

6-2004

## Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?

Janet M. Bing

*Old Dominion University*, [jbing@odu.edu](mailto:jbing@odu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english\\_fac\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs)

 Part of the [Anthropological Linguistics and Sociolinguistics Commons](#), and the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Bing, Janet M., "Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?" (2004). *English Faculty Publications*. 8.  
[https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english\\_fac\\_pubs/8](https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs/8)

### Original Publication Citation

Bing, Janet. "Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?" *Women and Language* 27.1 (2004): 22-33.

# Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?<sup>1</sup>

Janet Bing

**Abstract:** *Is the subject of feminist humor male oppression or a celebration of the female experience? This paper argues for the latter and suggests that inclusive jokes can be more effectively subversive than divisive ones. As long as women's jokes focus on men, male definitions, and male behavior, women are marginalizing females, even if their jokes target males. In addition, divisive jokes can strengthen prevailing beliefs about essential female-male differences. However, when straight feminists make jokes and laugh about the shared experiences of females rather than on oppressive male behavior, then feminist humor, like lesbian humor, becomes an agent for change.*

What is "feminist humor" and what is a "feminist joke"? For those unsympathetic to feminism, the term *feminist humor* suggests male-bashing jokes by angry women, a definition most feminists would reject. Yet even feminists do not always agree. Kaufman and Blakley suggest that feminist humor is the humor of the oppressed:

Feminist humor is based on the perception that societies have generally been organized as systems of oppression and exploitation, and that the largest (but not the only) oppressed group has been the female. It is also based on conviction that such oppression is undesirable and unnecessary. It is a humor based on visions of change. (13)

Although Lisa Merrill agrees that feminist humor "empowers women to examine how we have been objectified and fetishized and to what extent we have been led to perpetuate this objectification," she defines feminist humor as "rebellious and self-affirming"(279). For Merrill, feminist humor is not the humor of the oppressed, but empowering humor that recognizes the value of female experience.

This paper explores different types of feminist humor, primarily feminist jokes, and tries to identify those that are potentially most effective in bringing about change and subverting systems of oppression and exploitation. Paradoxically, the most empowering feminist jokes are not those that frame males as oppressors and females as victims, but those that celebrate the values and perspectives of feminist women. I will argue that feminist humor that is divisive can be counter-productive for producing change and that inclusive humor is ultimately more effective. I suggest that feminist humor, like lesbian humor, should be self-defining and make women, rather than men, the central focus.

The emerging interdisciplinary field of humor studies provides numerous insights about the potential effects of jokes. After defining some terms, I discuss some of these effects, particularly those of divisive and inclusive jokes,

and I conclude that inclusive jokes can be subversive without the negative effects of divisive jokes. I discuss lesbian jokes at some length because many of these jokes successfully challenge and undermine attempts by the straight community to define lesbians. Because many lesbian jokes are "rebellious and self-affirming," they fit Merrill's definition of feminist humor in a way that many feminist jokes do not. I suggest that straight feminists who create and tell jokes can learn from their lesbian sisters to stop focusing on males and start making women and women's concerns central.

## Definitions

Holmes defines *humor* as "intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants"(67). Thus, the term *feminist joke* has a different meaning for feminists than for those unsympathetic to feminism. A search for *feminist joke* under Google.com uncovered 14 anti-feminist jokes and 57 anti-male jokes. Apparently, the term *feminist joke*, like so many other terms referring to women, has become pejorative for many people.<sup>2</sup> Even for some feminists, feminist humor is sometimes defined as humor that insults men rather than humor celebrating the female experience.

As numerous writers have pointed out, neither feminists nor lesbians are easily defined groups, partly because these groups are so diverse (Rudy). Feminists have often been self-defined as people who work toward equal opportunity for women, a definition that includes males as well as females. Although there are many possible definitions of feminists and lesbians, and although the two groups often overlap, for the purpose of this paper, I will assume that feminists and lesbians are those who self-identify as such. I define *feminist joke* as a joke created by a feminist that assumes the shared values of most feminists; similarly, I define *lesbian joke* as a joke created by a lesbian that assumes the shared values of most lesbians. These definitions exclude jokes that would belittle or be hostile to feminists and lesbians, or to women in general.

## What effects do jokes have?

Many people assume that jokes are harmless fictions that simply amuse. However, the extensive literature on humor reveals that humor has many possible effects other than amusement. The next few sections describe a few of the relevant ones.

## Humor maintains hierarchy

Some types of humor reflect and reinforce existing hierarchies. That is, humor can help maintain the status quo. Pizzini studied humor in a medical setting and discovered that the initiators and targets of humor mirrored

the hospital hierarchy. For example, nurses would joke among themselves, but not in the presence of doctors. Although in several cases someone low on the hierarchy initiated a joke, the intended recipients did not laugh at it if they ranked higher than the joke teller. Noting the same phenomenon in the military, Ziv says that "anyone who has served in an army knows the term 'short army laugh.' Soldiers know that when a superior officer tells a joke, they had better laugh." He goes on to suggest that this is true in any situation where a hierarchy exists. "When someone in a superior position tells a joke or makes a comment that he [sic] means to be funny, he expects his underlings to laugh" (36). The frequent claim that males make more jokes than females can be at least partially explained by the unequal status of males and females in many situations, since in a public situation, jokes tend to reinforce the values of the group in power. As Stevenson notes, "when jokes involving stratification systems are taken as a group it is clear that their primary theme is not conflict. The kind of joke that is found in anthologies of wit and humor reveals, rather, an adherence to a set of values regarded as the traditional American creed." (216)

In fact, humor functions like other covert and ambiguous markers of relative status, such as interruptions (West and Zimmerman), the use of endearments such as *dear* and *hon* (Wolfson and Maynes), and informal speech (Bing, *Killing Us Softly*). Jokes are effective ways of reinforcing existing hierarchies without seeming to do so because they are ambiguous and fictional. When challenged, an offender can deny the offense in both cases. In the case of endearments, offenders can respond, "I was just trying to be friendly!" In the case of jokes, a standard defense is "I was just joking" or "Don't you have a sense of humor?"

#### Humor can help subvert a hierarchy

Paradoxically, humor can also subvert the status quo, or at least challenge it. The Guerrilla Girls have used humor as an effective strategy for many years. For example, the Tony Awards have tended to maintain the status quo of the theater community by recognizing and rewarding the work of established men only. The Guerrilla Girls created posters such as the one headlined with

- (1) Q: What do toilet stalls and the Tony Awards have in common?  
A: They only allow in one woman at a time!"

Several years ago, these posters put up in theater bathrooms informed theater patrons that by 2000 only one woman had ever won a Tony for directing a play and only one had ever won a Tony for directing a musical. An earlier poster from 1993 showed a cover of the *New York Times Magazine* with a group picture of the "Art World All-Stars" (all white males) with the title, "Hormone Imbalance, Melanin Deficiency." At the least, the Guerilla

Girls posters have helped direct attention to some barriers to participation by previously under-represented artists. As Merrill has noted, "satire, irony and comedy pointedly directed can wield enormous social and political power" (272). The Guerrilla Girls clearly raise awareness of the underlying systems and the values that preserve and reinforce inequality in the arts community.

There is a widespread belief that most women, and particularly feminist women, have no sense of humor. In *The Best of Modern Humor*, out of sixty-four selections, Richler includes only eleven by women. Crawford argues that an interesting paradox exists in the widely accepted stereotype of women as humorless,

"If we accept the argument that humor is a subordinate mode of discourse that rarely disrupts social hierarchies, there seems to be no reason for the culture to represent women as lacking a sense of humor" (153)

She notes that racist stereotypes of African-American people traditionally portrayed them as smiling and laughing, joking, and telling tales—as exaggeratedly comic", and considering the situation similar.

Why, then, the cultural representation of women as humorless? Crawford answers her own question by emphasizing the subversive potential of humor. She feels that humor is particularly important for women, "the only subordinated group that is fully integrated with the dominant group" (153). Men may need to convince women that women have no sense of humor because the alternative is too dangerous.

Subversive humor challenges the myth of women's missing sense of humor. On the Nov., 1973 cover of *Ms.*, a male comic book character asks, "Do you know the women's movement has no sense of humor?" A woman replies, "No, but hum a few bars, and I'll fake it!" Experiments by feminist scholars such as Stillion and White provide scholarly evidence that feminists do, indeed, have a sense of humor, potentially subversive because it often makes fun of the status quo.

However, some humor that *seems* to be subversive may actually reinforce rather than undermine the status quo. Holmes and Marra (70) distinguish between "reinforcing humor" that helps maintain or reinforce the status quo and "subversive humor" that challenges or subverts it. They say, "In formal meetings, humor provides an acceptable means by which subordinates may challenge or criticize their superiors. Between those of different status, humor can be a double-edged weapon, providing a legitimate means of subverting authority" (66). They continue, "Subversive humor challenges existing power relationships, whether informal or formal, explicit or implicit; it subverts the status quo" (71).

In a different article Holmes (6) gives an examples of subversive humor. Jon, an employee, uses a joke to criticize Harry, a manager, who arrives late for a meeting:

(2) Har: sorry I'm late

Jon: no problems, we've been enjoying some quiet character assassination while we waited [Laughter]

The work of Holmes and her colleagues distinguishes between the "reinforcing humor" identified by researchers such as Pizzini and Ziv and "contestive humor" that allows subordinates to contest existing authority structures. However, although Holmes claims that humor can be "an incisive weapon in the armoury of the oppressed" (6), there is some question about its effectiveness in changing the status quo.

In a study of a psychiatric work group, Ruth Laub Coser found that humor followed the staff hierarchy of rank and prestige, with those at the top initiating more humor and directing it downward. Coser reports that jokes were predominately made by males, who made 99 of 103 witticisms at the staff meetings observed for the study. However, Coser also discovered that humor that seemed to challenge the status quo actually helped maintain existing power structures. She concluded that some apparently disruptive jokes, which allowed people to show aggression against their superiors, actually strengthened the established hierarchy while appearing to challenge and disrupt it. She explains this apparent contradiction:

Hence, release of aggression in a witty manner may do much to prevent the undisguised outbreak of hostility or the bottling up of frustrations. Humor helps to convert hostility and to control it, while at the same time permitting it expression. (95)

When humor is used as in example (2), it may temporarily allow a subordinate to express a certain amount of hostility toward a superior in a socially acceptable way. However, if the humor allows the subordinate to vent frustration and then, feeling better, more easily accept the status quo, the underlying source of the frustration does not change. Even when there is a valid reason for the hostility of the joker, the existing hierarchy is not subverted unless the humor challenges or suggests alternatives to existing conditions.

#### Humor can help establish an in-group

Humor can also help those who are relatively less powerful cope with difficult or oppressive situations. This is partly because humor helps establish a feeling of group solidarity. In her study on why people use humor, Hay notes that in her data, "The odds of women using humor to create or maintain solidarity are more than twice as high as men" (734). As Ziv observes, "The laughter of the group members is a behavioral expression of something shared" (29) confirming shared values and beliefs. He says, "Private jokes are a result of group interaction; these reflect common experiences and cause great pleasure to group

members. They create uniqueness for the group because they do not mean a thing to a person from 'outside'" (33).

For example, the following joke is probably funnier to more women than men:

- (3) Q: What's an Australian man's idea of foreplay?  
A: "You awake, Sheila?"

Books like Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* and John Grey's *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* have popularized the idea that males and females have different needs, perceptions, and sexual responses. This foreplay joke assumes this, as do the following jokes, drawn from the web page, "Let's insult men."

- (4) Q: How can you tell if a man is aroused?  
A: He's breathing.
- (5) Q: How many men does it take to screw in a light bulb?  
A: ONE. MEN WILL SCREW ANYTHING

Jokes that disparage men may help establish a sense of solidarity among heterosexual women because of a presumed sense of shared experience. However, these jokes may also reinforce social stereotypes about what is (or should be) "normal" behavior for males and females. Although such jokes may allow women to vent frustrations, they suggest no alternatives to the source of the frustration, and may even allow women to better tolerate an intolerable situation.

#### Humor can reinforce boundaries and stereotypes

Clarifying and maintaining boundaries, including boundaries of acceptable behavior is one of the functions of humor discussed by Hay who says, "Making fun of outsiders serves a boundary function. If the humor reinforces readily accepted and agreed upon standards, then it will increase solidarity" (719). Thus, jokes can reinforce a feeling of solidarity within a group, but at the same time, reinforce differences between "us" and "them."

Quite often, the ways jokes distinguish between the in-group and the out-group are implicit rather than explicit, which is one reason it is important to recognize the assumptions and presuppositions that make a joke funny. The boundary-defining aspects of jokes, providing the basis for deciding who is "us" and who is "them," can be left unstated. Linguists, psychologists, and sociologists sometimes use the term *scripts* for identifying the underlying presuppositions, stereotypes, and assumptions behind different types of humor, and these scripts are helpful for the analysis of jokes. Attardo defines *script* as "an organized chunk of information about something (in the broadest sense). It is a cognitive structure internalized by the speaker which provides the speaker with information on how things are done, organized, etc" (198). Raskin gives a formal example of one lexical script for the term *doctor*. This script makes explicit the concepts and beliefs a typical

native speaker of English might activate when a doctor is referred to. The symbol "+" means that an attribute is present, the symbol ">" stands for "in the past" and "=" for "in the present."

(6) DOCTOR

Subject: [+Human] [+Adult]  
 Activity: >Study medicine  
 =Receive patients: patient comes or doctor visits  
 doctor listens to complaints  
 doctor examines patient  
 =Cure disease: doctor diagnoses disease  
 doctor prescribes treatment  
 = (Take patient's money)  
 Place: > Medical school  
 =Hospital or doctor's office  
 Time: >Many years  
 =Every day  
 =Immediately  
 Condition: Physical contact (85)

As Raskin notes, this DOCTOR script is activated by the first line of the following joke:

- (7) "Is the doctor at home?" the patient asked in his bronchial whisper.  
 "No," the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply.  
 "Come right in."

According to Raskin, the humor in this joke results when the DOCTOR script, which is activated in the first line, is replaced by a sex-related ADULTERY or LOVER script in the second line, triggered by the patient's "bronchial whisper." (117-127) In order for the story of the doctor's wife to be interpreted as a joke, the LOVER script must assume that young, pretty females are available to provide sex to any passing male, even an ailing stranger. This joke meets the basic principles for men's sexual humor discussed in Mulkey and quoted in Crawford:

1. The primacy of intercourse—all men want is sex.
2. The availability of women—all women are sexually available to all men even when they pretend not to be.
3. The objectification of women—women exist to meet men's needs and are, or should be, passive. (145)

Raskin does not provide the LOVER script, but for the doctor joke to work it would have to be something like (8):

(8) FANTASY LOVER SCRIPT

Subject: [+Human] [+Adult][+Male]  
 Object [+Human] [+Female] [+Adult] [+Young]  
 [+Attractive]  
 Activity: Have intercourse  
 =Responds to all male requests positively  
 = Has no other restraints or interests except sex  
 Place: =Any place  
 Time: = Any time male desires  
 = immediately with no foreplay  
 Condition: = Does not discriminate between attractive/  
 unattractive or sick/healthy males.

=Requires no motivation

Like many jokes, the doctor joke is a sexual fantasy joke that involves unreal conditions. This joke is funny for a male in-group when the Fantasy Lover script is substituted for the DOCTOR script. If the FANTASY LOVER script were an isolated event that occurred only in a few jokes, it would be difficult to argue that such a script contributes to the attitude that males and females are essentially different. However, similar fantasy lover scripts frequently appear in rock videos on MTV, where beautiful young women seem to be eager for sex, even with boorish, unattractive men. Such scripts are also common in movies, in popular music, on television, and in advertisements. Collectively, all these messages suggest that males and females are different, with fantasy females displaying few human qualities such as intelligence and common sense. One need not look far to find anti-female jokes that are far more dehumanizing and derogatory than the joke quoted by Raskin. Here is one of the many offensive jokes told by men on campus:

(9) What's a Cinderella 10?

A woman who sucks and fucks 'til midnight, then turns into a pizza and a six-pack. (Baird, 10)

This derogatory joke clearly dehumanizes and objectifies women. What Raskin's joke illustrates is that even an "innocent" joke such as the doctor joke in (7) also dehumanizes and objectifies women, but does it in a more subtle way. Disparaging jokes like this probably reinforce stereotypes and the boundary between males and females. As Bem has argued, gender polarization and the strict categorization of males and females has historically worked against the interests of women. Is it possible that divisive jokes told by women also reinforce gender polarization and strict categorization?

Tannen and many others have written about the differences between males and females as a result of their different socialization. She claims that women value cooperation more than men do, a belief shared by some who find the following joke funny:

- (10) A man is driving up a steep, narrow mountain road. A woman is driving the opposite way, down the same road. As they pass each other, the woman leans out the window and yells: "PIG"!! the man immediately leans out his window and screams "BITCH"!! They each continue on their way and as the man rounds the next corner he crashes into a huge pig that was trying to cross the road. The End.

In this joke, a BITCHY WOMAN script is activated when the woman yells "PIG" as she passes the man. The joke works because this script is unexpectedly replaced by the HELPFUL WOMAN script at the end. The joke fails to work unless there is a presupposition that women are stereotypically helpful and cooperative and males aggressive and competitive. Thus, in this joke, an aggressive male, perceiving an apparently hostile challenge by the woman, responds with an equally hostile reply.

Attempting to warn the man, the woman is misunderstood and her helpfulness is rewarded with an insult. This joke may resonate with women who have been in abusive relationships, where whatever they do to please or assuage a male has been rewarded with verbal or physical violence. In the fantasy world of the joke, the punch line finds the man getting punished for his unfair treatment of the woman. In this sense it is subversive, but because it still frames men as oppressors and women as victims, it is also potentially divisive.

Perhaps jokes like this give some women reassurance that they are not alone in their difficult daily lives. This type of humor that Hay calls "coping humor" (726) suggests fantasy alternatives to oppressive situations and may offer women momentary relief and a feeling that others share their situation. However, jokes like (10) provide little insight into the differences between males and females and offer no possible alternatives to the perceived miscommunication. Taken collectively, many anti-male jokes suggest that males are a mean-spirited lot who consciously set out to oppress women, a script that most males would reject.

For example, consider the following two jokes:

- (11) What is the difference between a man and a catfish?  
One is a bottom-feeding scum-sucker and the other is a fish.
- (12) Why are blonde jokes so short?  
So men can remember them.

Both of these divisive jokes are anti-male, since the implied schemata assume little more than "men are dreadful creatures" or "men are stupid," much the same way that the doctor joke in (7) assumes that women are stupid and always sexually available. The following divisive joke reported in Mitchell is more sophisticated than these crude jokes, but it is still divisive:

- (13) There was a lady married to a traveling salesman. She had no kids and no pets. So she decided to get a watchdog for when her husband was on the road. She went to the pet shop and got a German Shepherd and a few days later her house was broken into, but the dog just sat there and watched. So she took the dog back and explained to the pet shop owner. He gave her the only other watchdog he had, which was a Doberman Pincer. She took the dog home and two days later the same thing happened, and the dog just watched the robber take everything. So she took the dog back and explained to the pet shop owner. He told her all he had left was this bird that had been trained in karate. He demonstrated to her that you tell the bird to "beep beep" something and he'd tear it apart. He said, "Beep beep this table," and the bird tore it up. She said she'd try him out and was so excited she told him things to "beep beep" all the way home. "Beep beep this car," and the car was left in a heap. She got home with the bird and her husband came home and laughed at the bird. She said, "All you have to do is tell him to 'beep beep' something and he'll tear it up." The husband laughed cynically and said, Ha, beep beep my ass." And the bird did.

In this joke, the husband fails to take anything his wife says seriously. His arrogance, assumed superiority, and indifference to his wife all contribute to the humor when, at the end, he brings about his own punishment. As Douglas observes: "Humor chastises insincerity, pomposity, stupidity" (93). The fact that in this joke the husband is a traveling salesman, a stereotypically promiscuous group in the world of jokes, adds a second revenge script to this castration joke.

It is possible that a joke like this might be effective in revealing a system in which males have so much power that they think they can deny women a voice, ignoring anything their mates say. On one level, the implication is that there can be serious consequences for men who silence women, and on another level, for those who cheat on their wives. The joke provides a satisfying fantasy world in which arrogance, pomposity, stupidity and infidelity are punished. The underlying message seems to be that husbands should listen to their wives. However, most men (and some women) with whom I have shared this joke find it neither funny nor instructive.

Other divisive jokes told by women are less hostile. For example:

- (14) How many men does it take to change a roll of toilet paper?  
WE DON'T KNOW. IT'S NEVER BEEN DONE
- (15) What is a man's idea of helping with the housework?  
LIFTING HIS LEG FOR YOU TO VACUUM UNDER IT

Both of these jokes evoke a HOUSEWORK script. For joke (14), this could be formalized as:

- (16) HOUSEWORK: TOILET PAPER REPLACEMENT  
Subject: [+human]  
Activity: change roll of toilet paper  
=remove empty roll  
=install full roll  
Place: bathroom  
Time: periodically  
Condition: roller is empty.

Women enjoy the joke in (14) partly because many males still refuse to do the trivial chore of changing a roll of toilet paper, a task that has traditionally been the responsibility of housewives. The joke in (15) makes fun of an outdated division of labor. Although these jokes are anti-male, they do more than simply disparage men. They reveal and make fun of the attitude that a woman should do all the housework, regardless of her other responsibilities or those of the male.

The following joke targets another stereotyped behavior of males, also popularized by Tannen:

- (17) The children of Israel wandered around the desert for 40 years. Even in Biblical times men wouldn't ask for directions.

Jokes (14), (15), and (17) target males, but they also criticize attitudes, traditions and ideas that could some day be changed.

Although jokes like these may reflect women's perceptions, they also raise a potential problem. By evoking the script of a world in which males oppress females, these jokes also make men rather than women the center of attention. In language and gender scholarship, this script falls under the "dominance paradigm" (Cameron 39), a script that presupposes that men are generally oppressors and women victims. One shortcoming of this script is that most men do not recognize themselves as oppressors, and most women resist thinking of themselves as victims. Even women who have been assaulted or raped often try to minimize the importance of their assaults because they think of "victims" as powerless rather than the recipients of violent acts; they minimize what has happened because they do not want to be perceived or defined as powerless (Wood and Rennie). Divisive jokes often evoke the stereotypes of women as victims and males as oppressors who consciously and willfully keep women subservient. The following jokes by Elaine Boosler (from "Marriage Quotes") suggest such a world:

- (18) When women are depressed they either eat or go shopping. Men invade another country. It's a whole different way of thinking.
- (19) You ever notice that the same people who are against abortion are for capital punishment: Typical fisherman's attitude, throw them back when they're small and kill 'em when they're bigger.

In fact, some scholars, such as Shepherd, imply that women's humor must be divisive. Shepherd claims, "Recognition of oppression may be essential for women's humor, and that agent (or a suitable target) specified" (43). If Shepherd were right and if feminist jokes were only divisive jokes such as those discussed above, then feminist humor would necessarily include male-bashing. However, if feminist humor is "self-affirming" humor that recognizes "the value of female experience" as Merrill asserts, there are other possibilities. By targeting men, disparaging humor ignores women, and makes women, their lives, their values, and their interests invisible. Have feminists discovered humor only to complain about men?

#### **Divisive Jokes: What price fun?**

Divisive jokes can be fun, but they can also have some unanticipated negative consequences. When told among women, divisive jokes allow women to vent their frustrations without solving their problems, although perhaps making difficult circumstances more tolerable. When told in mixed company, divisive jokes can also alienate potentially sympathetic people of good will. In addition, by emphasizing differences between males and females, divisive jokes may reinforce assumptions about males and females being essentially and categorically

different and never being able to communicate. Divisive humor can reinforce the idea that sexist behavior results from miscommunication. Henley and Kramer assert that arguments based on miscommunication almost always benefit those in power. When there has been an assumption of essential differences, it has been easier for men to deny females equal access to the opportunities available to males (Bem; Jamieson; Bing and Bergvall).

Sexism requires rigid boundaries between males and females, ignoring the wide range of behavior and ability within and across categories. Sandra Bem discusses how a strict dichotomy works against the best interests of women. She shows how women have traditionally been denied their rights because of biological essentialism (the belief that men and women are essentially different), strict categorization (the belief that all members of a category share certain inherent characteristics), and gender polarization, (the ubiquitous organization of social life around the distinction between male and female). She notes that gender polarization establishes "a cultural connection [ . . . ] between sex and virtually every other aspect of human experience," including those that have nothing to do with sex. (2) Biological determinism, the belief that biology is destiny, suggests that males and females are categorically different, and thus should be treated differently on the basis of category membership rather than on the basis of individual abilities.

Most feminists are familiar with arguments attempting to show how males and females are biologically different, arguments that justify why females should have different (and usually limited) opportunities from males. Until relatively recently, females were discouraged from sports and exercise because of the belief that their wombs might be damaged if they exercised too much. They were denied education because of claims that if the "vital force" went to their brains, it would not go to their wombs and would lower their chances of bearing children (Bem, 10). Current authors such as Moir and Jessel argue that the brains of females and males are "hard-wired" differently, and, therefore, that women should not be scientists or computer engineers. Historically, females were denied many legal rights because of claims about their inferior brains, lack of education, and fragility (Ritchie). Jamieson describes a number of court cases in which the argument of essential differences was used against women, including the 1973 *EEOC v. Sears Roebuck & Co.*, a 1992 class action lawsuit against Lucky Stores, and a 1993 case, *Harris v. Forklift Systems Inc.* (112-119). As Jamieson demonstrates, the widespread belief that males and females are essentially different has led to gender polarization and has almost always benefited men.

Can one joke or even a series of jokes establish a viewpoint? Obviously not. Can listeners assent to gender polarities more strongly when they constantly hear divisive jokes? Possibly. We need not experimentally show a causal relationship between messages about differences and people's attitudes and behaviors; obviously, socialization is ongoing and results from many different factors. Nobody

expects a few drops of water or even a large river to create a canyon over a short period of time. Similarly, an occasional divisive joke will not have much effect on an individual's attitudes or behavior or convince people that males and females are essentially different. However, just as flowing water ultimately erodes stone, repeated messages from various media, parents, teachers and friends, as well as repeated jokes about differences between women and men may influence people's ideas and attitudes. Persian speakers have a proverb that translates, "Drop by drop a river is made." Similarly, it is also possible that "joke by joke a stereotype is made." At a minimum, a joke can reinforce existing stereotypes and provide resistance to alternative messages from other sources.

### Inclusive Humor as Subversive

Humor does not have to be divisive to be influential; inclusive humor can effectively deliver a message without the drawbacks of much divisive humor. Inclusive humor can target inequitable systems without attacking putative mean-spirited oppressors. Whereas divisive humor often attacks people, inclusive humor makes fun of absurd attitudes, ideas, beliefs and systems that keep females at a disadvantage.

For example, although studies about rapists such one by Skully and Marolla show that what a victim does or wears has very little to do with a rape, people discussing a rape often blame the victim. All too frequently, as in the Mike Tyson and Kobe Bryant cases, the questions asked will be, "What was she wearing?" or "What was she doing there in the first place?" According to Skully and Marolla, such attitudes make it easier for even convicted rapists to justify their behavior and blame it on the victims. A cartoon by Marian Henley (*Hysteria*, Summer 1993), with a male victim complaining to two policewomen, offers a different perspective on sexual assault. The text is:

(20) *Man: I've been ROBBED! Some &#\* took my WALLET!*  
*Cop 1: Well, what did you EXPECT?*  
*Cop 2: You're dressed so EXPENSIVELY!*  
*Cop 1: I'm afraid you wouldn't have much of a case. . .*  
*Cop 2: It'd be YOUR word against THEIRS!*  
*Man: WHAT?!*  
*Cop 2: How could you prove that you weren't willing?*  
*Man: WILLING?!*  
*Cop 1: Nice men keep their wallet covered in public. They spend money MODESTLY. . .*  
*Cop 2: . . .and don't call attention to their FINANCIAL CHARMS!*  
*Cop 1: Otherwise, people get the wrong idea!*  
*Cop 2: If someone takes your money, it's YOUR fault, not THEIRS!*  
*Man: This. . .*  
*THIS IS CRAZY!*  
*Cop 1: No, this is role-reversal!*  
*Cop 2: I mean, if you arouse somebody financially, you've GOT to follow through. . .*

By juxtaposing rape and robbery, Henley effectively reveals why victim-blaming is absurd.

Inclusive humor involves no presupposition that most males are mean-spirited or that they consciously try to oppress females. In fact, the assumption seems to be that if men really understood, they would change their attitudes. For example, in one *Sally Forth* comic by Greg Howard, Hilary's father asks what she's reading. Hilary says she's studying the American Revolution and reading the chapter about the founding mothers. The dialogue continues:

(21) *Father: Really? I never studied the founding mothers in school.*  
*Hilary: Compare history to arithmetic, Dad. How would you feel if they had taught you to add but not to subtract?*  
*Father: I'd feel they left out half of it.*  
*Hilary: Bingo.*

Comics like this suggest alternatives to the status quo, in this case, history books that report only the lives and achievements of males.

With inclusive jokes, both an in-group and an out-group can laugh. The following excerpt from a joke makes fun of penis envy and of e-mail, yet both males and e-mail users that I have shared it with have laughed, and have denied being offended.

(22) **Reasons why E-mail is like a penis.**  
 Some folks have it, some don't. Those who have it would be devastated if it were ever cut off. They think that those who don't have it are somehow inferior. They think it gives them power. They are wrong. Those who don't have it may agree that it's a nifty toy, but think it's not worth the fuss that those who do have it make about it. Still, many of those who don't have it would like to try it. It can be up or down. It's more fun when it's up, but it makes it hard to get any real work done. [. . .] If you don't take proper precautions, it can spread viruses. [. . .] If you play with it too much, you go blind.

E-mail humor often juxtaposes sex and technology, but in this joke, privilege is also targeted in phrases such as "it's a nifty toy" and "not worth the fuss that those who do have it make about it." When jokes can get people to laugh at their own pretensions and beliefs (such as the belief in penis envy), it is possible that they are more open to new ideas (such as the possibility that some people lead rich and full lives even without E-mail).

When women use inclusive humor, rather than divisive humor, they can still target problems, but they do not necessarily have to target men. They do not have to assume scripts in which males are oppressors and females victims. However, even with much inclusive humor, males still remain the center of attention. Where is the humor by and for women, humor that ignores men altogether, humor that allows feminists to define themselves rather than always reacting against the definitions of the wider society?

## Lesbian jokes as self-defining

A quick examination of jokes told by lesbians for lesbians reveals surprisingly little divisive humor. Instead, there are frequent jokes about topics of interest only to lesbians. By and large, these jokes simply ignore heterosexual definitions of lesbians. In the 1990's many lesbian writers challenged the idea of "lesbian" as a discreet identity and "lesbian community" as a coherent social formation. Queer Theory produced a notion of lesbian community based on diversity (Rudy). As Gever and Magnan say: "An enormous rift exists between how we are portrayed and portray ourselves as deviant women in patriarchal, heterosexist societies and how we function and represent ourselves within our own subculture" (67). Bing and Heller claim that

lesbian jokes "challenge the images upon which straight society--and even some lesbians--base its assumptions of who lesbians are and what they do. Lesbian jokes became more visibly aimed at demonstrating that 'lesbian' itself is an externally constructed category of identity, a fiction, that has been used by some in the interests of identity politics, and by others in the interests of demonizing and disenfranchising lesbians." (8)

Lesbian jokes often acknowledge, but at the same time undermine outside definitions. For example, one of the most widely known lesbian jokes is the following:

- (23) Q: What does a lesbian bring on the second date?  
A: A U-Haul.

Although the dominant culture tends to define lesbians primarily in terms of the sexual act--what lesbians do in bed-- this joke is funny to lesbians partly because it redefines lesbians primarily in domestic terms, that is, in what lesbians do at home. Thus, lesbian jokes deconstruct the popular stereotype of what it means to be lesbian, and undermine attempts at strict categorization. Just as sexism requires a clear distinction between male and female, homophobia requires a clear division between homosexuality and heterosexuality. One aspect of lesbian jokes is that they destabilize this homo/hetero opposition and show it to be a fiction.

For example, the idea of disease was what originally made "lesbian" a distinct category. Medical specialists invented lesbianism in the 19th century as a means of classifying and categorizing deviant behavior types. Robin Tyler cleverly deconstructs this underlying assumption of essential differences with the following joke:

- (24) "If homosexuality is a disease, let's all call in queer to work."  
"Hello, can't work today. Still queer!"

Tyler highlights the absurdity of the idea of homosexuality as sickness by taking to an extreme the illogic inherent in

that assumption. As Bing and Heller note, although "lesbian" was originally defined as deviance, lesbians challenge definitions or names imposed from the outside. Lesbian jokes are often jokes that implicitly ask: "Am I that name?" Many lesbian jokes both recognize and undermine the expectations of the dominant culture.

There are relatively few lesbian jokes about the oppression lesbians have traditionally had to cope with, but many jokes about, "How do you know if someone is a lesbian?" Sara Cytron and Harriet Malinowitz in *Flowers* suggest:

- (25) "go to someone's apartment, look inside her kitchen cabinet, and count how many Celestial Seasonings herbal teas she has. If there are more than six, she's probably a lesbian." (39-40)

Although some lesbian jokes are openly anti-male, such jokes are in the minority. A search on Google.com for "lesbian joke" resulted in 14 jokes about lesbians, 30 anti-lesbian jokes and only one anti-male joke. Lesbian anti-male jokes do exist, however. One example is Suzanne Westenhoefer's response to a heckler who wanted to know if she got "that way" because she had some sort of bad sexual experience with a guy. Westenhoefer responded,

- (26) Yeah--like, if that's all it took, the entire female population would be gay, sir, and I'd be here talking about the weather, all right? (181)

More typical are Chris Lanter's "10 Questions Most Commonly Asked of Lesbians and the Answers You'll never Hear."

- (27) Q: What exactly, do two women do together? (Usually asked by a woman)  
A: It takes too long to explain. A lesbian quickie lasts hours. We lay there and discuss politics until we figure it out. But if you like I'll show you. How about this evening at six?
- (28) Q: Which one of you is the man? (Usually asked by a man)  
A: We're lesbian, not confused. Look it up!

Although Lanter's jokes make fun of the discomfort and ignorance of heterosexuals, they still make lesbians rather than males or heterosexuals central. Notice the difference between the following two lightbulb jokes (for which there are many possible answers). In addition to one frequent hostile response to both questions--- "That's not funny!"--- a few answers to the question are:

- (29) Q: How many feminists does it take to screw in a light bulb?  
A: - Three. One to screw it in, and two to talk about the sexual implications.  
- Four. One to change the bulb, and three to write about how the bulb is exploiting the socket.  
- Three. One to change the bulb, and two to secretly wish they were the socket

- Two. One to change the light bulb, and one to kick the balls of any man who even tries to volunteer his help.
- That's wimmin, you jerk.

Notice that the answers to the light bulb question in this joke reflect the negative stereotype of feminists rather than a feminist self-definition. Compare these answers to the lesbian joke in (30).

- (30) Q: How many lesbians does it take to screw in a light bulb?  
 A: Seven. One to change it, three to organize the potluck, and three to film an empowering documentary.

Except for the first answer to the feminist light bulb joke in (29), most of the responses evoke a frame of oppressors and victims, suggesting that this is a joke about, and not by feminists. However, the answer to the lesbian joke in (30) challenges the dominant community's definitions of lesbians as primarily sexual. It is funny because it first evokes the sexual frame with the word *screw* and then replaces it with a frame of a community that feeds and empowers itself, despite the presence of a culture that would deny it the right to work or define itself.

Addressing women, Barreca emphasizes "the importance of defining and using our own humor," (*Snow White* 193) noting that humor is "a powerful way to make ourselves heard." (202) Lesbian humor provides a good model for self-definition and affirmation of one's own values. Lesbian humor undermines the idea that lesbians need or want to be heard or affirmed by outsiders.

Because lesbians and feminists share many of the same values and attitudes, much of the humor that lesbians use among themselves would work just as well for feminists, lesbian or straight. The following version of joke (29) still makes fun of feminists, but does not reinforce the stereotype of feminists as angry man-haters.

- (31) Q: How many feminists does it take to change a light bulb?  
 A: Five. One to justify the change, one to do a fund-raiser, one to buy the bulb, one to change the bulb, and one to host the potluck celebrating the achievement.

Lesbian jokes about cats, Birkenstocks, vegetarianism, herbal tea, anti-war sentiments, and women friends are often as appropriate for feminists as for non-feminist lesbians, and there are enough absurdities in potlucks, protest marches, women's caucuses, and women's studies classes to support any number of stand-up comics. However, with the exception of Kathy and Mo (Gaffney and Jajimy) in *Parallel Lives* and many of the stories of Regina Barecca, little feminist humor is about the shared experiences of women. With a few exceptions, such as *Titters: The First Collection of Humor by Women* (Stillman and Beats), *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor & Satire* (Kaufman and Blakely), and *The Penguin Book of Women's Humor* (Barreca), little humor by and for women about the lives of women has been published.

## Humor as Subversion

Because humor can be used in ordinary social situations to introduce and develop ideas that would be taboo in more serious modes, jokes can be an effective way to challenge the status quo. In discussing jokes, Mary Douglas claims that any joke, however remote its subject, is potentially subversive: "Since its form consists of a victorious tilting of uncontrol against control, it is an image of the leveling of hierarchy, the triumph of intimacy over formality, of unofficial values over official ones" (98).

Any teacher of a women's studies course knows how difficult it can be to introduce new perspectives to students who have never questioned the values of the culture they grew up in. Most people resist ideas that challenge long-held beliefs. For this reason, less powerful groups have effectively used humor to introduce new ideas to those who have closed their minds to anything that threatens or offers alternatives to an existing situation. In a non-humorous context, when an individual's world view is challenged with "irrelevant" information inconsistent with a long-established set of beliefs or attitudes, cognitive dissonance and/or a "closed mind" may be the result. According to Schaff, cognitive dissonance and closed minds allow new ideas to simply be ignored.<sup>3</sup> Because humor is assumed to be fiction and is relatively non-threatening, it can begin to open closed minds. Quoting Margaret Atwood, Barreca (in Dedyna, C9) gives one example of how a new idea can be introduced with humor. Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, speaking to her son, asks: "You really think your father was such a great man? You think we had a good marriage? Why do you think you're an only child?" How many Shakespearian scholars have pondered that particular question before?

Others agree with Barreca. Holmes says, "Subversive humor challenges existing ideas and power relationships and sometimes pokes fun at more powerful groups. Whether informal or formal, explicit or implicit, it subverts the status quo." (71) In comparing jokes to rituals, Douglas says that rites and rituals teach us that "the ordained patterns of social life are inescapable". In contrast to rites and rituals, the "message of a joke is that they are escapable" (103). If a joke allows a new message to be received rather than ignored or not perceived at all, that joke is indeed subversive.

One message that certainly needs to be challenged is the assumption that males should always be central and females peripheral, a message repeatedly sent to females through advertisements, movies, textbooks, religion, teacher behavior, etc. One way to undermine this message is to tell fewer jokes that frame men as oppressors and women as victims. This may not be easy for heterosexual feminists. Unlike lesbians, many feminists have husbands and/or lovers, and, thus, are less able to ignore males and the dominant society. As Walker notes, women are different from other minority groups:

Although women are intimately and consistently involved with men in ways that blacks, for example, are not with whites, their humor nonetheless reveals a collective consciousness: women give each other advice about dealing with men, they speak to common female experiences such as motherhood, and although they do not create specific negative stereotypes of men, they make clear that a group other than themselves has made the rules by which they must live (13).

Jokes can also either reinforce or undermine the assumption that males are central and females less important or that males and females are categorically different. Humor can disrupt ideas of what is "normal" and encourage people to question their assumptions. Many self-proclaimed feminists still accept the definitions of "male" and "female" as distinct stable categories, an assumption rejected by Queer theorists. In her discussion of Queer theory and feminism, Rudy explains that Queer theorists challenge the stable categories of men and women and "are devoted to rereading past events, texts, and social theories—especially those related to sexuality—with an eye toward disruption" (197-198). Feminists have established that gender is socially constructed, but Queer theorists claim that biological sex is also socially constructed. (For examples of evidence relevant to this position, see Fausto-Sterling and Bing and Bergvall.) Like humor, Queer theory questions standard beliefs, especially standard beliefs about strict categorization. Rudy claims "Being queer is not a matter of being gay, then, but rather of being committed to challenging that which is perceived as normal" (197).

Women need to tell jokes about women and their concerns. Nicole Hollander's comics ([www.nicolehollander.com](http://www.nicolehollander.com)) are good role models for feminist humorists. Hollander's Sylvia and other cartoon characters make jokes about weight loss, mammograms, HMO's, depression, disorganization, family trips, support groups, fashion, the information highway, self-help books, Republicans, the flat tax, and "the true nature of dogs and cats." For example, in one comic strip Sylvia, a writer, is typing the following:

Feeling totally disorganized and out of control?  
The Sylvia team of severe organizers will come to your home and get to the root of the problem and fix it, whether it's your desk, your medicine chest, your purse, or your spouse. Call 1-800-where-the heck did I put it?

From "off-stage" comes the question, "Ma, did you move the kitchen?" and Sylvia responds, "It's probably under something." Nicole Hollander does not ignore men completely, particularly Republican men, but her collected cartoons show that, in the world of Sylvia, cats, not males, rule the universe.

As more women begin to trust their own perceptions and recognize the value of their own experience, feminists

can avoid the angry feminist stereotype and the notion that feminist humor has to include male-bashing. When this happens, more feminist humor can become rebellious and self-affirming. Women share many common experiences, and laughter is a healthy response to the daily absurdity of women's lives.

In most "traditional" joke books most of the characters are male, unless the joke is about sex or the butt of the joke is a stereotyped female such as a dumb blond. Why should real women be invisible in jokes, as in so many other realms? For example, in Humes, the following story about a man arrested for owning a still contains only male characters.

- (31) The district attorney cross-examined the young defendant. "You mean to sit there and tell this jury that you had a completely assembled the still on your premises and were not engaged in the illegal production of alcoholic spirits?" "That's the truth," answered the defendant. "I acquired it as a conversation piece, just like any other antique." "You'll have to do better than that," sneered the prosecutor "As far as this court is concerned the very possession of such equipment is proof of your guilt." "In that case you'd better charge me with rape, too," the defendant said. "Are you confessing to the crime of rape, young man?" interrupted the judge. "NO, YOUR HONOR," answered the defendant, "BUT I SURE AS HELL HAVE THE EQUIPMENT." (77)

In Humes' collection of stories, females exist primarily as sex-objects or wives. However, notice that this story is much more effective when one of the characters is a woman, as in the following version, which was sent to me:

- (32) A couple goes on vacation to a fishing resort in northern Minnesota. The husband likes to fish at the crack of dawn. The wife likes to read. One morning the husband returns after several hours of fishing and decides to take a nap. Although not familiar with the lake, the wife decides to take the boat out. She motors out a short distance, anchors, and continues to read her book. Along comes a game warden in his boat. He pulls up alongside the woman and says, "Good morning, Ma'am. What are you doing?" "Reading a book," she replies, (thinking "Isn't it obvious?") "You're in a restricted fishing area," he informs her. "I'm sorry officer, but I'm not fishing, I'm reading." "Yes, but you have all the equipment. For all I know you could start at any moment. I'll have to take you in and write you up." "If you do that, I'll have to charge you with sexual assault," says the woman. "But I haven't even touched you," says the game warden. "That's true, but you have all the equipment. For all I know you could start at any moment." "Have a nice day, Ma'am," and he left.

It is seldom easy to change all-male jokes into jokes containing females, but the attempt can be quite revealing, even if the results are not funny. It is probably more important that jokes reflect women's perspectives and not

simply more women. In addition to making women and their interests central in their jokes, feminists who haven't done so already should become familiar with lesbian humorists such as Alison Bechdel, Kate Clinton, Lea DeLaria, Diane DiMassia, Roberta Gregory, Marga Gomez, Shelly Roberts, Suzanne Westenhoefer and Karen Williams. They may discover that, contrary to popular stereotypes, much lesbian humor is not only funny, but also often concentrates on the shared experiences of women. Subjects for women's humor are everywhere: menstruation, cramps, childbirth, child care, panty hose, hot flashes, fashion, low wages, beauty standards, housework, shopping, illness, old age, bad doctors, cooking, money, and, of course, sex. The list is endless, and such humor acknowledges that women's lives are not limited simply to a few stereotyped roles.

Most importantly, women should not overlook the potential revolutionary value of humor. Kate Clinton (quoted in Barreca) recognizes it and says:

Consider feminist humor and consider the lichen. Growing low and slowly on enormous rocks, secreting tiny amounts of acid, year after year, eating into the rock. Making places for water to gather, to freeze and crack the rock a bit. Making soil, making way for grasses to grow. Making way for rosehips and sea oats, for aspen and cedar. It is the lichen which begins the splitting apart of the rocks, the changing of the shoreline, the shape of the earth. Feminist humor is serious, and it is about the changing of this world. (*Penguin Book of Humor* 147)

## Notes

- I would like to thank a number of colleagues for suggestions on earlier versions of this paper: Carolyn Dunlap, Dana Heller, Carolyn Rhodes, Charles Ruhl, Joanne Scheibman, Anita Taylor, and two helpful anonymous reviewers for *Women and Language*. The data for this paper have been collected from a number of sources over a four-year period. These include collections of women's humor such as Stillman and Beatts (1976), Kaufman and Blakeley (1980), and Barreca (1996); collections of jokes on the Internet; requests to friends and friends of friends to forward jokes to me; jokes posted on bulletin boards, and academic discussions of humor, such as Douglas (1975). Despite these efforts, I discovered few feminist jokes that I enjoyed, and this was one reason I became interested in this subject. I have attempted to find the original sources for jokes used in this paper, but, in many cases, that attempt has been unsuccessful. Any failure to correctly acknowledge the author of a joke is inadvertent. Several of the ideas and jokes on page 29 have previously appeared in Bing and Heller (2003).
- The tendency of definitions of words associated with women to become pejorative has been well documented. As early as the 15th century, the current sense of the word *mistress* as an illicit replacement began to compete with the original positive meaning which was parallel to *master*. Until the 19th century, calling a woman a *tart* was an endearment, equivalent to calling her "sweetie," but by the late 1890's it had acquired the negative implication of "loose morals." More recently, the terms *feminist* and *Ms.* have become negative for many who do not identify themselves as feminists and these terms have become associated with the stereotype of man-hating bra-burners.

- Schaff defines *cognitive dissonance* and offers a summary of some of the research about it. He says:  
I mean the experimentally verified fact that in conflict situations, if the opinions and attitudes (in the sense of readiness to act) of a human being concerning certain issues, primarily social ones, are at variance with the realities of life and if neither those realities can be brought into agreement with the said opinions nor those opinions modified without ruining the ideology of their carrier, then a psychological defense mechanism is put into operation to make one's mind immune against inconvenient information. This leads to paradoxical situations, which, however, do occur often in practice, in which certain knowledge that has apparently been assimilated intellectually is emotionally blocked and practically erased from one's consciousness because it is inconvenient. Such situations are in a sense schizophrenic because a given person at the same time knows something and does not know it, which, while it must appear strange, often does occur in practice. This in turn breeds specific forms of dogmatism and the phenomenon of 'closed mind', deaf to all arguments (94).

## References

- Attardo, Salvatore. *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994.
- Baird, John. "ODU Men's Jokes," Unpublished essay, 1991.
- Barreca, Regina. *They Used to Call Me Snow White... But I Drifted*. New York: Penguin, 1963.
- Barreca, Regina. *The Penguin Book of Women's Humor*. New York: Penguin, 1996.
- Bem, Sandra. *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Bing, Janet. "Killing us Softly: Ambiguous Markers of Power and Solidarity." *Cultural Performances*. Eds. Mary Bucholtz et al. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Women and Language Group, 1994.
- Bing, Janet. "Brain Sex: How the Media Reports and Distorts Brain Research." *Women and Language*, XXII, 2 (1999): 4-12.
- Bing, Janet and Victoria Bergvall. "The Question of Questions: Beyond Binary Thinking." *Rethinking Language and Gender Research: Theory and Practice*, eds. Victoria Bergvall, Janet Bing and Alice Freed, 1-30. London and New York: Longman, 1996.
- Bing, Janet, and Dana Heller. "How Many Lesbians Does it Take to Screw in a Light Bulb?" *Humor* 16-2, 2003: 157-182.
- Cameron, Deborah. "The Language-gender Interface: Challenging Co-optation," *Rethinking Language and Gender Research: Theory and Practice*. Eds. Victoria Bergvall, Janet Bing and Alice Freed, 31-53. London and New York: Longman, 1996.
- Coser, Ruth. "Laughter Among Colleagues." *Psychiatry* 23, 1960: 81-95.
- Crawford, Mary. *Talking Difference: On Gender and Language*. London: Sage, 1995.
- Dedyna, Katherine. "Did Ya Hear the One about the Feminist Humourist?" *Times Colonist*, Oct. 26 2000, 8C, 9C.
- Douglas, Mary. *Jokes, Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*. London: Routledge, 1975.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.
- Flowers, Charles, ed. *Out, Loud, & Laughing: A Collection of Gay and Lesbian Humor*. New York: Anchor Books, 1995.
- Gaffney, Mo and Kathy Najimny. *Parallel Lives: The Kathy and Mo Show*. New York: Dramatist's Play Service, 1998.
- Gever, Martha, and Nathalie Magnan. "The Same Difference: On Lesbian Representation." *Stolen Glances*. Eds. Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser, London: Pandora, 1991, 67-75.
- Grey, John. *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus: A Practical Guide for Improving Communication and Getting What You Want in Your Relationships*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Guerrilla Girls. Online posting 10 October 2002 <<http://www.guerrillagirls.com>>
- Hay, Jennifer. "Functions of humor in the conversations of men and women." *Journal of Pragmatics* 32, 2000: 709-742.
- Henley, Marian. Cartoon. *Hysteria*, Summer 1993:17.

- Henley, Nancy and Cheri Kramarae. "Gender, Power and Miscommunication," *The Women & Language Debate: A Sourcebook*. Eds. Carnille Roman, Suzanne Juhasz and Cristanne Mille, 383-406. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994.
- Holmes, Janet. "No Joking Matter! The Functions of Humour in the Workplace." *Proceedings of the Australian Linguistics Society Conference*. Brisbane University of Queensland (July 1998). 16 July 2003 <<http://www.cltr.uq.edu.au/als98/holme358.html>>
- Holmes, Janet and Meredith Marra. "Over the edge? Subversive Humor Between Colleagues and Friends." *Humor* 15 (1) 2002. 65-87.
- Howard, Greg. Online posting "Sally Forth" distributed by King Features. 16 July 2003  
<<http://www.kingfeatures.com/features/comics/sforth/about.htm>>
- Humes, James C. *Podium Humor*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. *Beyond the Double Bind*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Kaufman, Gloria and Mary Kay Blakely, eds., *Pulling Our Own Strings: Feminist Humor & Satire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980.
- Lanter, Chris and the Gay & Lesbian Student's Union. Online posting. 29 July 2002  
<<http://www.ncf.carleton.ca/ip/signs/life/gay/humor/lesbian.faq>>
- "Let's Insult Men." Online posting. 31 July 2002.  
<<http://www.foxinternet.net/web/mal/veaux/hmr/men.htm>>
- "Marriage quotes." Online posting 4 August 2002.  
<<http://www.marriagepartner.com/talk/messages/79/77.html>>
- Merrill, Lisa. "Feminist Humor, Rebellious and Self-Affirming." *Women's Studies*. 15, 1988, 271-280.
- Moir, A. and Jessel, D. *Brain Sex: The Real Difference between Men & Women*. New York: Delta, 1992.
- Mitchell, Carol. "Hostility and Aggression Towards Males in Female Joke Telling." *Frontiers* 3 (3) 1978, 19-23.
- Pizzini, Franca. "Communication Hierarchies in Humour: Gender Differences in the Obstetrical/Gynaecological Setting." *Discourse and Society*, 2, (1991), 477-488.
- Raskin, Victor. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht / Boston / Lancaster: D. Reidel, 1985.
- Richler, Mordecai. *The Best of Modern Humor*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1983.
- Ritchie, Marguerite E. "Alice through the Statutes." *McGill Law Journal* 21 (1975), 685-707.
- Roberts, Shelley. Online posting. 2 August 2002.  
<<http://www.ncf.carleton.ca/ip/signs/life/gay/dating/detect>>
- Rudy, Kathy. "Queer Theory and Feminism," *Women's Studies* 29 (2000), 195-216.
- Schaff, Adam. "The Pragmatic Function of Stereotypes," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 45 (1984), 89-100.
- Scully, Diana. "Convicted Rapists' Vocabulary of Motive: Excuses and Justifications." *Social Problems* 31(5) 1984, 530-544.
- Sheppard, Alice. "Social Cognition, Gender Roles, and Women's Humor," *Women's Comic Visions*. Ed. June Sochen. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.
- Stillman, Deanne and Anne Beatts. *Titters: the First Collection of Humor by Women*. New York: Macmillan, 1976.
- Stillion, Judith and Hedy White. "Feminist Humor: Who Appreciates it and Why?" *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 11 (1987), 219-232.
- Tannen, Deborah. *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*. New York: William Morrow, 1990.
- Walker, Nancy. *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- West, Candace and Don Zimmerman. "Small Insults: A Study of Interruptions in Cross-Sex Conversations between Unacquainted Persons," *Language, Gender and Society*, Eds. Barrie Thorne, Cheri Kramarae, and Nancy Henley, Cambridge, MA: Newbury House, 1983, 108-118.
- Westenhofer, Suzanne. "Nothing in My Closet but My Clothes," *Out, Loud, & Laughing: A Collection of Gay and Lesbian Humor*. Ed. Charles Flowers. New York: Anchor Books, 1995, 179-189.
- Wolfson, Nessa and Joan Maynes. "Don't 'Dear' Me!" *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, eds. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker and Nelly Furman. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980.
- Wood, Linda A. and Heather Rennie. "Formulating Rape: The Discursive Construction of Victims and Villains." *Discourse and Society*. 5 (1) 1994, 125-148.
- Ziv, Avner. *Personality and Sense of Humor*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1984.

Janet Bing Janet Bing is a feminist who teaches courses in linguistics, women's studies, and cross-cultural communication at Old Dominion University, where she is a University Professor and Graduate Program Director of Applied Linguistics. With Victoria Bergvall and Alice Freed she co-edited *Rethinking Language and Gender Research: Theory and Practice*. Her current research interests are in language and gender, phonology, and humor studies. Correspondence is welcome and may be sent to [jbing@odu.edu](mailto:jbing@odu.edu).

Copyright of *Women & Language* is the property of George Mason University Communication Dept and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.