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Joan Rivers: Comedy and Identity on the Road to Fashion Police

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JOAN RIVERS: COMEDY AND IDENTITY ON THE ROAD TO *FASHION POLICE*

by

Melanie Gaw

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

JOAN RIVERS: COMEDY AND IDENTITY ON THE ROAD TO *FASHION POLICE*

by

Melanie Gaw

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2021
Under the Supervision of Professor Elana Levine

This thesis analyzes how Joan Rivers' comedy content and style changed during the first 30 years of her career and how these changes impacted Rivers' presentation of her identity as a Jewish female comedian. This project focuses on Joan Rivers' career in two sections: her early career with its reliance on a self-deprecatory style of humor spanning roughly from her first appearance on *The Tonight Show* in 1965 to the early 1980s, and a transitional period in her career that saw a shift toward a celebrity gossip style of humor during the 1980s. I perform textual analyses of some of Rivers' most prominent work during the first 30 years of her career, including her work on the stand-up comedy club circuit, her comedy albums, and her time as a guest host on *The Tonight Show*. I also perform contextual analyses in order to situate Rivers' comedy in specific socio-historical moments and to identify how Rivers' comedy is connected to larger changes in American society. This thesis argues that the changes that Joan Rivers' comedy content and style experienced during the first 30 years of her career were the product of various changes in American society, including the rise of feminism, the growing popularity of celebrity gossip, and increased competition between female comedians in a changing comedy industry.

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To my parents,

my sisters,

my friends,

and my cats.

And to Joan Rivers,

who made it all happen.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

My family loves the show *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and we have watched every episode together. Watching *Maisel* was my first significant introduction to an unapologetically Jewish female comedian unafraid to joke about Jewish culture and customs from a female perspective. I was especially fascinated by the second season of the show, which spends several episodes at a resort in the Catskills, a place close to my heart. Growing up I visited the Catskills a handful of times to stay at my great aunt's cabin. I have so many fond memories from my time at the cabin. It's where I first learned how to make a salad and play Rummikub. I would wake up early every morning and my great aunt would take me with her to the general store and buy me ice cream for breakfast. We went on a lot of family hikes and walked around outside taking in the gorgeous mountain views. For me, the Catskills were a quiet slice of heaven with never-ending board games and my favorite great aunt.

I was shocked when I watched *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and discovered that it had once been anything but quiet and peaceful. In fact, for about 20 years it was the premiere post-war vacation destination for Jewish families from New York City.¹ Every summer, families flocked to the giant resorts along the water to get away from the heat in Manhattan. The resorts offered nightly entertainment for their guests and one of the most popular forms of entertainment was stand-up comedy. The resorts helped launch the careers of famous male Jewish comedians like Jackie Mason and Mel Brooks, but through my exploration of the Catskills, I came across a lack of scholarship on female comedians who performed at the resorts.² My research on *The*

¹ Phil Brown, *Catskill Culture: A Mountain Rat's Memories of the Great Jewish Resort Area* (Philadelphia: Temple University Trade Press, 1998), 41.

² Samantha Hope Goldstein, "'Don't Mind Me, I'll Just Sit Here In The Dark': Illuminating the Role of Women in Catskills Performative Culture" (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2000,) 36.

Marvelous Mrs. Maisel and the history of Jewish female comedians in the Catskills brought me to the subject of this thesis, Joan Rivers, one of the few documented female comedians who performed in the Catskills. Rivers did not look back fondly at her time in the Catskills, where she claimed she “bombed,” but her presence there was significant, nonetheless.³ I was immediately drawn to Rivers because of her work as a celebrity fashion critic on E!’s *Fashion Police*. However, I was unaware that Rivers’ comedic material had not always revolved around the celebrity content she became famous for. I was also unfamiliar with Rivers’ decades-long career across a myriad of media, including comedy clubs, late-night television, books, movies, and a jewelry line with QVC. The more I learned about Joan Rivers, the more fascinated I became with her successful transmedia career as a trailblazing female comedian. I also began to wonder how Rivers transformed from a purveyor of self-deprecating humor in her early career to the cruel woman I watched on *Fashion Police*. This thesis is a retrospective analysis that explores Rivers’ comedic journey to *Fashion Police* and analyzes how she became the “Queen of Mean.”⁴

As important as the Catskills are to me personally, they were just a steppingstone for Joan Rivers as she struggled for recognition as a stand-up comedian. This project explores how Joan Rivers successfully negotiated her multifaceted identity as a female Jewish comedian throughout the first 30 years of her career. I interrogate how the socio-historical contexts of the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s played a role in shaping her comedic performances in terms of both style and content in order to better understand the evolution of Rivers’ comedy persona. One of the main areas of Joan Rivers’ career that I focus on is her identity as a Jewish woman in comedy. I delve into the historical relationship between Jewish women and comedy and try to answer the following questions: How do Jewish female comedians use and engage with humor?; how does Joan Rivers

³ Joyce Antler, “One Clove Away From a Pomander Ball: The Subversive Tradition of Jewish Female Comedians,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 29, (2010): 130.

⁴ Charlotte Alter, “Why We Needed to Take Joan Rivers Less Seriously,” *Time*, September 4, 2014.

address and express her identity as a female Jewish comedian in her comedy?; and what role does assimilation play in her comedic performance? I use performance clips from YouTube, interviews with Rivers, and taped standup performances to explore how Rivers presented her identity as a Jewish female comedian during the first 30 years of her career.

One of the most impressive aspects of Joan Rivers is the length of her career. Rivers spent over 50 years performing in various capacities. As impressive as her career longevity was, I explore the first 30 years of Rivers' career in order to showcase a pivotal transitional period in Rivers' comedy. This project looks at how the changes Rivers' comedy style and content underwent during this specific time period laid the groundwork for her eventual success with *Fashion Police*. By juxtaposing the stylistic elements of Rivers' 1960s and '70s comedy with Rivers' 1980s comedy, I am able to perform a detailed analysis of the circumstances that inspired Rivers' comedic evolution. I interrogate the different ways that Rivers performed her identity as a Jewish woman through both her self-deprecatory humor and her celebrity-focused humor. I also look at the social and cultural forces that may have influenced Rivers' decision to move toward a new style of comedy performance in the 1980s. I rely on popular press coverage such as that from women's and news magazines, interviews with Rivers, performance clips, and scholarship about American life during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s to contextualize Rivers in a particular era. In doing so, I explore how the trajectory of Rivers' career is the product of specific socio-historical moments.

Watching clips and reading transcripts of Rivers' comedy performances clearly indicates that Rivers was a product of her time, especially in regard to her discussions of female sexuality and the female body. In this project I answer the following questions about comedy and its socio-historical contexts: how and why does Rivers' comedy content and style change during the first

30 years of her career?; what makes Rivers' comedy successful in a certain time and place?; and in what ways did the subject matter that Joan Rivers cover shift across this portion of her career? By answering these questions, I connect Rivers' comedic material to broader societal issues and expectations. Joan Rivers was able to have such a long career not only because she was able to update her routine to better suit the current moment, but also because her signature material took on different meanings in different socio-historical moments. In particular, in this thesis I examine how women's changing roles in society during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s impacted the social acceptability of speaking openly about female sexuality and the female body. Additionally, I address the ways in which Rivers subverted and reinforced harmful female beauty standards in her comedy and what her discussions about beauty and the female body indicate about American culture during a certain era.

Rivers' comedy content and style changed throughout her career, but this project concentrates on a specific period in Rivers' career where she underwent her most notable shift in comedic material and style. This thesis focuses on Joan Rivers' career in two sections: her early career with its reliance on a self-deprecatory style of humor spanning roughly from her first appearance on *The Tonight Show* in 1965 to the early 1980s, and a transitional period in her career that saw a shift toward a celebrity gossip style of humor during the 1980s. The changes that Rivers' comedy went through during the 1980s were inspired by a multitude of factors, including changes in the comedy industry and larger social, cultural, and political shifts in America. I argue that the changes that America experienced during this time, such as the rise of second-wave feminism, the increased popularity of celebrity gossip, and growing Jewish assimilation, had a profound impact on Rivers' comedy content and style. As competition grew between female comedians and the popularity of self-deprecatory humor waned, Rivers had to

adopt a new style of comedy in order to stay relevant. During the 1980s, Rivers cultivated a comedy style rooted in the brutal critique of female celebrities in order to stay relevant in a changing comedy landscape. Furthermore, as Rivers' comedy content and style changed, her presentation of her identity as a Jewish woman evolved through her embodiment of two popular Jewish stereotypes, the Jewish American Princess and the *yente*. Like the transformation of Rivers' comedy style and content, the evolution of Rivers' identity presentation mirrored changing attitudes toward women and Jewish people in America. These factors, especially changing comedy styles and the increased competition present in the comedy business during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, all indicate a significant connection between the socio-historical moment that Rivers performed in and the creation of Rivers' comedy. I contend that the shift that Rivers' comedy content and style experienced during the first 30 years of her career demonstrates that Rivers' comedy is a product of a particular time and place, as well as a changing comedy industry.

Throughout this thesis I explore the connection between the various social, cultural, and political changes that occurred in America during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s and Rivers' changing comedy content and style. In order to illustrate how Rivers' comedy changed over the first 30 years of her career, I perform textual analyses of some of Rivers' most prominent work during that 30-year period, including her work on the stand-up comedy club circuit, her comedy albums, and her time as a guest host on *The Tonight Show*. This study offers important insight into how Joan Rivers presents and constructs her identity as a Jewish female comedian during the first 30 years of her career, as well as how the socio-historical context of her performances helps shape her comedic material. All of these insights provide an avenue for further research on Joan Rivers specifically and female comedians generally.

Review of the Literature

In order to contextualize my research, I first introduce and discuss the scholarly research that already exists on the subject matter covered in this thesis. This literature review is broken down into four sections: women in comedy, Jewish comedy, stand-up comedy, and Joan Rivers. Each section provides a broad look at scholarship on the topic and an explanation for how I expand those areas of research in regard to Joan Rivers. I provide definitions of important concepts as well as explanations for the relevance of each topic of study to this project.

Women and Comedy

Historically, women and comedy are an understudied field. This is in large part due to the exclusion of women from recorded histories of comedy.⁵ Over the past forty years, however, scholars have worked to write women back into the history of comedy. In the late 1980s and 1990s, Nancy Walker and Regina Barreca published books about the history of women's humor in literature. Both Walker and Barreca argue that the history of comedy is a history of male comedy. Barreca asserts that one reason for the lack of scholarship about women's comedy is that critics view women's humor as frivolous and unworthy of critical attention, a viewpoint she deems understandable seeing as women write outside the locus of power. However, Barreca and Walker believe that women's humor can and does acknowledge and critique issues of oppression, especially when it comes to gender inequality.⁶ Much of Barreca's and Walker's works deal directly with the relationship between female comedians and power, a subject I cover later in this literature review. For now I offer an overview of how issues of power contribute to

⁵ Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Comedy, Identity, and Cultural Critique*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).; Leigh Marlowe, "A Sense of Humor," *Imagination, Cognition and Personality* 4, no. 3 (1985): 266, <https://doi.org/10.2190/Y474-Q5N3-64RG-5K02>.; Andrea Greenbaum, "Women's Comic Voices: The Art and Craft of Female Humor," *American Studies* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1997).

⁶ Regina Barreca, "Introduction," in *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988), 6, 19.

the exclusion of women from the history of comedy. Nancy Walker states, “The very invisibility of this significant portion of American humor is one testament to women’s exclusion from power.” In other words, the absence of women from comedy history is indicative of their subordinate position in society. However, this absence is not for lack of trying. Women have always actively participated in the creation of humor, whether through literature, domestic sagas, or skits.⁷ Unfortunately, they have rarely been recognized for their contributions to the comedic field.

One possible reason for the exclusion of women from the history of comedy is the belief that women are inherently unfunny. Throughout history, women have been regarded as incapable of understanding or creating humor.⁸ In 1959, Reginald Blyth stated “[t]he truth is...that women have not only no humour in themselves but are the cause of the extinction of it in others.”⁹ In addition to being accused of having no sense of humor and no ability to joke, women are also accused of extinguishing humor in others.¹⁰ Lisa Merrill offers one possible explanation for the belief that women are humorless: “[b]ut that which women do find funny is frequently misunderstood or devalued...”¹¹ In other words, men believe that women aren’t funny because they either don’t understand women’s humor or they devalue it completely. I agree with Merrill’s assertion to a certain extent, but the more likely explanation for the belief that women lack the ability to create or understand humor is that recognizing women’s humor as valid and

⁷ Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 10, 12, 120.

⁸ Joan B. Levine, “The Feminine Routine,” *Journal of Communication* 23, no. 3 (1976), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1976.tb01921.x>; Barreca, “Introduction.”; June Sochen, “From Sophie Tucker to Barbra Streisand: Jewish Women Entertainers as Reformers,” in *Talking Back: Images of Jewish Women in American Popular Culture*, ed. Joyce Antler (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998).

⁹ Reginald H. Blyth, *Humor in English Literature: A Chronological Anthology*, (Tokyo: The Folcroft Press Inc, 1959), 14.

¹⁰ Gilbert, *Performing.*; Danielle Russell, “Self-deprecatory Humour and the Female Comic: Self-destruction or Comedic Construction?,” *Thirdspace: A Journal of Feminist Theory & Culture* 2, no. 1 (November 2002).; June Sochen, “Slapsticks, Screwballs, and Bawds: The Long Road to the Performing Talents of Lucy and Bette,” in *Women’s Comic Visions*, ed. June Schoen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991).

¹¹ Lisa Merrill, “Feminist Humor: Rebellious and Self-Affirming,” *Women’s Studies* 15, no. 1-3 (1988): 273, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1988.9978732>.

funny would grant women too much discursive power in society. There is power in the successful use of humor so by denying women's humor, men and society at large are denying women's power.¹²

The idea that women are subordinate to men in society plays a large role in scholarship about women and comedy. Historically, men have functioned as gatekeepers of comedy; determining what is and isn't funny and who was permitted to perform. This power stemmed from their dominant role in society as well as their positions of power as promoters, agents and club owners.¹³ Female comedians and women's humor were deemed unfunny, foreign and threatening by men; therefore, the male powers that be in the "old boys club" of comedy were averse to hiring female comedians, a trend that continues today.¹⁴ There are a handful of scholars who have spent time specifying and categorizing the subject matter covered by female comedians.¹⁵ According to these scholars, women tend to write and perform domestic humor or humor that occurs inside of the home. They also tend to focus on gender-specific issues, such as women's suffrage, motherhood, and the struggles of being a housewife.¹⁶ Joanne Gilbert identifies eleven categories of topics commonly covered by female comedians: "sex, relationships, weight/body image, fashion, religion/ethnicity/region, family, gynecology, domestic activities, politics, popular culture phenomena, and random observations." With the exception of religion, random observations, and politics, this list is heavily gendered, and it clearly supports the argument that women's humor concentrates heavily on women's issues. In addition to categorizing the topics covered by female comedians, Gilbert also identified five

¹² Paul E. McGhee, "The Role of Laughter and Humor in Growing Up Female, in *Becoming Female: Perspectives on Development*, ed. Clair B. Kopp (New York: Plenum Press, 1979), 183-84.

¹³ Marlowe, "A Sense," 268.

¹⁴ Russell, "Self-deprecatory."

¹⁵ Roberta Mock, "Female Jewish Comedians: Grotesque Mimesis and Transgressing Stereotypes," *New Theatre Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (May 1999), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1579022>.

¹⁶ Sochen, "Slapsticks," 147.

different “postures” or approaches that female comedians have adopted in their performance: “the kid”; “the bawd”; “the bitch”; “the whiner”; and “the reporter.”¹⁷ These categories function as a means for women to adopt the stereotypical roles assigned to them by men and male institutions in an effort to ultimately subvert them.¹⁸

Another reason for women’s exclusion from the history of comedy is that performing comedy goes against society’s definition of proper femininity. To this day, male comedians outnumber female comedians. One explanation for this imbalance is that the characteristics that a comic must possess do not line up with societal ideals of femininity. Walker states, “[h]umor’s inherent posture of superiority—even aggression—is in conflict with traditional notions of female submissiveness and passivity.”¹⁹ Comedy requires verbal aggression, something that women are conditioned to avoid in our society.²⁰ In order to perform comedy, women must show conversational dominance, eschewing cultural expectations and taking up positions of power.²¹ Conversational dominance and aggression are perfectly acceptable behaviors for men, but women are taught to be passive and subordinate. Historically, like most aspects of human behavior, humor had clearly delineated sex roles. Men were the initiators of humor, while women were the responders.²² Women were not permitted to initiate humor. Instead, they were expected to merely appreciate men’s humor, even when the jokes were at their sex’s expense. Women were expected to laugh at jokes that denigrated the female sex in order to “belong.”²³ It was deemed appropriate and attractive for women to laugh at men’s jokes, a fact made clear by

¹⁷ Gilbert, *Performing*, 26, 73, 96.

¹⁸ Walker, *Very Serious*, 11-13, 44.

¹⁹ Walker, *Very Serious*, 79.

²⁰ Greenbaum, “Women’s.”

²¹ Marlowe, “A Sense.”

²² McGhee, “The Role.”; Gilbert, *Performing*, 27.

²³ Merrill, “Feminist Humor.”; Barreca, “Introduction.”

articles from teen magazines encouraging girls to laugh at boy's jokes in order to win their affections. Essentially, women weren't expected to be completely void of humor, rather they were expected to eschew the creation of their own humor in order to meet societal expectations about proper femininity.²⁴

Proper femininity is characterized by passivity, intellectual inferiority, and submissiveness. Performing comedy directly violates all of these aspects of proper femininity. For a woman to take center stage and perform comedy they must threaten the most basic gender expectations. Leigh Marlowe states that the conversational dominance a comedian must possess violates, "norms of gender-based verbal socialization prescribed for females: passive presentation; hesitant, tentative speech; eye-contact avoidance; and closed body posture." In other words, when female comedians perform comedy, they are no longer performing femininity. By choosing to perform comedy instead of femininity, the female comedian threatens the "most basic social gender arrangements."²⁵ Female comedians are viewed as threatening because of their displays of verbal aggression, dominance, and intelligence.²⁶ Women's comedy serves to destabilize gender expectations and challenge the status quo.²⁷ Through comedy performance, female comedians are able to explore their own power and reject the characteristics of proper femininity.

Comedy and power are inextricably linked. There is power in the role of the comic because they function as social critics. Joanne Gilbert argues that "[c]omics perform a unique and important social function dating back to the traditions of ancient fools—they hold up a mirror to the culture, showing us our (and their) frailties and foibles, eliciting the laughter of

²⁴ Russell, "Self-deprecatory.," Walker, *Very Serious*, 79.

²⁵ Marlowe, "A Sense," 270-71.

²⁶ Russell, "Self-deprecatory.," Merrill, "Feminist Humor."

²⁷ Gilbert, *Performing*, xiv-xv.

recognition.”²⁸ This power is doubly important in the hands of female comedians. According to Joyce Antler, as marginalized members of society, female comedians have the ability to “publicly challenge the social structures that keep women from positions of power.” Therefore, female comedians often produce material that directly acknowledges and critiques the gendered inequalities of society. In this vein, comedy acts as a way for women to explore their power by subverting cultural expectations and challenging the structures that reinscribe women’s subordinate position in society. Because female comedians are at odds with gender role norms and because they often point out society’s ills, they are seen as threatening.²⁹ This poses a problem for female comedians trying to succeed in a male-driven industry. Female comedians have adopted various strategies in order to mitigate their perceived threatening nature for their audiences and the industry. The most popular strategy adopted by women is the use of self-deprecatory humor.³⁰ Joan Rivers utilized this style of comedy throughout her career as a means of ingratiating herself to audiences. She relied on self-deprecation heavily during the first 20 years of her career because of its ability to mitigate power differences between herself and the audience and because of the overall popularity of the style during the era.

Self-deprecatory humor encompasses humor that is turned on the self. A performer who utilizes self-deprecation makes themselves the subject of their comedic ridicule. Self-deprecatory humor has the potential to serve a myriad of purposes. For one, it has the power to ingratiate a performer to their audience. In this sense, self-deprecatory humor serves to level the playing field between the performer and their audience. This style of humor is not a uniquely female form of humor; however studies show that women utilize self-deprecatory humor at a higher rate than

²⁸ Gilbert, *Performing*, xiii.

²⁹ Antler, “One Clove,” 126.; Barreca, “Introduction.”

³⁰ Russell, “Self-deprecatory.”; Frances Gray, *Women and Laughter*, (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1994).; Levine, “The Feminine.”; McGhee, “The Role.”; Gilbert, *Performing*, xiii.; Walker, *Very Serious*.

men.³¹ Danielle Russell states, “[t]he (implicit) threat of the female speaker is defused when she sets herself up as the target of ridicule.” In order to appear non-threatening to their audience, female comedians must disparage themselves and become the object of laughter. By participating in self-deprecation, female comedians are able to adopt an authoritative position without alienating the majority of their audience.³² Essentially, self-deprecation complicates the power dynamics between the comedian and the audience. The performer lowers themselves through self-deprecation, granting the audience superiority by pointing out their own inadequacies.³³ However, even after lowering themselves the performer still retains the microphone and the power that comes with it. Therefore, the position of the performer on center stage with a microphone makes their surrender of power through self-deprecation nothing more than an illusion. For most female comedians, self-deprecatory comedy is a means to an end. If they are willing to disparage themselves and other women in their routines, they are more likely to reach a wider audience and have a successful career.³⁴

Jewish Comedy

The history of Judaism and comedy is rich and complex. There is a bevy of scholarship that recognizes the special relationship between the Jewish religion and humor.³⁵ In fact, Jewish people, specifically Jewish men, are overrepresented in the field of comedy. A 1980 study found that the infinitesimal proportion of Jewish people in America make up 80% of the comedy industry.³⁶ According to Elliott Oring, the long history of suffering that Jewish people have endured should mean that they have nothing to laugh about, and the very fact that they do laugh

³¹ Levine, “The Feminine,” 174.

³² Walker, *Very Serious*, 123.; Richard Zoglin, “Women,” in *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 183-84.

³³ Gilbert, *Performing*.

³⁴ Merrill, “Feminist Humor.”; Russell, “Self-deprecatory.”

³⁵ Antler, “One Clove.”; Gilbert, *Performing*.

³⁶ Samuel S. Janus, “The Great Jewish-American Identity Crisis,” *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 40, no. 3 (1980): 259, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01252209>.

“can only signal the existence of a special relationship between the Jews and humor...” The key to this symbiotic relationship between Judaism and comedy is the Jewish people’s status as minorities.³⁷ The tradition of Jewish humor is grounded in Jewish people’s attempts to both combat and come to terms with their outsider status. Jewish humor thus acknowledges Jewish people’s position as minorities while simultaneously making fun of their oppressors.³⁸

Although Jewish identities are a hallmark of American comedy, they were not always showcased. In fact, in the postwar era, Jewish performers, especially vaudeville comedians, were encouraged to downplay their ethnicity. In film and television, vaudeo stars who had once performed for largely urban audiences were suddenly expected to appeal to a much larger audience. The best way to avoid prejudice during this period was to simply downplay one’s Jewishness in an effort to not offend rural and suburban viewers. Television networks pushed their vaudeo performers to remove ethnic references from their acts and rely on sitcom plots to create a more family-friendly program. The struggle between staying true to the ethnic material that gave them their careers and attempting to appeal to a larger, homogenous audience was an experience that many Jewish comedians went through in the postwar period, including Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, and George Burns.³⁹ Joan Rivers experienced a similar push toward assimilation as her male counterparts. This project explores this push toward assimilation in depth, tracing how Rivers presented her Jewish identity during two different stages of her career.

Similar to the tradition of women’s humor, Jewish women’s humor has largely gone unnoticed and understudied. Despite its omission from recorded histories of Jewish humor, there is a rich tradition of Jewish women’s humor in the United States. Jewish women have performed

³⁷ Elliott Oring, “The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor,” *Western Folklore* 42, no. 4 (October 1983), 266-267.; Sochen, “From Sophie,” 68-69.

³⁸ Walker, *Very Serious*, 115.

³⁹ Susan Murray, *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 75-76, 107.

comedy in film, television, Yiddish theater, vaudeville, burlesque, nightclubs, radio, Broadway, and stand-up clubs.⁴⁰ Jewish women, like women in general, were not encouraged to pursue a career in comedy. This is due to the cultural expectations of women and more specifically the religious expectations of Jewish women. However, being Jewish is not necessarily religious. Jewishness can also refer to an ethnic group with a shared history and culture. One does not need to follow the Torah or Talmudic law to be Jewish. Nonetheless, much of the literature about Jewish female comedians concentrates on the religious expectations of Jewish women as stated in the Torah. Within American Judaism there are three main denominations: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. These denominations range from extremely traditional (Orthodox) to liberal (Reform).⁴¹ Most of the scholarship on Jewish women in comedy focuses on the strict expectations of Orthodox Jews. Those who belong to the Orthodox denomination follow rabbinic law closely.⁴² In the Orthodox tradition, one of the most important behavioral expectations of Jewish women is “tzniut” or feminine modesty. Jewish women are expected to act shy and humble in order to not attract sexual attention.⁴³ Jewish female comedians subvert these expectations in obvious ways. They eschew humility in favor of standing center stage, seeking attention and affirmation. Jewish female comedians are loud, profane, and practice excess. They speak in unladylike ways and talk about taboo subjects like female sexuality.⁴⁴ By performing profane and grotesque comedy instead of practicing modesty, Jewish female comedians stand in opposition to traditional Jewish culture.

⁴⁰ Antler, “One Clove,” 123-24.

⁴¹ Harriet Hartman and Moshe Hartman, “Jewish Identity, Denomination and Denominational Mobility,” *Social Identities* 5, no. 3 (1999): 280, 282, 287.

⁴² Hartman and Hartman, “Jewish Identity,” 282.

⁴³ Sarah Blacher Cohen, “The Unkosher Comediennes: From Sophie Tucker to Joan Rivers,” in *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*, ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 105.

⁴⁴ Mock, “Grotesque,” 106.; Sochen, “From Sophie.”

June Sochen claims that Jewish women are a “double minority.” “As both women and Jews in a male-oriented Christian culture, they are painfully aware of their marginal status.”⁴⁵ As a double minority, Jewish women embody a very particular history of Jewish comedy in which their humor operates in opposition to both gender and religious expectations. Nancy Walker and Joanne Gilbert make an interesting connection between the marginalized experience of women and the marginalized experience of ethnic and racial minorities. Walker states, “[t]o a large extent, women have lived apart from the mainstream of American culture, as have members of ethnic and racial minorities. Their angle of vision has been that of the outsider—the one who lives by someone else’s rules in a culture that has denied them independence and power.” Walker goes on to acknowledge that white women hold more power in this equation than women of color, but argues that both groups experience oppression, discrimination, and subordination. This in turn leads women and ethnic and racial minorities to employ subversive strategies in their humor.⁴⁶ Gilbert furthers Walker’s initial argument by labelling the humor of outsiders, such as women and racial and ethnic groups, as marginalized. She clearly distinguishes between “marginality” and “minority,” the former dealing with issues of power and control rooted in ideology, and the latter rooted in numbers. For example, women are not a minority because they outnumber men in the United States. However, despite their larger population, women are marginalized by the dominant hegemonic culture.⁴⁷ Similar to Walker, Gilbert argues that marginalized groups share comedic strategies. They often point out the hypocrisy of the dominant culture, acting as social critics and subverting the status quo.

Within Jewish culture, there are a multitude of exaggerated stereotypes that are supposedly representative of Jewish women. These include the Jewish mother, the Jewish

⁴⁵ Sochen, “From Sophie,” 69.

⁴⁶ Walker, *Very Serious*, 102, 137-138.

⁴⁷ Gilbert, *Performing*, 5.

American princess, the *yente*, and the *kurve* or slut. Each of these stereotypes are regularly employed by Jewish female comedians in their acts. The Jewish mother stereotype describes a woman who is nagging, self-sacrificing, and intrusive. The Jewish American princess, on the other hand, describes a woman who is self-centered, vain, and materialistic. The *yente* is a vulgar woman who loves to gossip, while the *kurve* is a woman who sleeps around. Unlike the other stereotypes, the Jewish mother is not meant to be embodied. Instead, the Jewish mother is presented as a target of comedic ridicule. The Jewish mother stereotype exists to be the butt of the joke. Comedians often combine two or more of these stereotypes to create an entirely new category. For example, the red hot mama is a combination of the Jewish mother and the *kurve*. Sophie Tucker and Belle Barth, women who were not considered traditionally attractive, embodied the red hot mama stereotype through their comedic songs about female sexuality.⁴⁸ Joan Rivers' comedic persona encapsulates the Jewish American princess and the *yente* through her concentration on consumerism and her penchant for gossip. Her role as a *yente* is most obvious when she invites the audience to have an intimate conversation with her by using her catchphrase, "Can we talk?"

Stand-Up Comedy

So far I've spoken about comedy in a general manner. In this section I dive into the intricacies of stand-up comedy. Lawrence E. Mintz states that "[s]tandup comedy is arguably the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression," and that it adopts "essentially the same social and cultural roles in practically every known society, past and present." Mintz tracks the history of stand-up comedy and its function in society. Stand-up comedy can be traced back to the Middle Ages and the tradition of court jesters and fools. Since then, it has played a role in the circus, popular theatre, variety comedy, radio, television, film and

⁴⁸ Cohen, "Unkosher," 107.; Mock, "Grotesque," 99-106.

comedy clubs.⁴⁹ Like comedy in general, the field of stand-up has historically been dominated by men. In 1960, heterosexual Jewish men made up close to eighty percent of the pool of American comedians and stand-up comedy remains largely a man's domain to this day.⁵⁰

The majority of the scholarship I've discovered on stand-up comedy is concerned with the role of the stand-up comedian and stand-up comedy in our society.⁵¹ According to these scholars, stand-up comedy is a powerful form of communication, because it has the capacity to challenge and critique society writ large through commodified entertainment. Tracy Wuster reiterates the scholarly argument that the role of the stand-up comedian is "as a cultural critic who uses the cloak of humor to disguise social critique" and that "[t]he comedian thus occupies a position of insight that allows him to show the audience unpleasant social truths, as long as the audience can laugh at them, thus disarming their radical danger."⁵² This power to critique controversial and often incendiary societal issues while eliciting laughter is the unique purview of the stand-up comic. In this way, the stand-up comedian acts as a non-threatening comic spokesperson or mediator of our culture, affirming certain aspects of it while also pointing out its ills. Mintz contends that the ideal stand-up performer engages in a type of "sanctioned deviance" related to "the ritual violation of taboos" in cultural traditions.⁵³ A comedian uses this license for deviant behavior to act as a comic spokesperson and subvert and affirm cultural norms and participate in social criticism.⁵⁴ This license for deviance is personified by comedian Lenny Bruce who regularly pushed the envelope and faced repeated obscenity charges for his aggressive and biting social critiques throughout his career. Bruce was Joan Rivers' greatest

⁴⁹ Lawrence E. Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 71-72.

⁵⁰ Tracy Wuster, "Comedy Jokes: Steve Martin and the Limits of Stand-Up Comedy," *Studies in American Humor* 3, no. 14 (2006): 28-29.; Russell, "Self-deprecatory."

⁵¹ Russell, "Self-deprecatory."

⁵² Wuster, "Comedy Jokes," 24.

⁵³ Mintz, "Standup," 77.

⁵⁴ Gilbert, *Performing*, xvi, 18.

influence, and she too took on the role of deviant social commentator in her comedy, albeit in a different fashion.⁵⁵

There are certain characteristics of stand-up comedians that make them suitable for this role. For starters, Mintz argues that “[t]raditionally, the comedian is defective in some way.” This defect or natural weakness generates the audience’s pity and excuses the comedian from the expectations of normal behavior. Without these expectations, the stand-up comedian is able to elicit laughter from the audience through ridiculous and normally unacceptable behavior. The comedian’s performance of their defects thus situates the audience as superior to the defective performer.⁵⁶ Another important dynamic of stand-up is its intimacy and authenticity. Stand-up comedy routines often appear less like a performance and more like a conversation. The comedian is merely being themselves and speaking to the audience directly.⁵⁷ This plays into the special relationship between stand-up comedians and their audience. Although the comedian has power because of their position onstage, the audience’s reaction determines how successful their act is. Stand-up comedy is unique in the fact that the audience is integral to the act’s success or failure. The audience’s laughter (or lack thereof) is crucial in determining whether an act is successful. If the audience laughs at a joke then it is deemed funny and the joke is viewed as a success.⁵⁸ Essentially, the audience is the sole authority on whether something is funny or not. This complex power dynamic is the bedrock of stand-up comedy and a key aspect of Joan Rivers’ career. This project expands upon this literature by addressing how Rivers navigated the

⁵⁵ Debra Aarons and Marc Mierowsky, “Obscenity, Dirtiness and License in Jewish Comedy,” *Comedy Studies* 5, no. 2 (October 2014): 166, 170, 173, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2014.967017>.

⁵⁶ Mintz, “Standup,” 74.

⁵⁷ Gerard Matte and Ian McFayden, “Can we talk? The reframing of social permissions in the comedy of Joan Rivers,” *Comedy Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 163.

⁵⁸ Wuster, “Comedy Jokes,” 25.

complex power relationships present in stand-up comedy during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. Specifically, it illuminates how Rivers utilized the audience in her comedic performance.

Joan Rivers

There is a significant amount of scholarly work that discusses Joan Rivers and her career. For the most part, this work is not centered on Joan Rivers, rather Rivers is included or referenced in works about Jewish comedy, aging, stand-up comedy, and female comedians. However, the works that do concentrate entirely on Rivers focus most of their attention on the details of her career. Her early life and career are popular topics, with scholars discussing Rivers' childhood and family life, her aspirations of becoming a serious actress, her time with Chicago's Second City, her struggles as a stand-up comedian playing clubs, and her eventual success on *The Tonight Show*.⁵⁹ The feud between Rivers and Johnny Carson after her exit from *The Tonight Show* to host her own rival late-night show is oft mentioned by scholars. Bernard Timberg dedicates part of a chapter of his book to the subject, outlining the timeline of events and reporting on the media response to the "talk-show war."⁶⁰ Several scholars have written about Rivers' later career, including her time as a red carpet correspondent, fashion critic, and QVC guest host. These articles discuss how Rivers speaks about the aging female body, how she attempts to curtail her own aging through plastic surgery, and how her time as a red carpet correspondent and fashion critic give her credibility on QVC.⁶¹ However, this scholarship concentrating on Rivers' career does not address how Rivers presents her identity as a Jewish

⁵⁹ Susan Horowitz, "Joan Rivers," in *Queens of Comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the New Generation of Funny Women*, (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 1997).; Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003).; Yael Kohen, "Mothers of Invention," in *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy*, (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2012).

⁶⁰ Bernard M. Timberg, *Talk: A History of the TV Talk Show*, (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2002), 133.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Nathanson, "Ageing on and off the Red Carpet: Joan Rivers, Celebrity Culture and Postfeminist Television," *Celebrity Studies*, (May 2019). <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2019.1608839>.; Roberta Mock, "Ageing, Temporality and Performance," *Performance Research* 24, no. 3 (September 2019),

woman. This project adds to the existing literature about Rivers by focusing on how her comedic content incorporates her identity as a Jewish woman during the first 30 years of her career.

Above all else, Joan Rivers is a stand-up comedian, so it is not surprising that there is scholarship about Rivers' relationship with stand-up comedy. This scholarship talks about the gender imbalances in stand-up comedy and how Rivers was able to succeed in a masculine profession. Matte and McFayden discuss the intimacy of stand-up comedy and how Rivers leaned into this aspect of performing. Their article concentrates on Rivers' signature catchphrase, "Can we talk?," which Matte and McFayden assert is a means of transforming the audience from a passive participant to an active participant. "Can we talk?" is an invitation to a private conversation in a public arena; it creates a sense of increased intimacy between Rivers and her audience. This increased intimacy allows Rivers to discuss subjects that are considered improper outside of private conversation. Rivers' comedic content is often controversial and shocking. She discusses everything from women's health and female sexuality to relationships and celebrity gossip.⁶² When Rivers began attacking celebrities for their looks in the 1980s, her career really took off. Her focus on attacking celebrities laid the groundwork for her TV show *Fashion Police*, which she hosted from 2010 until her death in 2014.⁶³ In this project, I take scholarship about Rivers' stand-up material a step further by comparing the subject matter she covered in her act during the 1960s and '70s to her content in the 1980s. By doing so, I illustrate how her comedic

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2019.1579022>.; Roberta Mock, "Stand-up Comedy and the Legacy of the Mature Vagina," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 1 (August 2012), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2012.685394>.; Jennifer Courtney and Gabriel Wettach, "Joan Rivers, QVC Discourse, and Stardom," *Studies in Popular Culture* 28, no. 3 (April 2006).

⁶² Sharon Lockyer, "From Toothpick Legs to Dropping Vaginas: Gender and Sexuality in Joan Rivers' Stand-up Comedy Performance," *Celebrity Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 118, https://doi.org/10.1386/cost.2.2.113_1.; Matte and McFayden, "Can we," 166, 168.; Mock, "Vagina," 20-21.; Gilbert, *Performing*, 92.; Nathanson, "Ageing," 4.; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*.; Cohen, "Unkosher.;" Gray, *Women*.; Horowitz, "Joan Rivers."

⁶³ Mock, "Ageing," 145.

content shifted over time and how various social and cultural changes played a role in Rivers' changing performance style.

Before she turned her aggression on celebrities, Rivers was known for her self-deprecatory comedy. Scholars repeatedly reference how Rivers uses self-deprecation in her comedy and how self-deprecation is connected to her identity as a Jewish female comedian.⁶⁴ Rivers' self-deprecation is strategic and serves to level the playing field between herself and the audience. Rivers' use of self-deprecation ties in with her status as an outsider: a Jewish woman. Rivers is often included in scholarship about Jewish female comedians. Most of this scholarship concentrates on the broad history of Jewish female comedians, but it also includes sections on specific comedians like Rivers. In these works, scholars have discussed how Rivers' comedy career fits into the broader history of Jewish female comedians and how Jewish female comedians subvert expectations of proper Jewish femininity.⁶⁵ A handful of scholarship explores the various Jewish stereotypes that Rivers embodies in her comedy, including the *yente* and the Jewish American princess.⁶⁶ The connection between Jewish culture and self-deprecatory humor is discussed at length in this scholarship, but it does not adequately cover the socio-historical context of the style. This project analyzes self-deprecatory humor's cultural position during the 1960s and '70s and how that impacted Rivers' decision to utilize the style. Additionally, I explore how Rivers' use of self-deprecation functions as a presentation of her identity as a Jewish woman. This project expands upon existing scholarship and focuses in depth on how Rivers presents her identity as a Jewish female comedian during the first 30 years of her career

⁶⁴ Gray, *Women.*; Lockyer, "Toothpick."; Matte and McFayden, "Can we."; Courtney and Wettach, "QVC Discourse."

⁶⁵ Antler, "One Clove."; Sochen, "From Sophie."; Aarons and Mierowsky, "Obscenity."

⁶⁶ Horowitz, "Joan Rivers."; Cohen, "Unkosher."; Mock, "Grotesque."; Gilbert, *Performing*.

and why changes in the presentation of her identity as a Jewish woman point to larger trends in society.

Methods

In this project, I use textual analysis to engage with examples of Rivers' comedic performances in order to analyze how the content and style of her performance changes over the first 30 years of her career. My textual analysis looks at various television offerings from Rivers' early career, including YouTube clips of Rivers as a guest and host on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, interviews and stand-up performances from other late-night shows, and clips from Rivers' stand-up performances. I also look at Rivers' first three comedy albums that span from 1965 to 1983 and her first autobiography *Enter Talking*. I use these texts to analyze the themes present in Rivers' comedic performances as well as how and if these themes fluctuate over time. Specifically, I analyze how Rivers engages in discussions about Judaism, women's issues, and the female body.

In my analysis, I incorporate articles about Rivers from trade journals, newspapers, and popular women's magazines. These articles help to contextualize Rivers in certain historical moments while providing important information about her career and life. In these articles I look at how Rivers is spoken about in the press, as well as how Rivers characterizes her own work and career. By including these publications, I offer a nuanced look at Rivers as a person as well as a broad overview of her career, which results in a more fruitful analysis of her comedic content and career.

Additionally, I perform various contextual analyses in order to support my claims that Rivers' comedy content and style are a product of a particular time and place. I use scholarly works about American life during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s to trace the significant social,

cultural, and political changes that occurred during the first 30 years of Rivers' career. More specifically, I use scholarship to contextualize concepts relevant to Rivers' comedy performance, such as feminism, female body ideals, and Jewish assimilation, at different points in Rivers' career. In doing so, I identify how Rivers' comedy is connected to larger changes in American society. I also analyze how changes in the comedy industry during the first 30 years of Rivers' career impacted her comedy style and content. New developments in the comedy industry, including increased competition between female comedians, the waning popularity of different comedic styles, and the emergence of new comedy styles all played a role in Rivers' comedic evolution. By performing these contextual analyses, I illustrate how the various social, cultural, and political changes that America underwent during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s impacted Rivers' comedy content and style. Contextualizing Rivers' career and connecting changes in Rivers' comedy to broader changes in American society is an essential part of this project, because it supports my overall argument that the Rivers' comedy content and style are a product of a particular time and place.

Chapter Breakdown

The second chapter of this project focuses on Rivers' early career as a standup comedian performing in comedy clubs and as a guest host on *The Tonight Show* spanning roughly from 1965-1980. I explore how Rivers' use of self-deprecating humor is a product of her identity as a Jewish woman during a specific era. I analyze how Rivers presents her identity as a Jewish female comedian by looking at how she speaks about Judaism and the female experience in her comedic material. I specifically look at the connection between Rivers' content and Jewish assimilation in postwar America. I also examine how Rivers talks about her own body, and more generally the female body, in her act. Additionally, I discuss how Rivers fits into the broader

history of Jewish female comedians, as well as Jewish comedians and female comedians more generally. In this chapter, I argue that Rivers' use of a self-deprecatory style of humor stemmed from a combination of factors, including the general popularity of the style during the era and the style's ability to mitigate the threat that a female comedian posed to audiences at the time. Additionally, I contend that the historical ties between self-deprecatory humor, Judaism, and women played a role in Rivers' decision to use the style in her act. During this portion of her career, Rivers used self-deprecation to comment on relevant issues in American society, such as the changing roles of women and Jewish assimilation. Rivers' adoption of the popular self-deprecatory style of humor and her timely material that addressed the social, cultural, and political changes that occurred in America during the 1960s and '70s clearly illustrates how her 1960s and '70s comedy content and style were a product of changing ideas about gender and ethnicity.

The third chapter focuses on Rivers' career during the 1980s using clips from *The Tonight Show*, interviews, and stand-up performances. The chapter explores how Rivers' comedic material shifted from a more introspective style during the 1960s and '70s to a focus on making fun of celebrities in the 1980s. I analyze how Rivers' comedic style and content shift during this time period, and how that shift impacts the presentation of her identity as a Jewish female comedian in her performance. Specifically, I look at the various Jewish stereotypes that Rivers embodies during this era. I explore the role that various social and cultural shifts play in Rivers' changing content and style, as well as what these changes indicate about the comedy industry. I also discuss the connection between celebrity gossip and women and the function of that connection in Rivers' performance. Additionally, I address how Rivers' discussions about female bodies progressed in her comedic content. In this chapter I argue that Rivers' transition

from self-deprecation to a celebrity gossip style of humor was a result of various industrial, social, cultural, and political shifts that occurred in the 1980s. One reason why Rivers updated her comedy content and style was to remain relevant in an increasingly competitive comedy industry. As more female comedians became successful, Rivers had to find a way to set herself apart. Additionally, Rivers' celebrity gossip-focused content took advantage of the increasing popularity of celebrity gossip in American culture. It also showcased her identity as a Jewish woman due to the cultural connection between women and gossip, and Rivers' embodiment of a gossiping Jewish stereotype. Furthermore, Rivers' new content about female celebrities allowed her to continue her discussions about female body ideals and beauty expectations, both of which were in flux during the 1980s due to the fitness craze in America. The 1980s also marked a cultural and political shift to the right with the election of Ronald Reagan and the evolution of the New Right. All of these developments factored into Rivers' changing comedy persona as she continued to discuss relevant issues like body image, Jewish assimilation, and women's changing roles in society in her act.

The fourth chapter includes a brief summary of the first three chapters as well as a conclusion. I address the limitations of this project and how future research could overcome these limitations. I also include calls for further research on Joan Rivers, Jewish female comedians, and how female comedians from different eras talk about the female body in their act.

Chapter 2

Joan Rivers: Comedy and Identity in Postwar America

This chapter will discuss the comedy style and content of Rivers' early career, spanning from 1965 to the early 1980s, in relation to her identity as a Jewish female comedian. I argue that Rivers employed a self-deprecatory style of humor rooted in her identity as a Jewish woman to communicate her status as both an insider and outsider. Through her comedy content, she painted a picture of herself as an outsider, but her physical appearance and commercial success pointed to her position as an insider. This paradox is a central component of her comedy content and style in her early career. Additionally, I argue that Rivers' use of self-deprecation is tied to the physicality of her performance and to her conversational style of comedy. Rivers uses her face and body to highlight her self-deprecating material and communicate her inadequacies to the audience. Rivers also conveys her Jewish and female identities through her physicality by engaging in traditional Jewish superstitious actions and by performing in a melodramatic manner. Additionally, Rivers' self-deprecatory material ingratiates her to the audience and minimizes the power differences between performer and audience. In doing so, Rivers creates an environment that allows her to speak to her audience in a conversational manner and gives the audience permission to respond.

Furthermore, I argue that the comedic styles and content that Rivers utilized in her early career are a product of the time period she performed in, as well as her personal milestones. Rivers' early career took place in a post-WWII America experiencing numerous cultural shifts, including Jewish Americanization, the growth of the middle class, a turn toward consumerism, changes in women's roles in society, and the beginning of second-wave feminism. These cultural changes had a profound impact on Jewish and female populations and inspired much of River's

comedic content. Rivers' comedic material focused on issues relevant to women and Jewish people in a changing society, including jokes about women's roles in society and jokes featuring popular ethnic stereotypes. Her jokes also shifted as she reached different personal milestones, including marriage and the birth of her daughter, Melissa.

I contend that Rivers' use of self-deprecation plays a large role in shaping her identity as a Jewish female comedian during her early career, because of the connection between Judaism, femininity, and the insider/outsider paradox. Women and Jewish people are considered marginalized due to their cultural position on the outskirts of American society. Even though they make up a larger portion of the population than men, women are marginalized by the dominant male culture. Similarly, the insider/outsider paradox mirrors the duality of the Jewish identity as the chosen people/victimized minority.⁶⁷ Jewish people are marginalized by the dominant Christian culture in the United States due to their smaller population and their status as religious and ethnic immigrants. By employing a self-deprecatory style of humor, Rivers solidifies her identity as an outsider and continues the traditional link between self-deprecation and Judaism, as well as self-deprecation and women. Through her use of self-deprecatory humor, Rivers successfully embodies the insider/outsider paradox central to her comedic persona. I also argue that, in turn, Rivers' identity as a Jewish female comedian influences her use of self-deprecation, because of the historical use of the style by Jewish female comedians who preceded her. Rivers was not the first Jewish female comedian to experience success using a self-deprecatory style of humor. In fact, Phyllis Diller built her career on self-deprecation ten years prior to Rivers' big break on *The Tonight Show*.

The majority of the content referenced in this chapter is from after Rivers' first *Tonight Show* appearance in 1965. This is due to a lack of records of her earlier performances in smaller

⁶⁷ Horowitz, "Joan Rivers," 105.

comedy clubs. However, Rivers does offer important insight into the comedic content of her early career in her first autobiography, *Enter Talking*, which I reference throughout this chapter. Her autobiography also includes important insights into Rivers' personal thoughts about her comedic content and style. In addition to Rivers' autobiography, my textual analysis relies on clips from her appearances as a guest on *The Tonight Show*, clips from her stand-up routines and interviews on other talk shows, clips from her monologues as host of *The Tonight Show*, and her first three comedy albums. This chapter is broken down into two main sections. The first section concentrates on the comedic styles that Rivers employs in her early career, and the second section focuses on the subject matter covered in Rivers' comedic content. By looking at Rivers' comedy routines during this portion of her career, I will showcase the importance of her identity as a Jewish female comedian to her comedy content and performance.

The Self-Deprecation and Comedic Physicality of Joan Rivers

The hallmark of Rivers' early comedic style was self-deprecation. This style choice did not go unnoticed. In 1965, at the very beginning of her career, a critic pointed out that Rivers' main comedy target was herself.⁶⁸ Her tumultuous childhood, her experience being the fat kid, her lack of sex appeal and her unsuccessful romantic endeavors were subject areas that she mined. Rivers' jokes at her own expense were ruthless, often eliciting gasps as well as uproarious laughter from crowds. She built her act around a character she created during her time with Chicago's improvisational group, Second City. The character, Rita, was a version of Joan herself: an ethnic loser who could not get married. Joan used the Rita character to form her self-deprecating comedy persona. At the beginning of her career as a single woman, she often lamented that no men wanted to date her. After she married Edgar Rosenberg in 1965, Rivers

⁶⁸ Variety Staff, "Read Our First Review of Joan Rivers in 1965," *Variety*, September 4, 2014, <https://variety.com/2014/tv/news/one-of-the-first-reviews-of-joan-rivers-stand-up-in-1965-1201298402/>.

transformed her persona from the ugly girl who couldn't get married to the ugly girl who got married but was still sexually unappealing.⁶⁹ The persona that Rivers created during the early years of her career was the embodiment of "woe is me." Onstage she was constantly complaining about her life and feeling sorry for herself, but offstage she was experiencing great success in her career and personal life. By using self-deprecatory humor, Rivers created a comedy identity as both an insider and an outsider.

Rivers presented her role as the outsider ugly ethnic girl throughout the first stage of her career. She often referenced her time as a fat, ugly child, saying things like, "I was my own buddy at camp because I was so fat," "It took them three days to pierce my ears," "I was ugly, a furrier once tried to club me," and "I was, in Larchmont, New York, the ugliest teenager you have ever seen. I mean acne was my best feature."⁷⁰ Though these statements were obviously hyperbolic, there was no reason why the audience should not believe that Joan grew up fat and ugly. By highlighting her childhood trauma, Rivers firmly situated herself on the outside. However, when Joan began taking swipes at her modern appearance, she made way for the insider/outsider paradox. On *The Tonight Show* in 1984, Rivers speaks about gaining weight and needing to diet.⁷¹ In doing so, she attempts to connect her modern appearance with the fat girl from her past. This is an example of Rivers trying to cast herself as an outsider through self-deprecation. Rivers was less believable when she spoke about her modern body because she was

⁶⁹ Nikki Finke, "Edgar Rosenberg: The Public Ending of a Private Life: Suicide of Rivers' Husband Came Without a Warning," *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1987, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-08-20-vw-3767-story.html>.; Joan Rivers, *Enter Talking* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1986), 218.

⁷⁰ Joan Rivers, "The Fat Girl," track 5 on *Mr. Phyllis and Other Funny Stories*, Warner Records Inc., 1965, Apple Music.; Archy L, "Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 1973," YouTube video, 14:57, November 5, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58NtPpxJXKk>.; MOR Music Clips, "Joan Rivers Interview on Carson 'Birthday Girl,'" YouTube video, 9:42, March 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoOyNCnIRZU>.; MOR Music Clips, "Joan Rivers monologue Black Glitter Top," YouTube video, 4:44, March 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvJuVUTJ958>.

⁷¹ ENTERTAINMENT BUFF, "Joan Rivers at her Peak on 'Tonight Show', about 1984," YouTube video, 4:55, July 23, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feRb6rK_rl8.

a thin woman. Rivers was no longer the chubby outsider but, rather, the svelte insider. This is where the true humor of her self-deprecating style lived, in the incongruities. The absurdity of a visibly thin woman referring to herself as fat created a comedic juxtaposition between what the audience saw and how Joan Rivers described herself.

Another example of the insider/outsider paradox comes from Rivers' jokes about her lack of sex appeal. These jokes attempt to personify Rivers as an undesirable loser. For example, as a guest on *The Tonight Show* in 1980, Rivers says things like, "I was gang rejected by 12 muggers once in Central Park," "Guys on death row say, 'let's just be friends,'" and "Last night I said to my husband, 'Edgar would you call me an attractive woman?' and he said, 'Call your own.'"⁷² When Rivers made these jokes about herself, her statements directly opposed her physical appearance. She looked glamorous and attractive, always dressed in the latest fashions. Rivers painted herself as an ugly loser that nobody wanted and yet she was the very opposite. She was a well-dressed, married, beautiful woman with a successful career. As hard as she tried to depict herself as a fat, ugly outsider, her presence on television, her slim figure, her successful marriage, and her glamorous wardrobe solidified her status as a Hollywood insider. In her material, Rivers presented a negative perception of herself as ugly, fat, and unwanted. The reason this material worked was because Rivers was obviously none of those things. The comedy lay in the inconsistencies of perception. The irrationality of a rich, attractive, successful woman calling herself ugly and unappealing is what made these jokes funny.

Rivers' use of self-deprecating humor was not groundbreaking or surprising. Rivers performed in an era when female comedians needed to present themselves as ugly or

⁷² Archy A, "Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 1980," YouTube video, 13:29, August 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U53v7v2-GKo>.

insufficiently feminine to succeed in comedy.⁷³ In fact, two of Rivers' comedic predecessors had already found success using self-deprecation. Phyllis Diller's and Totie Fields' self-deprecating humor paved the way for Rivers. However, Rivers' attractive appearance set her apart from other self-deprecating female comedians of the era. Unlike Phyllis Diller, who regularly performed in an intentionally unattractive "fright wig," or Totie Fields, who was noticeably overweight, Rivers appeared coiffed and glamorous.⁷⁴ Rivers' appearance brought a new dimension to the self-deprecating style of humor which made her act seem fresh and unique. Even male comedians from the same era, like Woody Allen and Don Knotts, were purveyors of self-deprecating humor.

The popularity of the self-deprecating style during the 1950s and 1960s suggests that Rivers' self-deprecation was a product of her time. In order to have a successful comedy career during that era, female comedians had to perform in gender-appropriate ways to make themselves palatable for audiences.⁷⁵ Self-deprecation was one strategy that female comedians used to ingratiate themselves to audiences so they could successfully command the stage. Rivers employed a self-deprecating style in order to neutralize the threat that an attractive female comedian posed to mainstream audiences in the 1950s and 1960s. However, I argue that in addition to the style's popularity, Rivers' use of self-deprecation also stems from her identity as a Jewish woman.

There is a strong historical connection between female comedians and self-deprecation. This connection stems from issues of power and control, especially in stand-up comedy. Stand-up was a man's domain when Rivers began pursuing a career in comedy in the late 1950s. It was

⁷³ Heather Osborne-Thompson, "Channeling Totie Fields: Female Stand-Up Comedy on 1960s-1970s Television," *Feminist Media Histories* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 58.

⁷⁴ Merrill, "Feminist Humor," 273.

⁷⁵ Rebecca Krefting, "Twentieth-Century Stand-Up: A History of Charged Humor," in *All Joking Aside: American Humor and its Discontents*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 47.

viewed as normal and expected for men to control an audience through laughter, but the same was not true for women. In fact, female comedians were viewed as a threat to the status quo.⁷⁶ A woman asserting herself onstage and wielding the power and control necessary to hold the attention of an audience was not an acceptable phenomenon.⁷⁷ There was an expectation for funny women to make themselves smaller in order to accommodate men.⁷⁸ This was a situation that Rivers was acutely aware of. In her autobiography, she states, “[W]e agreed femininity and humor were not supposed to go together and men were thrown off balance by us, were afraid of us, and we had to hold back, be careful not to banter with them, not to top them.”⁷⁹ Despite societal pressures, Rivers and other women found ways to be funny without threatening men or their audiences. One way that female comedians were able to negotiate the power difference between performer and audience was by making themselves the butt of the joke. By putting themselves down and inviting the audience to laugh at them, female comedians ingratiated themselves to audiences.⁸⁰ Through self-deprecation, these women were able to make audiences feel more at ease with their performance role.

Self-deprecation is not just commonly employed by women. Self-deprecatory humor is also a mainstay of marginalized humor, especially humor that comes from minority religious and racial groups, such as Jewish people and African Americans. Historically, Jewish people have often participated in the creation of self-deprecatory humor in order to ingratiate themselves to the dominant culture. Unlike other marginalized groups, Jewish people have historically situated themselves close to the center of power, but never quite in its reach. This juxtaposition creates a tension when Jewish people seek to be classified as insiders, but don’t want to give up their

⁷⁶ Merrill, “Feminist Humor.”

⁷⁷ Marlowe, “A Sense,” 270.

⁷⁸ Walker, *Very Serious*.

⁷⁹ Rivers, *Enter Talking*, 124.

⁸⁰ Russell, “Self-deprecatory.”

Jewish identity in the process.⁸¹ This tension was especially prevalent in American society in the 1950s and 1960s. After World War II, there was a cultural push toward Americanization in Jewish communities.⁸² Many Jewish families experienced affluence and entered the middle class, which became their path to Americanization. These families abandoned their urban lives and moved to the suburbs in large numbers, retaining their cultural and community ties by living in close proximity to one another.

Rivers grew up during this transitional period. She was the daughter of Russian immigrants who moved their family to the suburbs when Rivers was just a girl. Americanization was especially important for Jewish immigrants who struggled to assimilate to American culture before the war. After the war, Jewish immigrants were able to enter the cultural mainstream because of their participation in the marketplace, their entry into the middle class, and their adoption of the postwar American consumerist ideology.⁸³ However, despite entering the cultural mainstream, many Jewish people in the suburbs experienced prejudice from their non-Jewish neighbors. The tension between entering the cultural mainstream through their middle-class status while remaining a marginalized community facing discrimination exemplified the insider/outsider paradox that many Jewish people experienced. Growing up and performing in postwar America made Rivers' decision to build her comedy persona around the insider/outsider paradox understandable. Although she grew up in a middle-class family and became a successful comedian, Rivers remained a member of an ethnic group victimized by prejudice and intolerance. Like female Jewish comedians before her, Rivers was marginalized by her Jewish identity as well as her female identity. This dual marginality is central to Joan Rivers' comedic

⁸¹ David Biale, Michael Galchinsky, and Susannah Heschel, *Insider/Outsider: American Jews and Multiculturalism*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 5.

⁸² Riv-Ellen Prell, *Fighting to Become Americans: Assimilation and the Trouble between Jewish Women and Jewish Men* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 142.

⁸³ Prell, *Fighting*, 93, 157, 346.

style in which she perpetuates herself as the proverbial outsider while appearing to be the consummate insider. This perpetual struggle to negotiate the terms of their insider/outsider status made self-deprecation an obvious stylistic choice for Jewish female comedians in the postwar era.

The insider/outsider dynamic that Jewish people experienced in postwar America fits well with the “us vs. them” nature of marginalized humor, in which the comedian casts themselves as the outsider.⁸⁴ The examples of Rivers’ comedic material from earlier in this chapter illustrate how Rivers used self-deprecatory humor to mimic the insider/outsider status of the Jewish people. Because of her identity as a Jewish woman and the paradox that it caused, Rivers could never truly belong in middle-class America. This was a fact that Rivers was acutely aware of. Her frenetic delivery in her routines of this era appears desperate at times, as if she is begging the audience to accept her, to tell her that she belongs. In other moments, she seems to experience comfort in the paradox. Her routines were the most exciting and “on” when she was taking aim at herself. When she leaned into her marginalized status as a Jewish woman and adopted the mindset of the proverbial outsider through her self-deprecatory material, she soared. This is the true paradox of Joan Rivers’ early reliance on self-deprecation: she didn’t achieve success until she put herself on the chopping block.

Self-deprecation was not the only style of comedy utilized by Joan Rivers in her early career. Rivers also embraced a conversational style in her comedy. Oftentimes her performances seemed more like she was telling stories to friends than performing for an audience. One of the reasons why Rivers adopted this style was because it created intimacy between herself and the audience. This was seen most clearly in her catchphrase, “Can we talk?” When Rivers said, “Can we talk?” to her audience, she invited them to an intimate conversation, and gave them

⁸⁴ Gilbert, *Performing*, 137.

permission to become active participants in her act. This invitation was unsurprising, because Rivers regularly interacted with her audiences during her performances. When Rivers guest hosted *The Tonight Show*, she would often choose one person to speak to in the audience during her opening monologue. She would ask them personal questions about their life and their relationship status and use their answers to create new jokes. Rivers credits this strategy to her time improvising with Second City, where she was trained to see the audience as her improvisational partner, gleaning inspiration from their responses.⁸⁵ It is important to note that Rivers usually chose to speak to female audience members. I contend that she chose to converse with women because they provided her with subject matter she felt comfortable speaking about. Rivers' choice to speak directly to female audience members is further indication that her intimate treatment of the audience was heavily gendered. By inviting the audience, specifically women, into her act, Rivers treated them like girlfriends she could confide in.

On paper, relying on a conversational style of humor makes sense for a female comedian. However, at the beginning of Rivers' career it wasn't a safe stylistic choice because of its femininity. Despite the risk, Rivers chose to adopt a feminine style of humor and focus on women's issues, because she didn't want to be another female comedian doing, "a woman's version of men's acts."⁸⁶ For Rivers, it was important to embrace her identity as a woman, so much so that she built her entire act around it. The conversational style of humor was so effective for Rivers because it lined up with her identity as a Jewish woman. By embracing her identity as a Jewish woman, Rivers was able to build an act rooted in personal experience and honesty. This differed greatly from other female comedians of the era who relied on gimmicks, costumes, and comedy characters completely separate from themselves to create a successful comedy act.

⁸⁵ Rivers, *Enter Talking*, 215.

⁸⁶ Rivers, *Enter Talking*, 230.

Women like Jean Carroll and Patsy Abbott used their musical talent and sang comedic songs in their acts.⁸⁷ Belle Barth and Pearl Williams played “red hot mamas” when they performed explicit sexual material for audiences.⁸⁸ Phyllis Diller and Totie Fields performed self-deprecating material like Rivers, but they relied on appearing goofy and unattractive in order to be funny.⁸⁹ The desire to break away from the stylistic choices of her female predecessors allowed Rivers to embody a version of herself onstage, a Jewish woman sharing her struggles with a group of friends.

Another facet of River’s early comedy style was her physicality. Rivers did not engage in slapstick comedy, but she did use her face and body to support her comedic material. One of Rivers’ most-used gestures during her early career was sticking her finger into her open mouth to indicate disgust. She did this when she discussed her physical appearance and when she spoke about housework. This gesture hammered home her use of self-deprecatory humor, adding a layer to Rivers’ disgust with her own appearance. When she was a guest on *The Tonight Show*, Rivers would often contort her face when she mimicked others or made fun of herself. In one particularly animated performance on *The Carol Burnett Show* from 1974, Rivers starts out sitting on a stool, but once she stands up, she becomes a ball of frenetic energy. She moves her hands continuously while she talks, she walks to the edge of the stage and leans in toward the audience trying to draw them in until, eventually, she gets down on her knees to speak directly to individuals in the audience. Later in the performance, after she talks about her lack of sex appeal,

⁸⁷ Katla McGlynn, “What *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* Gets Right About Early Stand-up Comedy,” *Vulture*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/12/marvelous-mrs-maisel-historical-accuracy.html>.

⁸⁸ Giovanna P. Del Negro, “The Bad Girls of Jewish Comedy: Gender, Class Assimilation, and Whiteness in Postwar America,” in *A Jewish Feminine Mystique?: Jewish Women in Postwar America*, ed. Hasia Diner, Shira Kohn, and Rachel Kranson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 146, 148, 150, 155.

⁸⁹ Merrill, “Feminist Humor,” 273.; Osborne-Thompson, “Channeling,” 57.; Kristen Anderson Wagner, “‘With Age Comes Wisdom’: Joan Rivers, Betty White, and the Aging Comedienne,” *Feminist Media Histories* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 148, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2017.3.2.141>.

Rivers throws herself onto the floor of the stage and pretends to cry.⁹⁰ The physicality of this particular performance is reminiscent of a classic melodrama, full of grandiose emotional displays. Rivers uses her face and body to convey a whole range of emotions from shame, glee, boredom, and anger to despair. This overdramatic display fits in well with the idea that women are more emotional and dramatic than men. It also allows Rivers to command her audience's attention. It's almost as if she's waving her arms around and saying, "Look at me!" By adopting such a dramatic physicality, Rivers solidifies her identity as a loud, over-the-top woman. In doing so, she joins the ranks of other successful female comedians who relied on dramatic displays and brashness in their performances, including Carol Burnett, Patsy Abbott, Belle Barth, and Pearl Williams.⁹¹ Her sheer volume and physical presence onstage ensure that she is heard and seen in an industry dominated by men.

In the beginning of her career, Rivers often took part in physical acts rooted in superstition. I contend that these gestures were a physical manifestation of Rivers' Jewish identity which she used for comedic effect. Additionally, superstition's feminized characterization supports my argument that Rivers' act is gendered. During her performances, she would spit three times when discussing concepts or activities she deemed unpleasant. She would also knock on wood when she spoke about the good things in her life. These superstitious actions were rooted in Rivers' Jewish identity. There is a significant historical connection between the Jewish people and superstition. One of the most common Jewish superstitions is the evil eye. Jewish superstition sees the evil eye as a sinister influence activated by envy, jealousy, and hatred. There are over 80 recorded strategies used by Jewish people for warding off the evil eye. Some of the most common modern strategies include spitting three times, saying *keyn ayen*

⁹⁰ Nostalgoteket, "Joan Rivers – Stand up comedy, 1974," YouTube video, 6:50, August 31, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDHgAtFUaXE>.

⁹¹ Cohen, "Unkosher," 122.; Del Negro, "Bad Girls," 154.

hore (“may there be no evil eye”), and wearing or hanging a hamsa amulet.⁹² Spitting three times is a particularly interesting strategy, because it can be both preventative and counteractive.⁹³ In Rivers’ act, it is used counteractively to defeat the evil eye. During a monologue on *The Tonight Show* in 1984, Rivers talks about her deep-seated hatred for housework. When she says the word “cleaning,” she immediately follows by spitting three times, indicating that she believes that cleaning is a terrible, evil thing.⁹⁴ The humor in this action lies in the characterization of domestic labor as evil at a time when attitudes about women’s roles in the home were changing. Also, though housework can be tedious, labelling it “evil” was an exaggeration that Rivers used for comedic effect. Similarly, in a 1983 interview, Rivers talks about how looks are more important than brains for women. She says, “Education for women?” and proceeds to spit three times.⁹⁵ Again, Rivers is responding to something she deems evil or terrible at a time when public attitudes about women and education were shifting. It is also ironic because Rivers was a college-educated woman with a successful career. Rivers uses this superstitious action to elicit laughter by labelling something seemingly innocuous as “evil.” Additionally, Rivers’ repeated use of this superstitious strategy is a physical manifestation of her Jewish identity. However, the Jewish origins of the ritual may not be obvious for audiences, who could view it as an eccentric habit rather than a religious practice. Even if audiences don’t connect the ritual to Rivers’ Jewish identity, its presence in her act is still significant, because it indicates that even though her act is not built around her ethnicity like other Jewish comedians of the time, she is still displaying her

⁹² Leah Rachel Yoffie, “Popular Beliefs and Customs among the Yiddish-Speaking Jews of St. Louis, Mo,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 38, no. 149 (Jul.-Sep. 1925): 375-399.

⁹³ “Evil Eye,” Jewish Virtual Library, accessed February 26, 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/evil-eye.>; Ronald L. Eisenberg, “8 Popular Jewish Superstitions,” My Jewish Learning, accessed February 26, 2021, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/popular-superstitions/>.

⁹⁴ MusicalAtmosphere, “Joan Rivers stand-up Tonight Show – hilarious monologue 2 – 1984,” YouTube video, 9:53, April 29, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcBFIL8zBBQ>.

⁹⁵ Pritish Bhattacharya, “Joan Rivers Interviewed by Bob Monkhouse (1983),” YouTube video, 19:55, November 6, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CouMOKV6Vpo>.

Jewishness onstage. In doing so, she aligns herself with a rich history of Jewish comedians, like her comedy inspiration Lenny Bruce, who highlighted their ethnic identities in their acts.⁹⁶ By including aspects of her ethnicity in her acts, Rivers proves she is part of Jewish comedy history.

Another superstitious action that Rivers does onstage is knocking on wood. For Rivers, knocking on wood was used after saying something positive to ensure a good outcome. Though knocking on wood has traditionally been linked to Christianity, there are some sources that connect knocking on wood and Judaism. These sources claim that during the Spanish Inquisition, Jewish people used secret codes to gain entry into wooden synagogues. Thus, the tradition of knocking on wood began.⁹⁷ Rivers uses the action of knocking on wood as a preventative measure. When Rivers speaks about good things that have happened to her or her loved ones, she knocks on wood to ward off evil spirits. In her television appearances, Rivers knocks on wood after she speaks about finally getting married, about Johnny Carson looking good for his age, about her husband treating her well, about getting positive reviews for her book, and about her daughter thriving in life.⁹⁸ Many times before she knocks wood she exclaims, “Thank God!” to show gratitude for her good fortune. She uses these expressions in her act because they support her self-deprecatory humor. In her comedy, Rivers portrays herself as hopeless in certain areas of life, such as sex, romance, and beauty. In order to maintain her hapless image, Rivers can’t publicly accept her victories outright. When Rivers knocks on wood she essentially attributes her

⁹⁶ Ushi Derman, “The Fearless, Politically Incorrect Lenny Bruce,” ANU Museum, June 14, 2018, <https://www.anumuseum.org.il/blog-items/fearless-politically-incorrect-lenny-bruce/>.

⁹⁷ “Friday the 13th: The Jewish Origin of ‘Knock on Wood,’” Jewish Federation of Macon & Middle GA., accessed February 26, 2021, <https://jewishmacon.org/our-stories-from-around-the-world/friday-the-13th-the-jewish-origin-of-knock-on-wood.>; Sarah Coughlin, “The Truth Behind This Common Superstition,” *Refinery29*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/what-does-knock-on-wood-mean-history>.

⁹⁸ Archy L, “Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 1973.”; Nostalgoteket, “Joan Rivers – Stand up comedy, 1974.”; MOR Music Clips, “Joan Rivers Interview on Carson ‘Birthday Girl.’”; MOR Music Clips, “Joan Rivers monologue Striped Gown,” YouTube video, 5:39, March 26, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xq-hV5jrZN4.>; Archy L, “Joan Rivers Dick Cavett 1991,” YouTube video, 21:33, November 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yy9Cjp14ASM.>

good fortune to luck or superstition, rather than hard work. Rivers' repeated use of this gesture is funny, because it's a physical reminder of how hopeless and down-on-her-luck Rivers usually is.

Rivers' physicality reveals nuanced aspects of her identity. As her career took off, she became more comfortable using her body to support her comedy. By the 1970s, gone was the girl who spent her set sitting on a stool, too afraid to touch the microphone.⁹⁹ Her over-the-top, melodramatic actions on stage showcased her unapologetic femininity. In opposition to her self-deprecating material, which made her appear inferior to others, Rivers' physicality made her loom large. Even though her hand movements often appeared like physical manifestations of nervous energy, Rivers' physicality communicated a sense of confidence. She wasn't afraid to move around the stage, to take advantage of the space provided. She also ignored the boundaries of the stage, often walking into the audience, looking for someone to inspire her act. This added to her intimacy; not only did she speak to people in the crowd, she also physically joined the crowd. In doing so, Rivers reinforced the conversational style of her comedy. Rivers' Jewishness was also displayed through her physicality. Her participation in superstitious actions was a clear physical representation of her Jewish cultural identity. The sum of these physical aspects of Rivers' performances culminated in a complex, fully formed, female Jewish comedian. Rivers' identity as a Jewish woman was a clear inspiration for both her verbal and physical comedy styles. This indicates just how much Rivers drew from her personal identity to create her comedy act and persona.

Comedy and Identity in a Changing Postwar Society

The subject matter covered in Rivers' comedy content during the early years of her career was also shaped by her identity as a Jewish woman in postwar America. In these early years, Rivers' act focused on relevant women's issues, the modern female experience, and popular

⁹⁹ Rivers, *Enter Talking*, 269.

ethnic stereotypes. Within these subject areas, Rivers explored and shared her identity through humor. Rivers' early career coincided with several significant changes in American culture, including the migration to the suburbs, the baby boom, the return of women to the domestic sphere, and the beginning of second-wave feminism.¹⁰⁰ After World War II, the family became a symbol of security for Americans. From the end of the war until the 1960s, national trends showed that women were marrying at a younger age and having more children. This "baby boom" along with the belief that men should be the sole provider for their families caused many women who worked during the war to leave their jobs. Women were once again relegated to the domestic sphere and expected to take care of the home and their children. During this time, many housewives in the suburbs complained about feeling trapped in their domestic duties and isolated. These complaints came to a head in 1963 when Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*. The book addressed the issue of educated middle-class housewives who were bored with their domestic duties and felt unfulfilled in life. Friedan urged these women to reject the confinement of domesticity, leave their homes, and pursue careers.¹⁰¹ *The Feminine Mystique*, which is often credited as one of the catalysts of second-wave feminism, garnered responses from women all over the country.¹⁰² Many women felt relief and recognition while reading the book, but others disagreed with Friedan's opinions about women assuming domestic roles.¹⁰³

The cultural upheaval and changing gender expectations that women experienced after the war

¹⁰⁰ Prell, *Fighting*, 347.

¹⁰¹ Elaine Tyler May, *Pushing the Limits: American Women 1940-1961* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6, 52, 53, 54, 76, 135.

¹⁰² Margalit Fox, "Betty Friedan, Who Ignited Cause In 'Feminine Mystique,' Dies at 85," *New York Times*, February 5, 2006, 1.; Jacob Muñoz, "The Powerful, Complicated Legacy of Betty Friedan's 'The Feminine Mystique,'" *Smithsonian Magazine*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/powerful-complicated-legacy-betty-friedans-feminine-mystique-180976931/>.

¹⁰³ Stephanie Coontz, *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and America Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 25, 30.; Gail Collins, "'The Feminine Mystique' at 50," *New York Times Magazine*, January 23, 2013.

provided Rivers with the opportunity to comment on women's lives and society's expectations of women through a humorous lens.

In the beginning of her career, the majority of Rivers' content was about women and women's issues. She spoke about everything from politics, sex, gynecology, and housework to beauty. Through her humor, Rivers addressed the anxieties that many American women felt due to the cultural shifts of the era. Rivers did not experience any significant success until she started to write her own material based on her life. Rivers was acutely aware that her target audience was women. In a 1991 interview with Dick Cavett reminiscing about Rivers' career, Cavett claimed that most of Rivers' material was aimed at women because Rivers' core audience was made up of women.¹⁰⁴ He then went on to say that although women made up the bulk of Rivers' audience, men still laughed at Rivers' jokes. Rivers disagreed with Cavett and stated that men only found her funny when women were present.¹⁰⁵ I contend that this is because men were uncomfortable with Rivers' subject matter, such as gynecology and childbirth, and did not know the appropriate way to react without women present. Men were also not used to seeing a comedian who did not cater directly to them. Rivers delivered content for women written by a woman. By using her own life experiences, Rivers created an act that female audiences could relate to. Her identity as a woman was the greatest source of inspiration for her comedy act. She followed the advice of the old adage, "Write what you know." In doing so, Rivers crafted a unique comedy experience for her audiences and invited them into the life and psyche of a modern woman navigating gender expectations in a changing culture.

One of the most taboo topics that Rivers discussed in her act was gynecology. In her autobiography she claimed that the topic seemed tame in 1986 but was shocking in the early

¹⁰⁴ There is no data to back up Cavett's assertions about Rivers' core audience. As a comedian on television, Rivers likely aimed to reach a wider audience than just women with her act.

¹⁰⁵ Archy L, "Joan Rivers Dick Cavett 1991."

years of her career.¹⁰⁶ Before Rivers, female comedians did not talk about women's health in their acts. To do so was considered vulgar and inappropriate, but Rivers was fearless. Her material reflected medical advances in women's health, making jokes about contraceptives and birth control methods as they were developed in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰⁷ In 1984 when she was 51 years old, she joked, "I had a hot flash yesterday, so bad it melted my IUD."¹⁰⁸ This statement involves women's health issues as well as the aging female body. Rivers even used the gynecologist to joke about her nonexistent sex life. In 1980, she claimed, "I haven't seen a gynecologist in four years. Now I figure, if the car's in the garage, why pay for a mechanic?"¹⁰⁹ However, there were some limitations to this subject matter. In a 1984 interview, Rivers said that talking about women and their periods was the riskiest part of her act, and that television wouldn't allow her to discuss it on air.¹¹⁰ That statement indicates how Rivers' act changed based on the medium. She was able to talk about more controversial subjects in her comedy club performances that she couldn't talk about on television. This interview revealed that similar to the beginning of her career in the 1960s, Rivers continued to push the boundaries of comedy through her jokes about women's issues. She proved that women's health could be funny and paved the way for future female comedians to include jokes about women's health in their acts.

Rivers liked to talk about societal expectations for women in her act. She used these expectations to write material that subverted them. She often spoke about her distaste for housework, including cooking and cleaning. Rivers even included a track titled "Cooking?" dedicated to her disdain for cooking on her 1969 comedy album. In it she states, "If God wanted

¹⁰⁶ Rivers, *Enter Talking*, 268.

¹⁰⁷ May, *Pushing*, 107.

¹⁰⁸ MusicalAtmosphere, "Joan Rivers stand-up Tonight Show – hilarious monologue 2 – 1984."

¹⁰⁹ Archy A, "Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 1980."

¹¹⁰ Lee Israel, "Joan Rivers and How She Got That Way," *Ms.*, October 1984, 111.

me to cook he would have given me aluminum hands.”¹¹¹ By sharing her opinions, Rivers communicated to her audience that not enjoying or succeeding at housework was ok. In doing so, Rivers created an opportunity for women to discuss their feelings and opinions about their “job” as homemakers. She also called into question the idea that men are attracted to women because of their homemaking skills. During a television appearance in 1974, Rivers stated, “We were never told that men care about looks. We were told that men care that you keep the house clean, which is junk. Housework is stupid.”¹¹² Similarly, in one of her *Tonight Show* monologues in 1984, she claimed, “Not one woman was ever made love to ‘cause we kept the house clean.”¹¹³ Rivers’ jokes about domesticity and housework were present in her comedy material in the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s. The rise of second-wave feminism and concerns about the subjugation of women by the patriarchy played a large role in changing attitudes about women and domesticity. Rivers’ jokes about housework and domestic life were a product of these social movements and the changing ideas about women’s roles that they supported. Therefore, Rivers used the social upheaval of the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s to create jokes that resonated with modern women. By questioning the validity of housework and openly admitting her disdain for it, Rivers subverted the expectation that all women must be first-rate homemakers. Like Friedan and her fellow feminists, Rivers’ jokes about housework echoed the sentiment that femininity and domesticity were not inherently linked. Rivers’ material about her disdain for housework complemented the assertion that women were complex beings with different skillsets and desires who had more to offer than cooking, cleaning, and childcare.

A significant amount of Rivers’ early material focused on women’s bodies and their appearance. She talked about this through her self-deprecatory material in which she critiqued

¹¹¹ Joan Rivers, “Cooking?,” Track 4 on *The Next to Last Joan Rivers Album*, RCA Records, 1969, Apple Music.

¹¹² Nostalgoteket, “Joan Rivers – Stand up comedy, 1974.”

¹¹³ MusicalAtmosphere, “Joan Rivers stand-up Tonight Show – hilarious monologue 2 – 1984.”

her own looks, and through her discussion of female celebrities. Rivers argued that the most important thing a woman could be was attractive. During a television appearance in 1983, she said, “I think looks are very important for women. Oh, much more than brains.”¹¹⁴ She also believed that beautiful women were stupid. In 1982 she claimed that God divides and, “If he makes you gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous, he makes you stupid, stupid, stupid.”¹¹⁵ Rivers’ beliefs about the importance of good looks made her self-deprecating material all the more tragic. In Rivers’ world, looks were everything for a woman, and they were the one thing that she believed she didn’t have. Rivers’ claims about the importance of looks juxtaposed second-wave feminism’s beliefs about beauty. In 1963, Friedan argued that a “woman’s world was confined to her own body and beauty,” and that popular women’s magazines played a significant role in communicating and reinforcing beauty ideals and expectations.¹¹⁶ Feminists’ objections to beauty standards were so significant that a large group of women protested the 1968 Miss America Pageant on the grounds that it reinforced the idea that a woman’s worth was determined by her looks.¹¹⁷

Rivers did not echo these feminist principles in her comedy. Instead, she critiqued her own appearance based on popular beauty standards of the era, including the importance of sexual attractiveness and a slim figure.¹¹⁸ The issues that she had with her body and her appearance were often present in her early material. She complained about being ugly and fat as a child, her unhappiness with her weight, her lack of sex appeal, and her aging body. Even though Rivers

¹¹⁴ Bhattacharya, “Joan Rivers Interviewed by Bob Monkhouse (1983).”

¹¹⁵ Archy L, “Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 1982,” YouTube video, 14:32, October 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZx2D-DuhEs>.

¹¹⁶ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1963), 31.

¹¹⁷ Roxanne Gay, “Fifty Year Ago, Protesters Took on the Miss America Pageant and Electrified the Feminist Movement,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, January/February 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/fifty-years-ago-protestors-took-on-miss-america-pageant-electrified-feminist-movement-180967504/>.

¹¹⁸ May, *Pushing*, 91.; Jacqueline Howard, “The history of the ‘ideal’ woman and where that has left us,” *CNN*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/07/health/body-image-history-of-beauty-explainer-intl/index.html>.

was making fun of herself, her insecurities were similar to those experienced by women all over the world. These insecurities were socially constructed, including by media like women's magazines that pushed specific beauty ideals on women in the interest of encouraging consumerism.¹¹⁹ Instead of critiquing the unrealistic beauty expectations that women faced during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, Rivers ridiculed herself for failing to meet them. Thus, by writing jokes about her perceived shortcomings, Rivers created content that was relatable for female audiences at the time but failed to account for changing attitudes about women's beauty. This created a tension in Rivers' comedy persona, because despite benefitting from the gains of feminism, Rivers chose to go against changing ideas about the beauty industry. It's impossible to know Rivers' true motivations behind this choice, however her comedic persona remained dedicated to the harmful beauty standards she grew up around rather than questioning them as did many second-wave feminists of the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.

Rivers' self-deprecating jokes about her appearance were some of her most brutal. Her lack of sex appeal was one of the most-visited topics for her act, so much so that she often wrote several versions of the same joke to use in her performances. For example, she had a long-standing joke about running naked through her bedroom in front of her husband Edgar. In each iteration the essence of the joke remained the same, but Edgar's response was everchanging. In one version, Rivers exclaims, "I pointed my finger. Edgar went 'PHONE HOME.'"¹²⁰ Other responses include, "six more months of winter" and "who shaved the dog?"¹²¹ Rivers' tendency to revisit the same joke in a different way was a testament to her ability to recognize what her

¹¹⁹ Friedan, *Mystique*, 48, 221-22.

¹²⁰ MOR Music Clips, "Joan Rivers interviewed on Carson Black Ruffle Dress FUNNY," YouTube video, 12:16, April 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWrcW-f0ld0>.

¹²¹ MOR Music Clips, "Joan Rivers Interview on Carson 'Birthday Girl.'"; MOR Music Clips, "Joan Rivers monologue purple striped dress," YouTube video, 5:35, April 16, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrLmAXyy2JA>.

audiences responded to. Rivers spent so much of her act complaining about her lack of sex appeal because it made audiences howl with laughter. Another joke that Rivers used constantly during her early career involved her wedding night. In this particular joke she claims that her wedding night was a disaster because of her lack of breasts. The joke went that, after undressing, “My husband said, ‘let me help you with the buttons,’ and I said, ‘I’m naked!’”¹²² Rivers’ self-deprecating depiction of her body invited the audience to laugh at her and provided her with a seemingly never-ending well of material. There was always something Rivers could ridicule about herself, and she never assumed a self-confident attitude on stage. She remained the woman that men didn’t want to sleep with because it was comical in its irrationality and because it fit in with the self-deprecating style of comedy that was so popular at the time.

During her early career, Rivers also made fun of her aging body. When she got her big break on *The Tonight Show* in 1965, she was 32 years old. She spent the next 21 years as a guest and host of the show, aging in front of the whole country. Toward the end of her tenure on *The Tonight Show*, Rivers became increasingly vocal about her changing body. By the 1980s, she was regularly complaining about how her body was falling, something that every aging woman could relate to. She made jokes about her sagging breasts, like “My boobies are dropping so fast, I wear a 34 long bra,” and “Edgar said, ‘look you’ve got what every sailor wants, a sunken chest.’”¹²³ She also made jokes about the lower half of her body, saying things like, “My rear end, it is falling. I walk into a bar, they go ‘bottoms down,’” and “My body is falling so fast my gynecologist wears a hard hat.”¹²⁴ These were some of Rivers’ most popular jokes because they resonated with her female audiences. These women were able to come to terms with the realities

¹²² Nostalgoteket, “Joan Rivers – Stand up comedy, 1974.”

¹²³ MOR Music Clips, “Joan Rivers Interview on Carson ‘Birthday Girl.’”

¹²⁴ MOR Music Clips, “Joan Rivers interviewed on Carson Black Ruffle Dress FUNNY.”; pannoni14, “The Joan Rivers Comedy Hour (1981, most),” YouTube video, 56:31, July 27, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbp6JpMV3B4>.

of aging by laughing at Rivers' expense. However, Rivers' characterization of the aging female body was negative and did not line up with contemporary feminist ideas about beauty and the female body. Feminism called for women to reject the systems that exerted control over their lives, including consumerism and the beauty industry. Instead of supporting feminist ideals, Rivers' comments perpetuated sexist expectations placed upon female bodies, because constant pressure for women to combat the natural aging process did not apply to men. Instead of celebrating the strengths of the female body and the positive aspects of aging, Rivers concentrated on everything she deemed wrong and unappealing about her aging body. Even though Rivers spoke about aging in a negative manner, her willingness to discuss the aging female body showed that she did not shy away from uncomfortable truths. By discussing changing female bodies, Rivers gave women a comedic outlet for their own worries and insecurities while simultaneously reinforcing unrealistic beauty expectations for women. Thus, Rivers' content about the aging female body did not align with popular feminist ideals of the era about the female body, and instead, reinforced the harmful body expectations disseminated by the beauty industry and popular women's media,

Rivers also spent a great deal of time talking about her weight, especially at the beginning of her mainstream success. Rivers constantly hyperbolized her childhood weight. In her first comedy album from 1965, she claims that her parents put her in plays as a form of therapy to make her forget how fat she was. "It was Christmas time and they put me into the Christmas play and the first part I ever had, I played the three Magi. And I got to do a solo, 'I Three Kings of Orient Am.'"¹²⁵ In addition to its commentary on weight, this joke illustrates the dominant Christian ideology present in the United States at the time and how Rivers' Jewishness made her an outsider in this particular situation. It was odd that a Jewish child performed in a Christmas

¹²⁵ Rivers, "The Fat Girl."

play. Rivers also jokes that in order to cheer her up, her parents would take her for drives. “You know, they’d go for a ride and they’d take me along with them in the U-Haul It.”¹²⁶ She did offer the disclaimer that these stories were grossly exaggerated, but the sentiment behind them was true. She continued to worry about her weight throughout her early career. In a 1973 appearance on *The Tonight Show*, Rivers talked about how she wanted to gain some weight to help mask the wrinkles on her face. She shared that she did not want to gain too much weight because, “I was a very fat kid and I’m scared that it’s going to just go up again.”¹²⁷

Rivers’ fascination with weight did not occur in a vacuum. There were ever-present external societal pressures that women faced regarding body image and weight. As body expectations and trends changed during the early portion of Rivers’ career, one element remained the same. The ideal body types of the 1960s, ‘70s, and ‘80s were all slim.¹²⁸ In fact, a study conducted about *Playboy* centerfolds and Miss America contestants from 1959-1978 found that there was, “a shift in the ideal body standard toward a thinner size.” During this 20-year period, there was also a growing emphasis on dieting in magazines.¹²⁹ The increasing emphasis on thinness that occurred in the early part of Rivers’ career likely played a role in her obsession with weight and her desperation to stay thin. Rivers’ material about weight may have been inspired by her real-life experiences, but it was also a product of the shrinking ideal body weight for women at the time. Again, Rivers’ comedic content directly opposed popular feminist beliefs of the era about female body expectations. Rather than focusing on furthering the feminist cause by critiquing female beauty expectations, Rivers maintained those harmful expectations in her material.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Archy L, “Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 1973.”

¹²⁸ Howard, “history.”

¹²⁹ David M. Garner, Paul E. Garfinkel, Donald Schwartz, and Michael Thompson, “Cultural Expectations of Thinness in Women,” *Psychological Reports* 47, no. 2 (1980): 484-85, 489-490.

Rivers' content was not centered around her Jewish identity in the same way that it was centered around her identity as a woman, but she still included Jewish content in her act. During her early career, Rivers struggled to find the best way to present her ethnic identity in her comedy material. Before her big break on *The Tonight Show*, Rivers spent some time performing at the Jewish resorts in the Catskill Mountains. The audiences there were not receptive to her material, and Rivers felt she was, "Not ethnic enough for the Catskills."¹³⁰ Years later, Rivers' manager Roy Silver advised her to cut a lot of the ethnic references from her act. Silver wanted her to write jokes that were more universal and could reach a wider audience.¹³¹ The mixed messaging that Rivers received about her ethnic material during her early career made negotiating the number of ethnic references in her act difficult. Eventually, Rivers' act became centered around her identity as a woman, but she still managed to pepper in some ethnic jokes. In her early comedy albums and television appearances, Rivers made jokes referencing the Bible, Jewish stereotypes, Hitler, and the Nazis. Though these references didn't occur as often as her self-deprecatory content or jokes about women and celebrities, they still indicate the importance of Rivers' Jewish identity to her overall comedic persona.

When Rivers made Jewish jokes, she often referred to non-Jewish people as gentiles, the word for those of non-Jewish faith.¹³² This word choice is indicative of the us vs. them nature of Rivers' ethnic comedy persona. By using the word gentile in her act, Rivers situates herself in opposition to those outside her faith. The word isn't an insult, merely an ethnic way of referring to non-Jewish people, and its use is a clear representation of Rivers' Jewish identity. Rivers'

¹³⁰ Rivers, *Enter Talking*, 230.

¹³¹ Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 610.

¹³² "Gentile," Definition, Merriam Webster, accessed March 2, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gentile>.; Joan Rivers, "Diamond Rings," track 1 on *The Next to Last Joan Rivers Album*, RCA Records, 1969, Apple Music.; Archy A, "Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 17/5-1974," YouTube video, 12:03, January 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MF2EKYNCpAQ>.; Archy L, "Joan Rivers Flip Wilson Show 1973," YouTube video, 6:51, August 9, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDpjSt4ty_g.

ethnic material also dealt with Jewish stereotypes. She often made jokes about Jewish people that reaffirmed popular stereotypes. There is a widely held stereotype that Jewish people are good with money. This goes hand in hand with the belief that Jewish people are inherently materialistic.¹³³ Rivers acknowledged these stereotypical representations of Jewish people in her act. In her 1983 comedy album she speaks about UFOs, claiming, “A saucer has never landed on a Jewish lawn ‘cause we would turn it over to see who made it.”¹³⁴ This joke is a clear reference to Jewish materialism. In the joke, the Jewish person who happens upon the flying saucer isn’t concerned with where it came from or what it is, but rather what brand it is. This supports the stereotype that Jewish people are shallow and superficial and only care about material things. It also mirrored the postwar obsession with consumerism in America.¹³⁵ In another joke from 1981, Rivers makes fun of Jewish people who like country western music. Rivers quips, “If a Jew’s gonna write a country western song, it would be ‘I stand by my accountant.’”¹³⁶ This joke illustrates the clash between Jewish prosperity in postwar America and their status in the middle class with the rural, working class identity of country music. It is also a reference to the idea that Jewish people are obsessed with making and saving money. The job of an accountant is to manage their client’s money, so the joke is implying that Jewish people feel a deep sense of loyalty to the person who takes care of their financial needs. Instead of subverting this harmful stereotype, Rivers uses it to make a joke at the expense of Jewish people. However, Rivers was not disparaging her Jewish identity by making these jokes. Rather, she was participating in

¹³³ JP O’Malley, “How the stereotype of Jews and money go beyond the Pale (of Settlement),” *Times of Israel*, August 27, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/how-the-stereotype-of-jews-and-money-goes-beyond-the-pale-of-settlement/>.

¹³⁴ Joan Rivers, “Joan Talks About...(Beginning),” track 2 on *What Becomes a Semi-Legend Most?*, Geffen Record, 1983, Apple Music.

¹³⁵ Prell, *Fighting*, 340, 347.

¹³⁶ Archy M, “Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 14/5-1981 (Very funny),” YouTube video, 17:00, September 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufINzJrLTM>.

stereotypical humor because it was a popular comedy style at the time.¹³⁷ Two of the most popular stereotypes in Jewish humor in the late 20th century were the Jewish Mother and the Jewish American Princess. Rivers did not engage with the Jewish Mother stereotype, but she did use the Jewish American Princess to create her comedy persona.

In her act, Rivers embodies the Jewish American Princess (JAP). The JAP is a woman or girl who is obsessed with status, her physical appearance, and consumerism. She always takes and never gives.¹³⁸ Rivers presents herself as a spoiled Jewish woman obsessed with luxury and unwilling to perform household chores.¹³⁹ The most salient aspect of the JAP is her active engagement in consumer culture. The connection between women and consumerism was not limited to Jewish women. Consumer culture dominated the American economy after World War II, and consumer spending became the housewife's task.¹⁴⁰ The JAP stereotype developed in response to Jewish suburbanization and was a representation of the postwar affluence that middle-class Jewish families enjoyed. The stereotype came to prominence in the 1970s during the rise of second-wave feminism and in the midst of a cultural reevaluation of who was the breadwinner for the American family. It is not a coincidence that the height of the JAP's popularity occurred during a time when women began pursuing their own careers. The JAP reflected growing anxieties about changing gender roles as women joined the workforce and Jewish families became dual-income households. The JAP painted a negative picture of Jewish female consumerism, depicting a demanding woman who takes advantage of her hardworking husband or father to purchase luxury goods.¹⁴¹ The JAP stereotype embodies a form of

¹³⁷ Prell, *Fighting*, 145, 178

¹³⁸ Prell, *Fighting*, 189.

¹³⁹ Jamie Lauren Keiles, "Reconsidering the Jewish American Princess," *Vox*, December 5, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/12/5/18119890/jewish-american-princess-jap-stereotype>.

¹⁴⁰ May, *Pushing*, 74.

¹⁴¹ Prell, *Fighting*, 178, 182, 188, 189, 195, 204, 340.

femininity that many feminists of the era pushed back against. Her unwillingness to work, her rampant desire to consume, and her lack of financial independence were all characteristics that did not align with the ideals of second-wave feminism. In fact, the only aspect of the JAP stereotype that lined up with second-wave feminism's ideals was her refusal to do housework. Unfortunately, that facet of the JAP was attributed to her laziness rather than her feminist beliefs. Essentially, the stereotype counteracted the reality of women in the workforce by portraying them as lazy, entitled vultures who did nothing to contribute.

Rivers never refers to herself as a JAP, rather she acts in line with the ideal that they hold most sacred: they deserve only the best. The way that Rivers most commonly evoked the JAP stereotype was through her discussion of diamonds. During one of her television appearances she declared, "I don't exercise, I'm Jewish. If God wanted me to bend over he would put diamonds on the floor."¹⁴² This joke paints Rivers as a woman only concerned with luxury material goods. Rivers solidifies her role as a JAP when she discusses engagement rings with members of her audience. In these jokes, Rivers used her identity as a JAP to portray herself as an authority on luxury and good taste. When Rivers interacted with her audiences, she would often ask the women to put out their hands so she could see their rings. Sometimes she would choose which women she thought were first wives based on their rings, and other times she would merely comment on whether the man did a good job picking it out. On one of her comedy albums, Rivers asks a woman to show her engagement ring to her. At first Rivers tells the girl it isn't bad, but when she finds out that the girl is Jewish, she completely changes her tune. She yells at the girl, "You're a Jew and you took that shitty ring? It's a piece of shit in four prongs!"¹⁴³ According to Rivers' joke, the ring is acceptable for a gentile, but a Jewish woman should expect

¹⁴² Archy L, "Joan Rivers Dick Cavett 1991."

¹⁴³ Rivers, "Joan Talks About...(Beginning)."

more. The humor of these jokes lies in Rivers' obsession with luxury and the double standard that Rivers harbors for Jewish women. Through her jokes about engagement rings, Rivers asserts that Jewish women must marry a man who has money and is able to provide her with expensive things. These jokes confirm the stereotypical connection between Jewish women and consumerism, and cement Rivers' status as a JAP.

The most controversial Jewish jokes that Rivers engaged with were jokes about Hitler and the Nazis. Rivers made these jokes to shock her audience. Rivers was constantly pushing the boundaries of comedy, and she enjoyed making people squirm. She never shied away from these jokes, constantly using Hitler as a point of comparison for mean, controlling people. During several *Tonight Show* appearances, Rivers joked that Hitler couldn't get her to reveal her age and that Hitler would have loved the audience because they obeyed instructions so well.¹⁴⁴ Rivers also joked that when men were examined by a proctologist they could pretend they were being tortured by the Nazis.¹⁴⁵ Rivers said that she used the Holocaust in her act "[T]o remind people," and because it was her nature to make jokes about terrible things.¹⁴⁶ Rivers used her Jewish heritage, which gave her a certain amount of leniency, to make jokes about the darkest part of Jewish history. Despite the widespread belief that jokes involving Hitler or the Holocaust were considered distasteful, Rivers continued to include them in her act. Rivers' identity as a Jewish woman gave her the freedom to joke about the horrors that Jewish people suffered during World War II, although it did not guarantee that people wouldn't be offended by her material. These jokes showed how Rivers used humor to work through trauma. The horrors of the Holocaust

¹⁴⁴ MOR Music Clips, "Joan Rivers monologue Black Outfit," YouTube video, 4:44, March 26, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvJuVUTJ958](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvJuVUTJ958;); MOR Music Clips, "Joan Rivers Interview on Carson 'Birthday Girl.'" "

¹⁴⁵ Archy A, "Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 17/5-1974."

¹⁴⁶ Israel, "Joan Rivers," 111.

loomed large in the minds of Jewish people everywhere, including Rivers, and she used humor to work through her complex emotional response.

The early part of Rivers' career was defined by her self-deprecating style and her comedic content about women. Rivers used a self-deprecating style of humor to successfully portray her identity as a Jewish female comedian. Her use of self-deprecation was supported by an ethnic and gendered physicality and created a sense of intimacy between Rivers and her audience. Rivers' use of the style was also inspired by its popularity amongst successful comedians of the era, especially Jewish female comedians. Rivers' comedic content was a product of both her Jewish female identity and the time period she performed in. Rivers' act was dominated by jokes about women. She talked about women's issues and experiences relevant at the time, including feminism, domestic expectations for women, and women's health. She used comedy to comment on, reinforce, and subvert society's expectations for women from the era. She also engaged with Jewish stereotypes in her act, following another popular comedy trend of the time. Overall, Rivers successfully communicated her identity as a Jewish female comedian in postwar America by adopting popular comedy styles of the era to comment on relevant issues for women and Jewish people.

Chapter 3

1980s Culture, Celebrity Gossip, and the Road to *Fashion Police*

In the 1980s, Joan Rivers' comedy style and content shifted from self-deprecation to celebrity gossip. Rivers' newfound focus on celebrities paved the way for her eventual success on a show dedicated to celebrity fashion critique, *Fashion Police*. In 2010, E!'s *Fashion Police* became a weekly series. The show, hosted by Joan Rivers and produced by Rivers and her daughter Melissa, focused on critiquing celebrity fashion using humor.¹⁴⁷ Though Rivers occasionally made self-deprecating jokes on the program, the bulk of her material revolved around critiquing celebrities for their fashion choices and their physical appearance. This material was markedly different from Rivers' early comedy content where she repeatedly denigrated herself for humorous ends.

Fashion Police's focus on ridiculing celebrities was not a new comedic strategy for Rivers. In fact, during the 1980s, Rivers cultivated a comedy style rooted in celebrity gossip and criticism. Though she continued to perform self-deprecating material, Rivers' act focused increasingly on making fun of celebrities. I argue that this shift in content stemmed from a combination of social, political and cultural changes that occurred in America during the 1980s. The 1980s marked the rise of tabloids, celebrity culture, and a cultural concentration on fitness which were all factors in Rivers' changing content and style. The growing popularity of celebrity gossip likely influenced Rivers' decision to concentrate on ridiculing celebrities in her act. Additionally, the rise of fitness culture may have played a role in Rivers' choice to concentrate on critiquing the physical appearance of female celebrities in her act. There are many comedic avenues Rivers could have explored with her celebrity material, and I argue that her decision to

¹⁴⁷ Michael Schneider, "‘Fashion Police’ takes weekly patrol," *Variety*, August 6, 2010, <https://variety.com/2010/scene/news/fashion-police-takes-weekly-patrol-1118022668/>.

ridicule female celebrities for their appearance was linked to the cultural obsession with physical fitness during the 1980s.

Another factor in Rivers' changing comedy content was the rise of second-wave feminism and the creation of the women's rights movement. The increased concentration on women's issues and the fight for gender equality inspired new avenues of exploration in female comedy, including material that directly questioned societal expectations for women. As competition increased for female comedians, it was crucial for Rivers to set herself apart from her contemporaries. Rivers' big break on *The Tonight Show* occurred as the popularity of self-deprecating humor waned for female comedians, so by the 1980s it was essential for Rivers to modernize her routine. In order to do so, Rivers decided to develop a style all her own. Therefore, the rise of the women's movement, the popularity of celebrity gossip, and increased competition for female comedians all played a role in Rivers' decision to forge a new comedy style that capitalized on the popularity of celebrity gossip. Furthermore, the feminized status of celebrity gossip reinforced Rivers' status as a purveyor of "women's humor." By changing some of her content, Rivers brought a fresh perspective to comedy in the 1980s and set herself apart from other modern female comedians.

Despite changes to her comedy style and content, Rivers continued to showcase her identity as a Jewish woman in her act. Through her discussion of celebrities, Rivers embodied a popular gendered Jewish stereotype as a loveable gossip. Rivers' comedy did not lose any of the stylistic elements present in her 1960s and '70s material. Rivers still relied on self-deprecation and a conversational style of humor in her act. She also continued to engage in over-the-top physicality and acts of Jewish superstition. Rivers' comedy remained frenetic, aggressive, and

full of caustic wit. The difference is that the aggression Rivers aimed at herself in the 1960s and 1970s turned outward toward famous women in the 1980s.

Most of the content referenced in this chapter comes from Rivers' appearances as a guest and host on *The Tonight Show*. Additionally, I reference Rivers' 1983 comedy album *What Becomes a Semi-Legend Most?* as well as various taped stand-up performances from the 1980s. This chapter is broken up into two main sections. The first section focuses on the rise of the celebrity gossip industry and how Rivers integrated celebrity gossip into her comedy style. This section also concentrates on how this new comedy style is tied to Rivers' identity as a Jewish woman. The second section of this chapter focuses on textual analysis of Rivers' celebrity gossip material. It also explores the impact that changes in American culture, including shifting expectations for the female body, played in shaping Rivers' comedy content.

Celebrity Gossip, Feminism, and 1980s Comedy

Rivers' newfound focus on celebrities coincided with a new phase in the popularity of celebrity culture and celebrity gossip in American society.¹⁴⁸ The 1980s marked the height of popularity for supermarket tabloids. Publications like *Star*, *Globe*, *National Examiner* and the *National Enquirer* had circulations in the millions. The *National Enquirer* in particular was dominated by celebrity content and was Rivers' favorite gossip publication.¹⁴⁹ In fact, Rivers' celebrity gossip content often mirrored the style of the *Enquirer* with its cruelty and its blatant disregard for the truth. For both Rivers and the *Enquirer*, all celebrities were fair game.¹⁵⁰ The

¹⁴⁸ Frank Furedi, "Celebrity Culture," *Society* 47, no. 6 (September 2010): 494.

¹⁴⁹ Rivers, "Joan Talks About...Beginning."

¹⁵⁰ In recent years it was revealed that the *National Enquirer* does not actually believe that all celebrities are fair game. In 2021, the publication was fined for paying "hush money" to a woman who claimed she had an affair with Donald Trump before the 2016 election. Additionally, in 2019, journalist Ronan Farrow accused The *Enquirer* of destroying files full of Trump-related "dirt" before the 2016 election. These instances clearly indicate that the *Enquirer* is willing to forgo publishing disparaging stories about people they have a personal relationship with or a vested interest in. Dan Mangan, "Trump escapes FEC punishment for Karen McDougal hush money, but *National Enquirer* publisher pays settlement," *CNBC*, June 1, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/01/trump-escapes-fec->

discussions surrounding celebrities in these publications often involved scandals and immoral behavior. Tabloid coverage of these events was often judgmental and critical.¹⁵¹ Additionally, there was a focus on female celebrities and their bodies. Many of these magazines and tabloids focused on critiquing the female body, something that Rivers was familiar with through her self-deprecating material.¹⁵² This focus on female bodies and the perpetuation of narrow beauty standards were the very antithesis of feminist beliefs about women's bodies. Women's magazines and tabloids championed a tall, thin body type for women and failed to recognize that women's bodies come in many different shapes and sizes.

Despite their failure to uphold feminist values, publications such as the *National Enquirer* were extremely popular with female audiences. For a female comedian who focused on women's interests in her act, Rivers' adoption of gossip in her routines made sense. The feminized nature of gossip and the massive popularity of celebrities and celebrity gossip in the 1980s likely played a role in Rivers' decision to add material about celebrities to her act. By adopting this new style of humor, Rivers updated her routine for a new cultural era.

Rivers' new celebrity content fit in well with her conversational style of humor. According to Jörg Bergmann, the purpose of gossip is to create a sense of intimacy and connection between people.¹⁵³ When Rivers gossips in her act, she is inviting the audience to act as her "girlfriends." She is essentially mimicking the real-world phenomenon where women

sanction-for-hush-money-national-enquirer-publisher-pays-fine.html.; Lauren Frias, "The *National Enquirer* disposed of Trump-related 'dirt' right before he was elected in 2016, journalist Ronan Farrow writes in his new book," *Business Insider*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/national-enquirer-disposed-of-dirt-on-trump-before-election-farrow-2019-10>.

¹⁵¹ S. Elizabeth Bird, *For Enquiring Minds: A Cultural Study of Supermarket Tabloids* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 8, 40, 44.

¹⁵² Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, "Introduction," in *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture*, ed. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 122.

¹⁵³ Jörg R. Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1993), 153.; Erin Meyers, "Women, Gossip, and Celebrity Online Celebrity Gossip Blogs as Feminized Popular Culture," in *Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn: Feminized Popular Culture in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Elana Levine (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 71.

gossip with their friends to bond and create a sense of connection and community. By adding gossip to her routine, Rivers created an opportunity for her audience to create a shared meaning of the world while intimately connecting with them through her material. Rivers' personal love of celebrity gossip, combined with its popularity amongst women, likely influenced Rivers' shift in content. In her routines, Rivers gossiped about female celebrities, usually focusing on a few recurring targets like Elizabeth Taylor and Christina Onassis. Similar to her catchphrase, "Can we talk?" there were certain verbal patterns Rivers employed when she spoke about celebrities. After she made a joke about a celebrity and the audience reacted in a shocked manner, Rivers would turn to them and yell, "Grow up!" or say "Oh, shhhhh." In these moments, Rivers showed her awareness of the crowd while also wielding control over them.

Rivers' penchant for celebrity gossip is the most clearly gendered comedy style she employed. Gossip is viewed as a feminized form of communication, a designation that discredits its cultural validity and importance. This categorization is used to shame audiences for enjoying feminine media texts and to delegitimize the media form.¹⁵⁴ This devaluation of feminine texts is harmful because it disregards their positive characteristics. For example, discussing the lives of celebrities can help people negotiate their feelings about wider social ideologies like those of gender, race, and class.¹⁵⁵ When Rivers made fun of Elizabeth Taylor's weight and the audience laughed, it was a tacit endorsement of Rivers' opinion that reinforced the shared views between Rivers and her audience.¹⁵⁶

Rivers' use of a gossip style of comedy was successful because of the cultural connection between women and gossip. However, it was also a product of a particular era. I contend that

¹⁵⁴ Andrea McDonnel, *Reading Celebrity Gossip Magazines* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 28.

¹⁵⁵ Meyers, "Women, Gossip, and Celebrity Online," 72.

¹⁵⁶ Deborah Tannen, "Gossip," in *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: William and Morrow Company, Inc., 1990), 107.

another reason Rivers began including celebrity content in her act was because it set her apart in a growing field of female comedians. Rivers was the most successful female comedian in the United States during the majority of the 1980s but, as she shared in a 1986 interview, she believed it could all disappear overnight.¹⁵⁷ Modernizing her comedy content was a strategy that Rivers utilized to help maintain her success and relevance. The celebrity-centered content in Rivers' act differed greatly from other female comedians in the 1980s. Elayne Boosler utilized an assertive style of women's comedy and updated traditional Jewish jokes for a new era. Similarly, Sandra Bernhard made the JAP into a dangerous warrior in her act, which was more akin to performance art than comedy. Carol Leifer and Rita Rudner adopted observational styles of humor, with Rudner also performing self-deprecating material. Some women even used their humor to challenge societal expectations and call for change. Emily Levine performed social and political monologues, Roseanne attacked stereotypical images of women through her jokes about housework and motherhood, and Lily Tomlin used a variety of personas to mock the establishment.¹⁵⁸ None of these women made celebrity gossip a mainstay of their comedy routine.

In the 1960s and '70s, Rivers utilized a self-deprecating style of humor because it was timely and had already proven successful for other female comedians. In the 1980s, however, Rivers became a pioneer of the celebrity gossip style for female comedians. Though material making fun of celebrities had already been introduced by male insult comics like Don Rickles,

¹⁵⁷ Gilbert, *Performing*, 108.; Bruce Handy, "Joan Rivers on Celebrity and Gossip in a 1986 Issue of *Vogue*," *Vogue*, September 4, 2014, <https://www.vogue.com/article/joan-rivers-interview-vogue-archive>.

¹⁵⁸ Alice Sheppard, "Funny Women: Social Change and Audience Response To Female Comedians," *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 3, no. 2 (1985): 181-82, <https://doi.org/10.2190/6F5G-6L8U-VH7M-NQCB.>; Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 261, 262, 265.; Kohen, "Unkosher," 35.

they mostly focused their attention on male celebrities like Frank Sinatra and Bob Hope.¹⁵⁹

Rivers created her own feminized version of the style by concentrating on the physical appearance of female celebrities. In doing so, she paved the way for future female comedians to adopt a similar style. By the early '90s, several female comedians, including Joy Behar, Carrie Snow, and Judy Tenuta, followed in Rivers' footsteps and verbally attacked celebrities in their act. Almost 20 years after her big break on *The Tonight Show*, Rivers created her own comedy style that inspired female comedians for decades.

Much as in the earlier years of her career, Rivers' use of celebrity gossip perpetuates her role as an outsider. Rivers positions herself on the outside with her audience when mocking celebrities. She joins the audience and culture at large in their desire to see celebrities humbled. Despite her fame, success, and celebrity, Rivers presents herself as an outsider to these Hollywood types. She attacks beautiful, successful female celebrities because they have the "advantages—such as wealth and beauty—that people like Rivers had to work for."¹⁶⁰ Rivers performs her celebrity material with anger and bitterness. This performance of bitterness is just another way that Rivers solidifies her position as an outsider. It seems that even as Rivers guest hosted *The Tonight Show* and interviewed huge stars, she still performed as though she was on the outside looking in. Through her attacks on celebrities, Rivers adapted her outsider persona for a new era. The same bitterness with which Rivers performed her self-deprecatory material in the '60s and '70s was applied to her celebrity content in the '80s. In many ways, this transition in material heightened the performance of anger in Rivers' act. Rivers being cruel to herself was one thing but transferring that cruelty to female celebrities gave her act a more acerbic feel. This transition to outward cruelty is at the heart of the humor of Rivers' celebrity material. Her jokes

¹⁵⁹ Mike Crisolago, "Don Rickles: 15 of Mr. Warmth's Best Jokes, Insults and One-Liners," *Zoomer*, May 8, 2017, <https://www.everythingzoomer.com/arts-entertainment/2017/05/08/don-rickles/>.

¹⁶⁰ Wagner, "'With Age,'" 154.

about celebrities are funny because of their outrageous, over-the-top cruelty. As these jokes gained more prominence, Rivers solidified her legacy as the “Queen of Mean,” and set herself apart from fellow female comedians of the era.¹⁶¹

Additionally, Rivers’ use of celebrity gossip in her act ties into her identity as a Jewish woman. When she gossips in her act, Rivers takes on the stereotypical role of the Jewish *yente*. The *yente* is a Jewish woman with a penchant for spreading gossip and rumors.¹⁶² However, unlike the neighborhood *yente*, Rivers did not indiscriminately criticize everyone.¹⁶³ Instead, she focused her attacks on celebrities with high status. In doing so, Rivers adopted the comedic strategy of “punching up,” or targeting people who are privileged, and only criticized people she deemed above her. In an interview, she talked about how she did not want to hurt anyone in her comedy. She stated, “That’s why I pick on the biggies. They can take it.”¹⁶⁴ This is a questionable statement due to the cruelty of many of Rivers’ jokes, especially those targeting women’s bodies. However, the outrageous cruelty of Rivers’ *yente* is what made the role such an effective comedic persona. Rivers’ jokes about celebrities relied on intense hyperbole loosely tied to truth. Many of these jokes mirrored the traditional *yente*’s focus on people’s physical deformities. Historically, the *yente* often named people after their deformities for comedic effect.¹⁶⁵ Rivers performs a version of this when she refers to Elizabeth Taylor as fat or Christina Onassis as ugly. In her act, Rivers took the traditional Jewish *yente* and updated her for modern times. Instead of creating characters to ridicule, which she had done in the past with the neighborhood whore Heidi Abromowitz, Rivers built her material around popular celebrities of

¹⁶¹ Lilah Raptopoulos, “Joan Rivers: the best of her career in clips and quotes,” *The Guardian*, September 4, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/04/joan-rivers-best-of-career-in-comedy>.

¹⁶² Horowitz, “Joan Rivers,” 105.

¹⁶³ Cohen, “Unkosher,” 118.

¹⁶⁴ Esther Breger, “Joan Rivers Didn’t Care If You Liked It,” *The New Republic*, September 5, 2014, <https://newrepublic.com/article/119330/joan-rivers-death-was-she-feminist-comedian>.; Ben Schwartz, “Knock Yourself Out: ‘Punching up’ in American comedy,” *The Baffler*, no. 31 (June 2016): 134.

¹⁶⁵ Cohen, “Unkosher,” 118.

the 1980s.¹⁶⁶ Rivers recognized the rising popularity of celebrity gossip magazines and implemented celebrity humor into her act in order to modernize her content and capitalize on a cultural phenomenon.

Though Rivers' *yente* had a much further reach than the traditional neighborhood rumormonger and her targets were more specific, she retained the scandal-spreading spirit of the *yente*. It is important to note that much like the JAP stereotype that Rivers embodied earlier in her career, the *yente* is a gendered stereotype specifically applied to Jewish women. The fact that Rivers embodied Jewish stereotypes exclusively applied to women is indicative of how intertwined those aspects of her identity were. Another facet of her identity that may have played a role in Rivers' adoption of the *yente* stereotype was her age. In the 1980s when Rivers began to incorporate the *yente* stereotype into her comedy persona, she was in her late 40s. It is possible that Rivers felt she had aged out of the JAP stereotype that she embodied earlier in her career. The immaturity associated with the vapid consumerism and unwillingness to work that characterized the JAP may have made Rivers' performance of the stereotype less believable as she got older. By transitioning from the JAP to the *yente* stereotype, Rivers took on a role that appeared more age-appropriate while retaining the connection to her Jewish identity. Rivers' transition from the JAP to the *yente* also coincided with numerous ongoing changes in the lives of American Jewish women. By the 1980s, American Jewish women, like American women in general, experienced increased participation in secular higher education, expanded occupational choices, and a greater presence in the labor force. Despite the increased participation of Jewish women in secular education and work outside of the home, many American Jewish women remained committed to their ethnic community and lifestyle, successfully blending Jewish and

¹⁶⁶ Antler, "One Clove," 131.

feminist values in their lives.¹⁶⁷ Rivers' embodiment of the Yiddish *yente* echoed this commitment to Jewish culture by continuing to connect Rivers to her ethnic identity through her comedy.

Changing Cultures and Changing Content: Joan Rivers and the Beauty Myth

The rise of celebrity gossip was not the only cultural force that inspired Rivers' new material in the 1980s. Like the 1960s, and 1970s, the 1980s were a time of serious change in America. The decade began with the election of Ronald Reagan and the rise of the New Right. This change in tide for American politics marked the beginning of a widespread backlash to feminism. Many of the social and policy goals for members of the New Right revolved around reversing the changes that second-wave feminism had acquired for American women. The men at the forefront of this movement wanted the country to return to the defined gender roles of the 1950s, where women stayed at home and men went to work. Susan Faludi has written extensively about the 1980s backlash to second-wave feminism. She argues that women were subjected to two conflicting narratives in the cultural climate of the 1980s: first, that women had won their equality and were not successful and; second, that women's success caused them to feel unhappy. Faludi contends that the true reason for women's unhappiness in the 1980s was that their quest for equality was being pushed back and thwarted.¹⁶⁸

According to Faludi, the gains that women made in the 1970s as a result of the women's movement were viewed as a threat to men. In reality, the gains made were actually quite small, and women in the 1980s were still far from equal to men. Women were still making less money than men for the same job, and they were still segregated into jobs that were perceived as

¹⁶⁷ Sylvia Barack Fishman, *A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 93.

¹⁶⁸ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 1991), xv-xvi.

“women’s work.” Before women’s quest for equal rights could be achieved, backlash against the women’s movement helped strike it down. This backlash appeared in politics, with the defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), the U.S. Supreme Court’s move toward reconsidering their support of abortion, and the election of Ronald Reagan, whose policies did not support the women’s rights movement.¹⁶⁹ There was also a social and cultural backlash to feminism. One of the most effective anti-feminist backlash strategies was the creation and dissemination of the beauty myth.

The beauty myth is a term that Naomi Wolf coined to describe the media’s use of “images of female beauty as a political weapon against women’s advancement.”¹⁷⁰ Wolf argues that the beauty myth took over for Friedan’s “religion” of domesticity and functions in a similar way.¹⁷¹ The beauty myth encapsulates societal expectations for the physical appearance of women. In the 1980s, this meant thin but athletic bodies and a willingness to undergo cosmetic surgery in order to fix perceived flaws.¹⁷² These tenets of the beauty myth factor heavily into Rivers’ celebrity content.

When Rivers speaks about female celebrities, she usually speaks about their physical appearance. She likes to speculate about which stars have gotten plastic surgery, share her

¹⁶⁹ Faludi, *Backlash*, x-xi, xiii, xviii, xx, xix.

¹⁷⁰ It’s important to note how Wolf’s ideas have changed over time, as well as some of the problematic ideas that *The Beauty Myth* perpetuates about race. A 2021 article from *Slate* outlines Wolf’s ascendance as a COVID truther who appeared on Tucker Carlson to espouse her beliefs about the oppressive nature of COVID safety protocols. This claim about an overarching oppressive force is actually similar to some of her arguments about female oppression present in *The Beauty Myth*. Additionally, in the book Wolf makes problematic comparisons between racial prejudice and what she views as oppressive practices against women. *The Beauty Myth* does provide valuable insight into the beauty ideals and expectations present during the 1980s which is why I reference it in this project. However, due to Wolf’s penchant for conspiracy theories, the book and Wolf’s other work should be taken with a grain of salt.; Rebecca Onion, “A Modern Feminist Classic Changed My Life. Was it Actually Garbage?,” *Slate*, March 30, 2021, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/03/naomi-wolf-beauty-myth-feminism-conspiracy-theories.html>.

¹⁷¹ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), 10, 66.

¹⁷² Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993), 102.; Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 18, 20.

disgust about stars who are overweight, and make fun of famous women that she deems ugly. Despite the cultural shifts in female beauty expectations that occurred during the women's movement of the 1960s, '70s, and early '80s, Rivers chose to support the oppressive messaging of the beauty industry. These shifts, spurred by noteworthy feminist demonstrations against popular female beauty ideals, like the 1968 Miss America Pageant protests, called into question the validity of cultural beauty expectations for women. Even though Rivers clearly benefitted from the gains of feminism, she did not support prominent feminist ideas about female beauty in her act. Instead, Rivers completely bought into the beauty myth in her comedy content.

In many ways, this antifeminist material was surprising because of Rivers' public support for feminist causes. On *The Tonight Show* in 1978, Rivers announced her support for the Equal Rights Amendment, stating that women are given "half a loaf" for doing the same work as men.¹⁷³ Additionally, Rivers revealed that she identified as a feminist in a 1986 interview with *Playboy*.¹⁷⁴ Despite her personal and political beliefs, Rivers performed stand-up content that did not line up with conventional feminist views about body acceptance. River's choice to not perform standup that supports feminism was likely tied to the mainstream cultural shift away from progressive beliefs. Though the feminist movement did not disappear, it had slowed down significantly by the mid-1980s. This was likely due to the cultural and political backlash against feminism that attempted to cast the women's movement in a bad light. During the 1980s, groups like Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and the Heritage Foundation worked tirelessly to turn the clock back to the traditional family values of the 1950s. Concerns were raised about feminism's impact on everything from marriage and birth rates to the economy and masculinity. For many conservative Americans, especially members of the New Right, feminism became a catch-all

¹⁷³ Archy M, "Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 1978," YouTube video, 10:40, August 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjsfgDoKOoo>.

¹⁷⁴ Breger, "Didn't Care."

term for the problems present in American society in the 1980s. Even Betty Friedan, the so-called mother of second-wave feminism, criticized the movement in her 1981 book *The Second Stage*. Friedan critiqued feminism for its aggressive, masculine political tactics despite the fact that they were tactics that she helped create. Instead, she called for a more passive and genteel approach that relied on volunteerism rather than action.¹⁷⁵ It's possible that as the status quo changed and feminisms popularity waned, Rivers was willing to eschew her personal beliefs in her act in order to appeal to a larger audience.

Beauty expectations were an ever-present topic in Rivers' act. In Rivers' material, one of the most commonly discussed beauty expectations was weight. In the 1980s Rivers' obsession with her weight turned outward as she policed female celebrities who did not maintain a slim figure. There was a level of toxicity in the way that Rivers discussed weight in her act, especially when those discussions were about other people. Instead of subverting society's expectations for women's bodies, Rivers played right into them by ridiculing female celebrities who did not possess the ideal body type for the era. One of Rivers' favorite victims was actress Elizabeth Taylor. Despite her decision to take a step back from acting, Taylor remained a popular celebrity in the 1980s. She was also considered one of the most beautiful women in the world during her prime.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, she was a tabloid favorite who often appeared in Rivers' most beloved tabloid the *National Enquirer*. Though Taylor had a controversial personal life including many ex-husbands and a messy affair, she was almost never depicted negatively in the tabloids.¹⁷⁷ Perhaps that is one of the reasons why Rivers took it upon herself to ridicule Taylor, ruthlessly attacking her for her fuller figure and making constant fat jokes at her expense.

¹⁷⁵ Faludi, *Backlash*, 3-4, 62, 67, 180-181, 230, 242, 318-19.

¹⁷⁶ Ki Mae Heussner, "Science of Beauty: What Made Elizabeth Taylor So Attractive?," *ABC News*, March 23, 2011, <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/elizabeth-taylor-science-great-beauty/story?id=13203775>.

¹⁷⁷ Bird, *Enquiring*, 44.

There are two reasons why Rivers chose to target Elizabeth Taylor. First, she was one of the most famous women in the world who constantly appeared in the pages of magazines.¹⁷⁸ This notoriety meant that audiences were sure to know who Rivers was talking about. Second, despite her weight gain, Rivers claimed that Taylor remained an object of sexual attraction for men.¹⁷⁹ This likely incensed Rivers, who repeatedly equated thinness with beauty in her act and constantly complained about her lack of sex appeal despite her smaller figure. If Rivers had trouble attracting a man as a slim woman, how could Taylor attract so many men while overweight? There was also an ethnic component to Rivers' decision to mock Taylor. Elizabeth Taylor was a WASP and a paragon of ideal feminine beauty. Rivers could never attain Taylor's level of idealized femininity because of her Jewish ethnicity. By ridiculing Elizabeth Taylor, Rivers reinforced her position as an outsider who doesn't belong. The sheer volume of jokes about Taylor in Rivers' act point to a level of enjoyment on Rivers' part. Rivers took pleasure in Taylor's weight gain, because it prevented Taylor from maintaining her status as a paragon of feminine beauty. Taylor was no longer an example of the idealized femininity that Rivers could never reach. Perhaps through her jokes, Rivers was attempting to saddle Taylor with the same insider/outsider dynamic that she embodied in her act. Taylor was a world-famous, glamorous, attractive actress, but Rivers framed her as an outsider by mercilessly mocking her weight gain.

When Rivers spoke about Taylor, it was like a machine gun of jokes. They came one after the other, each one more brutal than the last. During a 1981 appearance on *The Tonight Show*, Rivers joked, "She had her ears pierced, gravy came out," "I took her to a bakery, she took all the numbers," "She had a bumper sticker: 'Eat the whales,'" and "She was gonna sue me for

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ bigeyezzzzzz, "JOAN RIVERS | Solid Gold | April 1983," YouTube video, 5:05, September 5, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EItd—mScXg>.

five million dollars, or one year's grocery bill."¹⁸⁰ Two years later in one of her comedy albums, she exclaimed, "Mosquitos see her and scream 'Buffet!,'" "Her thighs are going condo," "She has more chins than a Chinese phone book," "This woman can moon Europe," and "She puts mayonnaise on an Aspirin."¹⁸¹ These jokes were the beginning of Rivers turning her aggression outward instead of on herself. They also illustrated Rivers' performance of contempt for overweight people. This likely stemmed from Rivers' upbringing during an era that categorized being overweight as a moral failure. Rivers often performed a disdain for overweight people when she spoke about Elizabeth Taylor. This was most apparent when she responded to the audience's groans after one of her Elizabeth Taylor fat jokes. On two different occasions, Rivers turned to the audience and screamed, "Oh, like it's my fault she's fat. It's not my fault. I didn't stuff the potatoes in her mouth."¹⁸² Rivers' obsession with weight supported the overall messaging of women's magazines, the diet industry, and the fitness fad of the 1980s. It was also indicative of Rivers' upbringing in an era that glorified thin women.

However, Rivers brought a new perspective to the messaging by using humor to perpetuate it. These jokes serve as an equalizer between Rivers and Taylor. Rivers' jokes about Taylor are a form of "punching up" in order to bring a person down to your level. This material invites the audience to join Rivers on the moral high ground and ridicule someone who has become overweight due to some alleged moral failure. The humor of these jokes was their function as status equalizers, as well as their exaggerated subject matter. Rivers' jokes about Taylor were also a way for Rivers to performatively cosign an insidious cultural mindset about overweight people. According to some of Rivers' jokes, Taylor's weight gain stemmed from a lack of self-control. In other words, it was Taylor's fault that she gained weight. This is

¹⁸⁰ Archy M, "Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 14/5-1981 (Very funny)."

¹⁸¹ Rivers, "Joan Talks About...(Beginning)."

¹⁸² pannoni14, "The Joan Rivers Comedy Hour (1981, most)."; Archy A, "Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 1980."

problematic, because it places complete accountability on individuals and fails to take into account the social, cultural, and biological factors that play a role in weight fluctuation. Through her Elizabeth Taylor jokes, Rivers gives her audience a comedic opportunity to look down upon a rich, successful female celebrity.

In addition to the ascendance of celebrity gossip, the 1980s marked a newfound concentration on physical fitness in American culture. Unlike previous decades, exercise in the 1980s was not about health concerns, but rather physical appearance.¹⁸³ This fascination went as far up as the presidency. In 1983, Ronald Reagan promoted physical fitness by appearing on the cover of *Parade* magazine doing bicep curls. This particular form of exercise fit in with the coveted aesthetic of the 1980s, sculpted muscular bodies. This newfound concentration on muscular bodies caused an increase in the number of health clubs across the nation.¹⁸⁴ The cultural obsession with fitness was also present in the media. In the 1980s, there were countless books and videos released about physical fitness. Many of these fitness-related materials featured well-known celebrities promoting the secrets of their fitness regimens.¹⁸⁵ The most famous celebrity fitness aficionado was actress and activist Jane Fonda. Her workout videos were incredibly popular, so much so that Rivers joked about them in her act. During a 1983 stand-up performance, Rivers asks the audience if they do the Jane Fonda exercise videos. She then asks, “Is that Hitler in a curly wig?”¹⁸⁶ In another performance she references Fonda and declares, “She’s too much into exercise now, I’m sorry. I heard after her last baby was born she made a jump rope with the umbilical cord. The woman, all she thinks about is exercise. She has a

¹⁸³ Barry Glassner, “Fitness and the Postmodern Self,” *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 30, no. 2 (June 1989): 180.

¹⁸⁴ Benjamin G. Rader, “The Quest for Self-Sufficiency and the New Strenuousness: Reflections on the Strenuous Life of the 1970s and the 1980s,” *Journal of Sport History* 18, no. 2 (Summer, 1991): 262.

¹⁸⁵ Shelly McKenzie, *Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 145, 148, 165.

¹⁸⁶ Dubhglas Zaffa, “An Audience With Joan Rivers 1983,” YouTube video, 29:02, September 5, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YKb6q_j6R4.

vibrator with pedals.”¹⁸⁷ These jokes about Fonda were always used as a means to mock the public obsession with working out. Rivers makes it clear in these moments that she does not work out. In fact, she goes as far as to say, “If God wanted me to lift my leg he would’ve put a string on the end of my toe.”¹⁸⁸

Rivers’ jokes about Fonda are another example of her struggle with assimilation. Like Elizabeth Taylor, Fonda was a WASP and represented a form of idealized beauty that Rivers could never achieve. Unlike Taylor, however, Fonda was not overweight. She was actually in the process of building a very successful fitness empire. Instead of attacking Fonda for her outward appearance, Rivers focused on the effort Fonda put into maintaining her idealized body. Though Rivers admitted to taking certain measures to change her appearance, such as dieting and plastic surgery, in her act she did not support Fonda’s efforts to do the same. Essentially, Rivers made fun of Fonda for working to achieve her idealized body in an effort to denigrate her. This is likely because Fonda embodied the idealized femininity that Rivers constantly worked towards but could never achieve. Again, Rivers’ Jewish ethnicity prevented her from obtaining the idealized form of beauty in the 1980s. Additionally, by including these jokes about Jane Fonda and the 1980s exercise craze, Rivers shows that her finger is on the pulse of pop culture. This is a clear example of how her shift to celebrity content helped Rivers keep her act current.

Despite mocking Jane Fonda and the exercise movement, Rivers still perpetuated the cultural expectation of thinness in the 1980s. Her attitude about weight was likely influenced by popular media at the time. Magazines were flooded with ads from the diet and fashion industries, which were likely harmful for female readers. In the 1980s, the number of women with eating disorders rose dramatically. In 1984, some women’s magazines found that 60 percent of

¹⁸⁷ Pannoni 8, “The Tonight Show- May 28, 1984 (most, Joan Rivers hosts),” YouTube video, 46:42, June 29, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1jIZkFBfpE>.

¹⁸⁸ Zaffa, “An Audience With Joan Rivers 1983.”

American women had trouble eating, and a *Glamour* poll of 33,000 women found that 75 percent believed they were “too fat.”¹⁸⁹ Clearly, the social and cultural obsession with weight in the 1980s negatively impacted many women’s perceptions of their body. The cultural obsession with weight was ever-present in Rivers’ comedy content, especially in her jokes about herself and Elizabeth Taylor. The popularity of Rivers’ Elizabeth Taylor jokes in particular suggest just how pervasive American society’s obsession with weight was in the 1980s. No longer under the control of the cult of domesticity, women now had to face a new enemy: the unobtainable female body ideal.¹⁹⁰

Rivers took her obsession with weight a step further when she interviewed Oprah Winfrey on *The Tonight Show* in 1985. The interview is difficult to watch because of how direct Rivers was about Oprah’s weight and how visibly uncomfortable Oprah appears. In the interview, Oprah talks about how she used to do pageants when she was about 50 pounds thinner. Rivers immediately asks her how she gained the weight, forcing Oprah to disclose that she ate a lot. Rivers then tells Oprah, “You said 50 pounds, you shouldn’t let that happen to you! ...you’re a pretty girl and you’re single. You must lose the weight!”¹⁹¹ The interview was so traumatizing for Oprah that 31 years later she wrote about it on her website, recalling just how mortifying the experience was.¹⁹² It was one thing for Rivers to make jokes at Elizabeth Taylor’s expense, but it was an entirely different issue for Rivers to look Oprah in the eyes and tell her to lose weight. Unlike when she performed her Elizabeth Taylor material, Rivers was not joking when she spoke to Oprah about her weight. When Oprah tells Rivers that she gained weight

¹⁸⁹ Wolf, *Beauty Myth*, 11, 67,183.; Bordo, *Unbearable*, 154.

¹⁹⁰ Pirkko Markula, “Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin: The Postmodern Aerobicizing Female Bodies,” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 12, no. 4 (1995): 426.

¹⁹¹ joycollector, “Joan Rivers tells Oprah to Lose weight (1985 interview),” YouTube video, 2:05, May 26, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAtdjZa2eA>.

¹⁹² Julie Mazziotta, “Oprah Recalls the Moment Joan Rivers Called Her Out for Gaining Weight on *The Tonight Show*,” *People*, December 13, 2016, <https://people.com/bodies/oprah-winfrey-joan-rivers-called-her-out-for-gaining-weight/>.

because she ate a lot, the studio audience laughs. Rivers immediately turns to the audience and repeatedly says “no” until they stop laughing. Once the laughter dies down, Rivers proceeds to tell Oprah to lose weight. When she says this, she does not laugh, smile, or do anything else to indicate that she is joking. Instead, she looks Oprah in the eye and speaks to her in a serious manner. Usually, Rivers’ role as a comedian excused her brutal physical critiques of celebrities. However, in this particular instance, the absence of Rivers’ familiar humor did not provide that excuse. It is impossible to know how Rivers actually felt about Oprah or her weight, but it is clear that Rivers deviated from her usual playful style in this interview.

In her comments, Rivers also insinuates that no man will want Oprah at her current weight and that a woman’s goal should be to get a man. This interview reveals Rivers was willing to tell a famous woman to lose weight on national television. Rivers was in a unique position as the only female late-night television host, albeit in a temporary capacity. Instead of using her platform to elevate other women, in this instance she used it as a way to publicly tear someone down. A male host likely would not comment on a female guest’s weight gain, but River’s identity as a woman allowed her to comment on women’s bodies. Rivers’ interaction with Oprah is also interesting because of Oprah’s role as a female talk show host. Though Oprah hosted a daytime talk show, Rivers may have viewed her as a competitor. During the 1980s, there were only three prominent female talk-show hosts. Rivers was the only female late-night host, and Oprah and Sally Jessy Raphael were the only women with their own daytime talk shows.¹⁹³ In an industry dominated by men, competition was likely fierce between the small

¹⁹³ The success of women like Oprah and Sally Jessy Raphael led to a new wave of daytime talk shows in the 1990s. A number of these new talk shows included female hosts like Ricki Lake, Jenny Jones, Queen Latifah, etc.; “Sally Jessy Raphael,” IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0088598/>; “The Oprah Winfrey Show,” IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090493/?ref_=nv_sr_srsrg_0.

number of women who achieved success. Perhaps Rivers wanted to publicly denigrate Oprah in order to raise her own status.

Additionally, there is a racial aspect to Rivers' critiques. Though the civil rights movement of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s brought about important changes, including laws against discrimination on the basis of race and laws against obstacles to voter registration for black Americans, racism persisted in the United States during the 1980s. Negative attitudes toward black Americans solidified Oprah's distinction as an outsider despite her success. Due to her Jewish ethnicity, Rivers likely identified with Oprah's status as an outsider, though their positions were hardly equivalent. Rivers' Jewishness was far less marginalizing than Oprah's race. However, Rivers' interview with Oprah revealed an important distinction between the two women beyond their racial identities. Throughout her career, Rivers showed a willingness to meet popular beauty ideals in an effort to assimilate into American culture. Oprah, on the other hand, seemed less concerned with meeting those same ideals in this particular interview. I argue that Rivers' criticism of Oprah is connected to her identity as a Jewish woman and her continued struggle to achieve assimilation.

Though the status of Jewish people improved in the postwar years, some Jewish people continued to struggle with assimilation. By the late 1970s, America, "had moved away from its melting-pot ideal, where everyone was supposed to be alike, and given way to a salad-bowl America that legitimated an increasingly pluralist national character."¹⁹⁴ Despite this change, Jewish people continued to struggle with acclimating to American life. Physical appearance was an area of assimilation that many Jewish women felt pressure to achieve. Historically, certain physical characteristics have been coded "Jewish" in American society, such as certain noses,

¹⁹⁴ Samuel C. Heilman, *Portrait of American Jews: The Last Half of the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 101.

dark curly hair, and larger thighs and wider hips. In mid-century America, it was common for Jewish women to undergo cosmetic surgery to “fix” their noses in order to successfully assimilate.¹⁹⁵ They may also have straightened their hair, dyed it a lighter color, and lost weight in order to hide their “Jewish” shape.¹⁹⁶ Nose jobs were an exceptionally popular practice in the 1960s and ‘70s. In many cases, wealthy families paid for their children to get cosmetic surgery in order to help them integrate into mainstream culture and to shield them from the stigma left over from WWII.¹⁹⁷ Though these practices were less common by the 1980s, Rivers was likely strongly influenced by her upbringing during the postwar era. Additionally, Rivers’ desire to assimilate into American culture was presumably heightened as the child of immigrants. Therefore, Rivers’ comments toward Oprah may have come from a place of fear for Jewish women in the late twentieth century. Rivers’ insistence that Oprah lose weight may have been connected to her own anxieties and fears about assimilation. For a society that laid out clear parameters for women’s physical appearance, failing to meet those standards could result in rejection.

During her interview with Oprah, Rivers seemed exacerbated by Oprah’s joking attitude in regard to her weight. I contend that Rivers was frustrated by Oprah’s failure to work toward assimilation by altering her physical appearance to meet ideal beauty standards. After Oprah makes the joke about eating too much, Rivers appears frustrated with Oprah’s lighthearted attitude toward her weight. When Rivers proceeds to tell Oprah she has to lose the weight, she

¹⁹⁵ Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis Group, 1991), 193.

¹⁹⁶ Virginia L. Blum, *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁹⁷ Beth Preminger, “The ‘Jewish Nose’ and Plastic Surgery: Origins and Implications,” *JAMA* 286, no. 17 (November 7, 2001): 2161, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.286.17.2161-JMS1107-5-1>; Jane Gross, “As Ethnic Pride Rises, Rhinoplasty Takes a Nose Dive,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/01/03/weekinreview/as-ethnic-pride-rises-rhinoplasty-takes-a-nose-dive.html>.

wags her finger at Oprah, seemingly cajoling her for her apparent lack of concern.¹⁹⁸ It's as if Rivers was frustrated by Oprah's inability or refusal to recognize that in order to mitigate her role as an outsider, Oprah needed to strive to reach the popular beauty ideals of the 1980s. Though their positions as outsiders were different due to the status that Rivers' whiteness provided, Rivers presumably identified with Oprah as a fellow outsider. By telling her to lose weight, Rivers is giving Oprah advice on how to successfully assimilate into mainstream American culture. Despite the fact that neither Rivers nor Oprah could achieve the idealized WASP beauty of 1980s America, Rivers still pushed Oprah toward physical assimilation in order to shield her from a culture that was historically unkind to outsiders. Indeed, Rivers knew how cruel people could be to those who failed to meet society's expectations for women. In fact, by the 1980s, for the sake of her comedy, Rivers was that cruel person.

Rivers' humorous critiques about weight were not limited to people she deemed overweight. In her act, Rivers also made fun of people for being too skinny. During a show after Karen Carpenter's death from anorexia in 1983, Rivers quipped, "I don't feel sorry for anybody who's so thin she can be buried in pleats." The audience became hysterical with anger, upset over the callousness of Rivers' joke.¹⁹⁹ Rivers made this joke at a time when the number of women with eating disorders in the United States was skyrocketing. Making light of eating disorders fit in with Rivers' pattern of addressing women's issues, since at the end of the twentieth century, 90 percent of anorexics were female.²⁰⁰ However, since eating disorders were a growing problem for American women, and Karen Carpenter was a beloved musical artist, the joke likely hit too close to home for the women in the audience. It seems that Rivers viewed weight in a Goldilocks sense. She made fun of women who she deemed overweight, and she

¹⁹⁸ joycollector, "Joan Rivers tells Oprah to Lose weight (1985 interview)."

¹⁹⁹ Israel, "Joan Rivers," 111.

²⁰⁰ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 140, 154.

made fun of women who were “too skinny.” It’s safe to assume that somewhere in between the two, there was a weight that Rivers deemed just right.

Rivers’ attacks on celebrities focused on more than just their weight. She also enjoyed calling out female celebrities for being ugly or dumb. Her claim that “God divides” meant that if you were rich, you were ugly, and if you were beautiful, you were dumb. Therefore, the women she called ugly were all extremely rich, including Queen Elizabeth, Christina Onassis, and Gloria Vanderbilt. This is another example of Rivers utilizing the comedic strategy of “punching up,” or going after people of higher status, in her act. She criticized Gloria Vanderbilt for her plastic surgery, saying “That pulled back face, it’s like they gave her an enema with a vacuum cleaner,” “Every time she crosses her legs the mouth snaps open,” and “She looks like she sat on a spike.”²⁰¹ This line of criticism fit in well with the cultural trends at the time, because plastic surgery was very popular in the 1980s. In fact, Rivers had already begun to have work done in the 1970s, and by the 1980s, plastic surgery played a large role in her public persona. She viewed plastic surgery as a way to “get beautiful” and attempt to meet society’s beauty demands. Rivers’ jokes about Gloria Vanderbilt, a prominent, wealthy WASP, were another example of her struggles with assimilation as she worked tirelessly to meet modern beauty standards through plastic surgery.²⁰² She even had her nose thinned in 1985, which is a clear sign of Rivers’ attempts to physically assimilate into American culture. Rivers’ decision to undergo cosmetic surgery on her nose, despite changing cultural trends, points to her upbringing during a time that viewed cosmetic surgery as a viable tool for assimilation. Though it is impossible to know why Rivers chose to go under the knife, it is safe to presume that the culture she grew up in played an important role in her decision to get a nose job.

²⁰¹ Joan Rivers, “Joan Talks About...(Conclusion),” track 3 on *What Becomes a Semi-Legend Most?*, Geffen Records, 1983, Apple Music.; Archy M, “Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 14/5-1981 (Very funny).”

²⁰² Wagner, “With Age,” 155.

In addition to attacking Gloria Vanderbilt for her plastic surgery, Rivers called the Royal family “a bunch of dogs” and proceeded to bark.²⁰³ Rivers often barked or referred to people as “bow wows” instead of outright calling them ugly. One of her favorite celebrities to call ugly was Christina Onassis. In her 1983 comedy album, Rivers refers to Onassis as “the ugliest woman in the world,” and then barks. She repeatedly jokes that the first time she met Christina Onassis, “I thought she was in a fur coat. She was in a strapless dress. She is not attractive.”²⁰⁴ This material was problematic, because it directly contrasted the beliefs that many second-wave feminists cultivated in the 1960s and ‘70s. Feminists adopted the stance that the media’s focus on women’s outward appearance and the pressures of the beauty industry were a disservice to women.²⁰⁵ Again, Rivers reinforced the suffocating beauty standards of the 1980s by holding famous women accountable for their physical appearance.

Beautiful women were not exempt from Rivers’ criticism. In the 1980s, actress Bo Derek epitomized the new expectations for the ideal female body with her fit, athletic frame. According to Rivers and popular media, Derek was one of the most beautiful women in the world during the 1980s, which made her a prime target for River’s ridicule.²⁰⁶ In her act, Rivers equated being beautiful with being dumb. Therefore, in Rivers’ comedic content, Derek’s cultural position as one of the most beautiful women in the world also made her one of the dumbest. During one performance, she exclaims, “...this woman is an idiot! She studies for her pap test,” and “She lost out at charades to Ray Charles.”²⁰⁷ In another performance, she jokes, “She turned down the role of Helen Keller, she shouldn’t remember the lines.”²⁰⁸ Like Elizabeth Taylor and Jane

²⁰³ Rivers, “Joan Talks About...(Beginning).”

²⁰⁴ Rivers, “Joan Talks About...(Conclusion).”; Archy M, “Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 14/5-1981 (Very funny).”

²⁰⁵ Markula, “Firm,” 425.

²⁰⁶ Rader, “The Quest,” 263.

²⁰⁷ Rivers, “Joan Talks About...(Conclusion).”

²⁰⁸ bigeyezzzzzz, “JOAN RIVERS | Solid Gold | April 1983.”

Fonda, Bo Derek embodied an idealized form of WASP beauty that Rivers could never attain due to her Jewish ethnicity. Similar to her jokes about Jane Fonda, Rivers could not successfully attack Derek for her looks, so instead she targeted her intelligence. By calling Derek dumb in her act, Rivers punched up at a popular, beautiful woman in order to lower Derek's status and to elevate her own.

One of the benefits of making fun of female celebrities was that Rivers was likely saying things that many people in her audience thought but were too afraid to voice. This is especially true for her female audience members who were more likely to keep up with popular culture. It is telling that Rivers chose to attack female celebrities instead of male celebrities. I argue that this is because it fit in with the female-centric theme of her comedy act, and Rivers was more comfortable talking about women than she was talking about men. It also aligned with cultural expectations that women's bodies were up for comment and men's were not. Furthermore, there were complex power dynamics in play at the time. It was not normal for women to assert the power necessary to entertain and control an audience. Earlier in her career, Rivers mitigated this power difference through her self-deprecatory material, but it was also a concern with her celebrity content. If Rivers had stood in front of a crowd and ridiculed male celebrities, that would have thrown off the power balance she had so carefully constructed. Additionally, Rivers thrived off the shock value that these attacks provided, because many of the statements Rivers made about female celebrities were outrageous and over-the-top. Therefore, Rivers chose to attack and critique female celebrities, because it provided shock value and inventiveness to her act.

Rivers also attacked politicians and their wives in her act. During a 1983 performance in London, Rivers speaks candidly about her concern for modern American politics. She states, "I

think America right now politically is in a lot of trouble. We have nobody really terrific.” She then segues into a joke about First Ladies. She claims, “Every president’s wife has been a drunk,” and singles out Mamie Eisenhower, saying, “They said it was ear trouble. She couldn’t hear them say ‘You’ve had enough?’” She also quips, “Lady Bird Johnson began to drink when she realized those two daughters came out of her,” and Pat Nixon, “Began to drink when she realized she had to sleep with him.” Not even the President’s children were safe. She tells the audience that little Amy Carter made her feel, “ashamed to be an American.” She alleges that one year during the White House Christmas tree lighting Amy Carter, “Scatched her crotch on television,” and jokes that her response at the time was, “God almighty, the President’s daughter got crabs.” Though Rivers extolls the current First Lady Nancy Reagan for her elegance during the performance, she still calls her “a mean bitch” and jokes that, “She told Helen Keller ‘You shut up, I’m still talking.’”²⁰⁹ She briefly mentions President Reagan and a few of the other presidential candidates. However, Rivers chose to focus her attacks on women, in this case, the wives and female daughters of American presidents. Additionally, discussing prominent American political figures may have been another example of Rivers assimilating to American culture. She repeatedly refers to America as “the best country in the world,” and declares that she, “Wouldn’t live any place else.”²¹⁰ Her public declarations of patriotism signaled an in-group attitude. As an assimilated American, Rivers had the right to criticize American politics. This sense of national pride and belonging was likely doubly important for a child of immigrants like Rivers. Despite her Jewish ethnicity, Rivers was born an American citizen, which was a luxury her parents did not have. This presumably impacted the importance that Rivers placed on her identity as an American.

²⁰⁹ Zaffa, “An Audience With Joan Rivers 1983.”

²¹⁰ Archy M, “Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 1978.”

Rivers' celebrity content was regularly questioned by the media, and Rivers often had to defend her content. In a 1982 interview with Barbara Walters, Walters noted, "When you do your act, you'll take on anybody," and Rivers responds by saying, "But with love. These are my dear friends. I only talk about the truly greats." In this sense, Rivers frames her material as the ultimate compliment, because "the people have to know who I'm talking about." Walters then questioned whether Rivers had ever been sued by any of the celebrities she mocked in her act. Rivers replies with a head shake and says, "Because everything I say is true, Barbara. How can they sue me?"²¹¹ This line of questioning and the public fascination with Rivers' jokes about celebrities solidified the effectiveness of this style of comedy. In the 1980s, Rivers was notorious for her celebrity jokes, and her relationship with those celebrities became a matter of public obsession. Part of the humor of these jokes was the way that Rivers presented her relationship to the celebrities. Before she made one of her cruel jokes, Rivers would often call the women her "dear friend." She did this with Queen Elizabeth, Christina Onassis, and Elizabeth Taylor.²¹² This added to the humor of the jokes, because it was so shocking and ridiculous to think that a woman would speak about her close friends in such a cruel manner. It is also important to note that these women were not actually Rivers' good friends. It is unclear whether Rivers ever even met Onassis. There are no photographs of the two together or articles referencing a meeting. However, there are photos of Rivers and Elizabeth Taylor together at a charity event in 1985. The event, co-hosted by Rivers and Taylor, was apparently the first time the two women met.²¹³ Beyond that event, there is no indication that the women developed a friendship or stayed in contact. Rivers' jokes about Queen Elizabeth were particularly funny because her claim of

²¹¹ Mustafa Torphy, "Joan Rivers 1982 Barbara Walters-Interviews Of A Lifetime #248," YouTube video, 22:00, December 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-LoyLBOsonY>.

²¹² Archy M, "Joan Rivers Carson Tonight Show 14/5-1981 (Very funny)."

²¹³ Marylouise Oates, "Taylor, Rivers Break Bread Without Casualties," *LA Times*, November 19, 1985, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-11-19-vw-7744-story.html>.

friendship with the Queen of England was hard to believe. Though Rivers did eventually meet the Queen, they were not good friends. However, Rivers did develop an unlikely lifelong friendship with the Queen's son, Prince Charles.²¹⁴ Rivers spent a great deal of her early career solidifying her status as a cultural outsider. In doing so, she made friendships with women like Queen Elizabeth and Elizabeth Taylor, who were the very definition of insiders seem impossible. Her claims of friendship also leaned into the gossip side of this style of comedy, because if a woman did say horrible things about one of her friends, it likely wouldn't be to her face. It is in these moments, when Rivers insults her "friends," that she most clearly embodies the negative and toxic reputation of gossip.

Rivers' transition toward celebrity gossip in the 1980s was indicative of several social, cultural, and political shifts of the era. The rise of the celebrity gossip industry, the election of Ronald Reagan, the evolution of the New Right, the cultural promotion of the beauty myth, and the fitness craze of the 1980s all played a role in shaping Rivers' new comedy content and style. Though Rivers continued to include self-deprecatory humor in her act, the addition of celebrity content signified a concerted effort by Rivers to stay relevant in a changing society. This move also continued to showcase Rivers' identity as a Jewish woman. By embodying the Jewish gossip-mongering *yente* and continuing to include self-deprecation in her act, Rivers upheld the inclusion of her ethnic identity in her comedy persona. Additionally, Rivers' use of gossip fit in perfectly with her women-centered content. By focusing on female celebrities, Rivers maintained her identity as a female comedian who creates content for women. Unlike the self-deprecatory style of the 1960s and '70s, which was already proven successful by Rivers' female comedian predecessors, Rivers' celebrity gossip style was groundbreaking. Rivers' creation of the female

²¹⁴ Simon Perry, "Joan Rivers and Prince Charles: Inside Their Unlikely Friendship," *People*, September 6, 2014, <https://people.com/royals/joan-rivers-and-prince-charles-inside-their-unlikely-friendship/>.

celebrity-centered style of comedy paved the way for future female comedians and cemented her status as a comedy legend.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

Joan Rivers' road to *Fashion Police* was not always linear, but her stylistic shift in the 1980s paved the way for Rivers' future endeavors in fashion and celebrity satire. The changes that Rivers' comedic style and material underwent over the span of her nearly 60-year career often mirrored significant social and cultural shifts in American society. As Rivers' career progressed, she transitioned from a self-deprecatory style of humor to a celebrity gossip style of humor. Her content shifted from jokes mocking her physical appearance and lack of desirability to jokes mocking the appearance of female celebrities and their general shortcomings. These changes can be attributed to a number of factors, including increased competition for female comedians and the dwindling popularity of self-deprecating humor, but the most significant is the socio-historical moment in which they occurred. The changes that Rivers' comedy content and style underwent during the first 30 years of her career coincided with various important developments in American culture, including the changing roles of women, the increased popularity of celebrity gossip, the rise of feminism, and Jewish assimilation. Therefore, Rivers' changing comedic content and style were a product of the social, political, and cultural changes occurring in America at the time.

The self-deprecatory style of humor that dominated the early years of Rivers' career was a popular style for female comedians at the time. Additionally, focusing on her own alleged shortcomings in her performance helped Rivers showcase her identity as a Jewish woman, because self-deprecation was a tool often utilized in marginalized humor during that era. Though Rivers initially found success with a self-deprecatory style of humor, her content and style evolved in the 1980s. The shift that Rivers' comedic content underwent in the 1980s

corresponded with seismic cultural shifts that occurred in the United States during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. The rise of feminism, the emergence of the celebrity gossip industry, and the election of Ronald Reagan all played a role in Rivers' changing style. Also, Rivers' adoption of new comedy content was arguably an effort to remain relevant in a changing comedic landscape. Rivers' change in comedy style and content was a result of a culmination of factors, including her identity as a Jewish woman, significant changes in American culture, and the state of the comedy industry at the time. This change in comedy content and style also provided Rivers with an opportunity to communicate her identity as a Jewish woman in new ways. Rivers' comedy remained feminized and filled with Jewish references, but the new celebrity gossip content in Rivers' act gave her the creative freedom to establish a fresh style of comedy. The viciousness of Rivers' celebrity material earned her the reputation as the "Queen of Mean," which she carried proudly for the rest of her life.

As I come to the end of this thesis, I feel it is important to address its shortcomings and limitations, the biggest two being time and space. Due to the limited amount of time I had to complete this thesis and the average length of a graduate thesis, I narrowed my focus to a particular period of time in Joan Rivers' expansive career as a comedian. With more time I would have explored how Rivers presented her identity as a Jewish woman beyond the first 30 years of her career. The inclusion of Rivers' contemporary comedy content would have allowed analysis of her material through the lens of a postfeminist society. Through this analysis I could have explored how postfeminism's narrative that feminism succeeded and the fight for gender equality is no longer necessary may have impacted Rivers' comedy material. I could have discussed how Rivers' more recent material engaged with postfeminist ideas, like femininity as

bodily property, self-surveillance and discipline, and the makeover paradigm.²¹⁵ These facets of postfeminism would provide context for changing attitudes about the importance of physical attractiveness and the surveillance of the female body. This line of exploration would have fit in well with the themes of changing female body ideals and beauty expectations that I analyzed throughout this project. By looking at Rivers' comedy through a postfeminist lens, I could have explored how she reinforced and subverted postfeminist ideas in her comedy content. Additionally, expanding the time frame covered in this project would have opened up opportunities to discuss how the emergence of new technologies, such as the rise of social media and a changing comedy landscape, may have impacted Rivers' content and style.

Due to the limited scope of this project, I was not able to discuss various aspects of Rivers' life and career that interest me, including her time as a red-carpet correspondent, which took her celebrity-focused comedy to a whole new level. I would have liked to explore the dynamics of the red-carpet interview, including its comedic potential, as well as the industrial function of the red carpet. Furthermore, I would have enjoyed looking into the gendered aspect of red-carpet coverage and how that fit with Rivers' overall focus on women's issues in her act. Though this project is framed as Rivers' journey to *Fashion Police*, I was not able to perform an in-depth analysis of Rivers' time or work on the show. I would have liked to analyze how Rivers combined fashion and comedy on QVC and *Fashion Police*. Exploring Rivers' penchant for merging the comedy industry with the fashion industry would make for a compelling industrial analysis. Also, this line of inquiry would have provided more comedy content to analyze from a different historical era, as well as further opportunities to explore Rivers' performance of her multi-faceted identity.

²¹⁵ Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 149-150, 155-158.

Another limitation of this project was my lack of access to resources like physical archives due to Covid-19. Archives like the New York Public Library's collection of clippings about Joan Rivers from 1965 through 2009, and the Library of Congress's collection of Johnny Carson papers from 1970 through 1992 could have added further information and historical context to this project. I was also unable to acquire access to Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* video archive through the Johnny Carson website. The website states that every episode and segment from Johnny Carson's 30-year run on *The Tonight Show* have been digitized, catalogued and are available for clip licensing. Unfortunately that means that this resource is only available to those willing to pay for each individual clip. This excludes researchers who want to utilize the content for academic purposes. Without access to an organized catalogue of clips from Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*, I was forced to rely on clips of Rivers on *The Tonight Show* posted by third party users on YouTube. This complicated my work, because many of the clips did not include an original air date, so I couldn't discern what year some of the clips were from. As a result, I was unable to contextualize some of the content within Rivers' career. Ultimately, I was at the mercy of YouTube to provide me with clips from Rivers' comedic performances. On the other hand, being able to access so much of Rivers' comedy content on YouTube provided my research with an advantage that many earlier scholars did not have. Before the creation of YouTube, scholars may have had to purchase box sets of *The Tonight Show*, or comb through limited physical archives, like the Library of Congress's collection of NBC television programs which only houses programs from 1948 through 1977, to find pertinent content. Though I did not always have a clear timeline for the content I found on YouTube, I was able to find an impressive collection of relevant Joan Rivers footage from the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.

Though this project focuses on a single performer, the breadth and diversity of the ideas it covers provides a wide array of possible topics for further research. This thesis' focus on Rivers' career from the 1960s to the 1990s gives scholars an opportunity to examine Rivers' career from the 1990s onward in-depth. By examining Rivers' career after the 1980s, scholars could trace the many nuanced changes her comedy style and content underwent up until her death in 2014. In doing so, scholars could further contextualize Rivers' comedy style and content in specific socio-historical moments. Furthermore, the scope of this project is quite narrow. By focusing on Rivers' identity as a Jewish female comedian, other important facets of her identity were not explored in-depth. Further research could expand upon the subject matter of this thesis by broadening the analysis to include other aspects of Rivers' personal identity, such as social class and age. Looking at Rivers' social class, especially during her upbringing and the early years of her career, could offer important insight into additional influences on her comedy content and style. It would be compelling to explore how Rivers' childhood as a middle-class Jewish girl may have factored into her comedy. It could also further contextualize Rivers in a specific moment in American history and help expand upon ideas about Jewish assimilation in postwar America. Similarly, analyzing the role of age in Rivers' comedy identity would be highly relevant to a study that explores a performer's life across several decades. I briefly discussed Rivers' comedy content about her aging body in this project but expanding upon that analysis could offer further reasons for Rivers' changing content and style throughout her career. An exploration of the role of Rivers' age throughout her career could also prove a fruitful avenue for comparing the careers of several aging female comedians, such as Lily Tomlin and Kathy Griffin, in order to determine how aging, along with other factors, may impact the careers of women in comedy. Overall, expanding my analysis of Rivers' gender and Jewishness to include

social class and age would further contextualize Rivers' career in specific moments, and offer additional explanations for Rivers' changing content and style throughout her career.

In this project, I focused on Rivers' live stand-up performances, her guest hosting on *The Tonight Show*, and her print and television interviews. However, Rivers' career was not limited to these endeavors. She was also a successful author, jewelry designer, QVC saleswoman, red carpet correspondent, and actress. Looking into Rivers' career across different forms of media was beyond the scope of this project but could prove to be a valuable area of study. The breadth of media that Rivers was involved in merits a closer examination of the transmedia aspect of Rivers' career. Future research could look at whether Rivers' content and style changed depending on the medium, and if so, how? This line of research could provide important insight into how regulation across different forms of media, like film and television, might influence comedy content. Additionally, scholars could look at how advancements in technology, especially the introduction of the Internet, may have inspired changes in Rivers' content. Analyzing Rivers' 60-year career could create an opportunity to discuss how transmedia stardom has changed over time, especially in the wake of social media. This could lead to fruitful analysis of the changing nature of transmedia stardom in the age of social media, including the rise of the influencer and the cultural legitimization of reality stars. It may also be worthwhile to compare transmedia stardom today to a significant cultural period in the past, such as the transition from film to television that many film stars underwent in the 1950s. An analysis of that nature could attempt to explain what constitutes stardom in the modern era versus a cultural moment from the past, and why labelling someone a star remains an important cultural distinction.

In addition to transmedia stardom, it could also be beneficial to examine Rivers' comedy career through direct comparison. It could be useful to analyze Rivers' comedy style and content

in comparison to a modern Jewish female comedian in order to highlight the role that time period can play in shaping a comedian's style and content. Comparing Rivers' early career to a contemporary female comedian could also provide insight into how Rivers' career may have influenced the female comedians who came after her. It may also be beneficial for scholars to do a comparison along gender lines in order to analyze and assess the role that gender played in comedy creation during a specific time period. Along those lines, further research could perform an in-depth analysis of the comedy industry during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s through the lens of Rivers' career. That research could then be used as a point of comparison for the modern comedy industry, opening the door for new arguments about how the comedy industry has changed for female comedians in some ways, and how it has stayed the same in others.

Rivers' comedy content about celebrity gossip is another rich area for further research. Scholars could look into how the creation of celebrity gossip websites brought a new dimension to the cultural fascination with celebrity and to Rivers' celebrity content. There is also an opportunity to explore the postfeminist nature of Rivers' celebrity content, particularly on her show *Fashion Police*. In doing so, scholars could compare Rivers' early comedy content to her content post-1990 in order to discuss the changing landscape of feminism and its possible impact on Rivers' career. Rivers' celebrity content also brings up the issue of meanness. Future projects could consider the role of meanness in comedy and how Rivers' celebrity content changed expectations for the decorum of female comedians. It may also be interesting to analyze Comedy Central's roast of Joan Rivers and the idea of offering oneself up as a target for meanness. Finally, future research could focus on Rivers' fixation with the female body in her comedy content. I touched on that repeatedly in this project, but it is an area that could be explored in more detail. This research could be extended to include multiple female comedians from

different socio-historical periods in order to compare how female comedians spoke about the female body at different times. This could provide valuable insight into popular cultural beliefs about the female body, as well as how female comedians use humor to subvert or reinforce physical expectations for women.

This project only analyzed Rivers' career through the 1980s, but Rivers experienced continued success until her untimely death in 2014. After her stylistic shift during the 1980s, Rivers retained a focus on celebrity gossip in her comedy for the rest of her career. She laid the groundwork for other female comedians who joke about celebrities, including Joy Behar and Chelsea Handler. In many ways, the 1980s marked the birth of Rivers' status as a comedy legend. She proved that her comedy was adaptive, and that she had the ability to create a style all her own. Rivers' decision to continue to utilize celebrity gossip in her act after the 1980s can be attributed to several reasons. First, it's safe to assume that Rivers retained her celebrity gossip style because it was a style she pioneered. She may have felt some sense of ownership over the style and therefore continued to include it in her act. Another reason could be that through her celebrity gossip content, Rivers found a way to keep her material relevant without making significant changes to it. Many of the jokes that Rivers told about people like Elizabeth Taylor and Christina Onassis could be updated by applying the same material to modern celebrities. The ever-changing nature of popular culture and the constant emergence of new celebrities made the style ideal for the creation of new jokes and the reappropriation of old jokes.

Perhaps the most convincing reason that Rivers maintained her focus on celebrities in her act was the continued cultural fascination with celebrity, a fascination that in many ways Rivers helped create. Following Rivers' shift to celebrity content in the 1980s, American culture's obsession with celebrities only grew. The 1990s and 2000s saw the rise of gossip blogs and

television networks dedicated to all things celebrity. These new creations were indicative of the level of dedication many Americans exhibited toward keeping up with celebrity news and culture. Through her comedic material, Rivers helped create a culture obsessed with the surveillance and degradation of celebrities, which likely played a role in the explosion of celebrity gossip-centered publications and websites that followed her comedic transition. Gossip blogger Perez Hilton even adopted Rivers' cruel approach for his website, mocking the celebrities he covered by drawing on their pictures and cajoling them for their choices. The disdain and judgement that celebrity gossip sites like PerezHilton.com and TMZ adopted were likely influenced by Rivers' brutal attacks on celebrities. In many ways, Joan Rivers helped create the opportunity for a show like *Fashion Police* to exist with her celebrity comedy material. Rivers made ridiculing celebrities for everything from their weight to their fashion choices an expected and acceptable form of criticism. In doing so, she unwittingly opened the door for her future self to step into the role of fashion expert and cultural purveyor on *Fashion Police*, and she helped create a celebrity culture that is still prevalent to this day.

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