



Humorless Lesbians*

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This essay discusses how a sense of humor is distributed in society, focusing on the case of lesbians. Whereas gay men are often stereotyped as having sharp wit and sparkling humor, lesbians are stereotyped in the opposite way, as being leaden, unfunny and humorless. Why? How has such a stereotype arisen? Are lesbians really humorless or do lesbians, in fact, joke and laugh? What kinds of consequences follow from saying that an entire group of people lacks a sense of humor?

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The entire history of the philosophy of humor – from Plato and Aristotle, through Hobbes, Kant and Shopenhauer, on to Freud, Bakhtin, Bergson, and perhaps most recently, Simon Critchley (2002), F.H. Buckley (2003) and Michael Billig (2005) – has consisted of one long rumination on why certain things are funny. This essay breaks with that august philosophical tradition. I am not concerned here with why certain things are funny; I am concerned with the opposite: why certain things are not funny. I am particularly interested in lesbians.

Now reading that, and seeing that the title of this essay is “Humorless Lesbians”, it is possible that some readers may feel apprehensive, combative, or offended. These, in any case, were the reactions I tended to elicit whenever, in researching this topic, I walked into a Gay and Lesbian or a Feminist bookstore, and asked women behind the counter whether they had any books that were on lesbian humor, or representative of lesbian humor. In one particularly memorable case, at the *Gay’s The Word Bookstore* in London, the woman I asked narrowed her eyes, pushed back her glasses, stood up from her seated position, glared at me so darkly that the lesbian friend who had accompanied me to the bookstore receded discretely and safely into the background, and said to me, in a voice dripping with challenge and threat, “Why do you wanna know?”.

In another case, in the *Bluestockings Feminist Bookstore* in New York, the two women booksellers treated my query as a kind of puzzle to be solved. “Rhonda”, the woman I asked shouted across the store to her colleague, “Do we have any lesbian humor?”. “Lesbian humor?”, Rhonda hollered back, “ Gee Carol, I dunno. What would that be?” Much back and forth loud banter across the store ensued, and in the end, Rhonda and Carol concluded that they were all out of lesbian humor. They recommended that I try the *Oscar Wilde* bookshop, in the heart of New York’s gay village. So I did. When I asked the female bookseller there if she had any lesbian humor, she directed me to the latest volume of a comic strip called *Dykes to Watch Out For*. I told to her that I already had the whole collection. This gave the woman pause, but she was determined not to let me leave the store empty-handed. After thinking about it for a few minutes, she went to the stacks and pulled out a memoir called *Weeding At Dawn: a lesbian country life*. The author of *Weeding At Dawn* is a white, middle-aged lesbian who renamed herself after a bird and a tree, Hawk Madrone. I later learned, because of course I bought the book, that *Weeding At Dawn* is a memoir of the author’s day-to-day life on her secluded organic, woman-only homestead. Madrone describes her daily routines, which she shares with her partner, Bethroot, and her cats, Lilith and Missy Moonshine. The routines consist of activities like watering her garden with her own urine, and fertilizing her plants, not with manure, but with her own and other women’s feces – “womanure”, she calls it (2000, 89).

“I don’t know if the woman who wrote this meant it to be funny”, the bookseller at *Oscar Wilde* winked at me, “but I thought it was a scream”.

I recount reactions like this in some detail because they are instructive of the kinds of things people seem to think of whenever the phrase “lesbian humor” gets enunciated. “Lesbian humor” seems to be met with either bewilderment (as in Rhonda’s “What would that be?”), with a sly hint that lesbians can be laughed at because they have no ironic distance to themselves, as the *Weeding At Dawn* example suggests, or else the phrase is met as a kind of dare, an insinuation or accusation that lesbians really don’t have any humor at all, and that the only reason I as a man would go into a bookstore and ask for it is to mock lesbians.

And hence, my point. There is a perception, widespread certainly in much of the English speaking world, at least, that lesbians are humorless. Indeed, one of the most widely circulated lesbian jokes is precisely about that. The joke is: “How many lesbians does it take to screw in a lightbulb?” The answer, which must be delivered in a terse, rough growl, is: “Lesbians don’t screw”. Another version of the same joke makes the point about humorlessness in an even more obvious way. In this version, which appears in the lesbian-authored book *So You Want To Be A Lesbian?*, the joke goes: “How many lesbians does it take to screw in a lightbulb?”, and the answer, which, again, must be delivered in a terse, rough growl, is “That’s not funny” (Taylor and Porkony 1996, 175). Lesbian comedians regularly play off the stereotype. For example, the American comedian Susan Norfleet does a performance piece called *Gay 101*, which is presented as though she were a professional academic delivering a lecture.¹ At one point, she tells her “class” that they will move on to “debunking gay myths and stereotypes”. “Let’s start with number one”, she says, and up comes a Powerpoint slide that says “Lesbians are humorless”. As the audience reads the slide and laughs, Norfleet starts looking through her papers to find what she was going to say to debunk that myth. Her searching becomes increasingly frantic, and, flustered, she looks up at the slide and then out at her audience, struggling to come up with something to say. After an embarrassed silence, she tells the audience, sheepishly, “I... I’ve got nothing”. As the audience laughs, Norfleet quickly goes on to the next myth she will debunk, which a new slide announces is “Gay men have sex and lesbians have dogs”.

Norfleet’s joke about humorless lesbians both acknowledges the stereotype and uses it to raise laughter. But why does the stereotype exist at all? Why do people think that lesbians are humorless? That is the point I want to explore in this essay. Therefore, I can now end the suspense and put any still-anxious reader at ease by declaring plainly that my point here is not going to be that lesbians really are humorless. There are a lot of funny lesbians – Norfleet herself is one, and below I will discuss more examples of lesbian humor. If one set about trying to measure such things in an empirical investigation, there is no reason to believe that one wouldn’t discover that individual lesbians have neither considerably more nor less humor than individuals who are not lesbians.

So why is there a stereotype that holds that lesbians are humorless? One might think that the stereotype is a manifestation of homophobia, which is expressed, precisely, in denigrating caricatures of homosexuals. However, even to the extent that such doubtless is the case, what about gay men? Gay men are also targets of homophobia. But they are stereotyped in the *opposite* way; not as humorless, but, *au contraire*, as sparkingly witty and campy. The homophobia argument is also undermined by the fact that even some lesbians seem to believe that lesbians are not exactly barrels of laughs. The lesbian feminist scholars Julia Penelope and Susan J. Wolfe, for example, lament in a paper about lesbian humor that “Our difficulty in approaching Lesbian humor is that few Lesbians seem to be aware of its existence” (Penelope and Wolfe 1979, 15). Another researcher quotes a lesbian activist, who explains that lesbians “still don’t know what things we can quite laugh at about ourselves. It’s very tentative, the definition is evolving because we are still in the stage

¹ Norfleet’s performance can be seen on Norfleet’s YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDf01UTuGbg> (accessed November 10, 2016). See also her commentary on the “Debunking gay myths and stereotypes” part of her act in Norfleet 2007.

where we are taking ourselves so seriously, we *have* to, that we almost don't trust each other to laugh" (McDonald 1984, 295).

Lesbian humor

Lesbians, however, do laugh. And as the linguists Janet Bing and Dana Heller (2003) have pointed out, lesbian humor takes many forms. One place many people see it is on bumperstickers that say things like "Sorry I Missed Church, I've Been Busy Practicing Witchcraft And Becoming a Lesbian" and T-shirts with texts like "Vagitarian" or the brontosaurian logo for a fictitious summer camp called "Camp Lickalotapuss".² Humor is also a prominent feature of lesbian zines, comic books and cartoons, such as *Dykes to Watch Out For* by Alison Bechdel, which is a syndicated comic strip that appeared in gay and lesbian newspapers and magazines for over twenty years and has resulted in a dozen collected books. Another popular lesbian comic strip is Diane Dimassa's *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*. *Hothead Paisan* is a raging lesbian avenger who deals with misogyny or homophobia by shooting the offender, chopping him – always him – up with an axe, sawing him in half with a motor saw, or ripping out his spinal cord with a pair of giant pliers. Much of the humor here is raised through the outrageous shattering of taboos about how women should behave in a patriarchal world (see Queen 1997 for an extended analysis of *Hothead*).

Besides cartoons, bumperstickers, T-shirts and the rest of it, overtly lesbian humor can also be found in performances by women like Sandra Bernhard, plays by playwright like Lisa Kron and Holly Hughes, and books by authors like Liz Tracey and Sydney Pokorny (*So You want To Be a Lesbian?*, 1996) or Ellen Orleans (*The Inflatable Butch*, 2001). There are also comedy routines that feature multicharacter performances, like those by the American comedian Lily Tomlin, or like those that made up the 1990s New Zealand television show, *The Topp Twins*, which featured two twin sisters, Lynda and Jools Topp, both of whom are publicly declared and politically active lesbians.³

In addition to all the comic series, books, and sketch comedy routines, there is also stand-up comedy, a form of humor that lesbians, like women more generally, have only really broken into during the past 25 years (Auslander 1993, Gilbert 2004, Lavin 2004). There are a small number of established lesbian standup comics in the English-speaking world. The most internationally well known is probably Ellen DeGeneres, whose situation comedy *Ellen* ran on U.S. television from 1994–98. The show is famous as being the first U.S. situation comedy in which the main character "comes out" as homosexual both in the series and in real life. Since 2003, DeGeneres has hosted a popular daytime television talkshow and she still occasionally does standup comedy. But unlike other performers who are known as "lesbian comedians" lesbianism has never featured much in DeGeneres's act; she performs a kind of generalized observational humor, not humor concerned with or directed to lesbians (Lavin 2004, 119–24). This contrasts with performers like the Americans Kate Clinton, Suzanne Westenhoefer or Margo Gomez, all of whom build their standup acts around their

² Images of this T-shirt and others with lesbian themes can be found in designer Gayle Woodbury's profile CafePress: <http://www.cafepress.co.uk/profile/4109622> (accessed November 10, 2016).

³ See <http://topptwins.com/> (accessed November 10, 2016). Thanks to Janet Holmes for alerting me to the existence of the twins, whose careers and styles of performance are overdue for scholarly attention.

lesbianism and lesbian culture. Westenhofer sometimes begins performances by informing her audience “You know, I’m a lesbian comedian”, and then immediately moving to talk about issues of particular concern to lesbians and gays, for example:

People still hate gay people, isn’t that boring? It’s so last millennium. I’m so bored by that. But they still do, they still make these little horrified comments. Like there was a woman in Phoenix who was running for something... and she actually compared homosexuality to cannibalism, human sacrifice and bestiality. You know, I’ll give her cannibalism. But that other stuff is just mean. (Westenhofer 2003)

Bisexual comedian Margaret Cho, likewise, talks a lot about lesbians and her sexual experiences with women. One extended joke about lesbians begins like this:

One of the first jobs I ever had working as a standup comedian was working on a lesbian cruise. I was the ship comedian on the lesbian love boat. It was Olivia Cruises. They do cruises for women all over the world and I went with them to Alaska, because *lesbians love whale watching*. They fuckin’ love it! They love it more than pussy! They love it. They love whale watching. It’s any kind of sea mammal really. Whales, manatees, dolphins – they go crazy for the dolphins. I don’t know what it is, I think it’s the blowhole. (Cho 2000)

Later in the same performance, Cho reveals that on the cruise, she had sex with a woman: “And I went through this whole thing, you know, I was like, ‘Am I gay?’ ‘Am I straight?’ And I realized: I’m just slutty”.

Another example of lesbian standup comedy is a joke from a book written by comedian and singer Lea Delaria. Much of Delaria’s humor comes from vigorously poking fun at both stereotypes of lesbians and at actually occurring types of lesbians. A typical Delaria joke is this:

I won’t call myself a lesbian, because it sounds like someone you call to repair things in your home. “Honey, the air conditioner is on the blink. Better call the lesbian”.

I prefer “dyke,” even if by doing so I inadvertently ally myself with healingsistermountainwomanrain feminists. I mean the ones who paint themselves lavender, dance naked around tiered fires, and have beards. I want to secretly follow behind them like a stealth bomber and whisper things like “Tweezers” (Delaria 2000, 55)

Another Delaria joke mocks “lesbian chic”, which is the name given to the phenomenon in which, during the 1990s, lesbians were suddenly touted by the media as being hot, happening and sexy. (Sharon Stone in the film *Basic Instinct* was an archetype for the chic lesbian and the glossy lesbian characters in the long-running U.S. cable television series *L-Word* continue the tradition.) Delaria makes fun of lesbian chic by writing a script for a television advertisement featuring lesbians:

INT: Camera fades in on a foggy haze of a bedroom. Two smoky figures lie in bed. As the camera pulls focus we see that they are hugely fat and wearing flannel pyjamas.

Close-up: The first woman looks directly into the camera.

Woman one: I am fat and I am watching *Xena*.

INT: Woman Two turns on her side. We see she is holding a hockey stick.

INT: Two cats run across the bed.

Woman two (calling to cats): Gertrude. Alice.
INT: One cat knocks over a mug of chai tea.
INT: The two women gaze deeply into each other's eyes.
Woman one and two (in unison): I am fat and I am watching *Xena*.
Camera pulls out of focus as the two put their heads together.
Voice over (female)
Fallopian Tube. The new fragrance from Calvin Klein.
Fade out as: A sea gull calls. (2000, 130-31)

The humor in this imagined advertisement arises from the incongruity between the media portrayal of sleek lesbians who buy expensive Calvin Klein perfumes, and the more common stereotype of lesbians as overweight, Gertrude Stein reading, herbal tea drinking, cat loving, flannel clad feminist sports fans. *Xena: Warrior Princess* is a U.S. television program (1995-2001) that starred dark-haired and feisty Lucy Lawless as a fearless Amazon warrior, and blonde-haired and innocent Renee O'Connor as her ingénue companion and sidekick. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the series has a massive lesbian cult following. The sea gull features in DeLaria's advertisement as a nod to the claim by zoologists that female seagulls in some species form long-term partnerships with other females. Scientists could tell which seagulls were the lesbian ones because through their binoculars they observed them arriving for their second date in a U-Haul moving van.⁴

With this variety of rich material from so many different sources and women, it would be possible to do a content analysis in order to assess whether there are themes that one might generalize as being typical of lesbian humor. And that is precisely what researchers who have written about lesbian humor have tried to do, in scholarly articles that all reach the same, arguably rather unsurprising conclusion that humor by lesbians draws on lesbian frames of reference and can reinforce lesbian identity and community (Bing and Heller 2003; Queen 1997, 2005). The way that humor by lesbians like Lea DeLaria can also insult, deride and destabilize lesbian identity and community is an interesting topic not addressed by anybody, for reasons that deserve examination and debate.⁵

⁴ I offer this admittedly lame joke as my little version of the old chestnut about lesbians and U-Hauls (see Bing and Heller 2003).

⁵ If I were to start that debate, I would argue that the emphasis on solidarity and happy communities of jovial lesbians arises from two related factors. The first is that research on lesbian humor is influenced, naturally, by research on feminist humor. And the analysis of feminist humor by feminists is characterized by an inattention to or dismissal of the complex and often conflictual nature of humor as a genre of interaction. In those analyses, feminist humor tends to be rosy depicted as visionary, honest, affirmative, empowering and celebratory. It is contrasted with what one scholar has dismissively dubbed "female humor", which is humor by women who have no political agenda (Kaufman 1980), or with the self-deprecatory humor of comedians like Phyllis Diller or Joan Rivers, which is regarded as retrograde, embarrassing and even anti-feminist (e.g. Auslander 1993, Barreca 1991, Merrill 1988, White 1988). See Gilbert (2004) for an extended discussion and criticism of this analytical trend. The second factor in accounting for how lesbian humor is analyzed in the existing literature is the fact that those researchers who analyze lesbian humor are usually, themselves, lesbian and they are also usually explicit about their political investment in documenting the coherence and strength of "the lesbian community". In this kind of framework, which can be seen as part of what Deborah Cameron and I have labeled the "third phase" of research on lesbian and gay language (2003, 76-98), conflictual language is downplayed or ignored, and analysis focuses on how speakers create solidarity and strengthen their own identities as lesbian or gay.

In any case, though, a content analysis of lesbian humor in order to determine its forms and functions is not what concerns me here. Instead, having hopefully established that there is undeniably such a thing as lesbian humor – in the sense of humor produced by women who identify as lesbian and concerned with lesbian identity, relationships and life – I will now return to the question about why there is a stereotype that lesbians are humorless. This is a question about genre or rhetoric or performance. It is sociological question about how humor is socially distributed. It asks: why is humor socially distributed in such a way that some groups – gay men, for example, or Jews, or African-Americans, come to be thought of as inherently funny, while others – lesbians, for example, or Germans – are stereotyped as congenitally humorless?

Germans and other congenitally humorless types

Germans are an interesting kind of parallel case to lesbians, because, like lesbians, a widespread assumption about them is that they have no sense of humor. Type the words “humorless Germans” into Google and you will get 250,000 hits.⁶ The stereotype of the humorless German is a staple of Anglo-American comedy. From Charlie Chaplin’s Adenoid Hynkel character in his movie *The Great Dictator*, to television comedy shows like the British ‘*Allo ‘Allo* or the U.S. *Hogan’s Heros*, to John Cleese’s famous “Don’t mention the War” sketch on *Fawlty Towers*, Germans are portrayed as fastidious, dull workaholics, obsessed with orderliness and cleanliness (Ria Lina, a mixed-race stand-up comic in London, does a routine about how her mother was Filipina and her father was German: “So”, she quips, “I don’t just clean your house. I exterminate all *ze* germs”). And in addition, Germans are always supposed to be humorless. In a way that parallels how lesbians like Julia Penelope and Susan J. Wolfe think that other lesbians don’t know about lesbian humor, the stereotype of the humorless German is even expressed by Germans. A few years ago, one of them established a nationwide network of “laughter clubs” that encouraged Germans to meet once a week to practice laughter and tell jokes. Michael Berger, founder of the laughter clubs, explained that: “Germans have no sense of humor. The German is a very serious person, and he likes to moan a lot[...]. Germans have lost the art of laughter” (quoted in Potterton 1999, n.p.).

Before I began doing research on humorlessness as a social phenomenon, I assumed that the stereotype of humorless Germans must have arisen during the two world wars as part of the Allied propaganda campaigns. I imagined that it was the result of social processes not unlike those we are witnessing now in relation to Muslims, who are resolutely portrayed as dour fanatics who completely lack a sense of humor.

In fact, however, people have found Germans to be humorless for over two thousand years. The idea goes back at least to the Roman historian Tacitus, who lived in the first century AD. Tacitus describes Germans as violent, war-loving drunkards who “love idleness as much as they hate peace” (1999, 45), and who completely lack cunning or subtlety (1999, 49). This last observation is almost identical to Madame de Staël’s remark, in a letter written eighteen centuries later, that the German language is “incapable” of French subtlety (Jameson-Cemper 2000, 30), and that “the Germans

⁶ 169,000 hits for “humorless Germans”, 78,200 hits for “humourless Germans” (data retrieved on 20 June 2008).

are not naturally frivolous, there is always something melancholy about their gaiety, which always induces one to say ‘Why do you do it then?’” (187). Expanding comments like these in her book *De L’Allemagne*, published in 1810, de Staël explained that Germans cannot write comedy because they were thoughtful, but serious, graceless and without “gaieté” (Folkenflik 1987, 42-43). A few decades prior to de Staël’s book on Germany, the British diplomat Lord Philip Chesterfield commented that “Germans are very seldom troubled with any extraordinary effervescences of wit and it is prudent not to try it upon them”. Later, Friedrich Nietzsche, himself, of course, a German, observed that “Everything that is ponderous, viscous and pompously clumsy, all long-winded and wearying kinds of style are developed with variety among Germans”.⁷

The explanations offered by authors who perceive Germans as ponderous, unsubtle, dull, without gaiety or wit vary. For many, German humorlessness is a result of Germany’s cold climate. French writing about Germany, in particular, has continually emphasized the coldness of both the climate and the people. Madame de Staël in fact splits Germany between a cold Prussian north and a more moderate, Catholic south. It is in the north where one finds the coldest, least humorous German character. Another explanation might be found in Max Weber’s classic book *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*, in which he argues that Luther’s idea that work is a “calling” given by God, and that one’s religious duty involved a reliable, punctual and efficient performance of the tasks of one’s vocation – these ideas laid the groundwork for the development of an ethic which emphasized duty, discipline and restraint (Weber 2002).

Perhaps the most inventive explanation of German humorlessness, though, was offered a few years ago by David Myers, a psychologist from Hope College, in the United States. According to Myers, Germans are grumpy and lacking in humor because speaking their language makes them that way. He claims that the muscle movement required to produce German phonemes – Myers identifies the [ü] as the real culprit – causes the face to frown and look glum. And continuous frowning, says professor Myers, leads people to become unhappy. Thank goodness for English, which, Myers explains, has lots of “e”s and “ah”s – sounds which are far more cheerful and put people in better moods (BBC News 2000).

The problem with explanations like professor Meyer’s frowny-face theory of language, or Madame de Staël’s observations about climate are not answers to the problem they are trying to understand – they are symptoms of it. In other words, they do nothing more than contribute to and augment the stereotype. And that stereotype, while it may seem trivial and harmless, is in fact anything but. On the contrary: to claim that a particular group lacks a sense of humor is to make the ominous assertion that they lack a fundamental dimension of humanity. Aristotle famously asserted that laughter was what distinguished humankind from the beasts – a claim that has gone uncontested for over two millennia. What this means in social terms is that fostering a view that particular groups are without humor is tantamount to dehumanizing them.

Another example: given the strong connection today between Jews and humor – one need only think for a moment of Woody Allen, Jerry Seinfeld, Mel Brooks, the Marx Brothers, Bette Midler, Joan Rivers, Barbra Streisand’s early movies, best-selling books like Leo Rosten’s (1970) *The Joys of Yiddish* – it may be surprising to

⁷ Chesterfield and Nietzsche quotes from Rosten 1996, 333.

learn that in previous eras, one of the many stereotypes that circulated about Jews was that they were humorless. The French philosopher and Orientalist Ernest Renan wrote in 1855 that “the Semitic peoples are almost completely lacking in curiosity and the capacity to laugh”. The Scottish author Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) is quoted as asserting that Jews have shown no trace of humor at any period in their history.⁸ Remarks like these prompted the response of none less than the Chief Rabbi of London, Hermann Adler, who in 1893 published an article refuting the stereotype and arguing that Jewish people did indeed have a sense of humor. Adler’s method of refuting these remarks was to recount funny stories about rabbis and other Jews, and to quote from the Torah – in other words, to do exactly what Sigmund Freud did a decade later in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) and what Leo Rosten did a century later in his books about Yiddish and Jewish humor (e.g. Rosten 1970, 1996). It isn’t difficult to understand why Rabbi Adler went to the trouble: he was well aware of the possible consequences of adding humorlessness to the already gargantuan burden of negative stereotypes about Jews.

Another example of this same process, as I mentioned earlier, is occurring right before our eyes: we are witnessing the genesis of the humorless Muslim. Every day on our television screens we see bearded Muslims, veiled Muslims, shouting, screaming, wailing, throwing rocks, raising their fists in angry defiance. Who can remember the last time you saw an image of Muslims laughing, or telling a joke? Humorless Muslims are clearly a subset of the “humorless religious fundamentalist” stereotype. Humorlessness, in the West at least, seems to attach to the religiously devoted – which is why images of “Laughing Christ” are rare, jarring, and, for some, inappropriate or even blasphemous (judging from a film like Mel Gibson’s 2004 *The Passion of the Christ*, it is much less controversial to sadistically portray Christ bleeding and in agony than it would be to portray him telling jokes). The interesting sociological issue is how and why particular kinds of religious devotees, at particular moments, come to be seen as icons of humorlessness. There is an important study there to be done by someone interested in humor (a study that has been touched on, if only superficially and dubiously, by the US comic Albert Brooks, in his 2006 film *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World*).⁹

In any case, my point is that the belief that lesbians are humorless is not inconsequential. Indeed, the weightiness of the charge may explain the defensive reaction that my query about lesbian humor elicited from the bookseller in *Gay’s The Word* bookstore. Consciously or not, she understood that humor is a serious thing, and that regarding lesbians as humorless is one way to denigrate them.

⁸ The remarks by Renan and Carlyle are quoted in Adler 1893, 457.

⁹ Released in January 2006, this film is summarized on its website as “the hilarious story of what happens when the U.S. Government sends comedian Albert Brooks to India and Pakistan to find out what makes the over 300 million Muslims in the region laugh (see <http://wip.warnerbros.com/lookingforcomedy>). The film comes nowhere near to living up to this intriguing promise. It ends up revealing absolutely nothing about indigenous humor, and even giving it the benefit of the doubt as a satire, it would take a very forgiving analysis to conclude that the film doesn’t simply reiterate many of the current stereotypes about humorless Muslims – such as that they are generally inscrutable but also childlike, in that the only humor they seem to appreciate is slapstick humor: people falling down or getting hit with things. A take-home message of the film seems to be that to the extent that Muslims don’t laugh at the same jokes that amuse certain kinds of Americans, then they really do lack a sense of humor.

The genesis of humorlessness

How then can we think about how certain groups come to be regarded as humorless? Social history obviously plays an important role here. Analyses of gay men's camp, for example, often emphasize camp's role as a kind of defense. Bruce Rodgers (n.d.), the compiler of *The Queen's Vernacular*, with over 12,000 entries, the most extensive dictionary of gay slang in existence, summed up the opinion of many scholars when he wrote that gay slang was:

the street poetry of the queen. It was invented, coined, dished and shrieked by the gay stereotypes. The flaming faggot, men who look like women, flagrant wrist-benders...They stereotype others because they have been labeled offensively...They jeer because they have been mocked, they retaliate with a barrage of their own words which ridicule women, male virility, the sanctity of marriage, everything in life from which they are divorced.

In ways similar to what Rodgers claims for camp, scholars of Jewish humor – which one writer claims “is unique in its ability to find a jest among tears and make tragic situations tolerable” (Adler 1998, 19) – emphasize that it developed as a response to the extreme hardships that have been faced by the Jewish people over the centuries.

It is noteworthy and somewhat puzzling that historians and social scientists seem agreed that humor has never played a particularly important role in the formation or maintenance of lesbian communities, even though it is clear that identifiable lesbians have long been the targets of harassment and homophobia.¹⁰ But in their study of the lesbian community in Buffalo, New York during the 1940s and 50s, historians Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, for example, observe a “striking” difference between gay male and lesbian communities. They write that “anyone who talks to these old-time butches is not struck by their campy sense of humor, as one is when listening to or reading about old time queens” (1993, 383). Anthropologist Esther Newton agrees, recalling that “My own experience of butch-femme bar culture in the late fifties and sixties was not... ironic, not a camp, and certainly not, as Judith Butler had suggested, a parody” (cited in Halberstam 1998, 237).

Kennedy and Davis argue that the reason why lesbian culture seems never to have developed camp or a particularly characteristic sense of humor is because the gender hierarchy effects men and women in different ways. They claim that the lesbian butch persona

centered on physically taking care of lesbians [...] and protecting and defending women's right to live independently from men and pursue erotic liaisons with women [...]. The butch persona, unlike that of the [gay male] queen, carried the burden of twentieth century women's struggle for the right to function independently in the public world. Camp was not designed for the task. (1993, 383)

¹⁰ On the other hand, as I noted earlier, recent treatments of lesbian humor stress that lesbians use humor as “narrative means of self-construction and community imagining” (Bing and Heller 2003, 157) and an “interactive process through which similarity is created, recognized, and solidified”. (Queen 2005, 244). It might be debated to what extent this attention to the community-building function of humor among lesbians is a recent historical development of lesbian sociality and to what extent it is an artifact of the kind of scholarly interpretation that I discuss in note 4 (see also Davies 2004, 319-20).

This is an intriguing observation, but it is more of an assertion than an explanation. It is not clear why Kennedy and Davis see humor as necessarily incompatible with the butch struggle to carve out a space for lesbians in the public world. A shared sense of victimization could have created a shared humorous response to oppression, as it has done for many oppressed groups (Gilbert 2004). Effeminate gay queens, to return to that example, generally had more access to public space than women did, because they were male. But we would be mistaken to imagine that the world was a particularly friendly or welcoming place for those queens. Like butch lesbians, queens had to be continually ready to defend themselves against harassment and physical attacks by others who objected to seeing them in public. Despite this constant threat of harassment and attack, queens developed camp as one of their strategies of defense. It isn't obvious why lesbians couldn't do something similar.

On the other hand, Kennedy and Davis's insistence that lesbian humor can only be understood in the context of gender oppression is important. It draws attention to the crucial fact that lesbians are women. And generally speaking, women are not thought to be particularly funny. This is a theme that runs through every book or article ever written about women and humor. It is still regularly recycled: in an article about the American comedian Sarah Silverman in *The New Yorker* in 2005, journalist Dana Goodyear pointed out that "comedy is probably the last remaining branch of the arts whose suitability for women is still openly discussed" (see also Auslander 1993, Barreca 2004, Haggins 2008). And that's true: incredibly, one of its most recent occurrences was a long, blowhard (but a much-discussed) article by journalist Christopher Hitchens titled "Why women aren't funny" in the magazine *Vanity Fair* in January of 2007.¹¹

Now, one could argue that the stereotype of the humorless lesbians arises because if women are considered to have no sense of humor, then lesbians – who are, as they themselves sometimes say, woman-identified – must have even less humor than heterosexual women. A problem with the argument that lesbians are seen as humorless because they are somehow "more womanly" than heterosexual women is of course that lesbians are not stereotyped as being "more womanly" than heterosexual women – just as gay men are not stereotyped as being "more manly" than heterosexual men. Quite the opposite. Lesbian chic and the big-haired, long-nailed "lesbians" of heterosexual pornography notwithstanding, the most common stereotypes of lesbians, as media scholar Suzanna Walters has pointed out, is that they are all "flannel shirted, overweight, hairy-legged, 'man-haters'" (2001, 161). This is the stereotype that Lea Delaria sends up in her fictional advertisement for "the new fragrance from Calvin Klein". So even though there is undoubtedly something to the idea that one reason why lesbians are considered humorless is the fact that they are women, there must be more to it than that.

In her groundbreaking book, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*, literature scholar Nancy Walker provides us with a hint of what that might be. Walker discusses the fact that one particularly humorless kind of woman is thought to be the feminist. She suggests that the stereotype of the humorless feminist

¹¹ In her book *Women and Laughter* Frances Gray has noted that: "[...] ever since the word 'humour' began, about three hundred years ago, to denote the capacity for laughter rather than a bodily fluid, [m]en, and indeed some women, have been reiterating [the axiom 'Women have no sense of humour']" (1994, 3; order of clauses reversed). Other examples are Barreca 1988, 1992, Finney 1994, Horowitz 1997, Walker 1988.

arises because a woman who devotes herself to a cause rather than a man forfeits her femininity (1988, 140). Forfeiting femininity has consequences for perceptions of humorlessness, because even though women aren't supposed to cultivate comic talent, they are expected to cultivate themselves as appreciative audiences for men: smiling to appear demure, and laughing at the jokes men tell – even when those jokes make women the butt of the joke (a point made by many others as well, such as Barreca 1991, Beatts 1975, Kramarae 1981). Walker's observation correlates with empirical research that demonstrates that (a) that women laugh more when men speak than when other women speak; and (b) in heterosexual personal ads, women more often than men seek partners with a GSOH: good sense of humor (that is, they seek a man who will make them laugh). Men, on the other hand, offer a good sense of humor in their ads – that is, they offer humor for women to laugh at (Provine 2000, 27-30; 32-35, Coser 1960).

Walker's argument about the relationship between feminism and humor works for lesbians, because if the criterion for having a sense of humor is to either be a man or be devoted to one, then lesbians fail on both counts. But Walker's account is incomplete, because even though it illuminates some of the links between femininity and humor, it leaves largely unexplored the relationship between masculinity and humor. This has a direct and crucial bearing on lesbians.

At this point, the queer literature scholar Judith Halberstam's work on what she calls "female masculinity" – which is to say masculinity performed by women – becomes relevant. Halberstam suggests that one of the reasons why lesbians didn't develop a camp aesthetic similar to that of gay men is not just because they were women living in a tough world, as the Kennedy and Davis claim. Halberstam argues that lesbians, particularly butch lesbians who completely rejected heterosexual female roles, behavior, clothing and other attributes were also invested in particular forms of masculinity. In other words, these women didn't just forfeit femininity. Instead, many of them actively cultivated particular forms of masculinity as a way of staking claims to public life. This is important in this context is because Halberstam argues that mainstream understandings of masculinity rest on the assumption that it is nonperformative. In other words, masculinity is presumed to be natural, real, unproblematic. Femininity, on the other hand, says Halberstam – and here she echoes Simone de Beauvoir, Joan Rivière and many others – "reeks of the artificial" (1998, 234).

I reached a similar conclusion about femininity and masculinity in my own research on the linguistic advice offered to transgendered men and women (Kulick 1999). The overwhelming bulk of this advice is directed to transsexual women; that is to say, men who transition to women. In books and articles by and about transsexual men (women who transition to men) language issues are virtually nonexistent. The reason given in the literature for this lack of concern about female-to-male speech is physiological: estrogen has no effect on the vocal chords of men who transition to women, which means that their pitch level remains low. But this is different for women who transition to men. The ingestion of testosterone thickens their vocal cords, thereby deepening their voice.

As research on language and gender has consistently shown, however, a gendered voice is not only about pitch. And indeed, according to the books advising transsexual women how to talk, speaking as a woman involves a mastery of a wide range of skills that encompass not only pitch and intonation but also lexicon, syntax, paralinguistic behavior such as speaking softly, and nonverbal behavior, such as

moving one's mouth more, looking others directly in the eyes when speaking, and smiling and nodding encouragingly.

For this reason, the absence of literature advising transsexual men how to talk like men is an ideological fact as much as it is a physiological one. It both reflects and invokes widespread cultural attitudes that hold that being a man is unproblematic and self-evident, whereas being a woman is a complicated set of procedures. Those procedures require careful adherence to detailed, explicit instructions (instructions that are often issued by men) about how to walk, talk, sit, eat, dress, move, and display affect. All of this is also consistent with the interesting fact that whereas women who transition to men generally solicit few surgical interventions (most have only mastectomies, and perhaps liposuction around their buttocks and hips), many men who transition to women spend years returning to surgeons to undergo a large number of procedures and operations, including breast augmentation, lip augmentation, face-lifts, rhinoplasty, chin reduction, jaw realignment, brow shaves, cheek implants, false rib removal, chemical peeling, tracheal shaving, and vocal cord surgery. Being a man, both in cultural models and in transsexual practice, seems easy. Being a woman requires advice, assistance, and lots and lots of effort.

The elaborate constructedness of femininity makes it easy fodder for humor. The woman who goes to bed in the evening festooned with a head full of curlers and a face caked in cold cream is a staple of comedy, whereas an unadorned man who pulls the covers over his head and falls asleep is not. The effort and skill required to navigate into a pair of sheer silk stockings without ripping them, and to then to step onto and balance on a pair of 6 inch stiletto heels – this is a comedy routine waiting to happen. Slipping on a pair of socks and loafers isn't.

My point here is not to claim that men aren't funny. On the contrary, we know that men are funny – the overwhelming majority of comedians and comedy writers in Western culture are men. My point is something different: *masculinity* isn't funny. Or, to be more precise, masculinity only becomes funny when it is seen as failed masculinity, as masculinity that doesn't manage to embody the understated, self-evident, contained and non-performative quality that characterizes mainstream notions of what a man ought to be. Note the crucial difference: whereas humor is raised by the *failure* of masculinity, it is raised by the *achievement* of femininity.

So why are lesbians thought to be humorless?

This brings us back to humorless lesbians. My conclusion is that lesbians didn't develop a camp aesthetic not only because of their particular social history, but also because of their particular structural positioning in culture and society. Lesbians find themselves positioned culturally at the nexus of perceptions which hold that (a) women have no real sense of humor except in relation to men, (b) women who do not engage in heterosexual relationships forfeit their femininity and consequently, become masculinized, and lastly, (c) normative masculinity is no laughing matter. When these three ideological planes collide, they produce the humorless lesbian: a figure that can be laughed *at* but that, itself, doesn't laugh. The laughter it raises results from the perception that as masculinized women, all that lesbians can ever achieve is failed masculinity. This makes them funny and is why the flannel shirted, overweight, hairy-legged, "man-haters" are a staple of comedy about lesbians.

But those butch lesbians like the ones discussed by Kennedy and Davis – the ones who invested in masculinity in order to protect other lesbians and defend a space for women in the public world, and the ones who even today serve as the archetype of what a lesbian looks like and how lesbians behave – those women didn't see themselves as producing failed masculinity. On the contrary, they strove to embody the kind of no-nonsense, taciturn, non-ironic and self-contained form of masculinity that derives from and results in real power and real privilege in the real world. The problem is that to the extent that masculinity in itself is perceived to be nonperformative, conscious attempts to perform it can only ever fail. This perpetual failure, coupled with the fact that the old school butches drew no ironic attention to their performance of masculinity – unlike gay queens, they didn't put their gender performances in big fat quotation marks – resulted in making the lesbian an icon of earnest, ridiculous humorlessness.

Thinking about the stereotype of the humorless lesbian allows us to make a larger point about humor. And that point is a simple one: just as we produce humor, we also produce humorlessness. Philosophers and researchers of humor have endlessly pondered the question of why certain things, certain relationships and certain kinds of people are funny. But surely it is just as interesting to investigate why other things, relationships, and people are not funny. Indeed, the processes through which humorlessness are generated are important, because to perceive a group of people as humorless can be a way to diminish that group's claims to a common humanity. In this sense, the social consequences of being stereotyped as humorless are anything but funny.

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