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My Eyes Are Up Here: The Comedy of Amy Schumer and the Carnavalesque

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Abstract:

Through the lens of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, I analyze stand-up comic Amy Schumer's Comedy Central special *Mostly Sex Stuff*. Her use of sexual material juxtaposes the material upper and lower strata and subverts the social structure of gender roles through chaos and humor, specifically through the use of the grotesque body as a site in which to grapple with abstract concepts like sexism. Schumer's attractive looks contrast her archetypal unruly woman stage persona and attack the hegemony of sexism in American culture while also challenging perceptions of race and class. Schumer's carnivalesque satire eviscerates the image of the classical body, with its roots in oppression and power disparity, offering instead a body that is constantly in process which unifies people through its relation to the cosmic. I show how Schumer's use of these ideas transforms her otherwise dirty comedy into subtle social criticism, generating feminist commentary in the male dominated field of stand-up comedy.

Keywords: carnivalesque, comedy, women, rhetoric, stand-up, gender, subversion

### My Eyes Are Up Here: The Comedy of Amy Schumer and the Carnavalesque

Women's attitudes and ideologies in stand-up comedy are rooted in a question of rhetoric. Stand-up comedy is a speech communication targeted at making people laugh which, furthermore, serves as a vessel for messages that often prove unpopular without the gentle coaxing that laughter brings. Humor has long been identified as a fascinating and sometimes puzzling method of communication and persuasion, dating back to the time of Aristotle. Formalized comedy provides a setting in which this subject can be examined and analyzed for the extent of its communicative powers. Humor and comedy are rhetorical devices that are capable of reaching a large number of people, especially in the world of stand-up comedy. Beyond this, the role of women in stand-up comedy is one which complicates the matter of simple communication and introduces gender into the equation in a medium dominated by prevailing male and masculine attitudes.

Women are infrequent players on the stand-up comedy scene despite their status as a minority in American society. Given an ideological perspective, the content of their messages could lend great insight into the messages at play among women as a marginalized group in mainstream media. Analyzing these messages not only clarifies the capacity with which women stand-up comics communicate, but also the ideas they are disseminating. More attention needs to be spent on those contributions to the mainstream media that may or may not reinforce status quos and should thus be analyzed for their purposes and exposed as such. Especially on the topic of sex and gender, much has been written, but little has been discussed specifically regarding women in stand-up comedy from a communicative perspective. While feminist ideals may be largely at play among many of these comics, an analysis from a communication lens is a

valuable addition to developing understanding about this topic. The more that is understood about the competing dialogues and concepts at play in the contemporary media, the more social injustices can be righted through discourse and deliberation. For this study I will examine comedian Amy Schumer's debut special *Mostly Sex Stuff* through the lens of the carnivalesque. *Mostly Sex Stuff* uses elements of the carnivalesque to create a setting in which the social order can be questioned in a jocular manner; Schumer's subversive focus ultimately rests on power disparities in gender differences. I will first examine how Schumer uses the grotesque body to explore the carnivalesque primarily through the act of fecundation, which she characterizes as being dualistic, ambivalent, and liminal; through this I will demonstrate that the grotesque body serves as a site in which to grapple with abstract concepts, primarily sexism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Gender & Communication**

From a feminist perspective, gendered language is largely seen as a social construction, perpetuated by a male-dominated society, or patriarchy. The indoctrination of children into more traditional gender roles comes as a consequence of our culture; Western societies, including the United States, engender a more masculine-style of culture (Hofstede). Masculine cultures enforce rigid and traditional gender roles as well as valuing attributes such as strength and ambition over so-called feminine characteristics like compassion and sensitivity (Hofstede). The idea of gender as a social construction finds its genesis in the formative years, primarily the way they are raised as a child. Gender is first enforced to an individual when they are a child through a variety of different ways (Maccoby). A child's family growing up has an indomitable influence

on their gender development, as well as the way they see gender (McHale). The use of heavily gendered games and toys provided to children by their parents begins to create distinct categories and expectations for the gender roles children must fulfill (Benton). Arbitrary assignments of color and styles support the claim of gender as a social construction, such as the contemporary connection between girls and pink, and boys and blue. Simple and otherwise meaningless categorization creates a stratification of individual gender identity and contributes to male dominance in our society. Ergo, given a post-structural feminist lens, what begins as gendered language on an individual level is translated into widespread and oppressive discursive constructs which serve to constrain and alienate women and the idea of femininity (Butler).

Mass media is also an influential presence in an individual's development of gender norms and an individual's perceptions of his or her gender (Douglas). On top of this, the majority of the media that is streamed comes first through a lens of male perspective, which is further distorted by patriarchal influences and privilege that create a systematic and hegemonic oppression of women (Gill). Many of these destructive gender norms are facilitated through the rampant use of stereotypes in media. Individuals who aren't media literate are at risk of believing these roles to be real and thus enacting them in their lives and thus perpetuating these generalizations (Goodall). Although stereotypes of women are nigh unavoidable in mass communication, the stereotypes that do get perpetuated portray unrealistic and often degrading depictions of its subjects. Sexual objectification of women is another serious problem that comes as a result of a male-dominated perspective and is responsible for a destructive gender role for women: that of the object (Butler). This brings into question serious issues of agency and control in regards to gender roles (Gordon). Advertisements frequently use the objectification of the female form as a persuasive strategy of sex appeal. While blatant objectification has been found to increase

attrition in female consumers, exploitation of this kind does nothing to discourage men from buying the product (Zimmerman). The “baring of sexual body parts and the use of the gaze” in contemporary music videos further reinforce the fact that women are only valued for their bodies (Aubrey, 494). Both entertainment and consumer culture appropriate the female form as a means to seduce the masses and sell or glamorize their product. Beyond this, there exists a double-bind within our culture that both condemns and glamorizes women’s bodies; a standard often aggressively sexual and yet lacking of any sexuality (Trethewey et al.). This creates an exigence for the integrity of women in their presence on mainstream media when the market is flooded with empty and hollow representations of hyper-sexualized women. The absence of women’s perspectives is reflected in these symptoms of sexism, but ultimately the simple lack of a female perspective is itself a damning reinforcement of the socially constructed inferiority of women (Byerly). Often, the gatekeepers and policymakers of the mainstream media are upper-class-white-males, which limits the scope and diversity of the messages that get delivered to the public, despite the diversity and demographics of said public. While conventional feminism attempts to combat this sexism, the problem remains that of reachability; the general public continues to receive messages crafted out of patriarchal privilege despite the growing popularity of feminism.

## **Comedy & Women**

The sum of comedy's entertainment properties makes it a viable and palatable form of rhetoric through which to effectively disseminate ideas (Greenbaum). Much of mainstream comedy reinforces social norms, aimed at maintaining the status quo through the use of humor as a means of allowing the oppressed to cope with their oppression (Hanke). Comedy in this context often takes the form of pure distraction from the conditions affecting the oppressed and often takes the form of aggressively stereotyped and generalizable humor, like the Blue Collar Comedy Tour or Jeff Dunham. Alternately, stand-up comedy has specifically been a platform from which countless performers have taken to advocate political and social commentaries (Mintz). The strength of stand-up comedy lies in its resonance with people via its comical and lighthearted framing of otherwise sticky issues. Historically, stand-up comedy has thus served as a stage for the oppressed and sometimes revolutionary voice to be heard in a format that is both appealing and persuasive to the audience, while still maintaining a communication of cultural identity (Gilbert). For example, stand-up during the 1960's was dominated by heterosexual Jewish men (Limon). Lenny Bruce is one of the most popular and polarizing examples, with his advocacy for civil rights that preceded the formal Civil Rights Movement (Kofsky). To that effect, Bruce's Jewish background was a strong element in his material, although his satire attacked all inequality and discrimination. Richard Pryor was another outspoken critic of civil rights during the seventies, incorporating radical social commentary on race relations into his routine (Beavers). Beyond this, Eddie Murphy and Dave Chappelle have continued Pryor's tradition of discursive and biting satire aimed at white privilege (Schulman). Even Bill Hicks and Doug Stanhope, two middle-class white men, have contributed their two cents to social commentary and, as a result, have been heralded as "incendiary stand-up prophets," (Brian, 41).

This tradition of the stand-up comedy stage as a platform for social criticism and philosophical challenge has endured in American society since the latter part of the twentieth century (Smith).

However, despite its under-dog leanings and proclivity towards speaking out on behalf of the downtrodden, few women have reached the strata of critical and commercial success in stand-up comedy that Pryor, Bruce, and Hicks inhabit. To this effect, even fewer have used it as a platform to advance a feminist agenda, primarily because there is a “male dominance of all aspects of the comedy industry,” and as such, women have found yet another glass ceiling (Mills, 111). There are definite elements of masculinity, machismo, and misogyny to contemporary comedy (Hanke). One factor of this patriarchy is the fact that women have been socially constructed as “unfunny” (Bore). Late night comic personality Johnny Carson was quoted in a Rolling Stone article in 1979, saying “...when you see a gal who does 'stand-up' one liners, she has to overcome that built-in identification as a retiring, meek woman... You don't see many of them around. And the ones that try, sometimes are a little aggressive for my taste,” (Kohen). This blatant discrimination continues even today in a contemporary setting where there is allegedly more equality. Comedian Lee Mack claims that women aren't “cut out to be stand-up comedians” because, “When men sit around and talk, they are very competitive. One person will tell an anecdote and the next person will try to top that. When you get six women together, they share a lot more,” invoking some twisted manifestation of Deborah Tannen (Hastings). And while this does resonate on a level similar to theories of gender differences, sexism persists to a much deeper level intertwined in the very fiber of our cultural values. Other critics of women in comedy are harsher, penetrating to criticisms of women in general. According to Crawford, “Women are said to be uncreative in generating humor; to be incompetent tellers of jokes and stories, forgetting the punch line or obscuring the point; in general, to lack a sense of humor,”

(29). These negative perceptions reveal a fundamental sexism which finds fault in the very state of identifying with the gendered expectations of female and further stigmatizes such behavior. Nancy Walker explains this perception as, “culturally determined standards of ideal female behavior,” or put simply, socially constructed sexism (61). Alternately, the appropriation of the opposite gender’s trait is no more socially acceptable, leaving women once again in a damned-if-you-do situation. Often, the women that are successful in comedy, historically and contemporarily, have found fame by unsexing their comic personas: relying on material that either discusses femininity as an inconvenient aberration, or ignores their femininity altogether. In the words of Stott, there is a stigma, a “ghettoization of women’s comedy”, that is the, “belief that female comedians only discuss ‘women’s themes’ – relationships, shopping, and menstruation, for example – whereas male topics are thought to be unbounded and therefore to have universal appeal,” which pushes successful comediennes into using material that ignores their sex (99). Comediennes like Joan Rivers, Phyllis Diller, and Maria Bamford’s stage personas are characterized by strange, eccentric, and abnormal behavior that does not cast them in the role of a woman, but rather as a strange and eccentric person. Kathleen Rowe writes how after the sixties, “...women who succeeded as standup comedians tended...to occupy the ‘male’ position by directing their jokes at themselves in self-deprecating barbs, or at other women,” to conform to the contemporary popular expectations for comedy (69).

Recently the country has witnessed a growing trend of comediennes that embrace their sexuality and femininity as women (Ballou). As Limon writes, “Stand-up was once a field given over to a certain subsection of a certain ethnicity. By now, roughly speaking, all America is the pool for national stand-up comedy,” showing that the medium has expanded in the last fifty years (3). In fact, some African American women comedians even emphasize their femininity and



racial identity as a way of developing and maintaining a connection with their audience (Rahman). Some female comics, like Tina Fey and Ellen Degeneres, balance their feminine appearance exclusively from their material and maintain articulate female comic voices (Shugart). Comics like Sarah Silverman and Amy Schumer accentuate their appearance and discuss sordid details of their sex lives in their routines; their physical attractiveness is an integral part of their act, and, therefore, their femininity becomes a central aspect of their comic identity (Mizejewski). However, these women are still vastly in the minority when compared to the men that occupy the same position, and they have more struggle to establish themselves as a “comedian”. How women become successful with or without alienating their fans through their support of femininity is a subject as yet untouched in the research field. Furthermore, there is a big difference in how an attractive woman resonates with her audience and is able to talk about the same things that a man can easily discuss on stage and becoming a homogenized and bland comedienne. Perhaps the very fact of delivering material that would ordinarily come from a man is subverting enough in its innovation. Ergo, my research question is: What are the purposes of Amy Schumer’s use of sexual humor in a male-dominated business as well as its implications in relation to her physical appearance.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Artifact**

I examine Amy Schumer’s *Mostly Sex Stuff* because she has been celebrated for both her looks and her unconventional form of comedy. Calling Schumer a “blonde babe,” Molly Young of *Vulture* hails her “...sugar-frosted delivery,” and how it “smartly exploits her appearance –

pert nose, sunflower blonde hair – for effect,” through its stark and startling contrast. Schumer’s material is decidedly provocative, too. She delves into topics that are grotesque and brutal, ranging from AIDS and Plan B to anal sex and rape. Her first hour long special on Comedy Central, *Mostly Sex Stuff*, is really just that. The majority of what Schumer talks about is bluntly sexual, as the title indicates, but she gropes to find the most uncomfortable and sensitive topics to turn into punch lines to the audience’s squirming delight. *Mostly Sex Stuff* finds Schumer at somewhat of a departure from her first album, *Cutting*, in that she takes a more conversational approach to the audience, peppered in with small one-liners and vignettes.

To supplement this sex talk, she dresses very nicely in a short-cut red dress that gives her something of a bombshell look. The Palace Theatre hails her as having “wholesome, girl-next-door looks” that juxtapose her brutal and “edgy comedy” in much the same way that critics describe Sarah Silverman. Schumer finds herself in a position similar to Silverman with the release of a big special followed by a new show on Comedy Central. However, Schumer’s comedy differs radically from Silverman’s clearly defined social commentary. While Silverman’s deadpan satire is clearly an indictment of hypocrisy in racial and sexual discrimination, Schumer’s comedy is never so blatant. In *Mostly Sex Stuff*, Schumer discusses her sex life in graphic detail without taking an explicit feminist stance one way or the other in her material. Schumer occupies the unique position in stand-up comedy of owning her sex while remaining sexy and discussing gendered experiences. *NPR* calls Schumer a “risk taker” because of her “bold” material about sex, because they say the subject “is still considered man territory,” even today. Gratuitous sex jokes among male comics go relatively unnoticed, and so Schumer’s routine is highly unusual, although it also draws attention to the patriarchal double-standard so

deeply embedded in the industry. To find a female comedian on Comedy Central, perhaps the most mainstream venue for stand-up comedy, is unusual even unto itself.

Because of this, Schumer's opportunity to reach people through this medium is increased exponentially by her presence on Comedy Central. *Mostly Sex Stuff* is a unique artifact, on which no formal examination has been enacted thus far. Schumer's career is still in its early stages, and she appears to be headed nowhere but up. Therefore, the significance of analyzing this text would appear to yield rich insight into the budding career of a young woman whose influence is continually growing in the comedy world. Schumer represents the most articulate and loudest female voice in a new generation of comedy that has the potential to mold and shape not only the state of stand-up, but the state of our cultural identity.

### **Concept**

As a frame, I utilize Mizejewski's double pronged frame of Bakhtin's carnivalesque, and Rowe's idea of the unruly woman, in her analysis of Sarah Silverman's comedy because of its juxtaposition between the grotesque and the beautiful. While Mizejewski focused on the toilet humor of Silverman in her analysis, by way of Bakhtin's grotesque body, I use this archetype to approach Amy Schumer's discussion of sex and sexual acts in her comedy. This, although a departure from Mizejewski's analysis, remains consistent with Bakhtin's grotesque body as porous and leaky, and provides rich insight into the underpinnings of gender through sex and the subversion of the genre within *Mostly Sex Stuff*. Schumer's attractive physical appearance contrasts the lewd nature of her humor by "using the body as comedy's ground zero and inviting laughter at its unruliness," which in Schumer's case is sexual conduct (Berlin, 92). This theory, then, is an appropriate lens for looking at Schumer's comedy because Mizejewski has already

demonstrated the effectiveness of the carnivalesque when examining comedians with incongruous routines that exploit the divergence between the attractiveness of the female performer and the vulgarity and crudeness of her routine.

It is worth studying Schumer, though, because she focuses on sex jokes instead of poop jokes, like Silverman does. Breaking sexual taboos and norms in a society such as ours is an attack that strikes at a much different place than commentary on any other social norm. We live in a culture that has been deeply engrained with a Puritan conservatism for sexuality, but also with an insatiable fascination for the hyper-sexualized in the media; our media as a result reflects this backwards dualism through the systematic and simultaneous demonization and objectification of the female form. Therefore, Schumer's work in dealing with this subject has its hand on the pulse of our growing sexual identity as a nation, and furthermore, our sexual identities as individuals. The result of dealing with sex in a context like this is inevitably a comment on gender, as the two are inextricably linked. *Mostly Sex Stuff* when viewed jointly through the carnivalesque and the unruly woman can articulate these commentaries and give new meaning to what otherwise is just another hyper-sexualized piece of pop culture.

Rhetorical criticism is the most effective way to study my research question because there has been little previous research done on this subject. The limited theoretical basis from which I have to draw on has a history of rhetorical criticism, and so it only stands to reason that I should utilize the same method to find answers to my research question. Beyond this, quantitative or qualitative research would not be able to plumb the depth of meaning that I will be able to unearth through rhetorical criticism. I have no means of interviewing Schumer, and interviewing those who view Schumer does not answer my question, as it is critical in nature. To that effect, there is no real quantifiable data that can be obtained to find my research question,

outside of counting instances of sex jokes, but that would only leave me with a number to describe Schumer's act from a purely superficial level. To get under the surface and discover deeper insights, all that's left is rhetorical analysis. Given the narrative form of stand-up comedy, it also seems appropriate that I should draw from literary criticism to show the communicative potential of Amy Schumer.

### **Theoretical Groundings**

The method I will be utilizing to analyze the comedy of Amy Schumer is Mizejewski's unruly woman and carnivalesque frame. Mizejewski slightly alters Rowe's interpretation of Bakhtin's carnivalesque by adding the juxtaposition of an attractive physical appearance into the unruly woman to analyze Sarah Silverman's comedy.

### **The Carnivalesque**

Bakhtin's carnivalesque finds its form from the content of his 1965 book *Rabelais and His World*, in which he analyzed *Gargantua and Pantagruel* through its contextual invocation of the medieval festival of carnival. Drawing from its roots, the carnivalesque is that literature which subverts the social order through humor and chaos, reminding people of the "dynamic nature of language and the relativity of power in all aspects of social life," much like the tradition of carnival did in medieval times (Rowe, 32). Unavoidable in the carnivalesque, therefore, is the idea of the grotesque, and the implications that come from its purpose. In his essay *Carnival and the Carnivalesque* Bakhtin describes carnival as "a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators," which transcends the traditionally strict hierarchy that characterized medieval times (250). Carnival exists as a period replete with no formal social expectations where everyone lets down their decent façade of upright citizens highly stratified to

different social circles to engage in a festival of equality and ribaldry with one another, or as Bakhtin writes, “free and familiar contact among people,” (251). In the process of this intermingling comes something which Bakhtin calls “*carnivalistic mésalliances*” that he proclaims “...combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid,” and thus are responsible for subverting not only the very fiber of the social order, but what it means to be a human (251).

Inextricably linked with *carnivalistic mésalliances* is the idea of the grotesque. Bakhtin’s grotesque body primarily engenders degradation as a multidimensional issue; the abstract is degraded to the concrete, and the intellectual is degraded to the primal. Therefore, the so-called higher processes of the human body, such as cognitive processing and thought become inexplicably linked to the overwhelming power of those less sophisticated behaviors such as eating, defecating, and reproduction which Bakhtin labels the “material lower bodily stratum”. Bakhtin literalizes these concepts, associating the mouth and head with higher stratum functions and the lower body with lower stratum functions. The interconnectivity between these two strata Rowe writes that the grotesque body focuses primarily on the body’s “processes, bulges, and orifices” in stark contrast to the classical (post-Renaissance) perspective on the body which seeks to obscure them (33). The carnivalesque enacts these degradations, such that their subversion is not simply an intangible ideal that exists only on a purely abstract plane, but a concrete and literal manifestation of these radical juxtapositions. As Rowe explains, the grotesque “...exaggerates incompleteness, process, and change, maintaining a kind of neutrality or ambivalence toward time and death,” and so incorporates elements of otherwise incomprehensible concepts into the non-threatening practices of bawdiness and ribaldry of carnival (32). Bakhtin clarifies this ambivalence in its relation to women when he writes,

“...woman is essentially related to the material bodily lower stratum; she is the incarnation of this stratum that degrades and regenerates simultaneously,” eliciting an oft-interpreted misogyny, but also calling attention to the liminality that suffuses the unruly woman (240). Bakhtin also writes that in ambivalence, “...we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis,” which evokes images of the ancient and ongoing cycle of life as humans experience it (24). Bakhtin’s impressions through this elicit images of both balance and imbalance because of the decaying and degenerative nature of the grotesque body, but it is precisely this balance that makes the mysteries of the cosmos accessible to the people. In this then, we find a dualism which necessarily juxtaposes the two stratum, and which is a fundamental element of the carnivalesque. As Bakhtin writes, the grotesque exists as a “double body” which “retains the parts in which one link joins the other,” simultaneously (318). However, because of the dual nature of these concepts, they therefore must inhabit a space of liminality in which they are between worlds and categorization. This is because the grotesque “ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomena,” because the grotesque body is always growing and dying simultaneously (318). The liminality of grotesque realism is responsible for the subversive nature of the carnivalesque, in that it symbolizes a rejection of the ordered universe. Hierarchy cannot exist through the grotesque, and as such it culls the ranks of the otherwise categorical and stratified vertical social structure and creates a horizontal relationship.

The gross and universal equality of the grotesque body centers humans in relation to the world, which can only challenge hegemony and hierarchy. As such, the equalizing elements of this juxtaposition between higher and lower stratum characterizes the use of the grotesque body and creates a social balance between people, which is, in essence, the carnivalesque.

Although carnival is now a draconian practice, manifestations of the carnivalesque persist anachronistically today in relatively safe social environments such as stand-up comedy. Rowe explains how some people "...seek the carnivalesque closer to home, in popular film and television, our modern equivalent of Bakhtin's streets and marketplaces," showing that Schumer's work has the formal capacity to resonate with people as a modern version of the carnivalesque (48).

### **The Unruly Woman**

In her 1995 book *The Unruly Woman*, Rowe implements a feminist interpretation of the carnivalesque to analyze the messages underlying Miss Piggy from Sesame Street and Roseanne Barr's comedy. She defines the unruly woman through a series of qualities that have manifested themselves in time through the theoretical framework of the "woman on top" archetype in literature and history. The unruly woman is a recurring motif characterized by "...female outrageousness and transgression which often evokes...on the one hand, delight; on the other, unease, derision, or fear," (30). Rowe acknowledges historian Natalie Zemon Davis as the first to identify such an archetype, and claims that the unruly woman exists "whenever women disrupt the norms of femininity and the social hierarchy of male over female through excess and outrageousness," (30).

Rowe distills the concept of the unruly woman into eight attributes, evidenced in the work and research of Davis. First, Rowe claims that the unruly woman "...creates disorder by dominating, or trying to dominate, men," and that she rejects traditional social roles in lieu of the subversion of the status quo (31). In some cases the unruly woman consciously rejects the established norms of society, but in other instances she is herself unable to conform to the



gendered expectations put upon her. The second trope that Rowe identifies is that the unruly woman is "...excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites," à la Roseanne Barr (31). The unruly woman lives a Dionysian lifestyle that advocates self-interested behaviors designed to benefit the individual to the extent of the resources provided them. Ergo, she takes advantage of those things given to her. The unruly woman lives her life in excess on multiple dimensions, as Rowe's third criteria dictates that an unruly woman's speech is "...excessive, in quantity, content, or tone," which contrasts a voracious physical appetite with a loud and ambitious discursive one (31). Abstractly, this paints the unruly woman as self-indulgent and self-gratifying, as well as confident with good regard for herself. Fourth, the unruly woman has a healthy appreciation of humor. She will make jokes or laugh at something somebody else says to indicate the fact that she doesn't take life too seriously. She has little respect for social structures and conventions and uses humor to break those categories. The fifth and sixth tropes that Rowe identifies deal with the physical appearance of the unruly woman in that she may be "androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender," or she may be "old or a masculinized crone, for old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture are often considered grotesque," (31). Both of these physical characteristics of the unruly woman alienate her from her gender and the categorizations associated with that gender. Beauty is not typically identified with the unruly woman, who relies more on the strength of her personality and the content of her message to impact her world. Ironically, despite her appearance, the unruly woman's "...behavior is associated with looseness and occasionally whore-ishness, but her sexuality is less narrowly and negatively defined than is that of the femme fatale," leading the reader to assume that the reasons why the unruly woman is promiscuous is for the benefit of herself (Rowe, 31). Given the motivations for the rest of the

unruly woman's tropes, her sexually loose behavior comes as a result of her self-indulgence and appetite for pleasure. Finally, the last signifier that Rowe attributes to the unruly woman is that she is "...associated with dirt, liminality (thresholds, borders, or margins), and taboo, rendering her above all a figure of ambivalence," and reinforcing her subversion of gender roles (31). Against the frame of the traditional idea of female, the unruly woman transcends categorization and exists transitorily between the masculine and the feminine. She may appropriate more masculine characteristics, sometimes literally, as Viola does in *Twelfth Night*. Or she may appropriate feminine characteristics in a tongue-in-cheek parody of societal expectations. Regardless, she exists without identifying too strongly in one direction or the other, mostly remaining androgynous. Rowe also associates the unruly woman with dirt and taboo, as her rejection of the norms and conventions have the ability to permeate even to those norms fundamental to human behavior such as hygiene and health.

These outline the basic characteristics identified by Rowe in the unruly woman, but they are all connected by the fact that she is ruled by her own desire, and thus in a certain respect, her own sense of agency. This is in direct competition to traditional gender roles and allows her to transcend the confines of the societal expectations of her sex and endure as a woman free from the confines of gender.

### **The Intersection of Rowe and Bakhtin**

In Mizejewski's analysis of Sarah Silverman's comedy, she pinpoints a very significant difference between Sarah Silverman and Roseanne Barr in that Silverman uses her "adorable" looks to disarm the audience and sharpen the satire of her carnivalesque comedy. While Rowe's unruly woman is usually characterized by a literally grotesque body that can be overweight,

androgynous, or old, Mizejewski's lens focuses more on a figurative grotesque body that is juxtaposed by the physical attractiveness of the comic's actual body. Bakhtin's writings are consistent with this idea as just another contrast experienced through the degradation in the carnivalesque. She describes the "cartwheel effect" in Bakhtin's writings where the anus takes the place of the mouth, and in doing so theoretically wed's Rowe and Bakhtin's interpretations into a more cohesive and thorough analysis of Sarah Silverman, adding a deeper dimension to the framework (100). The displacement of beauty with the grotesque is consistent with Bakhtin's ideas of the balance and ambivalence of the carnivalesque, and so to switch them in a cartwheel effect is to fulfill the qualifications of the carnivalesque on a level relative to the unruly woman. In her study of Silverman's television show, Mizejewski asserts that carnivalesque narratives "...enact a radical subversion of gender, challenging the sitcom narratives appropriate for the 'totally cute white girl'" and rhetorically strengthen the role reversal inherent in the carnivalesque (104). Ergo, for the purpose of this study, Mizejewski's intersection of Rowe and Bakhtin's work will be utilized with respect to the physical appearance of Amy Schumer, as she successfully did with Sarah Silverman.

## ANALYSIS

Amy Schumer's *Mostly Sex Stuff* uses elements of the carnivalesque to create a setting in which the social order can be questioned in a jocular manner; Schumer's subversive focus ultimately rests on power disparities in gender differences. Schumer uses the grotesque body to explore the carnivalesque primarily through the act of fecundation, which she characterizes as

being dualistic, ambivalent, and liminal; through this the grotesque body serves as a site in which to grapple with abstract concepts, primarily sexism.

### **The Grotesque Body**

Mizejewski notes how, “the oozing, secreting body repressed in popular discourses of femininity” results in highly political implications as a product of the resurrection of these terms (106-107). Schumer has no shortage of an oozing and secreting body in her routine; her topics range from getting “slimed” with semen to menstrual bleeding all over the stage. Schumer recounts stories that involve excrement, such as when she describes sending texts to her family that just say “Good-bye” while she is “massacring” a toilet, a continuation of the dualism between death and the life of the grotesque body. She further merges the upper and lower stratum when she mentions how “we’ve all taken a load somewhere we’re not proud of,” after discussing how she hates the way all pornos end the same. Semen to the face is a blunt example of the dualism of the carnivalesque, between the higher and lower stratum of the face and phallus. Bakhtin writes about the inversion of the stratum, how the negation of objects can create a “bottoms up” effect, as apparent in semen being ejaculated onto a face instead of a vagina (411). In her routine, Schumer’s distaste for this inversion of vagina-face is not rooted in its backwardness, but rather in the monotony and predictability of it, as she sarcastically demonstrates that it is how all pornos end. This is consistent with the carnivalesque, where chaos reigns in direct opposition to the ordered and predictable world, but furthermore, it creates what Bakhtin calls a “double body” in which “one link joins the other” and continues the cycle of life and death (318).

Schumer's sexual bits are not only disrupting in their discussion of bodily fluids, but they are singularly political in their rejection of social stigmas and common norms. For instance, she opens her routine with a joke on "kid fucking" which she then feigns regret about because the "theatre is so beautiful" and quickly attempts to rectify her mistake by saying "My mom's a cunt." Mizejewski describes this as, "citing two taboo topics and casually ranking one as less objectionable than the other," thus calling into question the spectrum of taboo (101). Having sex with children and calling one's mother a "cunt" are in direct violation with social expectations for how we treat our young and elderly, and Schumer's ordering of them effectively challenges the constructed nature of their presumed distaste. But Schumer goes one step further when she accuses the theatre of inseminating its patrons while they are sitting, because it is so old. This accusation of an inanimate object serves as a grand metaphor for her act, where she takes something beautiful (Schumer's body) and attributes deviant sexual behavior to it, where the grotesque elements of the unruly woman, such as old age and sexual promiscuity, are driving forces which contrast, and contradict, her beauty. This creates a liminality which allows her carnivalesque material as well as her physical appearance to defy categorization and occupy some transitional space between an audience's expectations and reality.

Bakhtin discusses how the bowels and the phallus in the grotesque have the ability to "detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life," (317). Ergo, the motif of the personification of genitals recurs frequently throughout Schumer's show. Bakhtin insists that this is because "the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it...conceives a new, second body" (317). One instance of this appears when she recounts how she walked in on her boyfriend masturbating, and asks him "Does it owe you money?" because of his consternated facial expression, going on to create a relationship between her boyfriend and his

penis as between two people. She elaborates this relationship and solidifies the image of the penis as a person when she accuses the boyfriend of waterboarding it. The idea of torturing one's own reproductive organs invokes both the ideas of death and life. The dualism between fecundation and torture, or death, equalizes the two concepts and juxtaposes the upper and lower stratum. Alternately, when describing her preparations for her vagina, she appropriates human behavior to it, saying that "every night is like getting it ready for its first quinceanera," and is a lot of work. A quinceanera, the celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday, is a transitional event in Latin America. This demonstrates the liminality of the vagina, as though it is in transition every night, growing hair and having it cut off, or as Bakhtin describes it, an image that "consists of orifices and convexities that present another, newly conceived body," every night, but framed through human behavior (318). These personifications of genitalia represent the juxtaposition of the higher and lower stratum; in the carnivalesque, the so-called higher faculties such as thinking and reasoning, or what makes us human, are transposed to the lower faculties of bodily processes in a continuous cycle of balance and liminality, on which relationship is predicated carnivalesque dualism.

However, the most important of these personifications involves Schumer's description of her hairless vagina after getting it waxed. She describes it as looking red and angry, like "an old man frowning" and then proceeds to emit an old-person voice from her mouth, imitating the way her vagina would speak if it were a grumpy old man. This perfectly encapsulates the cartwheel effect that Bakhtin identifies, in which the "body turns a cartwheel" prompting a "transfer of the upper to the lower bodily stratum," and as such the mouth occupies the anus, and vice versa (373). Schumer creates this cartwheel effect in two ways, first in describing her vagina like a mouth, and second by speaking the voice of her vagina through her mouth. This successfully

debases the upper stratum, putting it on the same level as the lower stratum, and equalizing their importance in relation to one another and in the process, as Mizejewski writes, “symbolizing the potential undoing of the larger social body” (101). In contrast to the Puritanical values engendered in our society, anatomical dismemberment such that renders the mouth equal to the vagina is radically subversive. Furthermore, this juxtaposition creates an ambivalence of the body that is necessary to allow the dualism of the grotesque and subvert the conceptions of a relationship between utterance and body. The political implications of this bit as a symbolic act question the conventions of patriarchal norms where, as Schumer says later in her act, “Men hate when women speak,” which, by speaking through her vagina, she is speaking through the mouthpiece of her femaleness. As Rowe writes, “Women are expected to keep not only their bodies but their utterances unobtrusive,” and by Schumer making her vagina speak, she is violating both of those social expectations (63).

Schumer centers her conversation about age around sex, too, as she talks at length about how “It sucks getting older as a chick”. Schumer is 31, but she talks about how she still thinks she’s 20, which develops an ambivalent space around her chronemic identity. This again, is a feature of the unruly woman who is often crone-like, because they “refuse to become invisible in our culture,” just because they are no longer young and beautiful (Rowe, 31). Schumer crystallizes these social expectations by portraying some waifish unruly woman who transcends time through her existence. The liminality of age is apparent when she discusses shaving her pubic hair, alluding at times to looking like a “baby” or a “toddler”, which subverts the classical body and makes it ambivalent in age between sexual maturity and neoteny, thus corrupting it into a grotesque body. Age is also depicted as arbitrary and transitional when Schumer refuses to accept adult responsibilities, like when she responds to hearing her friend was pregnant by

saying “What are you gonna do?” and ignoring the fact that at 30 her friends are beginning to adapt a more “adult” lifestyle. The disparity between her actual age, appearance, and behavior all contribute to an articulation of the subjectivity of time. Bakhtin asserts that “cosmic fear,” like aging, “is defeated by laughter,” which helps people come to terms with death and time, but in the context of a woman dealing with time the stakes become much higher (336). As a woman, Schumer comes to terms with the idea of aging and finding her value reduced in society’s eyes. She observes how, “In your 20s, you’re like, ‘Life is awesome. Everybody wants to fuck me, you guys!’ Then you turn 30 and you’re like, ‘You guys?’” because society places a premium on the physical appearance and age of women. The carnivalesque quality of her age represents a rejection of this value system that penalizes a woman for being older than 20, and thus is consistent on an outrageous level with Rowe’s trope of the “old or a masculinized crone...who refuse to become invisible in our culture” (31).

Schumer’s grotesque body is a violation of the idealistic and classical body type in our society, and she addresses this when she says she “knows her body type” because she initiates pick-ups at bars by being forceful with men. This directly ties behavior with body type instead of physical appearance, as Schumer is aggressive and authoritative romantically. The idea of a woman as aggressive, forceful, and active in pursuit of men is contrary to the behavior advocated for women; it is in line with Rowe’s unruly woman, as she is described as “...dominating, or trying to dominate, men,” (31). Even though Schumer is not overweight at all, the archetype of the unruly woman is still enacted because she does not fit into the cult of thinness, or passivity. She further acknowledges this rejection of the frail woman ideal when she recounts her sexual exploits with a French man who tries to be romantic and pick her up but then has to set her down because she is too heavy. That Schumer considers herself a “base” in a cheerleading pyramid,



and that she was called “sturdy” by a Texan shows that her weight is perceived as a deviant to the norm. The unruly woman is excessive or fat, “suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites,” which Schumer would eagerly admit to, given her promiscuous persona (Rowe, 31). The comic identity of Schumer has a voracious sexual appetite, as evidenced by jokes such as “I’ve only slept with four people, and that was a weird night,” or on persuading her sex partner to wear a condom, “I’ve had a busy month...It’s like a petri dish right now,” which evidences a presumed lack of control. This lack of control is literalized through Schumer’s excessive sex. It is Schumer’s appetites, then, which challenge the behavior socially acceptable to women, her assertive and active behavior which creates perceptions of her like “sturdy”.

Furthermore, Schumer engenders assertiveness in her character oftentimes through outright aggression, even anger. Rowe discusses how “anger is one of the most socially unacceptable emotions for women,” and as such it must be “reworked into humor” as Schumer does when she randomly calls people, like her mother, “cunts” (69). Schumer exercises an exaggerated form of passive aggressiveness on the stage when she overhears a couple talking during her act and deals with them like hecklers, balancing the nice girl persona with the callous ambivalence of the unruly woman. She intermingles the messages to attack the two audience members through outright aggression, first effusively thanking them “so much for coming” and then insisting to them that “seriously, nobody cares”, continuing this two-faced barrage for several minutes, so long in fact that she loses her place in her story. Blatant and unabashed anger demands that Schumer’s voice is heard by the two audience members who were talking, just like she demands to be heard in the other aspects of her life. Dualism in the carnivalesque is justified

by Bakhtin on a greater scale because “The old world that has been destroyed is offered together with the new world and is represented with it as the dying part of the dual body,” (410).

However, Schumer’s body as grotesque is juxtaposed itself by the fact that she has an attractive and harmless appearance. Therefore, Schumer’s ambivalence comes from her villainous comic persona on multiple dimensions. On one level, her routine is full of awful and unspeakable utterances, but framed in such a way that they evoke laughter and joy in the audience. Bakhtin uses the phrase “gay monster” to describe this ambivalence of the carnivalesque, because it contradicts itself, showing threatening images in a way that renders them laughable (197). This is because abuse “reveals the other, true face of the abused, it tears off his disguise and mask,” and in this situation Schumer’s on-stage persona is the abused (197). The mask that she wears is her racist, promiscuous, and ultimately aggressive comic identity, but through her comedy that mask is necessarily torn off by the audience as they attempt to make sense of the controversial issues she talks about. The very framing of these terrible ideas and behaviors is abused by the fact that the audience is laughing at them, by the comedy of their presentation, and through this laughter the behaviors undergo a transformation in their message. Through this Schumer decays the ideas she enacts on the stage. The primary image that she degrades is the “entitled white girl” which she trashes through her villainous persona in the first place. She says that before she was famous people thought that, because she looked, “sweet...Amish...and kind of Cabbage Patchy,” that her material would reflect that “sweet” image and they would “bring the whole family” to come see her because she probably talks about shopping. The contrast between her unassuming good looks and her foul mouth creates ambivalence towards the archetype and challenges the audience’s perceptions between image and behavior. Mizejewski describes this phenomenon as the “Hybridity of appeal and revulsion,

the attractive and the objectionable,” which makes primarily for jarring comedy, but also creates a platform from which Schumer can say the most objectionable things (107). Given her ambivalence between classical and grotesque, she is able to juxtapose herself and generate real discourse on touchy issues. To this effect, Rowe writes that the “Sexually available woman...blurs the line between human and animal,” which brings the majority of Schumer’s taboo violations into the realm of the grotesque (43). This creates ambivalence in Schumer’s stage persona, best illustrated when she describes something “adorable” a French man said to her: “I have an apartment.” Women are not expected to be indiscriminate, or articulate, in their sexual conquests for fear of being labeled “loose” or “easy”, but men are allowed to openly discuss casual sexual relations. Rowe writes that the unruly woman may be “androgynous or hermaphroditic, drawing attention to the social construction of gender,” which perfectly describes Schumer’s status as a performer (31). The subject of a nameless one night stand is the fodder for many countless male comedians, and Schumer capitalizes on this to draw attention to the double standard. She does this through another form of ambivalence, in which she occupies some liminal threshold between woman and man, what Rowe calls “one of the most fundamental of social distinctions,” (43). Schumer does this by contrasting her apparent femininity with the fact that she is appropriating behavior usually associated with males. In her encore, she answers a question from a woman in the audience about her comic mentor that illustrates this dichotomy. In her answer, Schumer talks about how she “hangs out with mostly 45-year-old dudes” who “...think I’m so hot, just cause I’m not their wives,” but then goes on to contrast this with “out in the streets, people are just throwing lit cigarettes at me,” which once again invokes the relativity of beauty, but also shows the saturation of maleness in comedy and the centrality of Schumer’s role as a woman. She runs with the boys, but alternately is clearly womanly. This type of

androgyny is a product of the male-dominated industry, where a woman doing stand-up is already androgynous. Typically when women do stand-up they must, “occupy the ‘male’ position by directing their jokes at themselves in self-deprecating barbs, or at other women,” and so to have a woman joking about explicit and gratuitous sex, or conventional male comedy, rejects all social machinations and expectations for women in comedy (Rowe, 69). Therefore, all of Schumer’s sexual material occupies a space of liminality between male precedence and the role of the female comic.

### **The Grotesque Body as a Site to Highlight Power Imbalance**

Through her routine, the body becomes a site in which to highlight power imbalances; Schumer attacks civil inequalities using the grotesque body as a conduit through which the audience can grapple with abstract concepts like sexism and racism. However, Schumer is simultaneously reducing these prejudices and discriminations into their most primitive and basic philosophical form. She frames these topics around that which they already inherently involve, which is the body. Whether it is genitalia or skin color, Schumer forces the audience to identify these physiological differences in the conversation about oppression, creating an arena to discuss these overwhelming topics that is predicated on the very substance they are based on. This is an example of the grotesque, because she is once again connecting the cosmic and the body in a way that makes these otherwise terrifying ideas approachable to the audience, but that she also reduces them down to their most fundamental aspects. Furthermore, by framing these concepts against the lower bodily stratum, she subverts the institutions of race and sex, creating a world equalized by the carnivalesque.

Race becomes the subject of Schumer's carnivalesque *mésalliances*, as she discusses wanting to date a "brotha" who doesn't have a job, or a name. Schumer centers this discussion in the body when she says, "We'd need a ton of lube, just like, for his elbows" which plays out racism using the constructs of the physical body. The manifestation of race is in skin, and Schumer utilizes this to make a statement on the dualism of race and racism. She does this by acknowledging the racism present in her joke and thus creating cognizance of the racism, but continuing the loose racist persona she began with the joke. Mizejewski articulates this affectation of racism as "unthinkable thoughts" that "revolve around the abject body and the abjecting dynamic of racism," (95). Schumer systematically enacts various conventions of racism all while maintaining an almost chastising role to the audience's perceived racism. This dualism is an indictment of the hypocrisy of the racism and questions the means of solution to such an issue. The idea of race is played out in the body when she mentions her "Jew denial" hair, which designates race as something liminal or constructed. Race becomes almost more an individual construct than a social one in this context. More importantly, though, the idea of the body as an individual is inextricably linked to these larger social issues and thus inevitably invites a question of the grotesque. The cosmic ideas of racism are played out in the body, and through this they are naturally subverted in the carnivalesque tradition. Schumer relegates her androgyny as a female comedian to the body as well, when she says that the hardest part about being a female comedian is "the rape". By placing an abstract idea like sexism in comedy within the physical boundaries of sexual assault, Schumer creates a liminality that allows the audience to laugh about the expression of sexism because they can more easily grasp it in its manifestation in the body. These examples demonstrate the combination of the upper and lower bodily stratum and their effect on rendering both symbiotically into a system of palatable understanding of these

terrifying and otherwise unspeakable abstract ideas. By centering the conversation of racism and gender norms around the idea of fecundation and the grotesque, Schumer forces the audience to reconcile these ideas to their source.

Schumer attacks class differences through the carnivalesque as well. Through her Plan B bit, she subverts the image of the upper class woman by talking about being “mid-aborsh” while she is at yoga, a hobby usually associated with the bourgeois middle class. By juxtaposing these two images Schumer contrasts the typical associations of abortion as low income. Furthermore, it inverts the stigma of abortion and applies it to the otherwise safe and responsible middle class. The idea of Plan B is itself grotesque in that it combines death with birth, as Bakhtin describes, “...the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven,” making an abortion pill a symbol of carnivalesque dualism (317). The idea of the grotesque body as a setting to grapple with these power imbalances is fundamental to the satirical efficacy of Schumer’s jokes. The comic persona she adopts as a “white entitled girl” stands in stark contrast to the woman “from the killing fields of Cambodia” that does her bikini wax for her. However, the grotesque is a necessary part of this contrast, as they are both on different ends of Schumer’s genitals. Pubic hair serves as the central connection between these two women at competing ends of the power continuum. This is characteristically grotesque, because it represents the threshold of power in the similarities between the two women, as dictated by their differences. Schumer enacts the discovery of these power differences as manifested through the Cambodian salon worker getting a mirror and showing Schumer her now hairless pubic area, at which she has to “act like I’m not horrified”. Bikini waxing serves as the conduit through which Schumer must cope with her white upper-class entitlement. This enactment of the classical body represents a deeper enactment of the classist conventions which perpetuate power imbalances in our society; ergo the grotesque

body in a certain capacity transcends this disparity. As Rowe writes, “marginalized groups are vulnerable to pollution taboos that stigmatize them as less than human and their bodies as ‘dirty’” and which is apparent in Schumer’s depiction of pubic hair (42). Ergo, Schumer challenges the idea of an unshaven pubic area as dirty, talking about the social construction of the norm of a shaven vagina when she imagines, 10 or 15 years ago, “All the dudes got together and had...like a fantasy football draft about our privates,” which implies not only the objectification of women into a stock that can be traded, but also the social nature of the expectations we have for bodies in our culture.

Schumer eviscerates the archetype of the “Stepford wife” ideal of womanhood whom she describes as wearing “pastel cashmere cardigans and pearls and Burberry...tampons,” which translates to being upper class, materialistic, and clean. Schumer’s inclusion of a high-fashion-tampon indicates the suppression of these women’s femininity as they suppress the bleeding during their period. This is a symbolic object at odds with the grotesque body because in the carnivalesque, “the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven,” which in this case includes the menstrual cycle which symbolizes new life, in contrast to the aging of the woman towards death (317). However, there are definitely classed differences that Schumer draws upon, as she describes typical upper class adornments like pearls and cardigans. However, Schumer makes a distinction in the voices of the upper class women, as well. She describes how they all talk softly, “like almost in a whisper” and, affecting their whispering voice, reasons that “Oh, I guess we were just born with different vocal cords ‘cause I was raised better” which directly ties class with physical characteristics. Rowe talks about how feminists are stereotyped as “too loud and too high-pitched” because “voices in any culture that are not meant to be heard are perceived as loud when they do speak, regardless of their decibel level” (63). In this case, it

is the classical ideal of women as meek and non-threatening which dictates their voices as whispering and soft. The Stepford wives that Schumer talks about are completely unobtrusive on every level of their existence, and their bodies reflect this passivity. Schumer elaborates on this, and how “boring” they are, in a story about playing a game of “admitting something” with them. In this game, their darkest secrets are things like “Once I forgot to let the dog out all day!” whose banality Schumer finds offensive in its excess. Schumer singles out a girl named “Bridget” whom she describes as the “worst person I ever met”. Schumer takes care to explicitly state how Bridget “talked like an angel was sleeping on her tongue” and the women could barely hear her when she admitted her secret. This has weight in and of itself, as Schumer indicts the women who suppress their own voices in our society and willingly act against being heard. An accusation like this breaks the mold of the conventions of feminism in that it turns its attention on the members of the female sex who are deliberately dragging their feet to articulating their voices as women. Bridget’s voice is a representation of women as submissive and passive to the demands of the patriarchy. The big secret that Bridget admits is that “Sometimes, after Richard falls asleep, I get up and eat ice cream,” which Schumer calls her a “cunt” for admitting. This admission epitomizes Schumer’s critique of the expectations of our society for women, by encouraging docility to husbands and discouraging taking pleasure in eating. However, the biggest problem Schumer has with Bridget is not her submission to these hegemonic norms, but her blind and eager acceptance of them. Schumer contrasts Bridget’s secret by admitting one of her own secrets next, saying “It’s kind of like your ice cream thing” to Bridget before bluntly stating, “One time, I let a cab driver finger me,” which completely dismantles the archetype of the Stepford wife through the unruly woman. By inviting ideas, not only of reckless sexual misadventures, but also of the grotesque and sexual body, Schumer subverts the perception of the



ideal woman by articulating an attack on its fundamental values of chastity and purity. Bridget serves as the vessel through which this indictment is orchestrated, and in the logic of Schumer's act, she does look like a sociopath. Schumer's secret, while shocking, serves only to contrast the ridiculous superficiality of Bridget's secret. The audience has been acclimated to the idea of the unruly woman in Schumer's act and so Bridget's behavior seems ludicrous and comically insane, which successfully and unapologetically subverts the audience's conceptions of what is appropriate behavior for a woman. Schumer's sexually free and morally challenging character deconstructs the machinations of patriarchy and contrasts the upper stratum of gender-based oppression with the lower stratum of sex.

## EVALUATION & IMPLICATIONS

### **Implications**

Schumer's use of the carnivalesque provides a platform from which to speak the truth in a way that is palatable to people. As Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque, it is not like negative satire where the speaker is elevated above their audience as a cynic observing the exigencies of the world, but a continuous and inclusive process by which the world laughs at itself and is turned upside down. The laughter is different in that it is ambivalent, as Bakhtin writes, it is "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding," which describes the indirect satire which characterizes carnivalesque laughter (11). Schumer is making fun of herself and the audience simultaneously during her routine, asserting the presence of a chaotic but comedic world. Feminist scholars have labeled this type of humor the "pickup" in which "...we do not laugh *at* people, we bond *with* them," and it is considered an effective form of feminist comedy

and satire (Kaufman, 16). Bakhtin describes this type of satire as a “mixture of praise and abuse” because it is inclusive in its assault and embrace of the world (415). Schumer also uses this indirect satire to eviscerate the conventions of our society and gender expectations and create a laughter “of all the people” to thus practice a more equal form of satire (Bakhtin, 11). Elitism is a form of class discrimination that is much subtler than other, more explicit, forms of oppression, and yet elitism is often permeated into the institutions of social criticism such as academic feminism and purely negative satire. Schumer’s satire makes a message of equality available to all the people through its indirectness, making it much more effective and honest than jargon-filled journals chronicling scholarly elaborations of sexism. To this purpose, Schumer’s comedy also does not explicitly fall into what would be conventionally described as feminism, and so her message has the potential to reach a much greater audience (Merrill). Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque as finding its roots in folk culture, and so too does Schumer’s comedy resonate on a level that ordinary people can understand and appreciate. Through this, she makes a stage without footlights, where “...everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people,” and the actor and the audience are equal, where the hierarchies of everyday life are discarded in exchange for a universal equalization (Bakhtin, 7). Furthermore, the indirect nature of Schumer’s feminism falls into the great tradition of the aesthetic and subtle subversive powers of the arts (Bilger).

The very process of Schumer’s carnivalesque comedy inherently subverts the interpretation of the body in our society. The implications of Schumer’s contemporary challenge to the classical body are huge. The classical body downplays, even discourages eating and other processes, instead elevating an almost unattainable ideal from which to compare oneself. This manifests itself in our culture in forms such as unrealistic depictions of women in the media,

objectification, and even eating disorders. Objectification theory asserts that the sexual objectification of women in the media can lead them to self-objectify themselves and develop eating disorders (Tylka and Hill). The objectification and dismemberment of women in media is rectified by the view of the grotesque body. Advocating for the grotesque body rejects women's bodies as an object on a fundamental level and maintains that they are a functional and transcendent part of what makes us human and connects us to the abstract. One is necessarily comfortable with their body as grotesque because the grotesque body is much more grounded in reality than the classical one. The grotesque body, and unruly woman, has a voracious and unapologetic appetite for food or sex because the processes are an integral part of their being. Unrealistically thin body standards do not fit into an outlook like this.

Schumer fights for the right to be heard, regardless of the content of the message, and there is a recurring motif of voice throughout her routine. Schumer's characterization of the Stepford-wife-woman is whispering and simpering, and her voice sounds loud in comparison. This symbolizes the subdued voice of women in our society, and the worst part, as Schumer indicates, is that they are the ones who are subduing it themselves. Schumer fights against the victimization of women, that is, the act of accepting victimization, and rejects the expectation that she is oppressed. She does this by contrasting her oppression with her entitlement, questioning the idea of "victimization". She laughs at the idea that it is harder to be a woman comedian, but then goes on to say that it is just harder to be a woman in general. In her 1990 preface to *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler emphasizes that "...laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism," as it inherently subverts the structured order (6). This grounds her premise in reality while dictating the terms of her relationship with those circumstances. She is an unruly woman because she continues to make her voice heard; at 31

becoming one of the “old women who refuse to become invisible in our culture” that are unruly women (Rowe, 31). Schumer’s treatment of the couple that was talking during her act literalizes her voice: passive aggressive and apologetic, reconciling the expectations of society with individual anger and will. This dualism is what makes Schumer’s comedy so potent and effective as a voice of feminism, bending expectations through the carnivalesque just enough to allow it into the minds of the ever watchful masses. Schumer seduces her audience with her charm, beauty, and humor, but all the while she is using that beauty, charm, and humor to satirize and critique the very bedrock of gender roles in our culture. Schumer’s carnivalesque seeks to “...liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted,” especially in relation to gender roles (Bakhtin, 34). The attractive unruly woman has the luxury of saying unspeaking things to her audience and destroying the social order on a much deeper level than the conventional crone-like unruly woman. When the attractive woman subverts the social order, she penetrates to a space of relativity which is carnivalesque by nature, as the degradation of physical appearance by the unruly woman challenges the very system of hegemony and competing voices of discourse. The disparity between the upper and lower stratum generates a subjectivity of discourse which is very much consistent with Bakhtin’s other work on heteroglossia, polyphony, and dialogism. This is an effective voicing of feminist thought in its commentary on the greater social order and way of communicating, which is necessary in any discourse on gender equality .

These considerations then, lead us to some conclusions of our own and beg bigger questions on a large scale. As a female comic, Schumer challenges the stereotypes and “ghettoization” of women’s comedy, questioning the expectations for a woman comic by undertaking masculine material (Stott). She successfully articulates a feminist platform through

the indirect satire of the carnivalesque, and demands a voice for the “entitled white girl”. This method is critically effective in attacking the established order; however, she limits herself through her polarizing material, deterring audience members who might otherwise enjoy a strong female narrative with her crude sexual humor. Furthermore, despite Schumer being Jewish and handling race in her routine, she still represents a white perspective to multi-dimensional issues. Schumer’s routine is a step in the right direction for discourse about women’s bodies as a site of domination, and her framing of sexism and racism through the carnivalesque is illuminating in its simplicity. In the future, research should focus on the use of the body as a liminal tool towards equality in areas outside of comedy; the carnivalesque can be applied to the depiction of bodies in pornography and other sexually explicit films. The institution of the classical body should be challenged more frequently academically, as more research into it could yield a source for the contemporary social consciousness of objectification and dismemberment. Schumer has a new show called *Inside Amy Schumer* that already has articulated a strong feminist outlook and promises to subvert the structure of gender even more in the future which is worth noting for future studies of feminism in comedy.

## CONCLUSION

Voices like Schumer’s need to be heard more often in their self-aware and comedic representation of marginalized groups. Comedy is capable of making these otherwise unsavory truths palatable to a wider audience because it provides a sugarcoating which assuages the automatic guilt of privilege that would otherwise deny these observations. Schumer’s comedy, while rough around the edges, penetrates to a deeper consciousness and imbibes the viewer with

a social commentary that is greater than the collective body, intertwining the abstract concepts of what it means to be human into the conception of what it is to be a human.