

BARNARD COLLEGE

JOAN RIVERS AND THE SPECTACLE OF DEFACEMENT: COMEDY, PLASTIC
SURGERY, AND THE RED CARPET FREAKSHOW

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Prologue

Hokey game show music plays as she makes a bed under a sign that reads, in flashing lights, “In Bed With Joan.” Perched atop the mattress, the iconic comedian exclaims, “I’m Joan Rivers. Let’s see who is coming out of my closet tonight!”¹ On this particular evening, the closet reveals Sarah Silverman who joins Rivers in the latter’s repurposed bedroom. The first episode of the web series “In Bed With Joan” aired on March 5, 2013. The web series featured Rivers interviewing a different guest every week, from young comedians like Silverman to celebrities like the NYSNC band member Lance Bass and the actor Gary Busey. After Silverman has climbed under the covers, Rivers begins to fire off some questions. “Do you find it hard to be a woman?” she asks in a tone so mocking that it suggests the question is, to her mind, bogus. Silverman responds in the same spirit: “Well there’s a war on women.” She pauses, and then alters the question slightly. “Are women funny? Why is that even an issue anymore? Women run comedy! Have you seen comedy lately? It’s all Tina Fey and Whitney Cummings, and Joan Rivers, and all those hacks.” “That’s enough,” Rivers quips.² Rivers asks Silverman this question because this is sadly *still* a common question that is asked about women in comedy, even though there are many successful female comedians like Rivers and Silverman. For Silverman, as for Rivers, the relevance of women in U.S. comedy is obvious.

This question is the reason I began writing this thesis. During the summer of 2014, I attended the Comedy Studies program through Columbia College of Chicago and Second City. Part of the program included a comedy history course, which opened my eyes to the glory and the wonder of the rich history of American comedy. While I loved the historical content, I was

¹Joan Rivers, "In Bed With Joan - Episode 1: Sarah Silverman," *YouTube*,

² *Ibid.*

disappointed and aggravated by the lack of analysis and attention paid to female comedians. I remember sitting in a Second City classroom watching an interview of Phyllis Diller in the 2009 documentary, “Make ‘Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America,” and being very dissatisfied with the interview.³ The interview paid homage to Diller’s groundbreaking and lucrative career; it even mentioned her delivery style, which it compared favorably to her male predecessors. But that was not the focus of the interview. The main focus of the interview was that she looked like a clown. Because she was not sexual or pretty, only then could she be funny. Ultimately, she could only get her audiences to look at her as a clown, not as a woman. The desexualization and de-feminization in which Diller willingly participated infuriated me.

The analysis of female comedians in the United States is still in its infancy. Indeed, whenever the topic of female comedians is broached, critical treatments usually stop short of analysis. We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy (2012) by Yael Kohen, for example, is a great oral history about female comedians, but it only relays information anecdotally. While crucially preserving the history of female comedians, the book only offers a narrative.⁴ Christopher Hitchens’s 2007 article in *Vanity Fair*, “Why Women Aren’t Funny” argued that in general women are not funny, and that they certainly are not as funny as men.⁵ The fact that this question was still being asked as late as 2007 underscores the need for rigorous scholarly work on the topic of female comedians.⁶ The fact that there are only two prominent

³ Michael Kantor, “Make ‘Em Laugh: The Funny Business Of America,” 2009.

⁴ Yael Kohen, *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* (New York: Sarah Crichton, 2012).

⁵ Christopher Hitchens, “Why Women Aren’t Funny,” *Vanity Fair*, last modified January 2007, <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/01/hitchens200701>.

⁶ And while these are only two sources that explore the topic, they are the most prominent and well known. The scholarship on the field is relatively small. Alessandra Stanley wrote “Who Says Women Aren’t Funny?” in *Vanity Fair* as a rebuttal to Hitchens.

accounts on the topic is part of the problem, especially when one of them is about how women are not funny.

I had the pleasure of meeting Joan Rivers before she died in 2014. I recognized her after a show that I was attending in Midtown, and I decided that I was going to introduce myself, which I usually do not like doing with celebrities. I walked up to her, made eye contact and nervously said, “Hello. I’m so sorry to interrupt. My dad is a friend of yours and I go to Barnard--” As soon as I mentioned Barnard, she perked up and interrupted me by saying, “Oh you go to Barnard? Why didn’t you open with that? I don’t care who your father is.” And with that, I get to say that I met Joan Rivers. She went on to tell me about how great our shared alma mater was and asked about my interests. I told her I was interested in comedy. She told me that if I wanted to do it, I needed to, because comedy needs women. As a Barnard grad, I really can do anything, she said. This interaction would count among my fondest memories of my time at Barnard.

The analysis that follows explores different aspects of Rivers’s career and identity, not merely her comedy. The project is an attempt to diversify and change the conversation about female comedians by looking at Rivers analytically. Rivers never shied away from criticism or controversy. In the same way that she courted controversy in every aspect of her life—her comedy, her plastic surgery, and her role on the red carpet—I intend to show her respect by engaging her work on a thoughtful and rigorous basis, even if the conclusions drawn are not simply about praise. The complicated, complex artist deserves the same complex treatment. Rivers was a contentious figure, it has been a pleasure and a challenge to study her, and for that I am grateful.

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Introduction

I woke up a few months ago, and I thought, Why am I wearing a bunny slipper? And why is it gray? Then I realized, That's my vagina! It can be a good thing, though. When you get a hot flash, you can wipe your forehead with your vagina. When you're sixty, you can have sex in the bedroom and watch TV in the living room—at the same time. If these prospects don't appeal to you, however, you can have your vagina retooled. And I don't mean by the hunky handyman.

-Joan Rivers, Men are Stupid... And They Like Big Boobs: A Woman's Guide to Beauty through Plastic Surgery (2009)⁷

Unlike contemporary female comedians like Whitney Cummings, who freely explore their femininity in their comedy, Rivers faced an androcentric comedic world.⁸ As Cummings explains, “Whereas I used to think that looking pretty or sexy would alienate women, now it's the opposite. Now I feel like when I embrace my femininity, it makes women relate to me more, because they go, ‘Oh, she's just like me, she puts on makeup and she tries to look cute, and she wears Spanx and she wears heels.’”⁹ Although today women are able to embrace conventional markers of femininity if they so choose, Rivers did not feel that she had the option. Dressed in a nice dress and pearls in 1967, when she first appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show*,¹⁰ she was objectively attractive to her audience, but she claimed to be otherwise. She was a thin, beautiful, smart woman, who claimed that she used to be fat, that she was ugly, and that she was dumb.

This thesis examines the career and life of Joan Rivers through a feminist disability lens. It was the use of a masquerade that Tobin Siebers terms “disability drag,” that allowed Rivers to create a successful comedic persona. Siebers defines “disability drag” as the performance of disability by able-bodied performers, which mimics the performance of male drag performers,

⁷ Joan Rivers and Valerie Frankel, *Men Are Stupid ... and They like Big Boobs: A Woman's Guide to Beauty through Plastic Surgery* (New York, 2009), 263.

⁸ Kohen, *We Killed*, 196.

⁹ Kohen, *We Killed*, 196.

¹⁰ Joan Rivers, “Joan Rivers on “The Ed Sullivan Show.”” *YouTube*, last modified August 24, 2009, accessed April 8, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpPCFoXXhF0>.

drag queens, who exaggerate a female gender performance through female impersonation.¹¹ According to Siebers, the performance of disability drag by able-bodied performers is disadvantageous to the disabled community.¹² I do not, however, think that Rivers's use of disability drag had a detrimental impact on disabled-bodies. My definition extends past Siebers original definition because, as per my definition, disability drag is the verbal construction of a disabled version of one's identity. The form of disability drag that Rivers performed was a type of identity-crafting. Ultimately, Joan Rivers verbally created a disabled version of herself, which stood in contradiction to her true identity, by demanding that she was ugly, stupid, and fat. Her self-claimed disability, Rivers maintained, was the source of her failure as evidenced by her inability to attract a man.¹³ Through disability drag she became anything she said she was. Emily Nussbaum describes the character Rivers portrayed: "Rivers took that sexist bogeywoman and made it her own, raging at society from inside the stereotype: she was the Princess who did nothing but call herself ugly."¹⁴

Rivers's use of disability drag created comedy because what she claimed about herself stood in bold belief against what she so obviously appeared to be. Morreal explains that the incongruity theory creates humor when "there is something odd, abnormal or out of place, which we enjoy in some way."¹⁵ Thus, Rivers claimed to be fat, ugly, and stupid, but appeared on stage and television to be thin, beautiful, and smart, which created an incongruent situation. While

¹¹ Tobin Siebers, "Disability as Masquerade," *Literature and Medicine* 23.1 (2004): 16-17.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Even though she eventually did get married.

¹⁴ Emily Nussbaum, "Last Girl in Larchmont," *The New Yorker*, last modified February 23, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/02/23/last-girl-larchmont>.

¹⁵ Tom Coogan and Rebecca Mallett, "Introduction," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 7.3 (2013): 247.

simultaneously using black comedy¹⁶ and disability drag, Rivers confronted her audience with her duplicitous identity in order to openly display her harsh reality for her audience. Rivers was telling her audience how she was coping as a disabled woman – an ugly, stupid, fat woman– not as a means to transcend her disability, but as a way of confronting her audience with uncomfortable topics, all the while protecting herself from their potential derision or rejection.

Ironically, even as she claimed to be ugly, Rivers went to great lengths to align herself with American beauty ideals through cosmetic surgery. And while many may argue that her use of plastic surgery is problematic, Rivers nonetheless viewed self-modification as an act of self-empowerment. In her 2009 book, Men are Stupid... And They Like Big Boobs: A Woman's Guide to Beauty through Plastic Surgery,¹⁷ Rivers not only delivers her predictable jokes, advice, and anecdotes, but she also offers a “how to” guide to plastic surgery. As an established comedian and a fixture on American television, she explored yet another form of identity-crafting: cosmetic surgery. By undertaking and advocating the use of plastic surgery in order to achieve makeover beauty,¹⁸ Rivers created yet another masquerade. As I will argue, her career centered around crafting a particular kind of disabled identity—a female who was ugly, fat and stupid. Her surgically augmented face served as another form of disability drag. Rather than verbally creating her identity, she attracted attention to her physically-modified, unnatural face, which served as a marker of her identity, and she welcomed the public gaze, provided she controlled the discourse. But of course, this does not mean she was immune to criticism. She knew her act of empowerment could easily be turned into a joke. For years she verbally defaced

¹⁶ Black comedy approaches taboo or morbid topics.

¹⁷ Rivers and Frankel, *Men Are Stupid*.

¹⁸ Makeover beauty is a historically specific type of beauty that is achieved with the use of cosmetic surgery. Through plastic surgery, one’s “good” interior is displayed on one’s modified exterior. Only through body modification can makeover beauty be achieved.

herself in her comedy, but it was a form of identity commentary of her own devising. Although she physically defaced herself in the pursuit of asserting power over her own identity, she was the only person who could verbally and physically deface herself. Rivers was not attempting to look natural. Instead, her face became a canvas that demonstrated her own assertion of power over social expectation, times, and criticism. Through the use of plastic surgery, Rivers found empowerment, but to the public, she became a freak.

Rivers responded to her own freakery by making the world itself, the world of Hollywood, into a freak show where freakery oddly became the norm. Through celebrity commentary, she was able to enfreak celebrities in the same way that she had enfreaked herself through disability drag and cosmetic surgery. Critiquing celebrities on the red carpet was made popular by Joan Rivers on E!'s *Fashion Police*. As Aminatou Sow complained on the podcast, *Call Your Girlfriend* (2015), Rivers made it possible for people, commentators and the public more generally to turn into “sexist garbage monster[s]” during awards season.¹⁹ Rivers turned the mockery of female celebrities into a varsity sport. Not only was the anti-feminist ridicule of celebrities accepted, but the acceptance of her ridicule extended off of the red carpet²⁰ as well. From shouting that Palestinians deserve to die at a TMZ cameraman at the Los Angeles International Airport in 2014,²¹ to accusing Michelle Obama of being “a transgender” after

¹⁹ “Episode 17: Imposter Syndrome,” narrated by Anne Friedman and Aminatou Sow, *Call Your Girlfriend*, *BlogTalkRadio.com*, released January 16, 2015, <http://www.blogtalkradio.com/callyourgirlfriend/2015/01/16/episode-17-imposter-syndrome-1>.

²⁰ Within contemporary U.S. culture, the red carpet is a literal carpet that is rolled out in front of various exclusive events, like movie premieres and fashion shows, where celebrities wear high fashion garments while being photographed and interviewed.

²¹ DailyMail, “Joan Rivers: Palestinians Deserve to Die, They Started This War,” *Mail Online*, last modified August 8, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/video/news/video-1110864/Joan-Rivers-Palestinians-deserve-die-started-war.html>.

officiating a same-sex marriage in 2014, Rivers gravitated toward controversy.²² When discussing the dress that German model Heidi Klum wore to the Academy Awards in 2013, Rivers stated, “The last time a German looked this hot was when they were pushing Jews into the ovens.”²³ Though par for the Rivers course, this loaded comment infuriated many, including the Anti-Defamation League who publicly denounced the statement. Rivers, however, did not back down, retorting, “It’s a joke, number 1. Number 2 it is about the Holocaust. This is the way I remind people about the Holocaust. I do it through humor.”²⁴ If her use of black comedy was intended to disrupt decorum, she had clearly hit the mark. Nonetheless, Rivers’s invocation of genocidal bodily mutilation served a purpose. With one stroke, Rivers was able to dress Klum in the disability drag that she once wore herself. The joke itself focused on the objectification of Klum’s beauty, turning Klum into something, not someone, that is to be commented on. Through this exploitative objectification, she was able to use Klum’s nationality as a way to keep the Holocaust within public discourse. Although it is unfair to associate Klum with the Holocaust just because she is German, it served as a reminder that the Holocaust did happen, and should not be forgotten. Rivers was Jewish, so this historical event was important to her.²⁵ Ultimately, as

²² Lisa Respers France, "Joan Rivers Jokes Obama Is Gay, First Lady Is Transgender," *CNN*, last modified October 4, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/04/showbiz/celebrity-news-gossip/joan-rivers-michelle-obama-gay-transgender/>.

²³ Sam Webb, “‘The last time a German looked this hot was when they were pushing Jews into oven’: Outrage as Joan Rivers refuses to apologise after ‘vulgar and offensive’ joke about Heidi Klum’s backside,” last modified February 28, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2285794/Joan-Rivers-refuses-apologise-vulgar-offensive-joke-Heidi-Klums-backside.html>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Another facet of Rivers’s comedy that I do not address is Rivers’s Judaism, which she discussed often in her comedy. I refrained from discussing her Judaism because that would have been an additional chapter’s worth of content. Although there is a tradition of Jewish men in comedy, it would be interesting to see how being Jewish effected women in comedy, if it did at all. Was being Jewish another aspect of Rivers’s identity that she declared through disability drag? But again, Rivers was Jewish, meaning that being Jewish was one aspect of her identity that was true when she verbally declared it. Even though it was true, she did not read as Jewish. Since she had her nose thinned in college, she removed a physical feature that is commonly associated with Jews. Could she have been declaring her Judaism as a way of dressing herself in her identity, since she removed it through cosmetic surgery? I

Rivers claimed, the joke was not about Klum at all but something of far greater significance, even though contained with the joke was a twisted compliment about Klum's beauty. To Rivers, nothing was off limits. If she thought it, she said it: she had no boundaries. As one of the first successful female stand-up comedians in the United States, she garnered respect within the media and comedic sphere because of her long and prosperous career that paved the way for many female comedians that came after her. Both Rivers and her fans saw jokes, even if inflammatory, as social commentary.

Rivers expanded this critique on the red carpet: defacing celebrities, as she once defaced herself through disability drag, institutionalized Rivers as the carnival barker of the red carpet – the site of the modern-day freak show. Gawking at the spectacular has long been a tradition in the United States. Through American freak shows, from 1840 to 1940, spectatorship provided average Americans the opportunity to gawk at “extraordinary bodies,” or “severely congenitally disabled” bodies, which served to re-affirm their own “normate” identities.²⁶ This relationship has evolved with the newly evolved connection between celebrities and fashion culture. The rapid turn around of television production allows fashion designers to expose potential customers to their new designs. This relationship extends off the television screen as well, because the off-screen fashion of a celebrity is part of their modern appeal. Modern industrial conditions make it possible to produce cheaper, faster clothes so that the public can dress like their favorite celebrity. The spectacular that America stares at has become celebrities wearing clothes, whether it is high fashion garments on the red carpet or everyday-wear on the street. And this symbol of

do not believe that Rivers was ashamed of her Judaism. In fact it seemed to be a source of pride. But removing her physical identifier as a Jew had to be motivated by something. Was it to conform to beauty standards, even if it meant removing her Jewish identity, or was it a source of shame, even though she was a proud and vocal Jew, since being Jewish was exotic within Christian America.

²⁶ Thomas G. Couser and Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature,” *Melus* 24.3 (1999).

status and unapproachability, celebrities on the red carpet, has become a freak show of Rivers's devising.

By removing Rivers from where she once stood, microphone in hand, on the red carpet, to her own television program, Joan Rivers became an institution on the red carpet through *Fashion Police*, which facilitated a distance that allowed Rivers to comment on celebrities without consequence. The mantra for *Fashion Police* was "to tell the truth,"²⁷ and Joan Rivers attempted to do so by defacing celebrities on the red carpet, like how she took Klum's appearance and made it about the Holocaust. In the same way that Rivers once defaced herself with disability drag through her comedy, Rivers did so to celebrities on the red carpet. Since she was herself a celebrity, she was able simultaneously to be a celebrity while mocking celebrities, therefore creating a duplicitous relationship with celebrity culture. She enfreaked celebrities while simultaneously being a celebrity herself, which created a tension that mirrored the nature of her comedy. Rivers made these idolized figures freaks, in the same way that she used to verbally declare her disability and make herself a freak to be stared at.

This thesis is analyzed through a feminist disability lens. In the first chapter of this thesis, I examine Rivers's comedy. I claim that through disability drag, Rivers was able to create a comedic persona that is incongruent with her own. In the second chapter I analyze Rivers's relationship with cosmetic surgery. Although Rivers used cosmetic surgery as an empowering form of identity-crafting to achieve cosmetic beauty, it proved to be an unsustainable project that turned her into a freak of sorts. And finally in the third chapter, I view the red carpet as the modern day freak show, with Rivers as its carnival barker. In the same way that she verbally de-

²⁷ E! Online, "Fashion Police," last accessed February 23, 2015, http://www.eonline.com/shows/fashion_police. Although this is an episode that aired after Rivers's death the mantra is stated in every episode.

faced herself through disability drag, then physically de-faced herself through cosmetic surgery, she de-faced celebrities in Hollywood on the red carpet. In this spectacle of de-facement, Rivers democratized disability in order to make her highly-artificial face normal.

Joan Rivers created red carpet culture. Her impact on 21st century popular culture was pervasive: no matter the status of the celebrity, they were subjected to Rivers's gaze. It is important to analyze Rivers through a disability lens because ultimately, through her acidic commentary she was able to disable celebrities in Hollywood with her words. And through my analysis, I prove that Rivers first used verbal de-facement on herself, before she used it on others. Her feminism was one of universal de-facement: in the same way that she once defaced herself through her comedy, she de-faced others in Hollywood. This universal de-facement is worth questioning, as it created a toxic culture that kept women focused on their own appearance and body projects. But again, since she had subjected herself to her own de-facement, she was just as invested in the spectacle of de-facement and its consequences as her victims. Rivers started her career by first verbally de-facing herself in her comedy, then she literally de-faced herself through her use of cosmetic surgery, and finally, she turned her verbal knife outward to de-face celebrities on the red carpet: Joan Rivers created and perpetuated a spectacle of de-facement.

CHAPTER 1: Is Joan Rivers Ugly? Disability Drag in the Pursuit of Humor

Phyllis Diller was America's first prominent female stand-up comedian. Delivering rapid-fire jokes in oversized boas, spiked hair, and buffonish boots, she physically made herself into a clown. As she bluntly explained, "To be a female comic, you can't be a beauty. You *mustn't* be a beauty. It goes back to the court jester – the humpback, the clubfoot, and the crooked nose. It helps. That's how you say hello."²⁸ Joan Rivers took a different approach. Physically, Rivers did not try to conform to Diller's clownish archetype. "She didn't try to look like a comedian," Johnny Carson recalled. Instead, he said,

Joan always tried to look attractive, which was unusual [for female comedians]. Up until then women comedians were kind of dependent on looking funny and Joan really didn't. Nonetheless, her act was all about not being able to get a date, not finding a man. Of course, when she got married she went into bad-marriage jokes.²⁹

Although she was deemed "attractive" by the king of late-night comedy, she adamantly rejected the characterization. Indeed, before she was married, she joked about how she was not marriage material. Since she was incapable of finding a man herself, she claimed that people tried to set up her with just about anyone: "Oh Joan, there's the most attractive young man down here with a mask and a gun!"³⁰ Once she was married, she joked about how she failed at being married: "I have no sex appeal. If my husband didn't toss and turn, we'd never have had the kid."³¹ The inability to be attractive is, too Rivers, a disability. From classical antiquity to today, ugliness identifies a deviation from the norm.³² In the same way that disability is a variation from a "normate" body-- the "normate," as defined by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, being "masculine,

²⁸ Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York, 2003), 232.

²⁹ Kohen, *We Killed*, 33.

³⁰ Rivers, "Joan Rivers on "The Ed Sullivan Show'" This performance is from after she was married, but it was a joke that she used before she was married.

³¹ Adam K Raymond, "The 50 Best Joan Rivers Jokes," *Vulture*, last modified September 4, 2014, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/09/50-best-joan-rivers-jokes.html>.

³² Naomi Baker, *Plain Ugly: The Unattractive Body in Early Modern Culture* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2010), 17.

white, non-disabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle class”³³ -- ugliness and unattractiveness is a perversion from the “normate” standard of beauty and attractiveness. Ugliness is a defect when compared to beauty.³⁴ Rather than physically disfiguring her appearance through wardrobe and makeup, like Diller did before her, Rivers verbally claimed her disability through the use of what Tobin Siebers has called “disability drag.”

Tobin Siebers discusses the masquerade,³⁵ which has long been a concept in feminist and queer theory, to expand on the idea of passing from the point of view of disability studies. As Siebers observes, disabled people often exaggerate the most obvious markings of their disability in order to “perform” for able-bodies. He claims that the masquerade is applicable within disability discourse because it “claims disability as a version of itself rather than simply concealing it from view.”³⁶ This visibility, in turn, can be used for both ordinary or political means. Indeed, Siebers suggests that the masquerade, which actively claims disability, serves as a way “to manage the stigma of social difference.”³⁷ Siebers describes how the masquerade of disability has advantages and disadvantages. One of the ways that the masquerade does a disservice to disabled people is what he calls “disability drag,” which is a type of masquerade, which he associates with “the type informing human-interest stories about people with disabilities.”³⁸ He goes on to explain:

The best cases of disability drag are found in those films in which an able-bodied actor plays disabled. I make reference to drag because the performance of the able-bodied actor is usually as bombastic as a drag performance... While there are certain people with disabilities who embody the stigma of disability more visibly than others—and the masquerade permits the exaggeration of disability by people with disabilities—the most

³³ Couser and Garland Thomson, “Extraordinary Bodies.”

³⁴ Baker, *Plain Ugly*, 41.

³⁵ Masquerade allows individuals to inhabit an identity that is not one’s own, whether that is gender or ability.

³⁶ Siebers, “Disability as Masquerade,” 19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

obvious markings of disability as a spoiled identity occur in the performances of able-bodied actors.... In short, when we view an able-bodied actor playing disabled, we have the same experience of exaggeration and performance as when we view a man playing a woman.³⁹

In the same way that gender is bombastically performed through drag, disability is performed through “disability drag.” But because the drag community has insider knowledge of the performance, drag is not performed to display a “spoiled identity;” whereas the performance of disability by an able-bodied actor, where there is no insiders knowledge by the able-bodied actor and the able-bodied audience, is.⁴⁰ I think that Rivers can be considered an able-bodied performer who used disability drag in her comedic performance. While she did not explicitly masquerade as a disabled body, she dressed herself in disability drag through her words and through her later fascination with plastic surgery. And while I don’t think that Rivers’s disability drag was explicitly oppressive to disabled people, I do suggest that it is a way of kowtowing to audiences unaccustomed to the new model of a female comedy. But before I go into detail about how she dressed herself in disability drag in her stand-up, it is worth re-defining the term “disability drag.” I do agree with the term the Siebers definition of “disability drag” and how he uses it, but it must be re-tooled in order to fit the masquerade that Joan Rivers was performing.

The word “drag” has long been associated with the gay community. The term was originally emerged from back-stage slang, but the word now, as defined by The Oxford English Dictionary (2015), means “Feminine attire worn by a man; also, a party or dance attended by men wearing feminine attire.”⁴¹ Drag, however, is not solely about a man impersonating a

³⁹ Ibid., 16-17.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ "drag, n," OED Online, March 2015, Oxford University Press, accessed April 16, 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57406?rskey=3hUC0C&result=1>.

woman.⁴² As numerous gender critics have observed, it creates a space to play with gender. When one is performing drag, their gender is malleable and determined by the performer.⁴³

Those most dedicated to the craft of female impersonation are drag queens. Drag queens, although a touchy definition to some, are people who practice female impersonation through the use of drag.⁴⁴ In the same way that a drag queen dresses in different costume items to create his/her female identity—pearls, tiaras, boas, etc.⁴⁵—Rivers also dressed herself in gowns, boas, and pearls throughout her entire career. Rivers’s attire cannot be ignored, as it mirrors the attitude and confidence of a drag queen. The attitude that a drag queen subsumes when performing drag is the attitude of a Diva. Although Wayne Koestenbaum explores the role of the Diva in Opera, his analysis is applicable to Rivers. Koestenbaum writes, “The diva, debuting, invents herself, imposes herself on an audience unaware of her magnitude until she opens her mouth.”⁴⁶ This verbal declaration mirrors the queer experience of having to come out of the closet to claim a homosexual identity. The Diva mirrors this experience when behind the curtain, the Diva is hidden, but when on the stage, she is free to unleash her “magnitude” on her audience. Another aspect of being a diva is “fight[ing] an oppressive order by inventing a resilient self.”⁴⁷ Through the creation of her identity, she has a voice -- a voice that is unyielding

⁴² Although drag is most commonly associated with men performing as women, women can also impersonate men through drag.

⁴³ Roger Baker, *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* (New York, NY: New York UP, 1994), 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 17-18. “Both words [drag and queen] are part of the vocabulary of gay slang and when used together like this seem to be making a statement about the sexuality of the performer. Also some touchy or self-important artists reject the term because they see ‘drag’ as being tacky and down-market and so degrading their ‘higher art’ of female impersonation – which is a queen’s attitude if ever there was one. Others have even rejected ‘female impersonation’ as being too crude, preferring to be known as ‘impressionists’. But be all that as it may, to me the phrase conveys perfectly the *chutzpah* and the self-confident, challenging abrasiveness of these powerful performers.”

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Baker explores the different ways that the “Dame” figure has the ability to dress herself in order to create different characters.

⁴⁶ Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon, 1993), 92.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

and resilient. And part of her identity is using that voice to feud with others and to be bitchy, a mode from which Rivers never shied away. This bitchiness, Koestenbaum acknowledges, “is reputed to be a gay mode.”⁴⁸ This only further aligns the Diva, Joan Rivers with the gay community. In short: “Diva rivalry reverses the queer soul’s isolation, and makes the world of private gestures and grudges seem shared, gregarious, legitimate. Everyone knows what you are thinking, everyone is watching your motions, everyone is judging your mood. Everyone is taking cues from you.”⁴⁹

This leads to my definition of disability drag: rather than dressing oneself in physical drag, whether that is a physical disability or a grandiose costume, one is able to masquerade disability verbally as a way of identity-crafting. This identity being a self-consciously disabled version of one’s own true identity. While staying true to the spirit of drag and its identity-crafting capabilities, Rivers used this form of disability drag. As Baker said, drag “is about role-playing and questions the meaning of both gender and sexual identity. It is about anarchy and defiance.” Her masquerade claimed that she could not perform her female gender successfully: her comedy routinely circled out her inability to be attractive, beautiful, or smart. But her use of disability drag highlighted real issues, like the reality of sexism. So in the same way that Sieber’s definition of disability drag included claiming visibility of disability as a political act, Rivers used disability drag in order to raise awareness of her own reality. But of course, the drag that she wore was the words she verbally dressed herself in. Without physical ‘drag,’ like what Diller wore to create her comedic character, Rivers used her words. This form of disability drag is a feminist disability politics that, according to Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “uphold[s] the right

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 114.

for women to define their physical differences and their femininity for themselves rather than conforming to received interpretations of their bodies.”⁵⁰

A representative example would be a *Tonight Show* interview from November 1972.⁵¹ Johnny Carson notoriously did not like female comedians. As the *Tonight Show*'s talent coordinator Patricia Bradford recalls, “They hired women over their dead bodies.”⁵² By the 1950's and 1960's was full of Jewish men. The Borscht Belt, a vacation spot for many New York City Jews in the Catskills, produced numerous influential male comedians like Mel Brooks, Henny Youngman, Woody Allen, and Jack Benny.⁵³ Aside from Diller and Rivers, there were no prominent female stand-up comedians. In 1965, Rivers was introduced as a female writer, not a stand-up, and was given the death slot.⁵⁴ When she came onto the show, however, she was an instant sensation; she was summoned to Carson's chair, a signifier of success at the time, and her career took off from there. She was feminine enough to be attractive to her primarily white heterosexual middle-class audience, she was new enough to be exciting, and she was funny enough to be acceptable to Carson.⁵⁵

By 1972, when Carson interviewed her, Rivers was a seasoned regular and one of Carson's good friends, if not a daughter-figure.⁵⁶ Rivers walked on stage like a Diva at the Opera in an elegant black gown, and took a seat next to Carson. Her hair was piled in an updo, she was wearing jewels, and she was objectively “attractive.” The topic of conversation started from the outside in: Carson commented on her high wedges, to which Rivers retorted, “Fashion,

⁵⁰ Couser and Garland Thomson, “Extraordinary Bodies.”

⁵¹ *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*, directed by Doc Severinsen (1972; Los Angeles CA: NBC), Television.

⁵² Kohen, *We Killed*, 146.

⁵³ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 22.

⁵⁴ Nussbaum, “Last Girl in Larchmont.” The “death slot” is the last ten minutes of the show.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ *Tonight Show*.

you do what they ask you.” Carson then wryly responded, “You want to be independent, but you’re not.” Rivers agreed: “I do what they tell me.”⁵⁷ This seemingly harmless exchange illustrates how Rivers was working to stay in accordance with existing fashion trends at the time. Like any other woman, she abided by the standard of beauty and fashion. The banter continued:

Carson: Were you a popular girl?
Rivers: Oh come on.
Carson: Well you’re very svelte now.
Rivers: Yes.
Carson: But you said you used to be heavy. I can’t imagine you being really heavy. You’re too thin.
Rivers: Thank you. That’s the nicest thing you could say to me.
Carson: I think you are. I think you’re too thin.
Rivers: In the face but nobody, you know what I’m saying. Lumba lumba. I had a gym suit that said “Pass” and “Don’t Pass” on it. *Laugh break* Is that a fatty? So I wasn’t too popular, because what guys like fat stupid girls?
Carson: Yeah that’s kind of a bad combination.⁵⁸

This joke was grounded in reality. As a college freshman at Connecticut College (before she transferred to Barnard College) in the 1950’s, a blind date came to pick her up, who turned in disgust to his friend and said, “Why didn’t you tell me?”⁵⁹ Even though this joke on *The Tonight Show* was probably rooted in insecurity, the joke was used as a form of disability drag.

The incongruity between the identity that Rivers claimed and what Carson perceived her as, an attractive woman, added a comedic element. Incongruity theory, as Morreall explains, creates humor in situations where “there is something odd, abnormal or out of place, which we enjoy in some way”⁶⁰ Alain Shain, himself a disabled comedian, explains how he uses “the incongruity theory of humour” in his own comedy, because according to Shain, humor comes from reveling in contradictions while pointing out the discrepancy in an enjoyable, digestible

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Nussbaum, “Last Girl in Larchmont.”

⁶⁰ Coogan and Mallett, “Introduction,” 247.

way.⁶¹ Rivers used the discrepancy between her physical appearance as an able-bodied female and her assumed disability drag to create incongruence: she told her audiences that she was ugly, fat, and dumb, when they seemed to confront someone who was pretty, thin, and smart. By bluntly presenting her disabled identity, Rivers was able to tell her audience how she coped with being ugly, fat, and dumb. Moran also explores the role of humor in “coping” with disability, as does Meszaros, who links humor with the discourse of rehabilitation.⁶² Meszaros observes that black comedy⁶³ “neither ‘transcends’ nor ‘cures.’”⁶⁴ Indeed, “humor may be used to make oneself appear to be coping, rather than to cope.”⁶⁵ Rivers demonstrated this mode of “coping” through her comedic content, which consisted of her experiences of going through the world as an ugly, undateable woman. It was clear that she was “thin,” as it was something worth commenting on, in addition to it being a source of pride for Rivers. She was physically attractive to Carson, even though she claimed she was once “fat” and “stupid.” That incongruent concept, of her being fat and stupid, although she was clearly thin and smart, creates a comedic tension. And her joking about it shows the audience that she was coping. But within this, there is social commentary: men do not like women who are unattractive, “chubby” or “fat.” As a college freshman, Rivers did not fit into what she deemed attractive to men, as she said, “No chubby girls, I’m gonna be honest, guys don’t usually go for.”⁶⁶

⁶¹ Alan Shain, “Comment from the Field,” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 7.3 (2013). He goes on to explain, “My work highlights the discrepancy between the ways people should react to me and how people actually react to me as a disabled person.”

⁶² Coogan and Mallett, “Introduction,” 250.

⁶³ Black comedy has “no truck at all with decorum or sentiment.” It is “discordant, subversive, impolite,” as it addresses “subjects that are usually off-limits.” Ibid, 249.

⁶⁴ Ibid. Original citation from Beth Meszaros, “Enlightened by Our Afflictions: Portrayals of Disability in the Comic Theatre of Beth Henley and Martin McDonagh,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 23.3/4 (2003).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ *Tonight Show*.

As the interview continued, Rivers jokes about women who are willing to settle for a lesser partner in order to get married, because only marriage can remove the greater stigma of being single. When Carson asked if “looks matter” when evaluating the opposite sex, Rivers exclaimed, “Oh no, not to women. For a man, that’s all the counts. You know this. Women don’t care what men look like. A friend of mine is having an affair with a midget. It’s kind of interesting.”⁶⁷ A single woman and a little person are put on the same plane. A “midget” is still a man; his disability cannot trump his gender. A single woman, by contrast, is doubly disabled: she is both a woman and unmarried. Although women identify with this double standard, Rivers bluntly told her audience that no matter the potential partner, being a single woman is more of a disability than being a male little person.

Rivers had full control of how her identity was perceived. As she said, “Sometimes you look at yourself and you say, ‘it’s your own fault you are the way that you are.’”⁶⁸ But in reality, this “fault” can be seen as a triumph. By using disability drag, Rivers was able to create a disabled identity on her own terms. The incongruence between the duplicity she created — beautiful and ugly, stupid and smart, thin and fat, able-bodied and freakish — was at the center of her comedy. Although it is a way of cutting herself down, which can be seen as a belittling act, she was in control of it. Ultimately, the incongruence she created was a form of self-conscious identity-crafting.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

CHAPTER 2: Plastic Surgery In The Pursuit of Cosmetic Beauty: Joan Rivers and Physical Defacement

Joan Rivers wrote in 2009 Men Are Stupid ... and They like Big Boobs: A Woman's Guide to Beauty through Plastic Surgery, “My face has had more blades on it than a hockey rink. Last season, my plastic surgeon won the Stanley Cup— and that’s good! He considers my numerous procedures his own personal ‘War on Terror.’ A war, he is proud to say, he has successfully won.”⁶⁹ Although cosmetic surgery is an extension of other beauty practices, like putting on makeup or perming one’s hair, it differs profoundly from decorative forms of self-reconstruction, since it involves the mutilation of the body, which produces the pain that accompanies many physical disabilities. This chapter looks at Joan Rivers’s relationship with plastic surgery through a feminist disability frame.⁷⁰ Celebrities and their use of plastic surgery are nothing new. Plastic surgery is pervasive in the contemporary U.S.: on television, in magazines, and throughout the Internet, celebrity gossip is about who has had what procedure, and how many total surgeries they have undergone.⁷¹ As plastic surgery became increasingly common and accepted during the past three decades,⁷² Rivers became one of its most notorious subjects and apologists. Joan Rivers’s “How to” guide for plastic surgery mirrors the sentiment of makeover television shows that clutter modern media, like *The Swan* or *Extreme Makeover*. These shows and Rivers tell audiences that participants can achieve makeover beauty,⁷³ a

⁶⁹ Rivers and Frankel, *Men Are Stupid*, 134.

⁷⁰ Couser and Garland Thomson, “Extraordinary Bodies.”

⁷¹ Victoria Pitts-Taylor, *Surgery Junkies: Wellness and Pathology in Cosmetic Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2007), 4. In addition to the eight million non-surgical procedures performed, like Botox and skin resurfacing, there were nearly two million aesthetic operations performed in 2005, a quadrupling of the number performed in 1984.

⁷² Diane Naugler, “‘Oh, Sure They’re Nice, but Are They Real?’: Greeting Cards and the Normalizing of Cosmetic Surgical Intervention in Practices of Feminine Embodiment,” *Resources for Feminist Research* 33.3/4 (2010): 1120.

⁷³ Cressida Heyes, “Cosmetic Surgery And The Televisual Makeover,” *Feminist Media Studies* 7.1 (2007): 21. Through cosmetic surgery participants can finally become the good person they have always have been on the inside, that they can finally achieve their goals, and that they can become a more authentic version of themselves.

historically specific beauty that “incorporates a belief in the good and the beautiful through the violent manipulation of bodies.”⁷⁴ Through body modification, the good interior can finally be shown on one’s exterior. But ultimately, this form of beauty cannot fulfill the promises of happiness it offers.⁷⁵ Rivers claimed to be ugly, as she referred to her face as a site of terrorism. Although her face was a kind of cosmetic ground zero, she strived for makeover beauty. Through bodily modification, Rivers physically crafted yet another masquerade through physical defacement—the masquerade of cosmetic beauty. Rivers’s transparency with her plastic surgery, a taboo topic, allowed her to dispel stigma and become more famous which, in turn, allowed her to achieve more with her comedy. She defaced herself in the name of makeover beauty while the public perceived her as a celebrity who unapologetically loved plastic surgery, which is why the public began to consider her a freak of sorts.

Viewing cosmetic surgery as a form of empowerment is neither simple nor one-sided. Deborah A. Sullivan eloquently explains the tension that plastic surgery creates: “Respect for the right of competent adults to make decisions about their own bodies should not blind us to the larger cultural and social context in which personal choices occur.”⁷⁶ Ultimately, this form of “empowerment” does not “eradicate the problems associated with our contemporary beauty culture.”⁷⁷ Plastic surgery does not eliminate a women’s feeling of inadequacy, even if it does so

⁷⁴ Bernadette Wegenstein, *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2012): 63.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁷⁶ Deborah A. Sullivan, *Cosmetic Surgery: The Cutting Edge of Commercial Medicine in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: 2001), 5.

⁷⁷ Michelle Anne Abate, “‘Plastic Makes Perfect’: My Beautiful Mommy, Cosmetic Surgery, and the Medicalization of Motherhood,” *Women’s Studies* 39 (2010): 727.

temporarily by aligning her with an elusive ideal.⁷⁸ Plastic surgery also creates a new standard from which women are to be judged.⁷⁹ Cressida Heyes states that instead of altering existing norms of beauty, women must conform to these norms in order to achieve “greater authenticity,”⁸⁰ with the promise of surgery being a solution to all external and internal problems.⁸¹ Through homogenizing and aligning oneself with beauty ideals, plastic surgery paradoxically individualizes its participants.⁸² While plastic surgery oppresses women, it simultaneously helps them escape oppression by giving them tools to craft themselves.⁸³

Through the iconography and language of contemporary cosmetic surgery, the surgically unmodified female body is cast as having “abnormalities” that can easily be “corrected” through the use of cosmetic surgery.⁸⁴ As a result, women are acutely aware of the sexual double standard to which they are subjected, in terms of their weight and attractiveness. Studies have shown that women who are most concerned with appearing “feminine” have lower self-esteem.⁸⁵ Whether she recognized it or not, Rivers demonstrates this insecurity when she wrote, “Cross into your fifties, and you become the invisible woman... Being old is like wearing Harry Potter’s Cloak of Invisibility, all the time. A good way to tear it off is an eye lift.”⁸⁶ To avoid the stigma that comes with old age, which produces a form of invisibility, Rivers suggested an eyelift as the

⁷⁸ Of course, women are not the only people who seek out plastic surgery, and the impact of plastic surgery does not solely affect women. But because Rivers’s book is geared towards women, I have chosen to focus on the effects of plastic surgery on women.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Heyes, “Cosmetic Surgery And The Televisual Makeover,” 18.

⁸¹ Heyes goes on to examine how the practice of plastic surgery has been normalized through a Feminist reading of Foucauldian’s analysis of normalization: “one’s outer form reflects one’s virtues: the ever more minutely detailed visual objectification of (especially female) bodies... all induce that how we look become more, not less, important to how we understand ourselves.”

⁸² Ibid., 20.

⁸³ Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York: 1995), 5.

⁸⁴ Couser and Garland Thomson, “Extraordinary Bodies.”

⁸⁵ Julie M. Albright, “Impossible Bodies: TV Viewing Habits, Body Image, and Plastic Surgery Attitudes among College Students in Los Angeles and Buffalo, New York,” *Configurations* 15.2 (2009): 109.

⁸⁶ Rivers and Frankel, *Men Are Stupid*, 226.

solution. The “invisible woman” is the woman who is no longer sexualized, no longer relevant, and thus no longer “seen.” Through the choice of body modification, “Harry Potter’s Cloak of Invisibility” and the stigma of old age can be removed.

Rivers opened Men are Stupid by introducing the reader to her own journey with plastic surgery. Her first procedure was to “thin” her nose in college.⁸⁷ She next had an eye lift, which removed the “bags” under her eyes in her late thirties.⁸⁸ She underwent a second rhinoplasty in her late thirties, and then a full face-lift in her early forties.⁸⁹ In the 1980’s she had liposuction on her “saddlebags,”⁹⁰ which she later had performed again on her torso and upper arms.⁹¹ She had a breast reduction, and then a tummy tuck “by accident” when she was having a hysterectomy.⁹² She advised the reader, “Always, if possible, have a plastic surgeon do your stitching. I was the only hysterectomy patient smiling in the recovery room that day.”⁹³ From that point on, she only made “tweaks,” which she saw as “maintenance and stuff, like polishing the car or keeping the house painted.”⁹⁴ These “tweaks” included Botox every “six months or so,” collagen injected into her lips, and “if I have something to burn off, a mark or a spot, I do it.”⁹⁵

Rivers sandwiched the serious content of the book – how to undergo different cosmetic surgery procedures – between jokes. Each chapter opens with comedic vignettes that precede the description of a cosmetic procedure. Throughout her descriptions and explanations of various

⁸⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 8.

⁹¹ Ibid., 9.

⁹² Ibid., 8.

⁹³ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

cosmetic procedures, she elaborated on her opinions and experiences. For example, on the importance of getting a face lift: “Do you want a new face or a new patio? ... As I’ve always said, take your pick: Is it better to have a new face getting out of an old car, or an old face getting out of a new car?”⁹⁶ This joke demonstrates the economic sacrifices that some women make in order to go under the knife. According to Rivers, however, the economic sacrifice is worth it because getting a facelift is a potentially much more lucrative investment than buying a new car. This example is indicative of how River viewed plastic surgery— she saw it as an investment in a woman’s ability to get married, which in turn indicates her value. And since it was, in Rivers’s opinion, a good investment, she was willing to try anything: “I’ll probably try it. Why not? Looking good is not the sin of vanity. Looking good is the virtue of diligence! Many think of surgery as morally wrong or messing with divine plan.”⁹⁷ She turned the tables and rather framed her habit as grounded in a Protestant work ethic, “diligence” not sinfulness. Her diligent investment in her bodywork is ironic seen through the prism of her comedy, in which she claimed through disability drag that she was anything but marriage material. Despite what her comedy claimed, she felt that through the masquerade of cosmetic beauty she could become marriage material, as could any other woman.

Rivers believed in looking “good,” and she saw plastic surgery as the way to facilitate that. As she stated, “People will perceive you differently when you look put together. If you take the time to care for yourself, they owe you their respect. Not wearing makeup is willfully taking yourself out of the game.”⁹⁸ Heyes discusses the fetishistic quality of control and self-determination that plastic surgery narratives have. The idea of identity-crafting through body

⁹⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 282.

modification embodies feminism's own values of autonomy and self-realization, even in the service of beauty. Despite its homogenizing appeal, plastic surgery can serve to individualize its participants by giving them agency and control over their own bodies.⁹⁹ While Rivers viewed plastic surgery as a means to facilitate the best self-presentation possible, she saw the rejection of plastic surgery as a failure of imagination and competitiveness. To Rivers, it was "taking yourself out of the game." The game she references is the competition for men, one of the main topics of her book,¹⁰⁰ and it is why she advocated for other women to invest in plastic surgery. This game also extends to her career in Hollywood, where plastic surgery is a common, mostly secretive, practice.

Rivers's public discussion of her plastic surgery demonstrates how she believed that cosmetic surgery is something to talk about without shame. From the beginning of her journey with plastic surgery, she did not intend to be secretive about her body project. After her first facelift, she explained,

While taking a stroll down the hospital corridor, I saw two women I knew dressed in gorgeous silk robes...I greeted them happily and asked what they had done. Face? Eyes? What? Both insisted they'd been in separate car accidents! I guess we were *all* in car accidents. And we all got banged up in *exactly* the same places on the face.¹⁰¹

Because they "aren't required to be beautiful but still want to look good," female comedians, according to Rivers, are the only women to publicly "come out"¹⁰² about their procedures. A section of her first chapter is thus titled, "Surgery Is Out of the Closet— Sort of."¹⁰³ Like how Sarah Silverman came out of Rivers's physical closet in "In Bed With Joan," Rivers verbally

⁹⁹ Heyes, "Cosmetic Surgery And The Televisual Makeover," 28.

¹⁰⁰ For example, "Men love big boobs (as if we needed the reminder) for the same reason they like a hairless woman: they're attracted to any characteristics that are different than theirs." Not to mention that the title of her book is about what men "like," even if they are "stupid." Rivers and Frankel, *Men Are Stupid*, 100.

¹⁰¹ Rivers and Frankel, *Men Are Stupid*, 7-8.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

came out of the closet by disclosing her relationship with plastic surgery. The act of closeting involves the concealment of something that is difficult to disclose, and the inability to disclose that information makes it oppressive because the closet “controls the flow of information beyond individual disclosure or secrecy.”¹⁰⁴ Being in the “closet” is most commonly associated with the suppression of homosexuality. This suppression is the product of the fear of rejection, shame, and oppression that would make disclosing sexuality a difficult task. This comparative imagery, which Joan most likely deliberately chose to elicit in this chapter and with “In Bed With Joan,” serves to align her experience with the secrecy and oppression that homosexuals experience: both homosexuality and plastic surgery are potentially invisible and unreadable to the naked eye. And by aligning herself with the act of publicly declaring one’s sexuality, she made her verbal declaration of having undergone plastic surgery just as powerful and liberating as claiming one’s homosexuality.

If cosmetic surgery sculpts the body to resemble the Western feminine ideal, disability, conversely, moves the body away from that ideal. As Thomson states, “Feminization prompts the gaze; disability prompts the stare. Feminization increases a woman's cultural capital; disability reduces it.”¹⁰⁵ Coming out of the closet for Rivers had less to do with beauty and more to do with outing of disability and stigma. Rivers’s wanted people to know that she had alterations, and that she was undergoing the process of “feminization” in an attempt to increase her “cultural capital;” she urged people to indulge in the process rather than the final product because it seems as though she, herself was never happy with the final product. Ultimately, the process is not about satisfaction, but about longing and desire. In the same way that she purposely told her audience

¹⁰⁴ Siebers, "Disability as Masquerade," 2.

¹⁰⁵ Couser and Garland Thomson, "Extraordinary Bodies."

to stare through the use of disability drag, she came out of the closet to expose the invisibility of her “feminization” process.

By physically defacing herself, and therefore physically disabling herself, she was able to chase the masquerade of cosmetic beauty. In the same way that she verbally constructed herself through disability drag, she physically constructed herself through cosmetic surgery, and she advocated this self-construction to “Any woman, of any age, who wants to feel better, look better for her age— not necessarily younger — and has the desire to take steps.”¹⁰⁶ If women choose to empower themselves by going under the knife, then they “really can be the confident, beautiful woman you dream of being. Like me.”¹⁰⁷ Because “If you look good, you *feel* good.”¹⁰⁸ Rivers’s writing claimed that her use of cosmetic surgery made her feel “beautiful” and “confident,” but when considering the numerous procedures she underwent, evidence suggests that this satisfaction with herself was transient and unsustainable.

Conversely, even if it was an act of identity-making and empowerment, which she campaigns for in her book for other women to do for themselves, it was still a sore subject. In her 2010 documentary, “Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work,” the audience is given access to a rarely-seen side of Rivers — a make up free face.¹⁰⁹ She wrote in her book, “I’m not pretty without makeup. I was never the natural beauty. No man has ever told me that I’m beautiful. That’s why I do so many procedures, the constant push to look my best. I do think everyone should do whatever she can to look as good as she can.”¹¹⁰ And within this documentary, directed by Ricki Stern, there is discussion about her plastic surgery. When she was asked to be roasted on Comedy Central, she

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 284.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ *Joan Rivers A Piece of Work*, directed by Ricki Stern, performed by Joan Rivers, 2010, Netflix.

¹¹⁰ Rivers and Frankel, *Men Are Stupid*, 278.

hesitated. It was a celebrity honor, but also an opportunity for other comedians to ridicule her for her use of plastic surgery. This was ironic since she claimed to be the poster child for plastic surgery, and she insisted that she was not ashamed of it. And although she herself was ruthless with her comedy, her plastic surgery was clearly a point of vulnerability: she could dish it, but she could not take it. In her comedy, she could call herself names, but she did it to herself— she constructed her identity and she was the one who commented on it. When her identity was in her own hands, it was hers to craft and comment on. And even though she explicitly endorsed plastic surgery, she knew that others ridiculed her for it. This tension stems from the fact that this act that she found to be empowering was fragile and readily debased as a joke.

Rivers's pursuit of cosmetic beauty is yet another masquerade. Much like how she verbally dressed herself in the masquerade of disability drag, she physically altered her body to emulate the masquerade of cosmetic beauty. This suggests a trajectory, one that moves from the outside in. Rivers moved from verbally mutilating herself through her comedy, to physically disfiguring herself through plastic surgery. This pursuit was ephemeral, fragile, and unsustainable, since cosmetic beauty only produces temporary satisfaction. Although she found it to be another form of identity-crafting, it was one that kept her chasing the illusion that is cosmetic beauty.

CHAPTER 3: Joan Rivers, the Carnival Barker of the Red Carpet

In a series of clips of bonus footage from E!'s *Fashion Police*, hosted by Joan Rivers, Guiliana Rancic, George Kotsiopoulos, and Kelly Osbourne,¹¹¹ a photograph of Courtney Cox, star of the television program *Cougar Town*, on the red carpet flashes on the television screen. Cox is dressed lavishly, in high-fashion couture. After looking at the picture, Rivers stares directly into the camera and says, "You know everyone thinks Cougar Town is a stupid name for the show, but you know the original title was worse, was called, 'It's always Sunny in... What the hell happened to your face?'"¹¹² With her famously acerbic tongue, Rivers, in a flash, made the glamorous former star of *Friends* into something that should be looked at in horror, rather than in reverie. In light of Rivers's own penchant for cosmetic surgery, the comment was certainly ironic, but it was not unusual for Rivers or the *Fashion Police*. Indeed, the tradition of red carpet fashion commentary was made popular and acceptable by Rivers and her daughter Melissa, who began co-hosting the pre-award coverage for the Golden Globes for E! Entertainment in 1994.¹¹³ From that point on, the mother-daughter duo annually hosted *Live From The Red Carpet*, until 2003.¹¹⁴ The success of the show led to the creation of *Fashion Police*, a program that institutionalized Rivers's scathing commentary as something to be feared and even grudgingly respected in the world of Hollywood. In the same way that she would deface herself through the use of disability drag at the beginning of her career, Rivers verbally defaced celebrities, cutting them down to size and rendering them disabled in the eyes of the

¹¹¹ "Fashion Police," *IMDb.com*, (2015), <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0799870/>. These were the hosts of *Fashion Police* preceding Rivers's death in 2014.

¹¹² "Fashion Police: Bonus: Less Is Not More," Hulu, *E! Entertainment*, last modified April 15, 2011, <http://www.hulu.com/search?q=fashion+police>.

¹¹³ Tamara Abraham, "The Wit That Changed the Face of Fashion: How Joan Rivers' Acerbic Critique Shaped the Red Carpet as We Know It - and Heralded the Age of the Celebrity Stylist," *Mail Online*, last modified September 6, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2744092/The-wit-changed-face-fashion-How-Joan-Rivers-acerbic-critique-shaped-red-carpet-know-heralded-age-celebrity-stylist.html>.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

viewer. This spectacle of de-facement suggests a trajectory. Rivers first cut herself down through her use of disability drag in her comedy. Then she literally put herself under the knife, physically cutting herself via cosmetic surgery. And finally, she turned her knife outward to cut Hollywood down to size. And yet, she never critiqued celebrities for doing things she had not done herself. For example, she too had undergone copious amounts of plastic surgery, like Cox, and she too was made fun of for it. While being part of the culture of the celebrity, Rivers actively defaced celebrities and celebrity culture through her commentary. By disabling Hollywood, Rivers was able to make her highly artificial face “normal.” Rivers, herself a freak of sorts, turned these idolized figures into objects of the stare: freaks in a modern-day, red-carpeted freak show.

Physically removing Rivers from the red carpet and placing her on her own show created distance, which allowed Rivers to say what she actually thought about the celebrities walking into the theatre for various award shows. Prior to her removal, Rivers, microphone-in-hand, would stand on the red carpet as various celebrities would walk up to her to be interviewed. As she herself explained, “I love it because I don’t have to stand on the red carpet and pretend I like something — it goes against everything I believe in — and smile and say, ‘Don’t you look nice?’ and the next day, say she looked terrible. So I’d rather not have to do the first part.”¹¹⁵ Rivers’s signature snark became the tone and expectation for the show, and it was made possible through the distance that *Fashion Police* facilitated.

¹¹⁵ Archana Ram, "Joan Rivers on Her Return to 'Fashion Police': 'The Truth Is Very, Very Seldom Said on Television,'" last modified August 27, 2010, <http://popwatch.ew.com/2010/08/27/joan-rivers-on-her-return-to-fashion-police-the-truth-is-very-very-seldom-said-on-television/>.

A breathless interest in Hollywood stars has existed for over 100 years.¹¹⁶ From the desire to have a celebrity's body, to wanting to wear his or her clothes, or to wanting to know everything about a star's private life, the public has always wanted to know.¹¹⁷ Prior to the 1990's and 2000's, Hollywood stars existed primarily within the fictional realm of film. There was a separation between the celebrity as a person and the celebrity portraying a fictional character on the screen.¹¹⁸ Today, there has been a transition: when fans admire the style of a celebrity, they usually are referring to what they wear off of the screen and in the real world, rather than on it. The earning potential of celebrities no longer holds as much weight as it once did, because what matters now is the "press and Internet coverage of the stars' outfits and their personal lives."¹¹⁹ As Helen Warner writes, "fashion television" like *Fashion Police* "emerged as a reactive response to the historically specific economic and industrial conditions."¹²⁰ The relationship was symbiotic—the fast turnaround of television production allowed fashion designers to display new designs, which, in turn, gave them consumers, and television was then able to depend on the fashion industry to dress them. Cheaper, faster modes of production allowed the public to easily imitate stars.¹²¹ Previously, watching celebrities on the big screen inspired the audience's desire to emulate the star, but this desire has come off of the big screen and onto the red carpet, where designers can display their couture designs on the biggest

¹¹⁶ Pamela Church Gibson, *Fashion and Celebrity Culture* (Oxford, 2012), 60. Pamela Church Gibson elaborates on the history of how fashion evolved from the big screen to television, and how fashion became a part of a celebrity's identity.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. In the 1920's and 1930's, magazines were targeted at lower-middle class housewives, where they would show ways to achieve fashionable Hollywood styles on a limited budget. Since learning how to sew was part of education for women, most could sew. If they chose not to, or if they had the means to pay, local dressmakers were used. In the 1950's and 1960's, sewing was taken out of the average school curriculum. The demand was still there which led to the reproduction of celebrity styles on a mass scale. This illustrates the accessibility of fashion, and how even then there was a desire to emulate celebrities.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 53.

¹²⁰ Warner, *Fashion on Television*, 27.

¹²¹ Gibson, *Fashion and Celebrity Culture*, 69.

celebrities: the red carpet is the modern-day cat walk.¹²² The inaccessibility of red carpet fashions to the public, moreover, augments celebrity's unapproachableness.

Under the scrutiny of *Fashion Police*, however, this dynamic began to crumble. In this respect, the title of the show, *Fashion Police*, warrants further analysis. Fashion can be a noun, as it is something one wears. Since clothing is the ostensible focus of this show, as it serves as the way to bring celebrities down a peg, it makes sense that it would be included in the title. But the word fashion joined with the word police has a much more restrictive connotation. "Policing" is an idea central to the work of Michel Foucault. Policing is the disciplinary mechanism that creates multiple modes of power in everyday life. The common conception of power— power disseminating from top to bottom— is incorrect, Foucault argued. Instead, power is "deployed and exercised through a net-like organization," with a focus on the body.¹²³ This suggests that we are caught in a circulation, playing the roles of oppressors and of the oppressed.¹²⁴ As Foucault discussed in Discipline and Punish, surveillance is the continuous supervision of an individual, and it is used as a "form of control" and "punishment" in order to mold and transform individuals "in terms of certain norms."¹²⁵ Through the use of surveillance, Rivers utilized this mode of power, as she oppressed celebrities in the same way that she too had been oppressed. Modern media facilitated this surveillance by supplying Rivers with images and videos of celebrities on the red carpet, in addition to the images of their day-to-day lives. Through the surveillance footage of red carpet events, Rivers was able to police celebrity bodies, which is the main site of power. As someone who created her entire identity by fashioning herself through

¹²² Ibid., 54. The red carpet allows designers to showcase their couture designs by lending their pieces to a celebrity they consider consistent with their brand.

¹²³ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London, 1997), 34.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1977), 70.

plastic surgery, and defacing her own appearance verbally and surgically, Rivers moved onto doing so to others. Through fashion, the noun and physical modification, Rivers is able to police others. But of course, these are two areas in which she herself was experienced.

Because of Rivers's surveillance of the red carpet through *Fashion Police*, celebrities were expected to dress in a fashionable way that would keep them off of "Worst Dressed" list. From award shows to movie premiers, celebrities were subjected to Rivers's scrutiny. As Rivers explained in 2010, "These days they have a stylist and they have a PR person walking with them. God forbid you say something bad about it, they'll never let you talk to them again."¹²⁶ Rivers's influence on the red carpet reaffirmed the difference between an average person and a celebrity. The red carpet continues to perpetuate and reaffirm the cult of the celebrity and the spectacle.¹²⁷ Using Debord's definition of the spectacle, the class in power would be celebrities, and the medium that transmitted their images on the red carpet would be *Fashion Police*. These celebrities have an elevated status when compared to the general public, since celebrities are seen as inaccessible because of their wealth and status. Through her acid commentary, Rivers was able to take the spectacle and mutilate it in the same way that she used to deface herself. Through her use of surveillance and power as an oppressor, she was able to disrupt their class power through their verbal defacement, therefore disabling them. And by defacing the appearance of celebrities, Rivers also moved the gaze away from herself and focused it on them. Ultimately, the celebrity is on the red carpet to be seen and to be judged. And this culture, the culture of objectification and defacement, was started and made popular by Joan Rivers at the

¹²⁶ Ram, "Joan Rivers on her return to 'Fashion Police.'"

¹²⁷ The spectacle, as described by the contemporary media theorist Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1994), is "an assemblage of social relations transmitted via the imagery of a class in power."

Golden Globes in 1994.¹²⁸ This televisual spectacle nurtures class complacency in the average American because they are able to indulge in the life presented on the red carpet, even if temporarily; class mobility is unnecessary when the average American is able to live vicariously through celebrities. Even though celebrities have wealth, power, and status, it is all shot down by Rivers for viewers to watch. When celebrities are degraded to the clothes they are wearing, which are shredded apart by Rivers, there is an illusion that the viewer is rising above the celebrity—they are not victim to Rivers's comments, making them temporarily superior to the celebrity.

The tradition of gawking at the spectacular has long existed within the United States through the institution of the freak show. In her book, Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature, Thomson examines the practice of the freak show through feminist disability discourse. From 1840 to 1940, the freak show emerged in the United States. The practice of reading extraordinary bodies, or “severely congenitally disabled”¹²⁹ bodies, was a practice used by American spectators to re-affirm their own identities. Through their display, these bodies “functioned as icons upon which people discharge[d] their anxieties, convictions, and fantasies.”¹³⁰ As explored by Bernth Lindfors, the freak show mobilized the logic of spectacle.¹³¹ The spectacle, being the “freak” or the extraordinary body, and the spectator, being the individual viewing the freak show, have a relationship facilitated by spectatorship; the spectator reads the physical markers, or the symbolic codes, of a “freak’s” race, class, dis/ability, gender, and sexuality.¹³² The freak, in turn, serves as confirmation of the

¹²⁸ Abraham, “The Wit That Changed the Face of Fashion.”

¹²⁹ Couser and Garland Thomson, “Extraordinary Bodies.”

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Bernth Lindfors, “Circus Africans,” *The Journal of American Culture* 6.2 (1983): 12.

¹³² Couser and Garland Thomson, “Extraordinary Bodies.”

viewer's "normate" identity. The "normate," as defined by Thomson, is "masculine, white, non-disabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle class."¹³³ The relationship between the "freak" and the "normate" is thus symbiotic (if hierarchical), in that each reconfirms the other's identities by existing as each other's opposite. The "normate," the American man, looks and names what he is seeing, rendering the "freak" passive. The freak show serves as a way of both reinforcing and undermining the illusion of democratic equality. In a society that emphasizes democratic equality, this blatant inequality created by spectatorship keeps the illusion of democracy alive, outside of the tent. Within the tent, the "normate" holds power over the freak with his gaze.

Fashion Police depended on the new relationship of fashion and television, and it used the platform of the red carpet to display the spectacle, as defined by Debord. The fascination with celebrities on the red carpet, I believe, is the modern-day freak show. The freak show once "flaunt[ed] the erratic and spurn[ed] the stable,"¹³⁴ which is what Joan Rivers also did to celebrities on the red carpet through *Fashion Police*. The focus of the red carpet is on the stable, commodified identity of the celebrity. By turning the tables, Rivers made celebrities the "erratic," which therefore constructed her as the "normate." Whether it was her use of disability drag or her relationship with plastic surgery, she consistently played the part of the freak. For the first time in her career, she was able to be the "normate," since she pointed at celebrities as the freak through their fashion choices. But of course, she was not perceived as the "normate." It did not matter that she wielded her knife at everyone around her, she had already cut herself down to size through her comedy and plastic surgery for her audience—the damage was done.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Rivers's entire career centered around her being "erratic," so the red carpet gave her the opportunity to point that focus towards someone else. She succeeded in switching the gaze away from herself and onto the celebrity, creating a menagerie of disability. She actively enfreaked other women, like Cox, in the same way that she had enfreaked herself. Exactly what she criticized Cox for is what she herself had been criticized for, by herself and by the public. Although this enfreakment is democratic, it is problematic and cruel. Her enfreakment of other women only begets more enfreakment and objectification—it creates a vicious cycle. By leveling the playing field, she used the paradigm of the freak show to democratize disability. She dressed celebrities in the disability drag that she once wore herself. In this way she was saying that celebrities are just like us.

Which leads to River's accepted role as the carnival barker of the red carpet, even though her jests were often times mean-spirited, unwarranted, and explicitly anti-feminist. Her jests served to inflame battles among women who, in turn, were too busy to fight real gendered inequalities. But because of the jokes made about the celebrity, the cult of the celebrity and the spectacle were temporarily disabled. Rivers exercised her power, as the previously oppressed, to oppress others. Celebrities may seem like they have everything, but Rivers made it clear that they did not. Even though Courtney Cox is starring on her own sitcom, Rivers made it clear that her face does not look like it used to. In the same way that Rivers once de-faced herself, she de-faced others, therefore perpetuating the spectacle of de-facement. By being ridiculed by the carnival bark Joan Rivers, celebrities became freaks in the freak show of the red carpet.

Conclusion

There is a lot of work to be done on Joan Rivers, since she is such a problematic and complicated figure. Nonetheless, it has a pleasure to look at her body of work. Nowadays, it is easy to forget about how she achieved her status in society. She is often thought of as someone who is purely attempting to incite controversy, but I no longer believe that.

In the wake of her death in 2014, there has been a great deal of attention paid to her, but no formal analysis. I found the most notable remembrance after Rivers's passing to be "The Last Girl in Larchmont,"¹ written by Emily Nussbaum in *The New Yorker*. Not only was this piece enlightening, but it also yielded important insights through historically examining Rivers's career. The subtitle of the piece declares Rivers "a survivor of a sexist era: a victim, a rebel, and finally, an enforcer."¹³⁵ This cycle of victim, then as an enforcer, is not only an interesting perspective, but it suggests a trajectory that I mirrored within my work. Rivers started as a victim within the world of comedy, trying to stay afloat through her hard work and perseverance. She made her way to the top by dressing herself in disability drag and cutting herself down to size, verbally and then physically through cosmetic surgery. And when she finally made it to the top, she turned her focus outward and started to cut others down in the same way she had cut herself down. This progression mirrors the victim turned establishment enforcer through my own analytical discourse. To Nussbaum, this trajectory seems to be a result of a series of hardships and tragedies in Rivers's life, of which Nussbaum illustrated thoughtfully. With each failure came another wound, but Rivers persevered within an unyielding, male dominated system. Nussbaum concludes her piece by stating, "her flamboyant self-hatred made possible this generation's flamboyant self-love, set the groundwork for the crazy profusion of female comics

¹³⁵ Nussbaum, "Last Girl in Larchmont."

on TV these days, on cable and network, cheerleading one another, collaborating and producing and working in teams, as if women weren't enemies at all.”¹³⁶ Although I think that this is a nice, bold claim to make, I think it may be unsubstantiated. It's a theory, but it is definitely a theory worth testing. I would like to think it is true, but it is left unproven that Joan Rivers was the catalyst for this.

Joan Rivers problematized the American narrative of fortune and fame: she recognized the flip side of the so-called American dream and she capitalized off of it. She recognized that Americans do not just aspire to a better life, but they also want to see others degraded in order to create the illusion that they themselves are rising. Through her discovery, she was able to profit from evoking her audiences schadenfreude. Not only did she capitalize off of this phenomenon, but also she identified with it. Through her use of disability drag, she degraded herself into an ugly, fat, stupid woman with her words for an expectant audience. Rivers physically cut herself down through plastic surgery, which she was transparent about in order to dispel the stigma of having undergone such procedures. But ultimately, she was outing herself for an audience who could watch Rivers transform and de-face herself, yet again. And finally, her commentary on the red carpet served as the primary way that Americans could watch Rivers cut down the spectacular. Through watching Rivers degrade celebrities appearances, America watched as celebrities took the brunt of Rivers's judgment.

I think that my own intervention within the fields of Rivers criticism, disability studies, feminist studies, and American Studies, is only the beginning. In addition to the work that I started, there are so many aspects of her identity left to analyze. The homage has been paid, her story has been written (primarily by herself), and it is time to look at her critically. Rivers once

¹³⁶ Ibid.

said, “I would not want to live if I could not perform. It’s in my will. I am not to be revived unless I can do an hour of stand-up.”¹³⁷ Although I cannot revive her so that she can perform an hour of stand-up, I think that her legacy can be brought to life in the world of academia. Joan Rivers would not want us to shy away just because it is hard work.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

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