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## **Are Teenage Girls Funny? Laughter, Humor and Young Women's Performance of Gender and Sexual Agency**

Fiona Cullen

### **Abstract**

Much previous scholarly work has noted the gendered nature of humor and the notion that women use comedy in a different way than do their male peers. Drawing on prior work on gender and humor, and my ethnographic work on teen girl cultures, I explore in this article how young women utilize popular cultural texts as well as everyday and staged comedy as part of a gendered resource that provides potential sites for sex-gender transgression and conformity. Through a series of vignettes, I explore how girls do funny and provide a backdrop to perform youthful gendered identities, as well as establish, maintain, and transgress cultural and social boundaries. Moving on to explore young women and stand-up I question the potential in mobilizing humor as an educational resource and a site in which to explore sex-gender norms with young people.

### **Keywords**

comedy, pedagogy, transgression, youth work, [sex-gender norms](#), [stand-up](#)

### **Introduction**

In late 2013 on a BBC Radio 4 programme, *Desert Island Discs*, a well-known British comedian, Lee Mack, reflected on why there are so few female comics. He noted that women lack rivalry and do not need to rely on humor to be attractive, unlike their male peers. Such sentiments echo previous commentators such as the late Christopher Hitchens who argued in

a 2007 *Vanity Fair* article that women are less funny than men. I counter the idea that women are not funny by highlighting how teen girls use humor as a gendered resource to uphold, resist, and re-appropriate sex-gender norms.

The focus here is on exploring how young women use humor, and on a consideration of the spaces and contexts in which teen girls can be funny; I tease out the different ways that humor, including what I am going to call naturally occurring, spontaneous joking as well as crafted stand-up<sup>1</sup> is mobilised and read by teenage girls in differing contexts. I draw on examples of everyday discursive humor amongst young women as well as on examples of such crafted stand-up.

The vignettes in this article arose from my doctoral ethnographic work with young women in a large English city, and my subsequent practice as a youth worker working in youth arts. The completion of my thesis left behind data examples noted in my research diaries that highlighted girls' momentary gendered subversion and resistance that required deeper analysis. These examples were of messy moments that sprung up out of the use of everyday humor that highlighted the capacity of the mundane to mix with the spectacular. I revisit these moments since they provide insights into how girls mobilize humor as a gendered resource. I return to the comic as a staged performance in order to consider what is comically possible and permissible in the shifting sex-gender discourses for teen girls. Of course, the staged performance provides another kind of voice and power dynamic. In staged performance the (im)possibilities of being a powerful teen girl comic highlight some of the tensions drawn on in other studies of professional stand-up, including leaky uncontrollable bodies, female ineptitude, and the feminist potential to transgress normative gender (Barreca 1991; Gilbert 2004; Mizejewski 2014).

By drawing on earlier work on gender and humor, this article draws out how girls enact humorous personae or discursively draw on the comic to produce active comic femininities that simultaneously challenge and cement hegemonic sex-gendered identities. I use the term sex-gender in this article to signal a move beyond dualistic notions of gendered identities since it is arguably impossible to distinguish biological sex from cultural gender, in that both are socially and culturally constructed (Butler 1990; 1993). Indeed Butler (1993) states that sex is not "a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but... a [cultural](#) norm which governs the materialization of bodies" (2–3.). This usage is especially helpful in exploring humorous aspects of gender mutability, normative boundary-work, and the discursive blending of comic persona and sex-gender performance.

I am not arguing that all the humor vignettes I draw on here were commonplace, but rather that the carnivalesque nature of these (extra)ordinary moments provided insights into how young women negotiated and poked fun at normative sexuality and gender. Exploring both these everyday and staged funny moments provides insights into gender as performative, and the strategic use of comedy in maintaining girls' friendships. My argument is that humor plays a key role for young women's [undermining of the gendered status quo](#) in providing a resource to produce, police, resist, and subvert (hetero)normative femininities.

The first part of the article explores girls' everyday use of spontaneous humor, and the second examines one girl's use of stand-up. Following Crawford (1995), as a feminist educator I am interested in reflecting critically on the emancipatory potential within young women's humor as a tool to reflect on sex-gender norms and expectations. Although politically and theoretically I remain interested in seeking out moments of girls' resistant talk and action, the discursive complexities of these interactions refuse my pedagogic wish to read into them a clear feminist sensibility, but provide, rather, spaces in which to reflect on the enduring good girl/ bad girl divide, and the complexities of negotiating contemporary

girlhood. In the final section, I thus reflect on the (im)possibilities of drawing on gender and the comic within the curriculum.

### **Theorising Gender and Humor**

Earlier scholarship on humor noted its potential as a vehicle for conformity and transgression which can be conversely and simultaneously rebellious and disciplinary (Billig 2005). For Douglas (1975) the joker is an insider and has a key role in establishing and maintaining social conformity by means of ridicule and humiliation, and acts as a powerful reminder of the ever-present social codes (Douglas 1975; Billig 2005), including those of gender (Barreca 1991; Crawford 1995; Crawford 2003; Bing 2004; Kotthoff 2006). Women's humor has been seen to build solidarity and intimacy in contrast to masculine competitive status-based comedy (Barreca 2001). However, humor has also been theorized as both a space that confirms normative sex-gender, and one that provides a site of feminist resistance (Crawford 1995; 2003), enabling reflection and deconstruction of subordinated, othered identities.

Traditionally, female humor has been marginalized with women seen as the butt rather than the teller of the jokes. However, Kotthoff notes that, more recently, the gendered humor landscape has shifted.

The traditional incompatibility between displaying femininity and active, and, in particular, aggressive joking is declining. This does not mean that gender is no longer a relevant category for humorous activities, but rather that the relevance of gender differs from context to context. The simplistic model of the actively joking man and the receptively smiling woman has lost ground (Kotthoff 2006: 4).

Kotthoff's interest in the contextual shifting of dynamics of gendered joking includes the need to see women's humor as challenging societal expectations of demure femininity and she notes four key dimensions of jokes and gender. These are status; aggressiveness; social alignment; and sexuality.

I argue in this article that these four key dimensions are present in much gendered humor. Indeed, they can be seen in humor that consolidates and/or challenges hegemonic constructions of sexuality and gender. Such challenges to hegemonic structures are apparent in prior studies of schoolboy humor in, for example, how lads' jokes were mobilized to escape the constraints of schooling (Woods 1983), as class cultural symbols of resistance and preparation for young working class men's future career (Willis 1976), and to both marginalize and silence girls and other men, and produce, maintain, and police hegemonic masculinities (Kehily and Nayak 1997; Nayak and Kehily 2001; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli 2003). In a UK study of working class boys researchers noted the use of what were known as "cussing or blowing matches" (Kehily & Nayak 1997:73) to uphold a hypermasculine identity. These matches included the ridiculing of other pupils' mothers, constant jibes, and a replaying of mythic events to display a repertoire of laddish comic skills that sanctioned and supported young men's heterosexual masculine prowess through humiliation, and that discursively manoeuvred subordinated masculinities and femininities into an othered position (Kehily and Nayak 1997). In such matches, girls emerge as victims of the lads' shared humor, or as audience members to be wowed by the young men's witty repartee. Although Kehily and Nayak state that they did not see girls taking part in these cussing matches, in another UK school-based ethnography, Valerie Hey observed that "bitching" (1997: 73) provided a space for status competition, aggression, and social and (hetero)sexual competition for teen girls.

In my doctoral research based in youth work settings, I found that the subordination of othered femininities to create solidarity between and among friends was commonplace during girls' talk. So-called bitching was a key cultural resource for female friends to make each other laugh, and demonstrate their social status. The following vignette demonstrates young women's capacity to uphold normative gender and generational femininity by using the cohesive power of laughter while simultaneously producing a resistant femininity. As a

detached youth worker<sup>2</sup> based on a large urban estate<sup>3</sup> in a UK city, I established rapport with a local group of 14-year-old white British girls. There were few social spaces on the estate for the girls to congregate but they regularly met in front of a small parade of shops. One day, as the girls lit their cigarettes and pulled their thin tracksuit tops around their shoulders against the cold wind, a car drew up and a woman in her late thirties exited and made her way towards the off-licence.<sup>4</sup> The woman, despite the weather, was dressed in a short skirt, low-cut top, and high heels. Her route took her directly through the huddle of young women. The girls paused their conversation, parted as they made way for her, and watched the older woman strutting through the middle of the group. As she passed just out of earshot, one girl exclaimed, “She thinks she’s a Spice Girl!”<sup>5</sup> Another, laughing, shouted, “Yeh Granny Spice. She must be about 50!” The group collapsed in laughter and ridiculed the woman with her hyperfemininity and out-of-date Spice Girl fashion which was in stark contrast to their casual hoodies and sweats, and the perceived age inappropriateness of looking sexy on the way to the off-licence.

These girls’ uniform of sweats and their habit of wearing no make-up resists bounds of normative heterofemininity, on one level, yet the young women draw on notions of gendered, classed, and generational feminine “respectability” (Skeggs 2001:1) to use as a weapon (a cuss) on the transgressive older woman who trespasses on their physical and cultural territory. As Skeggs notes, issues of respectable femininity are of keen importance to women who know that through their social classed and bodily status they are othered. These working class young women strive to uphold such boundaries of respectability in relation to dress and behavior for fear that their own identity, particularly in relation to appropriate (generational) heterofemininity, might be seen as deficient. The notion of the older woman’s looking sexy out of context for these young women was thus contained within discourses of a socially classed, respectable womanhood (Hey 1997; Skeggs 2001). High heels and a short

skirt on a weekday evening on an older woman are perceived as disrespectful in relation to space, time, and context, as marked by the girls' jeers and the mobilising of a culturally controlling gendered, generational, and classed gaze.

There is a clear age policing here in that these girls believe that older women should not be sexy, and the construction of granny rather than girl power as evoked by the "Granny Spice" taunt is again one of women scrutinizing other women. In this the generational conventions are perhaps reversed, so, rather than older women being concerned that their daughters are dressing too sexily, these younger woman rebuke a woman of their mother's generation for her gendered and generational transgression.

This use of naturally occurring humor illustrates how jokes are used to uphold and transgress sex-gender and generational conventions. The mocking of the older woman also acts in a similar way to the on-going use of blonde jokes in a study of third and fourth grade children's humor by Lemish and Reznik in which they observed that such jokes were used as a way of exploring ideological struggles about gender and sexuality.

[B]londe jokes seem to offer the girls in our study a site of ideological struggle over their budding sexuality, as well as with the rival forces of conformation and resistance to traditional gender expectations.... [The] discussion of the 'blonde' offers girls the opportunity to explore representations of female sexuality while at the same time protecting themselves by putting it down as whorish, cheap, and stupid (2008:125).

The teen girls also explore representations of female sexuality by subverting age-based hierarchies of deference and respect, yet re-instating norms of gendered and generational aesthetics, desirability, and deportment through their group laughter. The presence of this older woman in their physical space is both temporally and spatially disruptive, yet the solidarity of the friendship group is consolidated and re-affirmed through laughter at her expense. The "Granny Spice" jibe functions to pass on codes in a similar way to how this was



done by the women described in Sander's ethnographic work (2004) who used humor as a vehicle to pass on rules, in this case on how to perform successful, respectable girlhood and female friendship. Implicit is the notion that the young women are the only ones who should be perceived as heterosexually desirable, and thus have the scope to choose to wear heels, and a short skirt, and be a *Spice Girl*, (not a *Spice Woman*).

### **Carnavalesque Bursts and Geezer Birds**

While humor can act as a powerful reminder of normalcy, it can also stretch and transgress normative social codes and thus offer a "momentary freedom from the restraints of social convention" (Billig 2005: 208). However, the conforming and resistant potential may often be intertwined, and thus the teasing out of a disciplinary/conforming aspect from the transgressive may be tricky since there is clearly not a straightforward divide between the two. Such fleeting transgressions are also explored by Stallybrass and White (1986) who highlight the transgressive potential of the carnival where paupers can be royalty for the day. Such transgressions are momentary and swift, and perhaps do little to trouble deeply the everyday given social order. Indeed, they argue that the cathartic blow out of carnival might be viewed as further cementing the status quo and thus preventing deeper and more enduring challenges to the given social order.

Humor has been identified as a powerful site of self-making for marginalized groups. Stronach & Allan (1999) argue that disability humor enables such groups to break taboos through direct and indirect laughter, in that the disabled person, through such jokes and joking practices can be both entwined fall guy<sup>6</sup> and perpetrator of the joke. Similarly, Gilbert (2004) explores the strategy of performers from marginalized groups (Jewish, black, women comics), to draw attention to their very otherness and marginality in a majority culture, and use this othered public identity to subvert the expectations and conventions of the audience. Thus, the potential of humor to be both conforming and transgressive means that it can provide a key

site for scholars with an interest in understanding how sex-gender normalcy is maintained, sustained, and may even possibly be challenged.

If we return to Douglas's (1975) notion of the joker as an insider how does the very otherness of, for example, outsider, disabled, Jewish, and female comics come to be played out in this public self-making? It is the very marginality of the performer and the very acceptance and centrality of this in the performance that reproduces and (re)configures these insider and normative discourses. While this humor and self-making by perceived oppressed groups creates new discourses that challenge and critique this normalising, they are again colonized in the laughter which shows and demonstrates the insider/outsider divide. The carnivalesque subversion is always partial, in addition to being spatially and temporally situated. Indeed the boundaries of (hetero)normativity may be recuperated and re-affirmed, once normalcy returns (whether that be after the carnival, post-performance, or after the laughter subsides). The transformative potential of humor and laughter remains fleeting in the "carnavalesque burst as a sort of momentary reversal of conventions" (Atkinson and De Palma 2008:31) that momentarily troubles normative boundaries and hierarchies of sex, gender, disability, and race.

This carnivalesque burst and subsequent humorous intent provides a site of critical endeavour in enabling discursive re-formations, and inversions of the normative social order. Thus, humor and comedy perhaps retain an ability to not only be straightforwardly drawn on as a resource to uphold dominant hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987) in the studies of schoolboy humor, but also as a clear site of resistance and transgressive discursive potential for marginalized and othered groups. Humor might be mobilized as a queer method with the capacity for progressive educators to draw on moments of carnivalesque inversion to even briefly trouble heteronormative sex-gender as participants are briefly encouraged to stop reading/thinking straight (Britzman 1995). The question posed is this: To what extent can

these performative resignifications (Butler 1997) extend beyond these queer moments, and how might humor enable educators and young people to engage critically with discourses of sex-gender and normativity?

The next vignette highlights how girls use humor to uphold and transgress sex-gender boundaries and normativity in moments of potential queer disruption and resistance. Much work notes the ubiquity of women sharing jokes and funny anecdotes in single-sex spaces (Barreca 1991; Crawford 2003). One such single-sex space was an after-school session in a large suburban youth centre. A group of schoolgirls congregated in the canteen area. Unlike the centre's usual mixed-sex groups, on this particular afternoon young women from the local girls' school had arrived en masse and were taking turns on the karaoke machine in the absence of the boys. Other girls wrestled playfully with one another on the couch.

Two girls began singing the rapper Eminem's *Real Slim Shady* track on the karaoke machine for the all-female audience. This involved the music video appearing on the machine's screen with the song words subtitled for the performers to follow, and the girls' voices amplified over the backing track. The karaoke singers dropped their shoulders, took up an exaggerated swagger and posturing stance bouncing to the beat. I noted in my reflective diary, 23

November 2003:

I went through to the canteen. Two girls dressed identically in hoop earrings and tracksuits were enjoying the lime light, singing renditions of *Slim Shady* on karaoke. Before one of the songs, one girl attempted to MC. She freestyled comically on the mic, her mate bounced up and down behind her shouting 'You're a right geezer bird!' <sup>7</sup> The audience repeated 'She's a geezer bird, geezer bird' through their laughter. I asked if she was, and she shrugged, 'Not really.' 'What is a geezer bird?' I asked. She pulled a butch face, by grimacing and pushing out her jaw, whilst doing an arm curl into her chest and showing off her biceps.

The geezer bird rap performance was amusing on several levels. The rap was consciously inept. The self-deprecating humor emerged from the girls' inability to rap well, and their mimicry of male rappers. Their ineptitude also served to critique the skill, which remained an esteemed attribute for their young male peers. Their caricatured swagger and booming voices ridiculed boys and their swaggering masculinity. The performers and audience were united in laughing chants of "geezer bird." The humor of a teenage girl doing a hypermasculine performance wrests, momentarily, a hegemonic masculine display from their absent male peers. The geezer bird appears as an inverse kind of pantomime dame<sup>8</sup> in her display of hypermasculinity—she is briefly fantastical and fleeting. Indeed, I wondered at the time whether the performance would even have been possible if the boys (and the masculine cultures) that the girls mocked had been present in the room during the performance.

This is a song about authenticity and identity. Throughout the music video, Eminem as *Slim Shady* is both there and not there. In the song he crosses gender and generation before multiple versions of his alter ego inhabit the screen in the final frames. The question that arises is whether Eminem's video cross-dressing provides the girls some scope to play with sex-gender in the temporary and spatial everyday theatrics of the karaoke stage. The *Real Slim Shady* video is itself punctuated with humor that focuses on same-sex desire and gender transgression for laughs. This includes humorous and grotesque depictions of gay marriage, S&M, and male cross-dressing, and, in one part of the video, Eminem appears in drag as a female psychiatric matron, as Britney Spears, and, finally, as himself, dressed in a leotard with fake buttocks, that he uses to sit on another man's face.

The *Real Slim Shady* song and video are both textually subversive and carnivalesque; sex-gender norms and desires are exposed and poked fun at. Perversely then, despite its arguably misogynistic and homophobic subtext, one might claim that the song/video offers

potential as a kind of queer text, which in its later incarnation in an English youth club, was used by two 14-year-old girls to facilitate temporary transgressive sex-gender play.

The term geezer bird highlights the ambiguous and amorphous gender categories made momentarily possible through humor. Yet as the girls abandon their microphones and jump down from the stage, the momentary resistance is broken and they return to performing the legitimate heteronormative femininity of teen girls, rather than the carnivalesque excess of the geezer bird. This performance provides a site for group hilarity and carnival in the everyday, and through the swagger, posturing and bicep curl, the girls push their femininity into relief. The cathartic laughter comes from the geezer bird performance as being inauthentic and fleeting, and thus as the girls leave the stage, the performance and durability of the geezer bird evaporates as a kind of ephemeral, extravagant, performed, everyday, temporal sex-gender play.

The girls recognized that humor as a strategy was one that could be used alongside the rapping, fighting, and cuss matches of their male peers to cement their own discursive sex-gender performances. These momentary transgressions temporarily destabilize the gender order, and turn it upside down, only for it to re-emerge. In everyday life, these girls do not rap, swagger, and pose, and this comic display acknowledges and accentuates the different sex-gender cultural practices available to these young women. The mimicry and swagger gives way to the announcement and disavowal of the geezer bird. Indeed, the final words of the song fade into a musing: “I guess there is a Slim Shady in all of us.”

### **Stand-up and In/formal Education**

Finally, I turn to an example of one teen girl’s public performance of stand-up comedy in a local youth group and offer, first, the back-story details and then I move from the everyday use of comic performances to staged performance because it highlights the comic repertoire open to teen girls in what is seen to be an essentially masculine medium, and it provides

scope to reflect on the strategies open to young female comics in formal stand-up. Feminist scholars of humor such as Gilbert (2004) and Mizejewski (2014) have analysed professional women's stand-up as a space to explore, perform and subvert normative gender—and here I explore the capacity for stand-up to provide a site in which a resistant femininity for teen girls can be produced. While stand-up retains aspects of the carnivalesque subversion, it also builds strongly on the humorous trope of self-effacing femininity. Another difference is, of course, the nature of the audience. While goofing around with friends still holds risks in relation to the joker's status in the peer group, such humor is often a collaborative sharing of laughter, whereas in staged stand-up—unless part of a double act or sketch troupe—the joker remains alone on stage with a microphone and an unknown and potentially hostile audience.

Increasingly, in the UK stand-up comedy is being used as a way of engaging young people in drama, performance and literacy (Sellek 2010). The success of an afterschool comedy club led to the commissioning of UK Channel 4's comedy show, *School of Comedy*, that features teenage performers and is broadcast late at night for an adult audience; it acknowledges the growing popularity of youth comedy as a medium for both education, and of course, entertainment.

The comedy youth group was established in 2007 in a suburban youth center in Southern England as part of a wider arts and music programme. The purpose of the sessions was to devise and perform new comedy with the support of professional comics and drama workers. The group participated in public comedy gigs at the center, on the local comedy circuit, and at national festivals. At first, girls showed little interest. The weekly sessions were attended mainly by teen boys who enjoyed taking part in laddish verbal sparring; they shared often risqué gags from popular male comics on UK television and radio shows. As a youth worker I found the racy gags built, as they were, on shock value—often with misogynistic subtexts—challenging; as the young men noted it was the riskiest TV comics who were

seemingly the most successful with their shock material. This led to discussions with young people, some of whom maintained that the most important aspect of a joke is its funniness regardless of the possible offense it might give. Such discussions emphasize the importance of critical dialogue and reflection around the nature and purpose of humor and issues of power when one is engaging with stand-up comedy within educational settings, and raising the question of who has the capacity to be heard, and who is silenced by such material.

Soon, girls keen to write and perform their own sketches and stand-up began to attend the sessions. In the UK female stand-ups have an increasing profile on the live circuit and radio, but remain marginal on TV (Haynes 2014). This is perhaps related to the relatively low visibility of UK female comics; there is no equivalent of US figures like Tina Fey, for example. It may also explain why stand-up workshops for teens initially attracted groups of young men keen to emulate the witty performances of their favourite TV comics. However, stand-up provides a space for younger women to perform and reflect on the complexities of contemporary girlhood. Such humor highlights other emerging voices within UK comedy such as Josie Long who began performing as a teenager using a multi-media approach including comic-fanzines to reflect on gender, politics, and popular culture, and who was popular amongst the girls who attended the comedy group.

Niamh,<sup>9</sup> a 15-year-old girl, used a variety of performance strategies in her own work including whimsy, puppetry, music, and poetry. The following example draws on her public performance in comedy venues. Niamh, using an understated, wry comic persona, carried a notebook on stage from which she hesitantly read comedy haiku. Her performances also involved a crudely wrought sock puppet called Reggie. During her act's mock ventriloquism scene, Niamh tells the audience that she and Reggie will "speak at the same time." During this performance, the puppet becomes increasingly unruly and berates Niamh for failing as a ventriloquist and performer. As the performance escalates, Niamh enacts becoming fearful of

the sock puppet who tells her that he now “controls” her. Finally, the puppet attacks Niamh and knocks off her spectacles. Niamh wrestles with the sock puppet and states that she will “kill” him by playing a ukulele with his button eyes. As she strums the instrument she chants with increasing emphasis on each word, “Die! Die! Die!” This explosive act of angry slapstick transforms Niamh’s stage persona and, through a burst of fury, she establishes a feisty, resistant guise in comic contrast to her former passive comedy self. Once this murderous carnivalesque burst subsides, Niamh returns to her whimsical act with a shrug at Reggie’s demise, and a shy smile.

Niamh then carefully lays out a box of eggs and asks for a volunteer from the audience. She reads out corny, surreal jokes from her notebook. Every time the audience fails to laugh she asks the volunteer to “egg [her]” by breaking a raw egg over her head. At the end of the act she is covered in raw egg. The violent acts of egg-breaking returns Niamh back to being a victim.

Niamh’s performance hinges around boundary-work, ineptitude, resistance, and control, the impossibilities and tyrannies of successful girlhood, and in particular, in what it is like to negotiate the competing demands of successfully growing up girl (Walkerdine et al. 2001). During parts of her act it appears that Niamh is not in control as the evil puppet gives voice to the inner doubts of teenage girlhood: “You are no good!” and “Everyone is looking.” The hysteria mounts as Niamh appears to falter and lose control to the commanding, critical voice of Reggie until he is finally vanquished. The humor arises from this boundary-crossing work in the knowledge that the evil puppet is both her and not her; it is a disembodied but embodied in/animate creature that can voice the faltering fear of performing to a paying audience. The puppet highlights the tension of being a good/bad girl. Niamh is initially passive, willing to please the audience—she is the perfect student—until the malevolent Reggie spoils it all by berating her into mock, theatrical weeping. The resurrection of the



newly reassured Niamh allows her to cross the animate/inanimate; good/bad girl divide, and the now vanquished Reggie is thrown to the floor. He is no longer her cruel tormenter, but only a sad sock.

The egging comedy again relies on the divide between competence/incompetence. Deliberate ineptitude becomes a key site of comic intent in Niamh's purposeful display of her lack of ability at ventriloquism, telling jokes, or, as discussed in the earlier example, the comical rapping parody by the geezer birds. Being successful at being comically and knowingly incompetent is celebrated in laughter, but, of course, risks misfiring: after all, is she really a good comic or truly incompetent? Indeed, a notable form of female joking is the prevalent self-deprecating form of humor that provides a space for women to uphold normative femininity by recognising and laughing at their status (Barreca 1991; Gilbert 2004; Mizejewski 2014). The risk is that it can misfire and be read straight, and, rather than having the audience acknowledge the humorous (and emotionally painful) reality of women's perceived lack within patriarchy, the female joker might be seen to be simply inept and truly lacking.

Of course, the audience knows that this is all rehearsed, but in the confusion and Niamh's berating of herself through the medium of Reggie an uneasy murmur flowed round the audience; the unspoken question, "Is this really funny?" highlighting the risk of misfire when female comics draw on self-deprecating humor. This laughter is linked to a kind of spectacle of cruelty. While, in this instance, the volunteer egging stunt may have been self-inflicted in that it was carried out at the behest of the comic it falls arguably into the category of masochistic humor as identified by Gilbert (2004) in her analysis of female stand-up. It enables the audience to laugh at the aggressive Reggie, and volunteer to egg the performer but the comic retains control; after all, this is Niamh's act and the attacks are either at her own hand or at her volition. The judgement of schoolgirl peers, parents, teachers, and audience

members is revealed through the disembodied voice of Reggie's barbs, and the egging. Niamh's performance encapsulates the modern tensions and concerns of contemporary girlhood, and opens up a space in which it can be critiqued by laughter.

Renold and Ringrose, drawing on the theoretical work of Rosie Braidotti (2006), explore the notion of schizoid subjectivity and how it fixes and unfixes sex-gender norms at play. The "multiple pushes and pulls" of how "schizoid subjectivities are experienced and negotiated by girls as a complex process of 'anti-linear becoming'" situates girls in impossible, contradictory cultural positions as they "... rework and resist expectations to perform as knowing, desiring and innocent sexual subjects" (2011: 392). Niamh's act, as she asserts power and victimhood, is premised on being situated in such contradictory positions as she highlights the ridiculousness of the double bind for girls. While they may try to assert their agency they remain challenged by the impossibility of neo-liberal success.

### **Funny Girls: So Why Does All This Matter?**

In an earlier issue of *Girlhood Studies*, Gonick et al. ask for girlhood scholars to consider: "What does resistance look like? How do we identify it? Where do the possibilities for resistance lie? How do girls themselves use cultural production as a mode of resistance?" (2009:4). I would maintain that teen girls' use of humor provides one of these crucial sites of cultural resistance and supplies a potentially effective forum in which to begin to critically unpack normative sex-gender and other discourses. Rather than being a resource that only young men draw upon in the construction of their sex-gendered identities, teen girls relished using humor discursively as part of their everyday cultural practices in supporting friendship and doing gender differently (West and Zimmerman 1987). The issue is whether young women's gendered humor is a temporary foray into hegemonic masculinity territory or is in itself a carnivalesque subversion in which one might highlight the boundaries of social convention before the status quo returns once again, refreshed (Stallybrass and White 1986).

From the examples explored I would suggest it is often both. In considering gender, humor and self-making, teen girls' joking practices, such as bitching, become sites to reproduce, police, and pass on dominant normative sex-gender codes such as the girls' mocking of the older "Granny Spice" sexy woman or in the gender transgressive girl, the geezer bird. Girls have the freedom to perform and to be recognized as funny in all-girl spaces, but these still remain sites of status anxiety, competition, and tension, in which young women highlight the limits of sex-gender autonomy and transgression by means of humorous barbs or goofing around. Humor provides a space in which to inhabit transgressive modes in becoming and remaking sex-gender, however temporarily, and such carnivalesque moments both exclude and reproduce acceptable and marginalized discursive subjectivities.

However, while fruitful as a site of analysis, the range and scope to use humor as a feminist pedagogic tool itself may be limited without a deeper critical eye to engage with the kinds of multiple organic joking practices, normative hierarchies, performative resignifications, and shifting targets of comedy that run throughout teen friendship/peer cultures, and the mutability and contingency of girls' resistance and agency. Indeed rather than challenging and stretching discursive formations, it might actually re-establish dominant forms of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative gender formations as laddish banter and joking prowess comes to be celebrated.

Using stand-up as an education strategy attempts, however problematically, to harness and direct disruptive, resistant, and jokey behavior into official education outcomes. Such intent seems to reduce the anarchic, and the queer potential of everyday momentarily transgressive humor that challenges and subverts social orders within schools and other settings, and places it within the tighter constraints of social control and narrow markers of neo-liberal success. In such a context future feminist work exploring the (im)possibilities of

girls' humor as sites of resistance, and for rethinking how comedy can be used as pedagogic tool for sex-gender equalities would be especially welcome.

### **Bio**

Fin Cullen is a lecturer in Youth Work based at Brunel University, London. Fin has a background in youth work, and a research interest in young women's friendship cultures and feminist theory. Her current work explores how to support youth practitioners and educators in theorizing sex-gender equalities and tackling gender-related violence.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> By naturally occurring humor, I mean the asides, jokes, and what is known as goofing around aspects that populate everyday interaction between groups of friends in social and

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recreational situations. The use of stand-up in this article refers to the formalized comic performance form, in which comedians will perform a monologue and/or audience interaction with the sole intention of engendering laughter from their audience.

<sup>2</sup> Detached youth workers work in a range of UK youth work contexts including the street.

Their role is to engage with young people outside institutional settings, using informal educational approaches in young people's territory.

<sup>3</sup> These are areas of public housing.

<sup>4</sup> This is a British English term for a liquor store.

<sup>5</sup> The *Spice Girls* were an internationally popular UK girl band in the 1990s.

<sup>6</sup> The fall guy in a comedy duo is a stooge who acts as a foil for the main comic. The role of the fall guy is to laugh at the main joker and be the victim of the comic's gags.

<sup>7</sup> Geezer is slang for a working class man, and bird is slang for a woman. A Geezer Bird is a woman who is seen to act like a man.

<sup>8</sup> The dame is a stock character in the UK theatre tradition of pantomime. Pantomimes are comical plays often based on fairy tales. Much of the bawdy humor is provided by the exaggerated gender performance of the cross-dressing dame.

<sup>9</sup> This performer agreed that I could write about her public comedy performance and insisted that I used "Niamh" as a pseudonym since she rightly thought I would struggle to pronounce this name when I was presenting earlier forms of this article at conferences and this amused her. She also insisted that I use a pseudonym for her sock puppet since "he also wished to remain incognito."