you know, they are just like car alarms. Quite often, you don’t need a put down so much as a mute button (In Double, 2005:195).

The loudness, harsh sound of the laughter suggested by the phrase ‘car alarms’ not only represents a transgression of the norms of female decorum, but is seen as intrusive. Jupitas’ notion of the ‘mute button’ is very revealing. Where female laughter is conspicuous it is seen as unruly and represents females ‘behaving badly’. This has correlations with the earlier discussion about perceptions regarding females doing stand-up comedy. At Colchester Arts Centre (2004), the author of this thesis found some female laughter at Mirza’s death threats too loud. Was she adopting a male perspective akin to that of Jupitas? Perhaps she was forgetting that

¹³⁰ These are not the only examples of female laughter, but they are the ones which are most frequently cited as applicable to females.

¹³¹ Mel Watkins (2000) notes how the word ‘cackle’ is also applied to African-American laughter. This is considered in more detail later in this chapter.

‘authentic’ female audience response has a wide range of diversity and may not always necessarily be appropriate.

In contrast to the above, male ‘guffaws’ are seen as manly, with the loudness of their laughter coming from deep inside the lungs indicative of a strong sense of embodiment. Such laughter could be detected in the male the audience for Jasper Carrott’s show (2007) cited earlier. However, these deep male laughs also tend to drown out female laughter. In relation to this, if Robert Provine is right in suggesting that females are the main laughers, why is this not in evidence within mixed-gender stand-up comedy gigs? The implication is that female laughter is being subsumed by the males in the audience, and perhaps because male-relational.

The terms ‘dirty’ and ‘wicked’ are also applied to female laughter and as shown regarding Jenny Éclair, these terms have connotations of sexuality and sinfulness (seemingly permitted degree of female transgression in response to male jokes).¹³² ¹³³ Whilst *The Vagina Monologues* (1998) is generally beyond the scope of this thesis it offers a good example of ‘wicked’ and ‘dirty’ female laughter in the context of female sexual jokes where the female was also its subject. In a performance at the Churchill Theatre, Bromley (2001), the female laughter was loud, uninhibited and embodied especially in response to a discussion about what sort of hat one’s vagina might wear. In Meera Syal’s words these females had new things they could laugh at together, which they never knew they could laugh at in public. This correlates with Mikhail Bakhtin’s view that laughter degrades, materialises and connects with the lower bodily stratum (1984:21). Such views resist notions of femininity, whilst simultaneously offering a more embodied female laughter

¹³² Importantly, Jenny Éclair re-appropriates these by first making them grotesque in her set in *The Live Floor Show* (2006).

¹³³ At the end of Debbie Isitt’s play *The Woman Who Cooked her Husband*, prolonged loud female laughter can be heard from the two wives, Hilary and Laura, knowing that they have ‘got away with’ killing their husband. The laughter goes out into the auditorium and envelopes females in the audience (revolutionary laughter (The

Disembodied laughter: failing to take up vocal space

Laughter is also gendered in terms of the ‘space’ it takes up. As noted earlier, coercion and collusion prevent female laughter from ‘taking up its full vocal and physical space.’¹³⁴ In Chapter Two, reference was made to Sandi Toksvig’s view that men are taught to ‘take up more space vocally’ and to ‘take up more space on the bus.’ In contrast, Yvonne Tasker observed that fat women are also deemed to take up *too much* space, and thus are ‘socially dismissable’ (1998:168). However, Tasker also suggests that laughter is one of the few replies fat women have for upsetting the dominant order (ibid, 169). This corresponds with Jo Anna Isaak’s view of laughter as a ‘metaphor for transformation’ (1996:5).¹³⁵ It would appear that one’s socio-cultural practice and ideology is implicated in the physicality of laughter.

Abject and aberrant laughter

Within mixed-gender audiences for male stand-up comedy, some female laughter does not take up space because it is disembodied.¹³⁶ This thesis argues that laughter is disembodied when gendered, or repressed or when overly polite, ‘feminine’, manipulated or coerced. It is also abject when parts of the body have been sloughed because of an ‘interiorization’ of the views and ideology or others. As such it reveals bodily abjection and becomes isolated. Julia Kristeva suggests that laughter might palliate abjection (1982:8) but when that laughter itself is abject, the sounds which come from the body are dead like the corpse.

Ambassador Theatre, London, 2006).

¹³⁴ This important subject which relates to embodiment was examined in Chapter Two regarding ‘first-generation’ female stand-up comics, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders, and Jo Brand.

¹³⁵ A similar point is made regarding black laughter later in this chapter.

¹³⁶ The word ‘dysmorphia’ is used in relation to Jacques Lacan’s notion of the ‘imaginary body’ and is used in this thesis to describe the psychological rejection of body parts in relation to being seen as imperfect when looking at oneself ‘through the eyes of

Do aberrant laughs also mourn parts of the body which have been sloughed to conform to the perceptions of others? Robert Provine asks if we are aware of people's laughs unless they are 'aberrant' and he sees such laughs as being too long, too loud or in the wrong place (2000:63-64).¹³⁷ This recalls Jupitas' notion of the 'car alarm'. However, female laughter might appear aberrant when it is actually being subversive or revolutionary; or being unruly and just 'behaving badly' or taking up more vocal space than has been 'allocated'.^{138 139} Dramatist Dario Fo's actors learned ten different ways to laugh including the mid-abdominal, abdominal, falsetto and head-laugh (1983:23). Embodied laughter engages the whole body. This thesis suggests that female laughter has a chance to become more embodied within 'the female joking relations' of female stand-up comedy. The following now examines female laughter in relation to three niche venues and three different female audiences.

Mikhail Bakhtin argues that 'Laughter purifies from dogmatism ... it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naivete and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality' (1984:123). This notion of purification is different to the idea of purification which was identified by Mary Douglas (1966) and Julia Kristeva (1982) because this one involves the ability of laughter to transform. Jo Anna Isaak offers a similar perspective in seeing laughter as a 'metaphor for transformation ... for thinking about cultural change' (1996:4).

others'.

¹³⁷ Mary Russo's notion of the freak was applied to the stand-up comedy of Jenny Éclair in Chapter Two.

¹³⁸ Such matters were discussed regarding females as stand-up comics in Chapter Two.

¹³⁹ The transnational position is discussed in greater detail later in the next section.

4.5.4 Niche venues and audiences

The niche venue is important to the arguments of this thesis because it represent a place where the marginalized are able to feel included and know that they and their life experiences will be addressed. It seems to be a place for the palliating abjection to appropriate Julia Kristeva's notion of laughter (1982:8).

Consideration is now made of three specific niche audiences: the predominantly-gay audience in attendance at the Comedy Camp (2006); the predominantly-female audience for Funny Women's *International Day* at the Hammersmith Palais (2007); and thirdly, the predominantly-transnational and predominantly-female audience at the Hackney Empire (2008). The author of this thesis was in the audience for the first two events, but the audience for Gina Yashere's *Skinny Bitch* show (2008) at the Hackney Empire is experienced 'on screen'.

Are there shared values in niche audiences? Perhaps more so than in others, but this cannot be essentialized. Similar questions are asked of niche female audiences as of mixed-gender audiences. Do they share cultural values? Are they homogenous? 'Who's laughing? What are they laughing at? Are they all laughing at the same thing and in the same way? The questions do not have straightforward answers, but are worth exploration. It is suggested that there might be some shared but limited cultural values. However, it cannot be argued that lesbian, white female, or transnational female laughter or understanding is homogenous.

It is not just that there are new things to laugh at as Meera Syal said in her interview with Melvyn Bragg (2003), but there are new audiences to enjoy them. The niche audiences in question include three specific examples where one is predominantly-gay, another predominantly female, and a third predominantly-transnational. Essentially, these audiences are not so

much outside of the mainstream as wanting their own space. Lynne Parker's Funny Women organisation offers a niche venue for females to watch and perform stand-up comedy. The author of this thesis asked her about niche audience in their telephone interview.

Blunden: Should there be more niche audiences for female and transnational comedy or should these groups enter the mainstream as soon as possible?

Parker: Somebody said that by year five, there would be no more need for organisations such as yours. It was an established female comic who was clearly threatened by the proliferation of new women on the comedy scene (June, 2010).

This is not entirely new because Frances Gray noted that after Mitzi Shore opened the Los Angeles Comedy Store in 1972 (1994:143), she opened the Belly Room as an annexe which became used extensively by female stand-up comics (ibid, 145). This suggests an early desire by females for their own performance space. Interestingly, such a place did not appear to materialise in Britain when Alternative Comedy began in the 1980s.

Case-study: Comedy Camp (2006): carnival laughter and 'taking up space'

Niche audiences are more likely than mixed-gender or mixed-race audiences to share cultural values but this cannot be reified because there are other multiple factors which affect audience responses. However, Comedy Camp's predominantly-gay audience confounds the notion of collectivity in that Simon Happily, the master of ceremonies, established audience composition at the beginning of the show by asking those who were gay and lesbians to raise their hands. Ninety-nine percent of the audience identified themselves as being within these categories. It could therefore be suggested that there might have been homogeneity, but this was not the case, because, although there were more males than females in

the audience, many of the latter were more highly vocal. Laughter was not unanimous but came from pockets of sound coming from different parts of the room in what the author of this thesis calls ‘choruses’. This was demonstrated by one group of females behind and another to the other side of the author. Another female behind the author and her companion laughed loudly and frequently, accompanying this with pats to her legs for greater percussive. In another group female laughter deepened as the group attuned themselves to Yashere.

Female bodies could be seen to fall forwards and backwards in their laughter; their head going back, whilst their shoulders, waist and pelvis gyrated. The greater the laughter: the greater the movement. There was nothing that could be called ‘feminine’ about such movements. However, there was enjoyment which represented disorderliness and a lack of femininity. Marcel Gutwirth, a gelotologist, describes such things as laughter’s ‘anarchy’ noting that ‘The diaphragm heaves and the torso flails out of control, in an instant of maladaptation ...’ (1993:113). Andrew Stott records more specifically that female laughter ‘dissolves good posture, contorts the face, causes physical abandon, and produces a loud noise’ (2005:100). The female laughter at the Comedy Camp was embodied and carnivalesque because unfettered. The author tentatively suggests that this was because it was not ‘in-relation-to’ males. Embodied laughter has a wide repertoire and can choose from both male and female laughs and gestures.

At the Comedy Camp a group of women also ‘performed’ their readiness to enjoy before the first stand-up arrived and thereby, they quickly created a carnival atmosphere. This was helped by the abundant chatter, the loud music and the atmosphere in this small, but full-to-capacity venue; there was a determination to enjoy. There were also small pockets of females singing and hand-dancing to *Xanadu* as Gina Yashere appeared. Another group behind the author of this thesis sang along with *It feels like I’m in*

love. Loud chatter could be heard from different groups of females, all adding to the energy and atmosphere. There was little 'elbow room' so the female hand-dancers adapted to their limited space. Moreover, this group became the 'laugh-leaders' as the loudest and most exuberant of the female groups.

They also used percussive movements such as pounding on their knees or the floor with their feet. At Yashere's joke about Dagenham they clapped, hands high in the air, accompanying this with whistles and cheers. The clap is an important percussive language indicating pleasure for 'each clap has its own rhythm: 4/4/ 2/2, 3/4' (Callery, 2000:123). These rhythms relate to heightened emotions. John Limon recalls the audience of Lenny Bruce 'adding percussion to their laughter, as if it were not possible to laugh sharply enough' (Limon, 2000:16). Hand-clapping represents another way for the female as audience to take up her space and to express enjoyment.

Case-study: Hammersmith Palais (2007) and the revolutionary power of women's laughter

Funny Women's *International Women's Day* at the Hammersmith Palais (2007) had a predominantly-female audience for a host of female stand-up comics which included head-liner Jo Brand along with newcomers Liz Carr and Suzy Bennett, and Jo Caulfield, the mistress of ceremonies. The space was large, but not full, and whilst there was chatter and movement, there was a lack of energy among the predominantly-female audience. There certainly was laughter, but some of it was lost across the expanse of the auditorium. Was revolutionary laughter in existence here or merely the potential for it?

Both the event and the female laughter therein could be said to be

revolutionary in the sense that Jo Anna Isaak sees it as previously noted, namely that it 'is meant to be thought of as a metaphor for transformation, for thinking about cultural change' (1996:5). Such a view can easily be applied to this event. Indeed, there are many reasons why it might be deemed revolutionary which relate to female 'joking relations'. Firstly, revolutionary female laughter is performed differently from gendered laughter; secondly, as previously suggested, it comes from the whole body. Helene Cixous, a cultural feminist wants to see a new style of female laughter which she sees as originating in the ovaries (In Parkin, 1997:229). The author of this thesis argues that embodied female laughter is able to choose from a repertoire of laughs and other reactions which include withholding laughter. Tina Modleski, cited by Kibler, 'theorizes anger as a pleasurable alternative to laughing at jokes ...' (1999:47). This has more application to mixed-gender audiences for male stand-up comedy, but it is a viable female response.

At the Hammersmith Palais, the audience members were each given a 'Sheila' bag which contained consumer and political leaflets.¹⁴⁰ This blurs the boundaries between entertainment, comedy, feminism and politics and also crosses the boundaries between stand-up comedy and daily life. Importantly, the audience takes centre stage, no longer mere spectators but participants in a process which is bigger than the event itself in that their money goes to fight such dangers and issues as were raised in Lynne Parker's Funny Women 'mission statement' which was discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Here females were performing on behalf of other females.

Case-study: The predominantly-transnational audience at the Hackney Empire

Simon Cottle in his book on the audience responses to the media argues

that ‘Studies of ethnic minority audiences, remarkably remains a rarity’ (2000:23). Cottle’s point has relevance also to stand-up comedy. The two examples in this thesis refer to a predominantly-Asian audience for the show *Goodness Gracious Me at Wembley* (1999), although this is not a case-study here because the thrust of the inquiry is to do with female niche audiences. With regard to Gina Yashere’s *Skinny Bitch* show at the Hackney Empire (2008) there was a predominantly-transnational and predominantly-female audience for transnational female comedy, although this does not necessarily indicate a sharing of cultural values.

Gina Yashere immediately engages with her audience by saying, ‘Hello, black people, white people, other people.’ Yashere also draws attention to diversity by identify Afro-Caribbean groups of Jamaicans and Barbadians, she also refers to Ghanaians and Nigerians. She comments on how Jamaicans are the loudest audience members to which their response is to cheer loudly. Having been addressed, the audience in turn feels included in the performance and thus able to enjoy themselves,

Was the laughter at Hackney revolutionary? This did not seem to be the case in terms of the sound of laughter, however, it was in the sense of being a space for people to celebrate and share their cultural similarities - and differences. Moreover, the Hackney Empire cannot be called a niche venue. However, in relation to Mel Watkins’ depiction of the trajectory of African American stand-up comedy and black audiences; this event was revolutionary in offering transnational female stand-up comedy to a predominantly-transnational female audience.

As noted in the introduction, Watkins’ models of ‘double-consciousness’ and his study has a whole, acts only as model by which to gauge the status of British female stand-up comedy. Moreover, although Watkins writes on black laughter, his references are to the Negro male and he neither

¹⁴⁰ This bag came from the car insurance firm ‘Sheila’ which insures female drivers.

explores female laughter, nor the female as audience. However, some of his views do have pertinence. Watkins notes how ‘Black humour and its insistent companion black laughter can now be found wherever blacks are found ...’ (1994/9:24). In Britain, this clearly is the case in Hackney, with its racially and culturally diverse population. Transnational stand-up comedian Andi Osho also draws attention to both alternative black stand-up comedy and laughter in her stand-up comedy set (2007).

Watkins also observes that whites ‘were astonished’ at ‘the uninhibited display and heartiness of blacks’ ‘cackling laughter’ (1994:16). The ‘cackling laugh’ both stereotypes and demonises as was indicated earlier with reference to female laughter. The implications of this seem to point towards a collective anxiety. At Gina Yashere’s *Skinny Bitch* show in Hackney, there appears to be no discernable defining characteristic of either white or transnational laughter, and certainly no ‘cackling laughter’.

However, black laughter has been demonized in other ways in that Watkins notes that ‘the accursed laughter of the blacks had early on established itself as one of the race’s prominent foibles’ (1994:17). There is the suggestion of abjection in the words ‘accursed’ which is endorsed by the word ‘foibles’. Thus, black laughter is seen here as abject because attached to an ‘abject’ race in John Limon’s terms. This view engages with the notions of ‘double-consciousness’ as ‘being seen through the eyes of others’ (Watkins, 1994/9:26). However, as with loud female laughter in general, it engages with Bakhtin’s notions of carnival degradation.

Black laughter

The question must be asked of Yashere’s Hackney audience, ‘Do transnational and whites experience things in the same way?’ They might

laugh at the same thing, but not necessarily for the same reason or in the same way. In Mark Lamarr's television programme *Stand up, America* (2003), the black comic Steve Harvey suggests that a white audience is more polite than a black one. 'The black audience says, 'We just paid \$35 dollars so you better get down and funny right away. Crank it up and make it funny. Make me laugh.' He adds that 'If they turn sideways and they're not looking at you; it's not funny.' Stand-up comic Andi Osho would seem to confirm Harvey's perspective when she referred to the white response to her rap compared with the black response.¹⁴¹ What is more, her point of reference was a female audience respondent who said of her comedy, 'My satnav can do better than that.'

John Limon pinpoints African American Richard Pryor's view of black and white laughter.

Pryor: Whites seem to laugh differently from blacks; they thrust up their chins, a seemingly assertive gesture except that it makes vulnerable their jaws in all their glassiness. Meanwhile, blacks are laughing in the opposite direction, doubling over as if self-protectively, except that the reflex seems to register a jab in solar plexus (In Limon, 2000:103).

The notion that 'whites thrust up their chins' whilst blacks 'are doubling over as if self-protectively' is interesting. However, this thesis argues that Pryor's view is too reductionist and would argue that audiences are far more complex than Pryor suggests for as shown elsewhere, responses are individual, plural, diverse and largely unpredictable. However, Kibler highlights a similar clear-cut difference of approach to laughter in her essay when she cites Lawrence Mintz's observations of an audience of older and younger people with regard to a male set on oral sex. Mintz noted that 'The older people in the audience gasped, flinched, physically backed away ... and frequently looked at each other' whilst 'The younger

¹⁴¹ Osho's stand-up comedy was discussed in part one of this chapter.

people ... leaned toward Foxx (the stand-up comic), often applauded, raised their hands or fists as though cheering a political speaker with whom they were in agreement' (In Kibler, 1999:46). There seems to be an element of excess in the last words of this citation. However, the comparison is interesting. In Yashere's audience, there did not seem to be any clearly visible or audible signs of difference; this was merely a group of women enjoying themselves in their own way.

This chapter has explored new trends in both the performance of stand-up comedy and its reception to argue that bodily abjection is both the context and the content of female stand-up comedy, but that female 'joking relations' are a way of both engaging with, and dissipating that abjection. Lynne Parker's organisation has been instrumental in bringing much new female talent onto the stand-up comedy scene as was shown by the two winners of her Funny Women competition. The author of this thesis has indicated how her embodied practice of stand-up comedy, as performer and audience member, engages with some important performance areas of this arena.

Conclusion

What original contribution did this thesis seek to make?

This thesis sought to make an original contribution to the field of comedy in offering an assessment of both the context and content of female stand-up comedy in relation to the question ‘How do stand-up comics of the twenty-first century perform the ‘comic side of bodily abjection’?’ It has sought specifically to address the strong presence of white and transnational females within contemporary British stand-up comedy in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Only a few females had been investigated prior to this and often merely as adjuncts to studies on (male) stand-up comedy. Detailed consideration has been given particularly to the impact made by Lynne Parker’s *Funny Women* organization in changing the face of stand-up comedy by facilitating increased female entry into this arena. This thesis has also examined new trends within female stand-up comedy such as female ‘joking relations’ which has been used to describe the relationship between the female as performer and the female as audience. These areas have not been previously investigated.

Summary

The aim of this thesis was to explore how far twenty-first century female stand-up comedy has engaged with, interrogated, interacted and played with, bodily abjection. In doing this it engaged with the socio-cultural, feminist theory, the performance history of female stand-up comedy, performance studies and media theory. The work of all case-studies was shown to be closely engaged with socio-cultural ideology and practice. Indeed, the thesis went further by arguing that female stand-up comedy influenced socio-cultural practice as much as it was influenced by this.

The issue of Britain as diasporic space was also seen as very important regarding abjection in relation to the cultural body. Engagement was made with the notion of 'double-consciousness' as 'seeing oneself through the eyes of others' (Watkins, 1994/9:26). This was used as a model against which to test the contents of transnational stand-up comedy. It was discovered that this notion was interrogated and played with by the comics. However, it was found that the term did apply generally to 'first-generation' case-studies whose stand-up comedy engaged frequently with the notion of 'seeing oneself through the eyes of others'. It has been argued that abjection has many facets and that it has been both the context, content and even the process of the performance of comedy of selected case-studies. It was also argued that female comedy did not move away from abjection, but embraced it in a variety of ways.

Conclusions were reached by closely examining the work of a number of white and transnational female stand-up performers; alongside this three other important considerations were made: the first related to the work of Lynne Parker, the originator of Funny Women; the second related to females as audience of stand-up comedy; the third related to the embodied practice of the author of this thesis, as performer and audience member.

The first decade of the twenty-first century has been the area under exploration but it was necessary to indicate the socio-cultural conditions and practices which influenced this. A key point of the study is that stand-up comedy is culturally specific and both British comedy and culture are in process. It was noted how the rapidity of cultural changes in Britain affected the style and nature of stand-up comedy. In exploring the above the thesis has indicated the complexity and diversity of female stand-up comedy in its relationship to abjection. Alongside abjection, elements of the grotesque were explored in relation to risk, threat and danger. Ancient ideas of comedy's relationship to 'ugliness' were also examined to show that some females embraced this concept as belonging to the realm of

abjection and the grotesque, whilst others interrogated it in their work or in their person.

It was important to show how feminist theory and socio-cultural practice has been implicated in female stand-up comedy in terms of performance and audience. The case was further argued that contemporary female stand-up comedy has encompassed a new politicisation of stand-up comedy and a new democratization in that it deals with both the 'political' and the 'personal' aspects of female life'.

In terms of the female stand-up comic in performance, questions were addressed about how females move, use gestures, use the stage space and relate to others in that space. Notions of spatiality were explored in the context of females as both performer of stand-up comedy and as audience; performance was found to be as important in drawing attention to bodily abjection as was the content and context of the comedy itself. In relation to this, notions of embodiment and disembodiment were explored in terms of the personal and the cultural. Alongside this a discussion was made of 'dysmorphia' as a form of disembodiment arising from the act of 'seeing oneself through the eyes of others'. The consideration of bodily orifices, surfaces and processes has been important to this thesis in its attempts to establish a connection between female stand-up comedy and bodily abjection. Such elements were explored for each case-study. Alongside this, the notion of 'becoming' explained how female stand-up comedy turned real abjection into art and interrogated the notion that only male comedy was dealing with important subjects.

This thesis has also explored the trajectory of female stand-up comedy, including where it has come from and where it has arrived. This path is revealed partly in the way the thesis has been structured, but also in comparisons made with the male-dominated history of stand-up comedy. As female absence is a key element of this history it was necessary to

explore the lineage of stand-up comedy to see why females had been missing or marginalized. This led to a consideration of the work of Funny Women which has been the single most important aspect of stand-up comedy since the 1980s.

In relation to female 'joking relations' it was also further argued that the relationship between performer and audience is in process. It seems clear that stand-up comedy is an organic process where audience and performer develop alongside each other. The conjunctive and disjunctive aspects of female 'joking relations' were explored as were audience responses to case-studies. It was only possible to offer examples and observations of such matters in this thesis rather than a definitive scientific study of these relationships, because when removed or isolated from their context they would have become invalid as a defining experience. However, in the case of televised shows, the possibility of verification arose and discussion was made of the role of the camera in relation to audience studies, although its presentation cannot claim to be entirely objective.

The strengths of this thesis

The strengths of this thesis derive from the fact that firstly, it offers a comprehensive examination of contemporary female stand-up comedy with a good balance between theory and practice. Secondly, its theoretical research is extensive and thorough. Thirdly, this thesis goes further than other recent texts on stand-up comedy in terms of its subject matter and in relation to the stand-up comics examined. With reference to this, it also contests many existing notions as being either generic or otherwise no longer pertinent to contemporary British female stand-up comedy. Another perceived strength of the thesis is that it examines the embodied practice of the author which is shown to engage with many of the theoretical positions explored in the thesis as a whole. The interviews

secured by the author with Lynne Parker and Andi Osho were also of much value to this thesis in its consideration of the present status of female stand-up comedy. Success also derives from the evidence which was increasingly revealed to suggest that the female body was still at the centre of female stand-up comedy.

The limitations of this thesis

One limitation of this thesis was that because of the number of case-studies used, it was on the whole only possible to analyse one example of the shows of each stand-up comic, when multiple examples would have offered a stronger indication of style. There were three exceptions to this: a twentieth century show was compared with a twenty-first century one for Victoria Wood; Meera Syal's work was examined in relation to stage and television, whilst Gina Yashere's stand-up comedy was explored at three different venues before three completely different audiences. The extent of the enquiry was also very wide and it would have been possible to create a thesis around the case-studies of any one of the three main chapters.

The present situation

Female stand-up comedy has only fully come to maturity in the twenty-first century in that Lynne Parker's Funny Women organization, set up in 2002, has made a big impact on the industry (although Parker would be the first to say that there is still a long way to go). There are now not only many more females going into this area, but there are more opportunities for them to do so. Parker's work has had as big an influence on stand-up comedy as did Peter Rosengard and Don Ward when they brought about the advent of British Alternative Comedy by setting up of the Comedy

Store in 1979.

This thesis also explored female comedy within a ‘time-line’ of stand-up comedy from the 1960s to the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. It further examined how female stand-up comedy had adapted in relation to Britain as a changing culture. It did this by looking at three groups of case-studies who had entered the arena at different times. Older female stand-up comics are either bowing out, still there, or making room for newer females. Victoria Wood has adapted and altered her style over the thirty-five years she has been doing comedy. Jenny Éclair has adapted in now doing her material more on ‘grumpy old women’ and less on sexuality. Jo Brand explores feminist issues more in her work. Dawn French did her own series of interviews with thirty-four funny women in *Girls Who Do Comedy* for BBC4 (2007).

The future for female stand-up comedy

This thesis has acknowledged the presence of a number of strong women who will carry female stand-up comedy into, and beyond the next decade of the twenty-first century. The author specifically asked Parker, ‘Where do you think female stand-up comedy goes from here?’ Parker said, ‘Onwards and upwards’ and she celebrated the fact that polling on entries to the Funny Women competitions was three hundred this year.

Parker: I want to see stand-up comedy as a viable career for women - there aren’t many of them. It’s improving and there’s room on the circuit for good female acts to make a living. They just threaten the not-so-good male acts who still get the gigs. But I do think that the introduction of more women on to the comedy circuit has upped everybody’s game ... Women coming into the industry has professionalized it (June, 2010).

The notion of stand-up comedy as an industry and a ‘viable career for

women' has made the discussions of the female body in the 'workplace' of stand-up comedy more significant. Parker spoke about Funny Women being 'my business' suggesting a professional and highly organized approach to female stand-up comedy which can only be beneficial to the industry. She revealed that her work had been honoured at Downing Street by the-then Prime Minister, along with other women in the public eye to celebrate women's contribution to Britain. This acknowledgement is very significant in terms of effecting change for women. However, Parker also mentioned a loss of sponsorship and funding because of the recession. She spoke of 'developing business partnerships and 'bartering', training and coaching'. The willingness to embrace the challenges faced is also important in moving stand-up comedy forward.

Suggestions for future research

Groups who would benefit from this thesis include sociologists, theatre practitioners, those studying audiences and audience reception and participation and stand-up comics.

There is scope to do revisionist studies, to do comparative research and in greater depth with issues already explored in this thesis. It has covered many important areas but there are some areas where only the surface has been touched, for example Iranian Shappi Khorsandi spoke of humour being a big part of her family life. Familial humour in diasporic homes would be an interesting area to study for sociologists. The study of female comedy in the British slave trade or of the Black comedy scene in Britain would also prove fruitful. Apart from Mel Watkins' book (1994/9), most studies tracing the history of black comedy from minstrelsy and vaudeville tend to concentrate on male comedy. Watkins included the work of female stand-up comic 'Moms' Mabley but there has been a lack of British work on Asian, black or Iranian traditions of female comedy.

The subject of female 'joking-relations' has been explored only briefly in this thesis and there is much more work which could be done on the relationship between the female audience and the female performer of stand-up comedy. Jo Anna Isaak writes of Greenham Common as an example of a modern female carnival (1996:17). This subject would offer an interesting study of female 'joking relations'. One could also profitably make a comparative study of male response to female stand-up comedy and female response to male comedy. The subject of female laughter was also examined in this thesis but there is room for a more in-depth approach to it. There is much research on the science of 'jovialisme' in France and many other Japanese studies on the science of gelotology.

This thesis fleetingly examined stand-up comedy in relation to sexuality. There are potential areas for research here. Dr Helen Paris has done some practical research in talking with prostitutes about their use of comedy and laughter as tools for survival. Lynne Parker is 'keen to get into prisons' and she argues that 'There are some social groups of women who would benefit from the confidence and communication skills that stand-up gives you, for example women offenders, former sex workers, prostitutes, pole dancers, trafficked women' (With Blunden, June, 2010). The relationship between comedy, laughter and female pornography would prove to be a very interesting line of research to pursue.

Female stand-up comedy is in a process of development, but there is still a need to do further revisionist studies of the history of stand-up comedy in order to find a stronger female presence. The author has only explored the history of absence within the last fifty years but it is important to go further back. Writers on Women's Studies have noted other similar un-researched areas. Lizbeth Goodman cites Andrenne Rich's notion of 'a necessary feminist re-visionary process' which she defines as 'Re-vision: the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction' (1993:7).

Along these lines a study of the ‘joking’ *hetaerae* of ancient Greece would prove interesting as these females would appear to be the precursors of female stand-up comedy. Their counterparts, the *auletrides* attended what appears to be the first physical training school for female comics (Davidson, 1998: 81-82). A close examination of the comic female duos within the Commedia dell’arte, and among the courtesans of Terence’s comedies also represents an un-researched area. The suggestions are only a few among the many potentially interesting areas that are worthy of being explored in relation to female comedy.

The research of this thesis has opened up an area of study which has much potentiality. Contemporary female stand-up comedy marks the end of an era and the beginning of an interesting journey - a ‘becoming’.

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