

“DUSTY MUFFINS”:  
SENIOR WOMEN’S PERFORMANCES OF SEXUALITY

A Thesis

by

EVLEEN MICHELLE NASIR

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2012

Major Subject: Performance Studies

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Chair of Committee,	Kirsten Pullen
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## ABSTRACT

“Dusty Muffins”:

Senior Women’s Performance of Sexuality. (August 2012)

Evleen Michelle Nasir, B.A., Texas A&M University

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Kirsten Pullen

There is a discursive formation of incapability that surrounds senior women’s sexuality. Senior women are incapable of reproduction, mastering their bodies, or arousing sexual desire in themselves or others. The senior actresses’ I explore in the case studies below insert their performances of self and their everyday lives into the large and complicated discourse of sex, producing a counter-narrative to sexually inactive senior women. Their performances actively embody their sexuality outside the frame of a character.

This thesis examines how senior actresses’ performances of sexuality extend a discourse of sexuality imposed on older woman by mass media. These women are the public face of senior women’s sexual agency. The women I use as case studies are crucial because they perform sexually on screen as well as in their everyday lives. Their personae engage and intervene in the discursive formation of incapability outside traditional modes of performance. The performances of Kirstie Alley, Cloris Leachman Joan Rivers and Betty White transgress the invisible but well documented boundary between bodies that can be sexed and bodies that can’t. Transgressing this boundary allows these older actresses to become active agents in their sexual lives.

Sexual confessions, performances of personae, and citations of previous senior women performers facilitate senior women's sexual performances. The case studies that follow illustrate how these elements work together to create sexual representations of senior women that are not always accepted by audiences, but are still able to intervene into the larger discourse of senior women's sexual incapability.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

Menopausal comedienne Kathy Griffin notes,

The fact that Hollywood is tougher on older women is hardly new. In all my years in this town, I've never heard a director or producer say, "You know, she's great, except she's not quite old enough." There's always a tendency to go with someone younger, because they're perceived to be sexier and, of course, sex sells. Look at the covers of weekly magazines: Their stock-in-trade is chronicling the love lives and mug shots of twentysomething [sic] starlets. That is the world we live in, that is what generates buzz. That's what generates money. And I guess a lot of women just feel like if they reveal their age, they're going to be viewed as past their prime or unsexy or some bullshit like that. And, hey, on a certain level that's understandable. No one wants to get old, no one wants to be put out to pasture. But, Jesus Christ, how f--ing bleak is the situation that I, Kathy Griffin, Queen of Dick Jokes, have to step in and basically write some sort of f--ed-up Hallmark card to the women of Hollywood?! ...

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This thesis follows the style of *Text and Performance Quarterly*.

It's possible that my being a comic has alleviated some of the pressure to stay young. ... But the ageism situation in Hollywood overall is only getting worse for everyone. ... The Hollywood notion of youth-as-beauty is never going to change. ... So what's my secret to aging gracefully? I just don't give a shit. I'm 51, and if you don't like it, then suck my dick. I'm also lucky to be friends with a lot of successful "older" women, from Cher to Jane Fonda to Joan Rivers to Suzanne Somers to Gloria Steinem to Marlo Thomas to Gloria Vanderbilt. I'm truly inspired by the examples they set. And, really, it's as simple as letting your talent speak for itself. ... Talent transcends age. And if you don't believe me, I have three words for you: Meryl. F--ing. Streep. She's as hot as ever! And don't say, "She's the exception because she's Meryl Streep." The fact is, she's a 62-year-old woman who's outstanding at her job. It's that simple. I just did a sold-out show at Carnegie Hall in New York City. I'm in the best physical shape of my life, and I'm getting laid on a regular basis by a younger guy. So don't tell me that getting older has to be a funeral dirge. ... So, take note, fellas. There's a new Hollywood mafia in town, and our ankles are in the air.

Senior women have been making sexual performance interventions in radio, film and television for decades. Audiences, however, often regard these actresses and their performances as either obscene or irrelevant.

This thesis examines how senior actresses' performances of sexuality extend a discourse of non-sexuality imposed on older woman by mass media. These women are the public face of senior women's sexual agency. They are performing the roles of sexually active senior citizens both on screen and in their performances of everyday life. The performances of Kirstie Alley, Cloris Leachman, Joan Rivers and Betty White transgress the invisible but well documented boundary between bodies that can be sexed and bodies that can't. Transgressing this boundary allows these older actresses to become active agents in their sexual lives. The fact that these women are actresses only increases the power of their sexual performances. Performance is a space of showing and education. Just as the eighteenth century Hallam-Douglass acting troupe educated audiences on gentility of speech and body language through their own genteel performances,<sup>1</sup> older senior actresses educate audiences on the need for older women's sexual agency.

For the purposes of this thesis, I am defining older or senior women as women who have reached at least the age of sixty and who have completed menopause. Medical texts inform the public that women who have completed menopause are no longer viable candidates for reproduction and thus sexual intercourse. The beauty industry also plays a part in marking the older woman's body as undesirable. As Kathleen Woodward describes it,

in our mass-mediated society, age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops, conspiring to render the older female body paradoxically both hypervisible and invisible. It would

seem that the wish of our visual culture is to erase the older female body from view. (163)

If the older woman's body cannot be erased, its flaws must be corrected. Persistent ad campaigns touting scientific breakthroughs in anti-wrinkle and anti-aging creams warn women about the dangers of aging naturally. Older female celebrities are featured in cosmetic commercials posing for the camera as it zooms in on their flawless faces as a voice-over spouts the benefits of the new wonder drug-infused moisturizer. Women's interest magazines are filled with advertisements pushing beauty products that promise to make a woman's skin appear ten years younger. For older women who want a face and physique that rivals a thirty-year-old, the plastic surgeon's knife is a viable option. Comedienne Joan Rivers understands that "A wobbly under-chin is a giveaway of a woman's age" and if there is something about a woman's body that she does not like she should lift, tuck, or cut it off (9). Some women choose to disregard the daily bombardment of wrinkle-and age-spot-free images of older beauty. Whatever the reasons, they have chosen to age naturally and accept the physical markers that index age. Women who choose not to fight against gravity and their biology have bodies that are marked by Western society as unattractive, undesirable and unsexable. The senior women of this thesis range from Betty White, who has embraced her aged body, to Joan Rivers, who has surgically removed the signs of aging, to Kirstie Alley who is still able to pass as a younger woman. While this is a limited spectrum of senior bodies, they do represent how aging is embodied in Western culture.

This thesis is a preliminary intervention; neither globally relevant nor even complete in an United States context. I am not attempting to write an all-encompassing or globally complete history of senior women's sexuality. These actresses are currently still alive and performing, identify as white and heterosexual, and are prominent figures in American film and television. Thus, the women I use as case studies are crucial because they perform sexually on screen as well as in their everyday lives. Their personae engage and intervene in the discursive formation of incapability outside traditional modes of performance. Performing their sexuality outside of film and television allows audiences to engage with Alley, Leachman, Rivers and White's sexuality on an "intimate" level.

### **A Queer Reading of Senior Women's Sexuality**

This work constructs senior women's sexuality as queer sexuality. Following from David Halperin,

Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. "Queer," then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative— a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices.

(62)

It is important to remember that even if a senior woman does not publicly perform her sexuality, it still exists. Senior women's sexuality is a queer sexuality in that it contradicts the dominant ideology of the inactive sex life into which senior women are interpolated by the discursive formation of incapability. Senior women are often viewed as having an inactive sexual life because they do not publicly display their sexuality. Heteronormative society does not create a space in which senior women can perform their sexual desires and sexual feelings. Senior women's sexuality is pushed into the margins of heteronormative society and therefore out of the public view. Senior women's sexuality, then, is queer because it is hidden by or performed in the margins of heteronormative society. The active or public displays of senior actresses' desires are queer because they display them from the margins of society and because they run counter to dominant constructions of sex and gender.

Senior actresses' active sexuality is constructed and performed in opposition to the expectations of society, simultaneously alienating and disarming audiences. Alexander Doty writes that "queer" has the "ability to describe those complex circumstances in texts, spectators, and production that resist easy categorization, but that definitely escape or defy the heteronormative" (7). Senior women's performances of sexuality complicate heteronormative society by publicly acknowledging senior women's sexual desires and actions. The heteronormative spectator reads the senior women's aged body and post-menopausal status as both an inability to reproduce and as sexually incapable. Although the sexual performances of the senior women of this thesis

are all heterosexual, the complexity of their position in defying heteronormative popular media's incapable senior woman marks them as queer.

The comedic medium from which these public displays of senior sexuality emerge also further an understanding of them as queer performances. According to Doty, "as a genre, comedy is fundamentally queer since it encourages rule-breaking, risk-taking, inversions, and perversions in the face of straight patriarchal norms" (81). The queerness of comedy allows audiences to experience and enjoy sexual rule breaking by senior actresses because the performance is "ultimately contained or recuperated by traditional narrative closure (as it attempts to restore the straight status quo), or through the genre's 'it's just a joke' escape hatch" (Doty 81). Audiences allow themselves to laugh at senior actresses' television and film performances of sexuality because they understand them to be "just a joke" or because they interpret the actresses performing as a character. Audiences are less threatened by senior sexual performance when it is framed as comedic. Not all senior actresses restrict their performances of sexuality to the screen or stage, however the senior actresses' performances I consider actively embody their sexuality outside the frame of a character. They insert their performances of self and their everyday lives into the large and complicated discourse of sex, producing a counter-narrative to that of the sexually inactive senior women.

### **Senior Women and the Discourse of Sexuality**

Discourse is regulated through power structures and determines people's actions and reception of those actions. It is through discourse that a society's values and culture are constructed. Michel Foucault points out that

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (*The History of Sexuality Volume 1* 100-101)

There is a discursive formation of incapability that surrounds senior women's sexuality. Senior women are incapable of reproduction, mastering their bodies, or arousing sexual desire in themselves or others. This discourse is developed out of myths and misconceptions but is grounded in medical research. The sexless senior woman is a stereotype that is reproduced through discourse and a strongly held belief that the biological transition of menopause removes women's sexual desires. Menopausal and post-menopausal women encounter symptoms of menopause that include

period changes...hot flashes or night sweats...less interest in sex, pain during sex, or trouble getting aroused or having an orgasm.... trouble



sleeping... trouble controlling your bladder...weight gain, especially around your waist...mood swings. (Healthy Advice 6)<sup>2</sup>

Medicine informs menopausal women that they are not only no longer able to reproduce offspring but that they should also expect to lose the emotional desire and physical ability to have sex. While the discursive formation of incapability is dominant, senior actresses are creating their own discourse of older women's active sexuality.

Once a woman completes menopause, her body is no longer able to reproduce human matter. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler traces materiality back through Greek etymologies of matter and concludes "That which matters about an object is its matter." Furthermore she understands matter as a source of potentiality and "In reproduction, women are said to contribute the matter; men, the form"(31). Thus, if women are the producers of matter and potential, senior women who have passed through menopause have lost the ability to produce matter and no longer "matter." Once a woman is no longer able to reproduce and contribute matter to society, her reason for engaging in sexual activity becomes null and void. The potential that sex has to produce feelings of pleasure and enjoyment is inconsequential because it does not reproduce matter. The strongly held belief that a woman's societal worth is her ability to procreate has led to post-menopausal and senior women's sexual needs eliminated from sexual discourse. Tying a woman's worth to her reproductive potential produces material effects for aging women. Abstract discussions about various phenomena result in either new or different behavior on the ground. When generations of individuals are told that older women are

incapable of having sex, physical manifestations of that discussion appear in everyday life.

Biological symptoms of menopause that declare senior women incapable frame discussions as well as experiences of sex as impossible for senior women. The discourse of incapability has marginalized senior women's sexuality, revoking their sexual agency. This is not to say that senior women do not have sex. Following from Isadore Rubin,

there is no longer any reason for anyone to continue to believe that sex, love, and marriage— and romance, too— are the exclusive privileges of youth. Although the facts are far from complete, research has given us a clear outline of the basic realities. Careful studies have shown that there is no one age in life at which an abrupt end of sex life occurs. (12)

Assumptions are being made about senior women's sexuality that result in a sexual landscape in which senior women are no longer expected to participate. While it is medically supported that the loss of sexual desire and difficulty having sex can occur after menopause, it has not stopped many senior women from having and enjoying sexual activity. Senior women are having sex, but they are being ignored while they do so.

Aging is an embodied process and the performance of age is reconstituted through what Judith Butler terms the performative act. In the same way that gender is understood as a cultural construct formed around biological sex, age too is culturally constructed on top of the biologically older body. Butler's performativity is "not a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which

discourse produces the effects that it names” (2). Women learn how to be old by citing the previous performances of age and performing them again. Women understand how to age by watching their mothers and grandmothers age. Society at large learns what to expect from senior women by watching performances and representations of senior women’s lives on stage and screen. The senior actresses of this thesis learned how to perform their sexuality by citing the performances of sexuality by senior women who came before them.

### **Sexual Seniors of the Past**

There is a long history of representations of senior women’s sexuality on stage. Jackie “Moms” Mabley, an African American comedienne in the early 1900s, made jokes about the sexual adventures that she had with younger men. “Through her accumulated performances past the age of sixty-five, Moms Mabley created a legendary image of herself as the lover of men to whom she could have been mother or grandmother” (Harris 770) It was not the age gap that created the humor in the joke, but the thought that sexual activity was impossible for an older woman. Furthermore, the sexual humor that Mabley performed “leaned toward the sly double-entendre rather than the straightforward use of obscenity” (Bennets). Mabley understood herself as a sexual grandmother and performed her role. Sophie Tucker is often referred to as “the last of the Red Hot Mammams.” Throughout her career, Tucker was a singer and self-deprecating comic who made jokes about her weight, sexual appeal and failed romantic life. “For Sophie Tucker, aging was not an issue. Her role demanded that she be at least

menopausal” (Loy 345). Tucker’s performance did not require her to remain young; thus, her act became funnier as she aged. As she grew older she was able to incorporate her sexuality into her performance and cite the same sexual humor that Moms Mabley had before her.

Arguably one of the most famously sexualized senior actresses is Mae West. Kirsten Pullen’s *Actresses and Whores* details West’s career contributions to representations of female sexuality on stage and screen as well as their material effects on the discourse of prostitution. West had a long career that ended with her final film *Sextette*. Pullen notes,

At eighty-four, West produced and starred in her final film, *Sextette*. She played a much-married screen legend who commanded a legion of male admirers despite her advanced age, re-presenting the persona that brought her fame and admiration in the first half of the twentieth century. ... *Sextette* failed precisely because it resurrected the iconic West in an aged and failing body. West’s final performance of femininity no longer seemed authentic, ... West could not, in the minds of her audience at least, convincingly portray feminine sexuality. As a young and even middle-aged woman, West was believable as a sexual dynamo. As an octogenarian, she was not. (20-21)

Like West, the senior actresses of this thesis are not “believable sexual dynamos.”

Unlike West, their performances of sexuality are well received because they are framed as comedic and laughable. As a senior woman, West took her sexuality too seriously for

audiences. Mae West's octogenarian sexuality failed on screen because audiences were (and still are) unable to accept a genuine performance of senior sexuality. The senior actresses of this thesis descend from a history of senior actresses' performances of sexuality. Through embodied performance White, Rivers, Alley and Leachman are citing the performances of Moms Mabley, Sophie Tucker, Mae West and other senior actresses. Their sexual performances contradict the aesthetics of their bodies but not their performances of self.

### **Senior Women's Sexual Confessions**

Senior actresses successfully intervene into the discursive formation of incapability through the confessions of their sexual personae. These personae combat the discursive formation of incapability with sexual confessions as well as performances of sexuality. In his work on celebrity confession, Sean Redmond notes that "sexual desire—the lust for one's own or another's flesh—is that which very often drives the logic of the confessional ritual" (150). Michel Foucault's theories of confession and the repressive hypothesis from *The History of Sexuality* are useful in examining how hetero-normative society requires insights concerning the sexual lives of celebrities.

The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's

illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. (Foucault 59)

Confession has spread to film and television through the aptly named “Confessional Room,” an institution of reality TV. In this small room, reality television participants are able to confess the so-called “truth” about their feelings towards their house-mates/competition. Televised celebrity confession also takes place on talk shows where “the talkshow host thus becomes a supra-charged redemptive icon—a High Priest or Pastor of the screen, and very often a sutured amalgamation of ‘qualified’ therapist and preacher, given the cultural authority to absolve the confessor of their sins” (Redmond 151). For example, Joan Rivers has performed the role of “pastor of the screen” to celebrities on the award show red carpet, and her various talk shows addition to her own sexual confessions. She understands both how to confess her own sexual sins and have others confess to her.

Foucault’s theory of confession frames it as a therapeutic practice. Those who confess are not bowing to a pressure to confess but rather are freeing themselves from a repressive force trying to silence them. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Foucault argues that through Catholic confession, discourses on sex became more detailed:

the Counter Reformation busied itself with stepping up the rhythm of the yearly confession in the Catholic countries ... it attributed more and more importance in penance ... to all the insinuations of the flesh: thoughts, desires, voluptuous imaginings, delectations, combined movements of the

body and the soul; henceforth all this had to enter, in detail, into the process of confession and guidance. According to the new pastoral, sex must not be named imprudently, but its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramifications ... A twofold evolution tended to make the flesh into the root of all evil, shifting the most important moment of transgression from the act itself to the stirrings—so difficult to perceive and formulate—of desire. (19-20)

Through confession, power regulates confessors' lives. The confessor/confession is being surveilled by power and thus the confessional performance is regulated by power. Power tells the confessor that it is good to confess. The path to absolution is through the detailed description of sin. Thus, through the discourse of absolution, power is able to convince individuals that confession is not a tool of power but rather a tool of freedom.

Confession as absolution explains why popular media expects knowledge of the sexual exploits of celebrities and why celebrities are so quick to confess. As confession was constructed by religious authorities, "An imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire, into discourse"(Foucault 21). Furthermore, when confession is examined simultaneously with Foucault's work *Technologies of the Self*, it is clear that confession serves as a way for people to "know themselves." Foucault argues that this principle of Greek and Roman life has become fundamental to the morality of the modern world. Confession, sexual or otherwise, prompts the confessor to reveal an aspect of their identity that will allow them to know themselves better. It is expected that

younger celebrities should and want to confess their sexuality to heteronormative society. The need to confess has been pressed upon them by power not only to absolve themselves from sin but to know themselves better. When senior actresses absolve themselves of their sexual sins, it unsettles audiences because popular audiences understand senior women as having no sins to confess.

### **Internet Confessional Gossip**

When private confessions transform to tabloid gossip, outsiders can know celebrities as well. Gossip hounds are not only concerned with the sexual lives of celebrities, but are also eager to be privy to the rest of their private lives. Often, confessions are heard and repurposed as gossip. Expanding televisual and filmic confession, this trope is also evident in celebrities' use of social networking. When celebrities' sexual escapades are printed for society to read in gossip magazines, and/or celebrity gossip blogs, private knowledge goes public. This obsession with knowing the private makes confessional gossip integral to heteronormative societies' everyday lives. The Internet facilitates society's desire for confession by

forc[ing] users to renegotiate continually the boundaries and registers of publicity and privacy, and thus it is the technic [sic] that constellates the ideal conditions for gossip, quite apart from its speed and efficiency in circulating tittle-tattle ... The Internet blurs the distinction between confession and gossip and between intimacy and publicity, two sets of parallel lines that have begun to bend toward one another. (Fackler 391)



Fackler understands confession and gossip to be phenomena that gradually blur because of internet technology. The blurred lines of intimacy and publicity allow celebrities to post the intimate details of their lives for thousands of fans/followers to read. Fackler emphasizes that the gossiper is dislocated from the listener by time and space, but this does not make the exchange less intimate. It simply allows the gossiper/celebrity to be intimate on a larger scale. The further the confession disseminates across the internet, the more potential to it has become gossip.

Facebook status updates and Twitter entries of 140 characters or less allow celebrities to connect with their fans as well as other celebrities in nearly real-time. Though social media use, especially of Twitter remains limited, some celebrities create publicly private spaces in which they can confess their daily lives. Essentially, celebrities are performing confessions, sexual or otherwise, on and through the Internet. As discussed below, Joan Rivers uses Twitter to confess not only her own sexual exploits, but the sexual performances of other celebrities as well. Thus confessions are transformed into gossip by celebrities themselves.

### **Constructing a Sexual Senior Persona**

Importantly, these case studies consider senior women who started their careers several decades ago. Much like the senior women performers who came before them, these women have developed specific personae. It is significant that these performers are not simply performing characters who are older and sexually active but rather they are performing themselves as sexually active women. Senior actresses like Meryl Streep and

Diane Keaton have played roles as sexually active senior women in the films *It's Complicated* and *Something's Gotta Give* respectively. Each of these actresses performed a character who wanted a heterosexual sexual relationship. In Keaton's film, her character had sex with both the younger Keanu Reeves character and the older Jack Nicholson. The movie poster for *It's Complicated* shows Streep undressed in bed with Alec Baldwin, one of the two men with whom she has a sexual relationship in the film. Both of these senior actresses portray characters who have multiple sexual partners throughout the film. Audience members understand these film performances as character choices rather than personal choices because these actresses do not construct their personae around performances of sexuality.

These film performances differ from the sexual seniors of this thesis because Alley, Leachman, Rivers and White are all understood by audiences as sexual women. Though they are not necessarily understood as sex symbols, they are open about their sexual desires. Confession is one of the tools which manufactures a celebrity persona. The revealing of truth invites audiences to be intimate with the celebrity.

The celebrity confessor is nearly always, then, already a performer, acting out their contrition through the intertextual signs of their famedom. ...

The celebrity confessor, then, supposedly opens up a space where the real replaces the artificial or manufactured, and one gets to see them as they really are. (Redmond 152)

The supposition of truth being placed onto the celebrity by the audience creates an intimate bond between celebrity and fan.

Truth and intimacy facilitate the creation of a persona, but so does repetitive performance or “type casting”. Alley, Leachman, Rivers and White have all been cast as themselves or sexual senior women in multiple roles throughout their careers. Alley played herself in the Showtime sitcom *Fat Actress*, her reality television show *Kirstie Alley’s Big Life*, and her appearance as a contestant on *Dancing With the Stars*. As Leachman got older, television casting executives had her reprise a crazy, obscene grandmother for the Fox sitcoms *Malcom in the Middle* and *Raising Hope*. This persona followed Leachman into her appearance on *Dancing With the Stars* and became the kind of persona audiences expected her to present. Rivers has made a career out of performing as her sexual self, from her stand up comedy act to her appearance on the FX drama series *Nip/Tuck* and her recent documentary *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*. Finally, White was first cast as the sexy, menopausal Sue Ann Nivens on the CBS sitcom *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and then moved on to play the sexually naïve senior woman Rose Nylund on the NBC sitcom *The Golden Girls*. Both of these roles help construct the sexually active persona that White has recently performed as host of NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* and the TV Land sitcom *Hot in Cleveland*. As audiences repeatedly see these senior actresses perform sexually active roles in film and television, they expect that same behavior from them in their performances of self. This conflation of character with performer increases the impact of the senior actresses’ performance intervention.

Audiences see the sexual character roles and the sexual performances of self that these women perform as a single performance of a sexually active senior woman.

Importantly, these performances make a space in popular media for sexually active senior women. The senior women's intervention is served by intimacy because it creates the appearance that White, Rivers, Alley, and Leachman are actually sexually active or at least desire sexual activity in their everyday "real" life. If there is not a sexual persona crafted (in the case of Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton, and other senior women performers), audiences can disregard a sexual performance as an actor playing a character role; in those cases, the performance intervention is ineffective. Instead, the visibility of these senior women performing sexual availability and sexuality both within and without a scripted context shows audiences that these senior actresses are sexual in their everyday lives. While the senior actresses of this thesis are not actively trying to change the discourse on age and sex and may be accused of chasing youth, the inclusion of sexuality in their scripted and everyday performances complicates the current discourse of sexual incapability that faces senior women today.

### **Thesis Outline**

My first chapter examines Betty White in her role as the naïve sexual grandmother. Her comedy is filled with double entendre and raunchy word play; however, White maintains an on and off screen persona of innocence. My second chapter investigates the sexual performances of Kirstie Alley and Cloris Leachman on the reality television show *Dancing With The Stars*. In this chapter I investigate how the combination of sexual persona and senior body led to their individual successes or failures on the competition dance floor. While neither senior celebrity won the competition, Alley placed first

runner up her season and Leachman was successful past the half way mark of her season despite the judge's best efforts to eliminate her with low performance scores. My third chapter investigates Joan Rivers senior performances of sexuality. Rivers is often criticized for her vulgar comedy and penchant for plastic surgery, but these elements are what strengthen her sexual intervention. Her stand up comedy performances and documentary film construct a more intimate side of Rivers that allows audiences to feel closer to the sexual senior. This intimacy then fosters the creation and maintenance of her sexual persona.

Sexual confessions, performances of personae, and citations of previous senior women performers facilitate senior women's sexual performances. The case studies that follow illustrate how these elements work together to create sexual representations of senior women that are not always accepted by audiences, but are still able to intervene into the larger discourse of senior women's sexual incapability.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Hallam Douglass troupe see Bruce McConachie's "America Theatre in Context, from the Beginnings to 1870" in *The Cambridge History of American Theatre Volume I: Beginnings to 1870*

<sup>2</sup> This information is pulled from a health pamphlet that can be found through-out Texas and presumably other parts of the United States. I have chosen it for its accessibility of language as well as availability.

## CHAPTER II

## BETTY WHITE'S MAINSTREAM SEXUALITY

*I have a suspicion—and hear me out, ‘cause this is a rough one—I have a suspicion that the definition of “crazy” in show business is a woman who keeps talking even after no one wants to fuck her anymore. The only person I can think of that has escaped the “crazy” moniker is Betty White, which, obviously, is because people still want to have sex with her.*  
(Fey 271)

On September 28, 2010, a previously recorded interview between James Lipton, the host of *Inside The Actors Studio*, and Betty White aired on the Bravo television network.

Like most of Lipton's interviews, White discussed her performance career and after the interview portion concluded, the audience asked White questions. One audience member asked “Now that you are experiencing this wonderful resurgence in your career is there any specific role you are looking for?” White responded jokingly “I'd like to play with Robert Redford but that's a different story.” And then with a more serious tone she continued, “Everybody talks about the resurgence . You know, I have never been away guys, I've never stopped working. ... I have been so lucky, I have been so fortunate that one thing leads to another to another and believe me I never take it for granted”

(Alecsei4 *Inside the Actors Studio* 2010). Though White's age and lengthy career position her to intervene into the larger normative discourse of senior women's sexual

incapability, she only furthers this discourse through mainstream sexual jokes and her sexually naïve persona.

Born in 1922, White began her extensive television and film career in 1939 on a local, experimental, Los Angeles television show. She is most famous for her appearances on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *The Golden Girls* but had a very long career appearing on late night television shows and daytime game shows, such as *Password*, where she met her late husband Allen Ludden. In 1983, White won the Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Game Show Host for her work on NBC's *Just Men!*; she became the first woman to win in this category, beating Richard Dawson and Dick Clark. This Emmy is just one of the seven she has won, along with countless other awards and nominations. In January 2012, White celebrated her ninetieth birthday. NBC aired a television special *Betty White's 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday: A Tribute to America's Golden Girl* to celebrate the actress' long, successful career.<sup>1</sup>

### **Betty White Constructs the Naïve, Sexualized Grandmother Persona**

While White had performed as a young woman, most of today's audience knows her as a post-menopausal or senior actress. In 2010, White starred as herself in a Snickers Super Bowl commercial. This commercial sparked a Facebook campaign which led to White as the host of *Saturday Night Live*. Since *SNL*, White played supporting roles in two blockbuster films, *You Again* (2010) and the animated film *Dr. Seuss' The Lorax* (2012) and stars in the TV Land sitcom entitled *Hot In Cleveland*. But why has White skyrocketed into popular culture? At 88, White hosted SNL, making jokes about her



“dusty muffin,” and saying her former stripper name was “Ascertain” (ass or tain<sup>2</sup>).

White has become the sexualized grandmother<sup>3</sup> in both the media and her real life. This crafted persona elides two of her most famous characters: Sue Ann Nivens from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and Rose Nylund from *The Golden Girls*. Importantly, White’s persona, though sometimes sexual, is not especially transgressive.

Betty White’s career began on television and two of the performances she is most known for are television sitcom characters. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* ran for seven seasons from 1970-1977 (Internet Movie Database 2010). Of those 168 episodes, White appeared in 42 as happy television homemaker Sue Ann Nivens (Internet Movie Database 2010). When searching for an actress to play Nivens, the producers knew that they wanted someone like White but were afraid to hire her because of the possibility that White and Moore’s friendship would be strained if White’s performance didn’t succeed. White was originally hired as a guest star on the show, but Nivens’ character worked well and became a series regular (YouTube 2010).

White described her character Nivens as “a sickeningly sweet neighborhood nymphomaniac” (YouTube 2010). Nivens was the host of a homemaking show, *The Happy Homemaker*, an early fictional version of *The Martha Stewart Show*. Off the set of her homemaking show, Nivens is a sexual being, using all her wiles to seduce married men. Making a fantastic first impression on her first episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Nivens is introduced to the audience as a party guest of Mary’s. We later find out that Nivens is having an affair with Lars, the husband of Mary’s friend Phyllis, played by actress Cloris Leachman. Nivens ends the affair only after being threatened by Mary

with the loss of her television show. In season seven, episode seventeen of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Nivens gets fired from her homemaking show. Using her sexual wiles, Nivens convinces Lou (Ed Asner) to ask Mary to hire her in the WJM newsroom. White's character Nives flaunts her sexuality openly and freely. It is important to note that White was fifty-one years old when she first appeared on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in 1973. While fifty-one is certainly not "senior," White can be identified as a menopausal actress. White's performance of sexuality and sexual misbehavior were new and different: "So many people [knew] [sic] me as that nice lady, it was great fun for [audiences] to see that nice ladies sometimes have claws. For me, it was like being born again." (The Paley Center for Media). As a menopausal actress White's physical appearance did not signal her menopausal status. She was certainly older looking than her co-star Mary Tyler Moore, but did not possess the signs of age that are marked on her body today. White's menopausal performance of the sexualized, man-hungry Nivens is the foundation on which White has created the sexualized grandma character that she portrays today. White reveals in her *Inside The Actor's Studio* interview that Allen Ludden used to get asked how much of White was in Sue Ann Nivens. He responded they're, "there very much alike but Betty can't cook"( 2010).

In 1985, White joined Beatrice Arthur, Rue McClanahan and Estelle Getty on *The Golden Girls*, a sitcom about four women living out their retirement years in Florida. Throughout the run of the show, White portrayed the innocent, sweet, caring and naïve Rose Nylund, a character very different from Sue Ann Nivens. But Like Nivens, Nylund was based on White's own personality and biography. Both Rose and

White are widowed,<sup>4</sup> and the sweet charms of White from her first days on television were back. One of the main character traits for Nylund was her seemingly genuine naiveté and gullibility. For a long run of the show, Nylund was convinced that her biological father was Bob Hope.<sup>5</sup> Another running gag through the series is Nylund's informative yet ridiculous St. Olaf stories.<sup>6</sup> All of these character traits combined to create the second layer upon which White's sexualized grandma rests. White's sweet performance of Nylund allows audiences to relate to White as their own grandmother.

Part of the pleasure watching *The Golden Girls*, especially in syndication, is a distance between the elderly women and some audience members. Following from Kathleen Woodward,

Given the ageism that saturates American visual culture, my point is that in general we cast ourselves as younger in relation to the old people we see on the screen or in a photograph (as spectators we inhabit the position of an uncritical “younger than”) unless, importantly, we are invited otherwise by the non-normative nature of the cultural text, or if we have educated ourselves to see past conventional and reductive ageist responses. I equate this default spectator with what might be called the ideology of American youth culture, where youth is valued at virtually all costs over age and where age is largely deemed a matter for comedy or sentimental compassion. (164)

White's performances, especially her performance of Nylund, exemplify Woodward's statement. In today's youth culture, audiences watch White perform Nylund's character

and identify themselves as “younger than” White. This ageist view of the default spectator held true in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the sitcom first aired, but it is especially relevant now that the comedy runs in syndication twenty years later. Different generations watch White as Nylund on *The Golden Girls*, laugh at her jokes and feel compassion for her when she is made fun of by her roommates. Audiences identify Nylund as their sweet, naïve, grandmother. This identification supports the second half of White’s naïve sexuality.

During White’s 2010 *Inside the Actor’s Studio*, interview host James Lipton asked White how much of her was in the character of Rose Nylund, White responded, “I think a lot. I think more than ... I might have realized at the time because, I’m not a good negativist. ... I’m a positivist.” White recognizes, as do others, that she is a part of each of the characters she creates. It is a recent phenomenon, however, that White and her characters have been conflated to create White’s naïve sexual grandmother persona. In Veronika Ambros’ article *Prauge’s Experimental Stage: Laboratory of Theatre and Semiotics*, Ambros discusses Otakar Zich’s concept of the “stage figure,” explaining that the figure of the actor is who appears on the stage and that the dramatic character that the actor plays exists not on the stage but in our consciousness. Essentially, the stage figure is the signifier while the dramatic character is the signified (Ambros 57). White and her audiences are actively conflating White as the stage figure with the various dramatic characters that she has played on screen. This conflation of White’s senior body on film and television with the dramatic characters of Nivens and Nylund has created a persona of naïve sexuality that White supports and embodies in her “everyday life.”

During the interview, Lipton asks “What is there in you that has been bringing out this raunch in your writers for half a century?” White, with big eyes and a Nylund-esque expression replies, “I don’t know. I don’t understand, and they can write anything and I’ll read it. I don’t want to be disobedient” (*Inside the Actors Studio*). Here White is playing off the naiveté that she has constructed through her previous performances as Rose Nylund and is incorporating that element into the performance of her “real” self. White understands that audiences will read her naiveté about the meaning of the writer’s jokes as comedic because she is aware of the raunch in her scripts. She simultaneously manipulates the audience to laugh at her joke, but does not actually confess to knowing the vulgarity of the jokes that various writers have written for her. By performing both the innocent grandmother and the senior comedienne, White conflates her own identity with that of her most famous characters. This conflation constructs the persona White performs on film and television.

### **Betty White’s Sexually Active Performance**

On May 8, 2010 Betty White hosted *Saturday Night Live*. During the 90 minute broadcast White portrayed many different characters, all of them old. One significant character of the night was Florence Dusty on the classic sketch “The Delicious Dish.” This recurring segment, known for its double entendre and salacious word play (especially in previous host Alec Baldwin’s “Schweddy Balls” segment) starred White as a baker who made muffins. This set up allowed White to joke that “my muffin hasn’t had a cherry in it since 1939” and “many bakers from my era have dry or even yeasty

muffins” (*Saturday Night Live*).<sup>7</sup> This sketch is significant to White’s performance of sexuality in that it is not an outright sexual confession. Instead, the sexual performance disguises itself through double entendre to get audience’s attention. In the “Scared Straight” sketch, White plays a prisoner talking to a group of “teenage boys” (played by adult male cast members) about what happens in prison. In this sketch, White’s character name is “Grandmammy Loretta Macintosh” and she tells her life story. As one of the boys notes, her story is strikingly similar to Dorothy’s from the *Wizard of Oz*.

Grandmammy corrects the boy, pushing him around and says “If you keep that up, you’ll be playing Twister on the floor of the prison bathroom ... and don’t look behind the shower curtain or you’ll meet the wonderful Wizard of Ass!”. At this point White leaves the sketch only to return a moment later and yell “Wizard of Ass” a second time before the sketch ends. (*Saturday Night Live*). While this sketch does not contain a sexual confession from White, it does show White performing and understanding the homosexual content of stereotypical prison jokes. This sexual performance is different than her performance of self as the naïve sexual grandmother. Contrary to her persona, White performs a sexually experienced senior woman; however, her performance, whether naïve or not, does not complicate the discourse of incapability. The jokes that she is making can’t intervene into senior women’s discourse because they are both too funny and too mainstream.

White continued to perform her sexually experienced character in a sketch set in 1904. White and the *SNL* actresses are costumed in Edwardian dresses singing around a piano when actress Amy Poehler enters the scene costumed in dirty overalls bearing fish

for dinner. Poehler's mother (Ana Gasteyer) asks what is wrong with the young girl. From the corner of the scene White (never looking up from her needlepoint) bluntly says, "she's a lesbian." Poehler next bemoans having to wear dresses and bows like her sisters. When Gasteyer asks why Poehler puts up a fuss, White again announces, "she's a lesbian." When Poehler's sisters nag her to go out and find a husband and White responds, "just let her stay home and lez." The family then attacks Poehler with a dress and White responds from her needlepoint in the corner, "you can put that lesbian in any kind of dress you want, and you know what you're gonna end up with? A lesbian. That girl is a lesbian." Then from her needle point, White begins to reminisce and says, "you know if I could go back in time, I would lez it up twenty-four hours [a day]. And believe me, one thing I would not miss, balls. Terrible little things" (*Saturday Night Live*).

White's confession of homosexual sexual desire within this sketch is comedic and safe. The obvious performance framework and the "just a joke escape hatch" (Doty 81) allow White to make a confession of homosexual desire understood by audiences as a joke. Audiences understand White as playing a character with homosexual desires. Because White's sexual performance in this sketch is so obviously not her naïve sexualized grandmother persona (and thus clearly not a performance of self), it does not have the ability to complicate the discourse of senior women's sexual incapability.

White's performance on *SNL* reaffirms the larger discourse of incapability that surrounds older women. The scripted confessions of hetero and homosexual desire were all easily laughed off by audiences and the sketches that relied on White's double entendre are read by audiences as White revealing her sexually "authentic" naïveté.

Audiences laughed at White's performances because she played the role of an older woman unable to recognize the sexuality of her words and actions. The thought of White being sexually active is laughable. White's appearance on *SNL* provides an alternative performance for senior women; however, it does not provide an opportunity for a discussion to take place about the realities of senior women's sexuality. The jokes made by White and the *SNL* writers are recycled, mainstream, conservative jokes about senior women's sexuality. Her humorous performance pulls from the larger normative discourse of incapability and uses that discourse to make jokes about senior women's sexuality.

### **Betty White's Citation of Sexuality**

Unlike predecessors Moms Mabley or Sophie Tucker, White isn't a stand up performer. The performances of sexuality that White cites are from women who wrote their own acts. As Lipton points out, White has had a team of television writers giving her lines to say. However, the joke of Betty White saying dirty things is two-fold. It is humorous to see an old lady claim to be a stripper or say the word "ass" on late night television; however, what makes White funny is not just the words she says but also her ability to say the raunchy lines while acting as if she is oblivious to the fact that they are raunchy. White's performance is in stark contrast to the sexual performances of Joan Rivers and Cloris Leachman. Both of these senior women performers own their sexuality and performances of sexual confession. Their audiences expect to see them perform sexually; however, both the audience and Betty White know that the lines she says are "dirty," and that it is inappropriate for an eighty-eight year old woman to say them. Yet,



when Lipton questions her about the lewdness of those lines, she cites a performance of *The Golden Girls* character, Rose Nylund.

Following from Diana Taylor, White cites her own performance “repertoire.” According to Taylor, the repertoire “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (Taylor 20). The repertoire is a space of potential complication. By citing her repertoire, White can complicate her own previous performances as well as discourses of senior women’s incapability. White has embodied her performance of Nylund as well as other past characters. Those performances are a part of her performance repertoire and frequently transfer between her repertoire and her performance of self.

By playing the innocent and naïve Nylund in the face of Lipton’s question, White made a joke and for a brief moment brought Nylund out of the performance repertoire and restored that performance behavior. To answer Lipton’s question, White is such a good actress for writers to write raunchy material for because she delivers the line like the sexual Sue Ann Nivens and embodies the performance of wide-eyed innocence like Rose Nylund. Even in an interview with Lipton, White plays a character. She has embodied Nylund and Nivens and she conflates them creating the character of the sexualized grandmother.

While the sexual actresses of history Mabley and Tucker got laughs from self deprecating humor, White’s audience is laughing because an old lady is saying lewd things and doesn’t even seem to know it. For White, the audience laughs at her saying

“muffin” not because she is knowingly saying the slang term for vagina but because she is naively playing a baker who doesn’t know that “muffin” is a slang term. White further cites Nylund by telling Lipton that she doesn’t want to be disobedient and therefore must say the lines the writers give her without questioning the meaning of them.

Through her sexually naïve persona, White places the responsibility and blame of the raunchy and vulgar lines onto the scriptwriters. White does not write her own sexual confessions, but rather relies on the words of film and television writers to confess her sexuality. White’s main mode of performance relies on the work of other people to be successful. Without their script, she would not make any confessions of sexuality. Alternatively, without White to embody the confessions, the writer’s jokes would not be funny. As many reporters noted the week after White’s *SNL* performance, “White dominated the proceedings, both live and in taped bits ... many of the sketches simply played off the idea of an old woman saying something naughty...over and over and over” (Tucker). White’s embodiment and performance of the writer’s jokes transformed them from repetitive to entertaining, at least in Tucker’s view.

White’s most recent performances of active sexuality are enacted through the character “Elka Ostrovsky” on the sitcom *Hot in Cleveland (HiC)*. *HiC*’s premise is that older women from L.A. more attractive in Cleveland. After making an emergency landing in Cleveland, three middle-aged women decide to stay because Cleveland men find them more sexually attractive than L.A. men. The women rent a house in Cleveland and the house is taken care of by Elka Ostrovsky. Ostrovsky is judgmental, rude, and

horny. In short, the character of Ostrovsky is not a stretch for an elderly actress. In fact, audiences familiar with *The Golden Girls* might recognize White citing the performance of Estelle Getty. Getty's character, Sophia Petrillo, on *The Golden Girls* was the mother of Bea Arthur's character and therefore the oldest character on the show. Petrillo often criticized her daughter's lack of a husband, Rue McClanahan's character's promiscuity, and Rose Nylund's idiocy. She was simultaneously inappropriate and endearing.

It is appropriate that White cites Petrillo in her performance of Ostrovsky. Her character is the mother figure, giving both solicited and unsolicited advice to the three middle aged women. On episode four of the first season, "The Sex that Got Away," White's character gives advice to a co-star on how to look younger while having sex, "A word to the wise, a smart jockey always sits straight up on the horse ... so your boobs don't flop to the side and get lost in your back fat"(White Episode 4, 2010). This advice is both humorous in its sexuality and hints at a confession of sexuality. Because Ostrovsky is able to give advice on the best way for aging bodies have sex, audiences can assume that Ostrovsky herself has taken up this position as a senior woman. Essentially, *HiC* is a new generation's *Golden Girls*. Crucially, White is citing the sexual and vulgar performance of an actress and a character she was often judged by in performance.

Following from Judith Butler, citationality constructs the performatives of gender.

It is in the terms of a norm that compels a certain "citation" in order for a viable subject to be produced that the notion of gender performativity calls to be

rethought. And precisely in relation to such a compulsory citationality that the theatricality of gender is also to be explained. (Butler, *Critically Queer* 23)

This can be applied to White's performances of senior women's sexuality. White cites her signature characters Nivens and Nylund. She also reflects on the performatives she created for Nivens and Nylund through citations of historically sexual but naïve characters. White has embodied and created performatives for each that she has performed. Furthermore, the performatives of Nivens and Nylund are created through the citations and performatives of other historical sexually active or innocent characters. These performatives are also citations of self. She is able to appear as ignorant Nylund while answering Lipton's question of raunch because she is performing the sexually naïve and innocent performatives from within her persona. To borrow a phrase from Richard Schechner, White is not Nivens/Nylund and not not Nivens/Nylund (37). Because White performed both of these characters on television for several years, part of her is in the performances of those characters just as part of those characters are in her. White's understanding of herself being a part of the characters she performs is an example of Schechner's "me behaving as if I am someone else"(37). While she is performing the character the naïve grandmother she is simultaneously behaving as if she was Nylund and Nivens. Schechner says that "restored behavior is symbolic and reflexive: not empty but loaded behavior multivocally broadcasting significances" (1985, 36). White is broadcasting the behavioral voices of her signature characters Nivens and Nylund. She also has to reflect on her own behavioral voice not just because she is recognizing her behavior but also because she is reflecting on the behavioral elements

that are both she and Nivens/Nylund. Furthermore, all of these behavioral voices are coming from her repertoire of embodied knowledge.

By understanding White's performances of sexuality, naïve or not, as performatives, we can further understand how the discourse of senior women's incapability is a complex set of performatives that have been cited repeatedly. The citations of the performatives of incapability come from both senior women who don't believe there are options to perform sexually, and heteronormative society. By understanding how performatives are created, senior women can queer themselves by performing sexually. If enough senior women queer themselves from heteronormative society and successfully perform their sexual desires, a performative of sexually active senior women could destabilize the normalized discourse of senior women's incapacities.

White's embodiment of sexual characters has helped to construct her sexual persona. By enacting her embodied sexual knowledge, White has crafted a persona that audiences believe to be her performance of self. This performance of intimacy only increases the effectiveness of White's false sexual confessions. Even though White is playing the character "Elka Ostrovsky" on *Hot in Cleveland*, audiences perceive White as performing herself. This reception is augmented by the public appearances in which White confesses her sexuality. "Unscripted" televised moments such as the James Lipton *Inside the Actor's Studio* interview or the *Betty White's 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday: A Tribute to America's Golden Girl* television special present audiences with an intimate look at White instead of a character performance.

Betty White was correct when she said that her career has never stopped, and that it has been a string of performances leading from one performance to another and another. While chronological, White's career is also circular. Her most recent incarnation of the naïve but sexual grandmother as seen on *Saturday Night Live* and *Inside The Actors Studio* citationally connects her to Rose Nylund and Sue Ann Nivens. White's most recent characters are citations of past character performatives. Rather than creating a new character that could intervene into the discourse of incapability, White cycles through her past mainstream character performances and contributes to the growth of the normative discourse. Her career is continuous, but her performances are stuck rotating in place, citing performatives from her repertoire. They are unable to intervene into the discourse of incapability because they are mainstream rather than transgressive performances. These performances are only repeating what White has already said in previous character roles. These performances are not innovative and therefore become part of normative discourse rather than changing the conversation.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> This biography is a composite biography of undisputed facts about milestones in Betty White's personal and professional life. The biography is drawn from the Wikipedia entry on White ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betty\\_White](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betty_White)); her New York Times Biography entry (<http://movies.nytimes.com/person/75846/Betty-White/biography>) and her Internet Movie Database entry (<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0924508/>). As with all popular culture figures, Wikipedia is a legitimate source for initial fact-finding research. Information found on Wikipedia should always be corroborated by other sources but Wikipedia should be cited as a reference when it is used.

<sup>2</sup> "Tain" is a shortening of taint, the slang term for the perineum, the spot between a persons anus and genitalia

<sup>3</sup> Betty White does not have children and therefore is not technically a grandmother. I chose to identify her as a sexy grandma as opposed to sexy senior woman because she often performs the role of the grandmother as well as audience members who often view or wish her to be their grandmother.

<sup>4</sup> White's third husband Allen Ludden, died in 1980 from bladder cancer. (White, YouTube 2010)

<sup>5</sup> In the series Rose Nylund is adopted.

<sup>6</sup> St. Olaf is Rose Nylund's hometown.

<sup>7</sup> In this context, muffin is a slang term for vagina.

## CHAPTER III

## DANCING WITH THE SENIORS

*I [will] tell the tale of Dancing with the Stars, how it began, the tumultuous events of each demanding day, the indignation from some that an eighty-two-year-old woman, any eighty-two-year-old woman, should throw herself around in front of a huge TV audience, and the applause from others who thought that an eighty-two-year old woman, any eighty-two-year-old woman, taking on that challenge was showing some late-in-life guts and what she was doing was something the human race could be proud of. (Leachman 260)*

*I have hugely high standards for myself and so does Maks. So, when I think we've pushed ourselves as far as we push, we push harder. (Kirstie Alley in Codebear4 "Kirstie Alley & Maksim Chmerkovskiy – Jive")*

*Dancing With The Stars (DWTS)* is a show framed by confession. Stars appear in order to dance in competition with each other but also to confess their failings as dancers. In Kirstie Alley's and Cloris Leachman's cases, they fail at having youthful bodies which means bodies that might also confess sexuality. Alley and Leachman lack the youthful bodies that are needed not only to master ballroom dance technique but also to express sexuality within the dance.<sup>1</sup> Further, because it is a reality show, these senior women should confess their sexuality, but presumably have none. In important ways and always imbricated within commercial networks and capitalist frames, *DWTS* gives these senior women a reason to confess their sexuality again. Senior women use *DWTS* to place



themselves back in the celebrity spotlight by giving the audience a reason to care about their confessions. *DWTS* provides a space for the confessions of aging celebrity bodies' failings and eventual triumphs.<sup>2</sup>

### **Dancing With The Stars as a Site of Confession**

In Summer 2005, ABC aired the first season of *Dancing With the Stars*, a British import reality television show that pairs celebrities with professional competition ballroom dancers. Each week of the competition, the dancing couples rehearse a predetermined, producer-mandated dance that is then performed on live television. The dancing couples compete against one another for a score of up to thirty points from the panel of professional ballroom judges as well as votes from the at-home audience. The couple who has the lowest combined score of judges points and viewers' votes is eliminated until only the champion couple remains. The winning couple receives the highly coveted Mirror Ball Trophy and bragging rights until the next season airs. The most recent season of *DWTS* began airing on March 19, 2012.

Though audiences watch *DWTS* to see celebrities dance, they also tune in to see celebrity confession. Performers share their celebrity confessions both pre- and post-dance. The pre-dance rehearsal interviews (referred to as packages) as well as the post-dance scoring act as confessional frames. In these spaces of confession Leachman can confess that "I may not be as flashy as [my competition] but I am giving everything this 82-year-old-body can bring" (Codebear4 "Cloris Leachman & Corky Ballas - Foxtrot") or Alley can reveal to the audience that "I think if I were a size zero and twenty-two

[dancing] would be easier” (Codebear4 “Kirstie Alley & Maksim Chmerkovskiy - Cha-Cha-Cha”). It must also be noted that the pre-dance interview is a confession constructed through editing. What is aired on television is not just Leachman or Alley’s confession but a construction of that confession to fit the programming needs of the television show and to pique audience interest in the forthcoming dance. The ideal package must be crafted to sell to the *DWTS* audience. It must contain an aural confession from the celebrity and/or visual confession from the celebrity’s body. Most importantly, the star must struggle in the package so that they can triumph on the dance floor.

The editing process that creates the package does not make these celebrity confessions false.<sup>3</sup> Alley and Leachman are still making statements about the dysfunction of their abject bodies. These statements are mediated by accompanying footage of the dysfunctional bodies in rehearsal. While their confessions are edited to fit the stars’ narrative, the events and the confessions of the narrative happened in front of the camera. Audiences watch Alley fall to the floor several times due to exhaustion in the package before the Argentine Tango in week eight. They see through her clothing changes that she falls over several days in rehearsal. The audience also sees her partner Maksim Chmerkovskiy talk to her about the number of calories that she is eating daily and suggests that she should be eating more than 1400 calories a day. What is actually a week-long rehearsal period is edited down to only a few seconds of confession, but that confession is still “true” to both the audience and the dancing couple.

Mediated confessions work in similar ways as celebrity television interviews.<sup>4</sup> Following from Barry King, “The celebrity confessional process is designed to be a

demonstration of competence and success, or—in the event of failure, of exemplary survival—the rebuilding of a career or a comeback” (123). King suggests that with the confession comes a narrative that must be told to either maintain the celebrity persona or rebuild it. While the competition stakes for the show’s participants are not as high on *DWTS* as they are on reality television programs such as *Survivor*, there is still potential for bodily harm as well as damage to a star’s persona. Celebrity contestants on *DWTS* are not being asked by producers to go days without eating or to eat bugs and animal entrails. They are, however, subjecting their bodies to rigorous daily exercise and the possibility of public humiliation. The senior celebrity confession prepares the audience for the success or failures of the dance to come. It is premeditated damage control if their persona needs to be rebuilt or a demonstration of competence if they are successful on the dance floor.

The packages constructed by *DWTS* are narrativized confessions created to establish a through line for the competition. Alley and Leachman’s transformation from out of shape to fit or from fat to thin have become a secondary narrative to the main ballroom dance competition. This narrative of transformation has become so common that for the thirteenth season *DWTS* forums and message boards discussed changing the show’s name.

It seems ever since Marie Osmond lost so much weight dancing (she says it's that weight loss product that she endorses) the show has at least one, sometimes two, on the show who's sole purpose is to lose weight - Kirstie Alley, the little skinny girl who had just had a baby [Bristol Palin], and

now Ricki Lake and probably Nancy Grace. I guess it's easier and more pleasing to the eye to watch than all the workouts on *The Biggest Loser*, but maybe they should rename the show to [*Losing Weight With The Stars*]. (nationsdj)<sup>5</sup>

These transformation narratives are now an expected part of this ballroom dance competition show. Confession has transformed *DWTS* into a show that is about the transformations and confessions of stars' lives within the frame of a ballroom dance competition. Alley and Leachman may be competing with other stars on the ballroom floor for the Mirror Ball Trophy, but they are also competing against their bodies for the ability to create younger, sexier personae.

The post-dance scoring also acts as a site of Foucauldian confession. It takes place on live television after the dance is complete. The discourse that takes place between the judges, host Tom Bergeron, and dancing couples creates a space for the judges to confess their impressions of the dance and the dancers and for the dancing couple to acquiesce to the terms of the confession. Often Leachman interrupted the confessional discourse of the judges by dismissing their critique and complaints altogether or trying to turn the critique into a conversation. Leachman refused to allow the judges to deliver a critique of her performance by dominating the discourse with her own discourse of disagreement and frustration. Leachman's frustrations with the judges' critique made Bergeron have to work hard to keep the show on track and keep the judges' critique from spiraling out of control on live television. Thus, as I discuss below,

Leachman consistently queered the narrative of *DWTS* through her outbursts and interruptions.

Typically, the package interviews, dances, and scoring air without commercial break. Without the pauses provided by commercial breaks, the dancing stars must maintain their performance of a dancer and not collapse on stage. Both Alley and Leachman struggle to regain their breath during the post-dance judges' critique and scoring. The sound of their heavy breathing through the microphones as well as their tendency to lean on their partner for support confess what these women are trying to hide in their dancing: they no longer have the ideal body for vigorous ballroom dance. Their bodies betray them, speaking a confession that is not intended for audience consumption. After the critique, the contestants are taken backstage as the judges announce their scores. As the scores are announced, the television screen splits and displays the judges with their scoring paddles and the competitors standing backstage. The dual screen allows the audience to observe the couples' immediate reaction. Sometimes, this immediacy causes problems for network censors, as in the case of Leachman, when they must be ready to censor out the string of swear words that come out of her mouth in response to low scores. Once all three scores are announced, the dancing couple's number is displayed and home viewers are told that if they like what they see they can call in and vote for that couple. This process is repeated for every dance and dancing couple. While the critique and scoring is individual for each couple, the format is the same.

This confession acts differently from the package because this is where the stars and their dance partners must confess on live television for votes. Because television audience votes are weighted evenly with the judges' score, it is possible to receive a low score from the judges but be saved by the audience from elimination. This means that the stars and their dance partners must be "honest" and confess to a bad performance and ask for forgiveness from the television audience. Alley lost her shoe during her performance of the Waltz in week four, resulting in a low score of twenty-two. During the post-dance interview, Alley reviews a clip of the moment in the Waltz when she lost her shoe and confesses to her mistake and her embarrassment: "Look at me I'm supposed to be acting like a swan and I'm putting my shoes on" (Codebear4, "Kirstie Alley & Maksim Chmerkovskiy - Viennese Waltz"). Alley appears obviously embarrassed as she covers her face while watching the clip and it is, at least partly, this confession of failure that compelled audience members to vote her and her partner through to the next week.

I love that Kirstie is so honest about everything...[sic] she wants to be good and is so unhappy about the 'mishaps', [sic] she knows and admits she is getting higher scores than warranted because of her personality. What a great work ethic she has, she just hates that she is not doing as well as she wants to do. (Bonny)

Bonny, like other posters on the Television Without Pity *DWTS* forum, read Alley's confessional performance of embarrassment as a moment of honesty from the actress and supported her with their votes into the next week of competition. Because the post-

dance interview is a live performance, there is less obvious scripting and therefore less narrative written into that confessional space. However, the dance competition floor, a space reserved for the stars to show off their talent and technique, becomes a space where both Alley and Leachman's bodies confess their inability to perform.

### **Camp and the Queering of Ballroom Dance**

There are at least two types of audiences who watch *Dancing With the Stars*. The first group watches their favorite celebrities dance, fall down, laugh, and be their favorite celebrities while dancing. This group does not care whether or not their favorite celebrity is a good dancer and has proper technique. This group just wants to watch their celebrities on television. The second group watches the show to see professional ballroom dancers turn their celebrity partners into lean, competitive, ballroom dancers. Celebrities, such as Leachman, who lack ballroom dance technique, but are saved by audience votes because of their celebrity charm and persona, offend this group. For this second group, the camp and queerness of *DWTS* is lamentable but an inevitable part of the reality television competition. Borrowing a phrase from Susan Sontag, *DWTS* is a ballroom dance competition "saturated with Camp" (55). In particular, as she points out, "the hallmark of Camp is the spirit of extravagance. Camp is a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers" (59). From costumes to live music to hyperbolic and spectacular confessions, *DWTS* is extravagantly camp.

The costumes on *DWTS* are extravagant. Typically, the more queer the dance the more extravagant the women's dress. For the Jive in week seven, Alley was dressed in a

dark purple body suit covered in sequins with a plunging neckline. Around her waist she wore a knee length skirt made of layers of purple tulle and her hair was put up in a very youthful, high, curly, pony-tail. The Jive was one of Alley's more queer dances in the competition because it called for her to perform a youthful exuberance where she bounces up and down, shimmies her chest and pulls her tulle skirt up to reveal her panties in the style of toddler hiding behind her dress. Alley confessed that she "really got caught up in the acting" of the dance and forgot that she needed to show technique. Not only was Alley's costume for the Jive extravagant with its sequins and layers of tulle, her performance of youth in the dance was so extravagant and exaggerated that it hindered her Jive technique, thus queering this performance.

Further, *Dancing With the Stars* queers traditional ballroom dance because, "camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much'" (Sontag 59). Celebrities who can't dance but are able to survive the competition through the extravagance of their personae and performance are "too much" for ballroom dance fans. The celebrities take their performances on the dance floor seriously. They rigorously train in rehearsal but when costumed and performing on the dance floor the celebrity persona overwhelms the dance technique and ultimately reveals the instability of the dance *qua* dance. These moments of ballroom technique failure but overall competition success prove too much for fans of traditional competitive ballroom dance.

*Dancing With the Stars* further queers ballroom dance because it shows aging, unfit, amateur bodies performing on the dance floor where young, fit, professionally



trained bodies should be. Even the young bodies of former contestants Kendra Wilkinson and Bristol Palin queer the ballroom dance competition. They fit the aesthetics of what professional ballroom dancers should look like but their technical performance marks them as queer because it is so visibly in opposition to the professional technique of their dance partners.

For Alley and Leachman the age difference between their celebrity bodies and the bodies of their younger partners also marks *DWTS* as queer ballroom dance. The passion and sexual relationship that must be acted between the older female celebrity and the younger male dance partner is not acceptable to heteronormative society or heteronormative ballroom dance. This age difference also lends itself to *DWTS*' camping of ballroom dance. It is impossible for the "May-December" couple to be taken seriously as a competitive professional couple nor for the romance and sexual passion between the couple to be seen as a serious performance of love. Because *DWTS* already queers and camps ballroom dance, senior women's bodies and performance of sexuality have a space in which to make an intervention into the larger discourse of senior women's incapability.

### **Kirstie Alley and the Transformation of the Post-Menopausal Body**

On March 21, 2011 (three months after her sixtieth birthday) Kirstie Alley cha-chaed onto the dance floor for the premiere episode of the twelfth season of *Dancing with The Stars*. In addition to displaying her mastery of Latin dance technique, Alley performed as a sexy, Latin, ballroom dancer. She thrust her hips, seductively ran her arms up and

down her body, and jiggled her breast with her hand. With this last move, Alley clearly incorporated her comedic persona within the confines of traditional cha-cha steps. Her shaky dance technique was complemented, then, by her charisma. But not all of her fans were happy: “I think she’s hysterical. My only complaint for her dance ... is her bobbling her boobie at the beginning. I just didn’t think it was necessary”(Callietwo 2011).

At sixty years old, Kirstie Alley (b. 1951) appeared on the twelfth season of *Dancing With The Stars (DWTS)*. She competed against younger women with sexier bodies such as Kendra Wilkinson (b. 1985), playboy playmate and former girlfriend of Hugh Hefner; Chelsea Kane (b. 1988), Disney Channel star; Petra Němcová (b. 1979) supermodel; and Wendy Williams (b. 1964), syndicated talk show host. Alley was not only the oldest female celebrity dancer on the show, but the oldest celebrity dancer of her season, with Ralph Macchio ten years her junior. Alley managed to place second in the overall competition, beating out all the other female celebrity dancers. Her success on *DWTS* put her back in the celebrity spotlight after an absence marked by tabloid stories of massive weight gain. Alley owes her success to her extreme weight loss during the show as well as her sexual confessions, both those embodied and voiced.

Alley has never performed the quiet, demure ingénue. In her 1991 Emmy acceptance speech for her role as Rebecca Howe on the NBC sitcom *Cheers* she thanked her husband by saying “I’d like to thank my husband Parker, the man who has given me ‘the big one’ for the last eight years” (AllisonTheSNLGuru). Her current performances

in the autobiographical sitcom *Fat Actress* and the reality television show *Kirstie Alley's Big Life* further her sexual persona.<sup>6</sup>

From the beginning of the twelfth season, Alley demanded that her partner Maksim Chmerkovskiy treat her as if she was younger, skinnier woman and not give her “grandma” dances. From the package before her first dance (the Cha Cha) the audience sees an out of breath Alley in rehearsal with Chmerkovskiy asking him “Is that the speed we will dance to right there?” Chmerkovskiy replies, “Yes” while shaking his head no to the camera. Alley then asks “And that’s the normal song?” again Chmerkovskiy replies, “Yes” while shaking his head no towards the camera. Finally Alley asks “And if I was 25 you’d do the same dance?” This time Chmerkovskiy replies, “Yes” without shaking his head to the camera. Alley follows up with “Swear to God?” Chmerkovskiy answers “Yes” but again shakes his head no to the camera. This time Alley sees his play towards the camera and gives him a smack on his arm (Codebear4, “Kirstie Alley & Maksim Chmerkovskiy - Cha-Cha-Cha”). Probably scripted, this conversation provides entertainment to the audience but it also prepares the audience to watch Alley’s body fail or succeed on the dance floor. If her body failed her, the audience could explain the failure by referring back to her labored breath and lack of confidence in her body to do the work on the dance floor. Simultaneously, Alley’s playful smack on Chmerkovskiy’s thirty-one year old arm is slightly flirtatious. But when performed live, Alley and her body succeeded, garnering much praise from the studio audience and the judges’ panel. Bruno Tonioli gave her the biggest compliment of all: “I think we are just scratching at the surface of what you can do. Because I’m telling you your foot placement in the Cha-

Cha-Cha was the best of the night” (Codebear4 “Kirstie Alley & Maksim Chmerkovskiy - Cha-Cha-Cha”). In addition to her technique, Alley performed the role of a sexy Latin ballroom dancer by jiggling her breast with her hand. Alley’s recognition of her body’s sexuality threatens *DWTS* fans. Confronting the realization that Alley does not just have a dancing body but a sexual one is difficult for fans used to viewing Alley as nonsexual and nonthreatening. Of course, Alley is not the first person to have moved sexually on the dance floor.

*DWTS* has mildly sexual content, which is probably one of the reasons it is so widely viewed all around the world. Sex sells, it always has, and even folks 60 years old ... can muster up a believable display. Kirstie used her assets to sell her dance, and herself on *DWTS* (ImSoDizzy).

ImSoDizzy is correct because Alley, through her performance on the dance floor, shows off and sells herself. She is selling her persona to an audience of consumers, putting herself on display so that *DWTS* consumers buy into her performance of senior sexuality. In this case, Alley’s senior body showed off both sexual and athletic ability and earned a score of twenty-three out of thirty.

The Quick-Step was the second dance for Alley, and even her success of the week before could not shake her lack of confidence in her senior body to perform. “Do really skinny girls, your skinny partners, has it been hard for them too?” This lack of confidence is confirmed by her performance in the Quick-Step. Alley struggles with moving her feet fast enough during the small section of hops in the middle of the dance and eventually resorts to just bouncing up and down on her toes while Chmerkovskiy

dances his feet around hers. Alley's body could not keep up with the pace of the Quick Step and by the end of the dance her feet are struggling to move her body across the dance floor, resulting in a slower step. Alley attempts to cover her lack of technical ability by planting a "spontaneous" kiss on the mouth of her partner at the end of the dance. The kiss did receive some extra audience applause, but it did not stop the judges from giving the couple a lower score of twenty out of thirty. Importantly, the kiss demonstrated her sexuality. Kissing Chmerkovskiy, a sexy younger man, helped Alley produce and sell her sexuality to the audience. The kiss maintained Alley's heterosexual persona but it could not make up for her failing body on the competition floor.

For Alley and Chmerkovskiy, the third week of dancing included the fall heard around the world. During their Rumba, Alley and Chmerkovskiy fell to the ground when his thigh gave out during a move in which he had to support Alley. Chmerkovskiy fell to the ground and Alley fell on top of him. The dancing couple was able to recover from the fall, thus earning a score of twenty-one from the judges panel. However, this score did not save them from the media frenzy that surrounded the fall. As hard as Chmerkovskiy tried to take responsibility for the fall "My thighs just gave off. Any dancer would know it happens. Muscle strains and all of that but it has nothing to do with her [Alley]. I just want to apologize" (Codebear4 "Kirstie Alley & Maksim Chmerkovskiy - Rumba"), media outlets placed the blame on Alley and her weight. *The Huffington Post* reported online that both Chmerkovskiy and Alley fell to the floor but the article's headline read "Kirstie Alley Falls on 'Dancing With the Stars' During Rumba". Similar headlines placing Kirstie in the spotlight ran in other online

periodicals. Alley's falling body became the focus of media attention. Chmerkovskiy's role in being the person who dropped Alley is rarely if ever mentioned in the articles and his name never makes the headlines. Alley's fans came to her defense, however, in the online forums.

Maks has been dancing with Kirstie long enough to know her weight and his strength and how those two things factor in with his choreography. I think it's entirely plausible that he would have had a charley horse ... no matter who [sic] he was dancing with, but even if Kirstie's weight did have something to do with it Maks is correct that it's still his "fault." He's the one who's responsible for letting his partner know how and when to shift her weight or stay still or whatever, and he's also the one responsible for knowing how to compensate for any errors since there's no way an amateur is going to have the kind of knowledge he does. (Petramom 2011)

*TV Guide* also came to the senior dancer's defense:

Everyone loves a good fall, but this one wasn't spectacular. It was more a hiccup followed by Maks gently placing Kirstie on the ground ... But there's an additional undercurrent of derision aimed at Kirstie in much of the online coverage. A few blog posts have gone as far as snickering at Maks' supposed buckling under Kirstie's weight (as if Maks has ever given any reason to doubt his strength, regardless of his partner's size!). The fat jokes are not only lazy — they're redundant. (Juzwiak 2011)

Juzwiak and Alley's fans realize that Alley's body was not to blame for the fall on the dance floor. Her body is not the one that failed during the Rumba. Rather, Chmerkovskiy's body failed both him and Alley. It was Alley's ability to regain composure and continue the dance that gave them a score one point higher than the previous week. Once again Alley's persona, her ability as a performer to show off to the audience her sexy but vulnerable side, saved the dancing couple from a lower score. The judges' panel agreed that Alley's performance after the fall was the dance's saving grace, "Dancing is a bit like life. It is about overcoming adversities and you know, you over come it. You got up, you dusted yourself off, and you came back stronger" (Len Goodman in Codebear4 "Kirstie Alley & Maksim Chmerkovskiy - Rumba" 2011). Critical praise for Alley's performance demonstrates that Alley's body was able to show emotion and move elegantly enough to save the routine after the fall.

Unfortunately, Alley's aging body was less cooperative the week of the Waltz. In the package the audience is exposed to a darker side of the rehearsal process. A very tired looking and hoarse sounding Alley screams out in pain from what the audience is told is a muscular hip injury. Alley wants to push through the pain because,

I don't want a damn, frickin' grandma dance. I want the same kind of dance choreographed for me that he would choreograph with someone who is twenty-five. So, if it kills me and I am screaming through the whole damn thing, I really don't care. It's like he [Chmerkovskiy] said, I'm not gonna die from this. I just keep going (Codebear4 "Kirstie Alley & Maksim Chmerkovskiy - Waltz").

Even after several weeks of dancing, Alley is still fighting against the perception that older women cannot perform the same dances as younger women. She recognizes that her hip injury is her body telling her to slow down, but the drive to prove herself successful as a senior women on the dance floor has actually injured her body. The language of her confession gives the audience insight into her struggles with her senior body. Her fixation on youth and not having a youthful body indexes her frustration with her aged body. It might be argued that because her body is out of shape she is having trouble on the dance floor. While the shape of Alley's body is a contributing factor to her performance, it is her constant confession of age that is significant in the interpretation of her body on the dance floor. The Waltz, minus the mishap with her shoe falling off, was uneventful and not engaging. At points in the Waltz, Chmerkovskiy literally dragged Alley around by the arms and it appeared that Alley was not as concerned with hitting her marks with her feet or her arms. The sexy, comic persona that the *DWTS* audience had come to expect from Alley was not on the competition floor. Neither the panel of judges or the hosts mentioned her hip injury during the live show so the audience can only assume that the injury had something to do with her low performance and score of twenty-two out of thirty, the lowest for that week.

Despite all of her mishaps and low judges' scores, Alley and her partner Chmerkovskiy did make it to the finals on *DWTS*. The posters on the *DWTS* forums debated whether or not it was Alley's talent as a dancer or her personality that got her there. What is agreed upon however is "Kirstie is what this show is all about, she has grown and when you look at her from week 1 until now, she has done phenomenally



well”(u dwoos). Over the run of the show, Alley transformed her dancing technique and her senior body. “Kirstie is looking fab! With or without the [Mirror Ball Trophy], she should realize that she’s a winner for transforming herself within and without (Sandynz). Despite looking “fab,” Alley lost *DWTS* and ultimately her senior body failed her. It was not able to perform up to the standards created by the *DWTS* audience. Had her body been able to perform in the beginning as it did in the end, it is possible that audiences would have been willing to give Alley the win. However, as it stands, Alley’s body could not dance well enough or move quickly enough to win the Mirror Ball Trophy.

### **Cloris Leachman and Grotesque Female Sexuality**

Cloris Leachman (b. 1926) competed on the seventh season of *DWTS* and is the oldest person ever to have danced on the show. Often introduced as an “Oscar winning actress,” Leachman performed on stage, film and television. She has won several awards: eight primetime and one daytime Emmy; a Golden Globe award for her performance as Phyllis Lindstrom in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* spin off *Phyllis*; an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in *The Last Picture Show*; and was inducted into the Television Academy Hall of Fame in 2011. Her most recent sexually obscene and vulgar performances have been in roles as the “crazy grandmother” on the Fox sitcoms *Malcom in the Middle* and *Raising Hope*, for which she has earned her latest Emmy nomination.

Leachman's first attempt to appear on *Dancing With The Stars* was not well received by network associates. From her autobiography *Cloris*, Leachman recounts her experience on *DWTS* and how in 2005,

I mentioned to my then manager that I wanted to be on *Dancing with the Stars*, DWTS. I don't remember getting a reply, but some months later I heard that DWTS had turned down the idea, saying I was too old. I also heard DWTS had denied that was the reason. (271-272)

In 2008, after much resistance, Leachman was accepted into the *DWTS* cast contingent on her ability to pass a "three-hour rehearsal with one of the dancing staff to see if [she] could handle the moves" (Leachman 273). After passing the audition, Leachman then met with several doctors and the producers of the show in which she had to list her "physical problems: osteoporosis, asthma, 28 percent lung capacity, a bad knee, and high blood pressure" and the

DWTS medical staff said [her] blood pressure would have to be taken at the beginning of every rehearsal, and it could not be higher than 120/70. More meetings ensued between [her son/manager] and the producers, and the values were revised to 140/80. I took pills twice a day to lower my blood pressure, the first one at 7:00a.m., because it took five hours for them to kick in, and I had to be ready to rehearse at noon. (Leachman 273)

*DWTS* fans displayed an equal amount of concern and hesitancy about Leachman performing on the show. “I love Cloris almost beyond measure, but 82 is finally...too old. This seems...exploitative to me” (MoreRidonkulous).

Leachman’s fans supported her, but fans of *DWTS* as a dance competition were offended by senior Leachman’s infamous “crazy Cloris” persona.

Okay... I loved Cloris Leachman growing up, she was a riot in all those sitcoms (Mary Tyler Moore, etc.) ... but I have to admit that the roles I’ve seen her in lately, she was kinda gross! Like, dirty/nasty old lady kind of gross. (ObstantantGirl)

Leachman’s character roles have evolved over the years from the spoiled Phyllis Lindstrom of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to the despised Grandma Ida of the dysfunctional family sitcom *Malcom in the Middle*. *DWTS* fans’ resistance to Leachman’s appearance on the competition show may also be partially due to her 2008 appearance on Comedy Central’s *Roast of Bob Saget*, where she and John Stamos shared a long kiss after she made her desire for the younger actor very explicit. Audiences read Leachman’s performance of sexual desire for a younger man (outside of the framework of a character) as a performance of self. Her display of sexual desire and the success of that desire alienated audiences. Audiences are offended by Leachman’s queer sexual desire. It is transgressive for a senior woman to desire sex, especially sex with a much younger man.

From the beginning of her performance on *DWTS*, Leachman’s narrative was constructed around her senior status. While Alley brought attention to her status as a

senior woman, Leachman's seniority was obvious enough that *DWTS* capitalized on it. On the first episode of season seven, *DWTS* host Tom Bergeron introduced Leachman by saying, "giving her more years than our youngest competitor, his partner, and her brother combined, it's Oscar winning actress Cloris Leachman" (2008). While it might seem unnecessary to emphasize Leachman's age difference from the rest of her competition, *DWTS* producers focus on her age difference because it increases the spectacle of Leachman's dance performance. Audiences are manipulated into caring about Leachman's performance on the dance floor so that they can feel righteous in their fandom if she succeeds or righteous in their criticism if she fails.

The package that follows Bergeron's introduction shows Leachman walking around the studio in a ball gown with a cane. As her voice over tells the audience that she is the "oldest person ever to be on *Dancing With The Stars*," she throws the cane away and pulls the bottom of her gown to show the long slit in the dress that runs up her thigh to the bottom of her buttocks (Codebear4 "Cloris Leachman & Corky Ballas - Foxtrot"). From this image audiences are shown that Leachman's age is not going to stop her from performing sexually on the dance floor. By throwing the cane, a marker of age and disability out of frame, Leachman is refusing to enact the performatives of age. Instead she performs youth, seducing audiences by baring a large amount of skin including the more taboo buttocks area. Refusing performatives of age and embracing sexual performatives shows audiences that Leachman is aware of her senior status but is not going to let that status limit her performance of sex or celebrity on the dance floor.

The package continues with the introduction of Corky Ballas (b. 1960), Leachman's dance partner. Ballas tells audiences that he has been dancing longer than some of the *DWTS* professional dancers have been alive (Codebear4 "Cloris Leachman & Corky Ballas - Foxtrot"). Again, *DWTS* producers are emphasizing the age of the professional dancer. While Ballas is older than the rest of the professional dancers, he is still thirty-four years Leachman's junior. Ballas is brought on to the show by *DWTS* producers to even out the age difference between dancer and celebrity and presumably be more understanding of the physical limitations of Leachman's age. This presumption is further strengthened by Ballas partnering of Florence Henderson (b.1934) in 2010 on the eleventh season of *DWTS*. In her autobiography, Leachman remembers working with Corky, "The first thing Corky had me do was walk. He stood beside me, and we walked forward, then backward. Then we stepped sideways... Corky watched carefully to see what I could and could not do" (274-275). Ballas' patience and concern for Leachman's physical abilities is further emphasized in the package when he asks Leachman if there is anything physical he should know about. Leachman replies with a laundry list of ailments from her bunion to her bad knee. While she is voicing her list, the studio audience can be heard in the background laughing at Leachman's list and the possibility that Leachman would be able to dance decently.

The rest of the package shows Leachman and Ballas working together in rehearsal but very little dancing is shown. Instead audiences see a very energetic Leachman chasing Ballas around the room and arguing with him about the dance steps. The package ends and the partners take the stage to dance the foxtrot. Leachman's form

fitting gown is ankle length with a slit up to her knee, and a very low neckline. While the foxtrot is not necessarily a sexual ballroom dance, Leachman's costume definitely emphasizes the more sexual parts of her body. During the dance Leachman was, as judge Bruno Tonioli said, "floating about there with the imposing presence of Battleship Geriatrica" ("Cloris Leachman & Corky Ballas - Foxtrot"). Never forgetting to smile, Leachman moved across the dance floor with grace but often had to be steadied by Ballas as she came out of spins.

Leachman also had difficulty finding Ballas' hand while traveling across the dance floor. Leachman made up for her lack of technique during the judges' panel discussion when she lifted her leg up and rested it on the judges' table as Tonioli gave his critique as well as resting her cleavage on the table in front of judge Len Goodman and sat in the lap of judge Carrie Ann Inaba. Goodman (b. 1944) said that she acted the dance well and then interrupted his critique to say "mind your cleavage. It's putting me off a bit. Getting a little hot under the collar. I always wanted to be a toy boy and this could be, this could be my big chance!" ("Cloris Leachman & Corky Ballas - Foxtrot") If Leachman's performance of sexual self did not score her any points with the judges, awarding her a total score of sixteen out of thirty points, it did help her get to the next round. Fans of *DWTS* were divided when it came to Leachman's post dance sexual performance,

She'll be around for a while, only because there were far worse dancers last night (and also because some people will be curious to see what outrageousness she brings over the next few weeks.) However, I agree

that unless she tones it down considerably, she'll be out before the halfway mark, simply because by then people will be bored with the over-the-top 'crazy aunt/grandmother' routine. Cloris, dear, we get it: You're 82, not dead. Now kindly dial it back a notch or 20. (Legaleagle44)

Like legaleagle44, many fans of the show and Leachman were more entertained by her sexual antics than her dancing ability. They understand that Leachman's senior body is unable to dance like her younger competition and she must make up for this lack of physical ability by putting on a bigger show filled with sexual spectacle to keep the audience entertained.

At the same time, for some *DWTS* fans, her senior age does raise questions of taste, appropriateness, and mental faculties,

I think that Cloris is cognitively impaired and the vulgarity we are seeing is a part of her mental deterioration. She has difficulty responding to direct questions with coherent answers and appears to wander about until someone reins her in. She seems to have little or no ability to self censor or be self aware of her actions. I do not find her funny in the least. I think her antics are pathetic ... If there is no cognitive deficit, then I think she is simply vulgar and inappropriate. Cloris had comedic talent in her day.

That day is long gone. (Risingsun)

Risingsun's only way of understanding Leachman's sexual performance is by marking it as a mental defect. In this case, Leachman's performance of sexual self must be queered into the margins of everyday life as either comedic or mentally unstable. Risingsun and

others are unable to imagine a space in which senior sexuality can legitimately take place. For Leachman's "vulgar" body and performance of self to exist, it must be framed as abnormal. Her sexuality successfully intervenes into the discourse of incapability because it is transgressive enough to be understood by audiences as complicated.

In the package for the mambo, Leachman's second dance of the season, her age is further emphasized as she notes that "I am older than the mambo [the dance originated in 1940s Cuba]. That's a strike to the heart" ("Cloris Leachman & Corky Ballas - Mambo"). The portions of rehearsal that audience sees during the package are focused on the shaking, wiggling and hip grinding motions of the mambo. Leachman voices her concern about these movements citing her age as a reason for her inability to wiggle. It should also be noted that during the rehearsal, Leachman's appearance emphasizes her senior woman status. She wears very little makeup, either long skirts or sweat pants and long sleeve t-shirts with a scarf or shawl wrapped around her. These outfits cover her body and reduce the size of her chest. In contrast, Leachman's costume for the mambo, was a gold sparkling gown with fitted deep v-cut top to emphasize her breasts as well as a four tiered ruffled skirt with slit, cut along the diagonal to show her legs as she spun around the dance floor. In addition to her gown, Leachman was heavily made up, wore a wig and large, bold, gold jewelry. All of these elements work together to create an image of a younger, more vibrant Leachman, especially when viewed in direct contrast to the underwhelmingly costumed Leachman of the rehearsal package. In her autobiography, Leachman notes that it is the costume designer Randall Christensen's job to use diplomacy when speaking to the stars who have "unrealistic ideas about their



body types, about what they can and cannot wear” (276-277). In Leachman’s case, it is also his job to transform her so that even if can’t dance the part, she can at least look it.

Like the foxtrot, Leachman’s mambo was not technically sound but it entertained the audience and judges panel. All three judges’ critiques focused on the amount of personality and sexuality Leachman incorporated into the dance by shimmying her chest and miming a grab for Ballas’ crotch area. As entertaining as the dance was, the couple received a score of sixteen and was saved from elimination by audience votes. Like Alley, Leachman starts her season of *DWTS* by relying on her abilities as an entertainer to get her through to the next round of competition. She understands that it is her sexual persona that audiences find entertaining and that they will vote for her to simply see what kind of “crazy Cloris” antics she will perform the next week. Leachman’s body however, is unable to learn how to move like Alley’s and therefore she is limited to her sexual persona in entertaining the audiences. This is made clear by the judges who never scored Leachman’s dances above twenty-two points.

The highest score Leachman and Ballas received was for their tango. The package for this dance is different from the others in that audiences see less of Leachman the entertainer and more of Leachman making an effort to learn the technique of the tango, “I want to compete with the best dancers. I want to fail if necessary but I want to try for the very best that you [Ballas] can come up with” (“Cloris Leachman & Corky Ballas - Tango”). Ballas also notes that it is important for the couple to find a balance between entertainment and technique so that they are not eliminated from the competition. Where as previously Ballas seemed to dance around Leachman, the tango

was the first dance in which Leachman appeared to thoughtfully move and perform the dance with Ballas. Leachman not only performed the part of the seductress, she performed the technique as well. The judges positively commented on Leachman's embrace of technique and congratulated on her performance. A more serious Leachman emerged during judging when Carrie Ann Inaba commented "what I love about you [Leachman], is that you pushed yourself to the edge of your capabilities." Leachman interrupted Inaba disagreeing with her simply saying "No I didn't" ("Cloris Leachman & Corky Ballas - Tango"). Here is where Leachman demands the audience to not underestimate her abilities as a performer as well as the ability of her senior female body. Cloris pushes the audience and judges further when during the post scoring interview, she comments that the judges are prejudiced. While Leachman never says explicitly what or who they are prejudiced against, it can be understood that they are prejudiced against the elderly Leachman.

Leachman survived past the halfway mark of the season but placed seventh out of the overall competition. The package for her final dance, the cha-cha, shows Leachman up to her old antics during rehearsal as well making an effort to learn technique. Leachman and Ballas surprised the audience during the dance with a lift and spin that was not seen in the package. In her autobiography, Leachman recounts the frightening experience:

When the moment arrives to do the lift and spin on the live telecast, I am fearful about it. I can't control my body well, and at the end of my turns toward Corky, I present my left leg instead of my right to him, and my

right arm bangs against his forehead ... But Corky Ballas has been through every imaginable catastrophe in ballroom dancing, and that night, somehow staying in time with the music, he wrenches the uncountoured mass that is my body around till he has my right arm and my right leg in his hands. He jerks me up and begins to spin. I am facing death. My teeth nearly hit the floor as he swoops me low, and then I'm sailing four feet above the floor in the parabola he's designed. A death wail escapes me, but it goes unheard due to the howling of the audience members, who don't quite believe what they're seeing. (270)

Leachman's last dance was one of the most physically demanding dances of the competition for her. Her senior body swinging in the air shows the audience that Leachman is committed to the competition, performing dance moves that she was frightened by. Unfortunately, the combination of spectacle and technique did not impress the judges who felt that Leachman's dance was nothing close to an actual cha-cha. Adding insult to the critique, Carrie Ann Inaba remarked that she was disappointed to watch Leachman's poor performance when such a great dancer like Toni Braxton was eliminated the week before. That night, with a score of fifteen, Leachman and Ballas were eliminated from the competition.

In her autobiography Leachman notes,

My appearance on *Dancing with the Stars* gave me tsunami of publicity and recognition. I can't go anywhere ... without people greeting me, ... telling me how they'd been moved, what they'd learned about life from

watching me on the show ... thank[ing] me for reminding [them] that at any age, you can do something with your life. (277)

Both Leachman and Alley's appearances show audiences that age is a performative and that "acting one's age" is nothing but a discursive statement intended to restrict performances of everyday life. Leachman and Alley performed and confessed their sexuality weekly for a live television audience. They faced criticism from both fans and competition judges, but they continued to perform their queer sexual personae.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Of course, Alley is more than twenty years younger than Leachman, and so is better able to “pass” as youthful on the show. Not surprisingly, she finished higher than Leachman.

<sup>2</sup> All of the *Dancing with the Stars* performances discussed in this chapter were watched on YouTube. Despite questions of copyright, YouTube user Codebear4 has uploaded a very large amount (if not all) of *DWTS* dance numbers for all seasons of the show. This online collection has been an invaluable resource for this chapter.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the editing process see Debra Seagal’s “Tales from the Cutting-Room Floor”

<sup>4</sup> There is considerable scholarship concerning such television talk shows as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as a site of confession and therapeutic exchange. For more information see Eva Illouz’s *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture*.

<sup>5</sup> The quotes for this chapter are pulled from the Internet forum *Television Without Pity*. This forum is a popular site for fans and non-fans alike to comment on popular television programming. For this thesis, it acts as an archive of popular audience opinion.

<sup>6</sup> This biography, and that of Cloris Leachman, which follows, is a composite biography of undisputed facts about milestones in these celebrities’ personal and professional lives. Alley’s biography is drawn from her Wikipedia entry ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirstie\\_Alley](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirstie_Alley)) and her New York Times Biography entry (<http://movies.nytimes.com/person/1093/Kirstie-Alley>.) Leachman’s biography is drawn from her memoir, *Cloris*; her Wikipedia entry ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloris\\_Leachman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloris_Leachman)); and her New York Times Biography entry (<http://movies.nytimes.com/person/41211/Cloris-Leachman>). Wikipedia is a legitimate source for initial fact-finding research, and is often a comprehensive and easily accessible and verifiable source for data about popular culture figures. Information found on Wikipedia should always be corroborated, but should be recognized as an academic reference tool as well.

## CHAPTER V

## “CAN WE TALK?”: JOAN RIVERS’ SEXUAL INTERVENTION

*Age, it’s the one mountain that you can’t over come. It’s a youth society, and nobody wants you. You’re too old. You’re too old. You’re too old. If one more woman comedian comes up and says to me, ‘You opened the doors for me,’ And you want to say, ‘go fuck yourself.’ I’m still opening the doors. (Joan Rivers in Joan Rivers: A Piece Of Work)*

Born Joan Alexandra Molinsky in 1933, Joan Rivers began her entertainment career in the theatre but made a name for herself in the 1960s through her appearances on *The Tonight Show*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and as the host of her own talk show. For the past six decades, Rivers has worked consistently on television and the comedy club circuit. Her loud, grating voice and shocking, vulgar comedy made Rivers, for better or worse, a household name. With her 2009 victory on the reality television show *Celebrity Apprentice*, and the release of the 2010 documentary *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, Rivers’ career has experienced a renaissance. Currently, she is starring in her own Comedy Central roast, the reality television show *Joan & Melissa: Joan Knows Best*, and hosting *Fashion Police* E! television’s critique of celebrity fashion and style. In addition to her performances on reality television, Rivers appeared as herself in the self-titled, season two finale of the FX drama series *Nip/Tuck*. Rivers is even entertaining online through the social networking sites Twitter and Facebook. Rivers’ persona is everywhere, and therefore, so are her desires.<sup>1</sup>

Rivers cites her appearances on the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson as her big break in the entertainment industry. When another comic flopped on the show the night before, comedian Bill Cosby told Carson that he should have Rivers do her stand up routine on the show. Carson took the advice and put Rivers on the next night (Rivers 2010). Rivers became very popular with Carson and late night audiences, eventually becoming the permanent guest host for the *Tonight Show*. Despite her success, Rivers has had a tumultuous career in the entertainment business. She chose to leave the *Tonight Show* to host her own late night talk show and this move not only ended her friendship with Carson but drove her husband, Edgar Rosenberg, to suicide. Fox executives constantly fought with Rosenberg over every detail of the show. Fox executives asked Rivers to fire her husband and when she refused, they fired him themselves. After his death, Rivers decided that she and her daughter should play themselves in a Lifetime network-produced film about the aftermath of Rosenberg's death, entitled *Tears and Laughter: The Joan and Melissa Rivers Story (Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work)*. Rivers is no stranger to doing what it takes to both make money and keep herself in the celebrity spotlight. She courts controversy and makes sexual jokes because it keeps her name in the headlines.

In addition to her sexual performances on stage and screen, Rivers uses the social networking site Twitter to "tweet" her sexual confessions along with the confessions of her fellow celebrities. On January 4, 2012 Rivers tweeted, "Mel Gibson's ex-wife got \$425 million in their divorce settlement!!! For that kind of money, even I'd call out Hitler's name during sex." This joke is funny not only for the obvious comparison of

Gibson to Hitler but because Rivers is Jewish. Rivers calling out Hitler's name during sex provides comedy through both the image of Rivers engaging in sexual intercourse and the ethnic Jewish comedy of the opposition between Rivers and anti-Semitism.

Occasionally, the ambiguous nature of reading comedy can create a sexual confession where one might not be intended. On December 24, 2012 Rivers tweeted to her fans, "I just spent an hour stuffing my Christmas Eve goose and as I was finishing, the damned bird bit me!" The naïve fan would read this tweet and find the humor in that Rivers was trying to stuff a live bird. Other fans, however, might read this tweet and understand it to mean that just as Rivers was reaching an orgasm by having sex with a goose, she was interrupted because the animal attacked her. Either way this tweet is funny; however, looking at the goose as a sexual partner turns the tweet into a queer sexual confession of abnormal love for a farm animal. Rivers uses Twitter for self-promotion as well as a platform to tell her vulgar jokes and confess her sexual sins. She also makes jokes at the expense of other celebrities, which in turn has the potential to be transformed into gossip.

From the beginning of her career, Rivers' comedy was controversial, sexual, and shocking to audiences:

When I started comedy I was very wild for the time, but different times.

The last line in my original act was, "This business, it's all about casting couches, so I want you to know, my name is Joan Rivers, and I put out."

And you would hear the audience, such a sweet little, silly line from a girl who was what 28 years old, you know, dressed up, trying to look nice.



The audience, half of them laughed. Jack Lemmon saw me and walked out. He said, “that’s disgusting.” So for my time, I was very shocking  
*(Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work)*.

In the 1960s, Rivers’ sexual persona offended audiences. The jokes that Rivers made about her sexual availability were seen as inappropriate and obscene for a young, upper middle-class woman. Rivers believed, however, that the female body should be able to be talked about and that things that people did not talk about needed to be discussed. Controversial topics such as abortions were outside of discourse for 1960s mainstream American audiences. There was no language through which women could confess abortion. Rivers made her own discourse when she used a joke to confess about a friend travelling back and forth from the United States to Puerto Rico to have fourteen separate appendectomies. Rivers not only made a joke about the sexual morals of her friend but also made a space for discourse on abortion by labeling abortions as appendectomies. Citing stand-up comedy performances from previous Jewish comedians, Rivers constructs spaces in which sex and the consequences of it could be discussed in a public arena.

Jewish female comedians have a long history of performing vulgarity on stage. As Giovanna P. Del Negro notes, Jewish women like Belle Barth, Pearl Williams, and Patsy Abbot were a

trio of working-class Jewish stand-up comics, [who] enjoyed enormous popularity in the United States ... With their earthy, old-world sensibility and strategic use of Yiddish, these middle-aged performers railed against

societal mores that told them to be quiet, well behaved, and sexually passive. (144)

As these women's careers were flourishing, Rivers stand-up career was just beginning. During the 1950s and 1960s these comediennes took the stages of night clubs during the late, late show and

by drawing on comedic devices historically used by male comics to demean women, [they] strategically employed the tools of their male dominated trade to highlight the asymmetries that existed between the sexes ... terms which had been used to objectify and silence women's sexual enjoyment served to destabilize the power and privilege exerted by men on the public stage and in the wider patriarchal culture. (Del Negro 156)

Rivers' vulgar comedy career follows from a tradition of Jewish women who inverted the comedy of men to intervene into patriarchal discourse. As she has aged, Rivers is still intervening into the heteronormative discourse by highlighting the asymmetries that exist between generations. Rivers' jokes about sexual desire and the actual act of sex employ tools of younger comedians to complicate the discourse of incapability that surrounds senior women.

As Abbot, Barth and Williams, opened doors for Rivers, Rivers is opening doors for younger Jewish female comediennes. Sarah Silverman is a young controversial Jewish comedienne who is an equal opportunity offender. One of her more controversial jokes was in her 2005 comedy special *Jesus Is Magic*. Discussing a visit to her

gynecologist she joked “I was raped by a doctor, which is a bittersweet experience for a Jewish girl” (*Sarah Silverman: Jesus is Magic*). Here Silverman is simultaneously referring to the stereotype of the Jewish woman marrying a doctor and making a sexual and vulgar joke about the gynecological examination process. As a Jewish comedienne, Rivers owes some of her success to Abbot, Barth and Williams but is also making a space in which women like Silverman are able to joke in a more public forum and in plain language about a woman’s reproductive system.

Further, because comedy is always already queer, Rivers took risks and broke rules normally enforced by heteronormative society. The queerness of comedy also allowed audiences to understand River’s joke about her friend’s sexual irresponsibility as “just a joke” (Doty 81). Fifty years later and at seventy-eight years old, Rivers’ continues to perform her sexual persona for nightclub, television and Internet audiences. Thus, Joan Rivers’ sexual performance is not a new 2010s phenomenon; rather, Rivers has adapted her sexual performance to have the greatest effect on her changing audiences.

For Rivers’ sexual performance to successfully intervene into the discourse of senior women’s incapability, it must appear as if Rivers is performing herself and not a character role. This comes more easily to Rivers than the other senior actresses I discuss because she has made a career out of speaking and joking as herself. She has had a limited career in theatre and has performed few character roles on film and television. The majority of her career has taken place on the comedy stage, where she performs as Joan Rivers. Rivers’ sexual persona benefits from this because the vulgar jokes she tells

are understood to come from her, and not necessarily a group of writers. Audiences are able to watch Rivers perform and feel that they are connecting with her on a personal, intimate level. This intimacy furthers her senior sexual intervention by showing audiences that senior women can be sexual in their performances of everyday life.

### **Joan Rivers, the Senior Stand-Up Comic**

Stand-up comedy's emphasis on storytelling and confession is profitably understood as Foucauldian confession. The comedienne is compelled to confess her sins or the sins of her friends and family not because the audience will absolve her of her sins but because those sins will provide entertainment to the audience.

The verbal act of confession is the proof, is the manifestation, of truth. ... because what marks the difference between good and evil thoughts, ... is that the evil ones cannot be referred to without difficulty. If one blushes in recounting them, if one seeks to hide his own thoughts, if even quite simply one hesitates to tell his thoughts, that is the proof that those thoughts are not good as they may appear. (Foucault *The History of Sexuality: Volume I* 219-220)

It is the comedienne's job to blush or perform shame in her confessions even if she feels none. Audiences are entertained when they see that a joke or confession might be more difficult to tell. If the comedienne blushes or hesitates to confess, audiences understand that the joke might be more personal than the comedienne would like. Of course, for comediennes, blushing is simply a performative tool that is used to incite audience

interest in the confession. In order for the audience to be entertained by the comedienne's truthful confessions, however, the audience must first feel connected to and invested in the comedienne's personal life. The audience becomes the priest to whom the comedienne confesses.

Rivers' documentary is a valuable site for illustrating the intimacy-building practice between performer and audience as well as a space in which audiences are able to watch Rivers perform sexually on stage. In the documentary, audiences watch as Rivers works at a small club on her act.

Every Wednesday night when I'm in New York I work in some tiny little club where I can practice my act. I just talk about anything and everything that annoys me. The minute you're not angry about things, the minute you're not upset about things, what are you talking about? 'Oh, my grandson was so cute.' Pthhh. [Rivers makes a raspberry sound.] It's not my comedy. I'm furious about everything, furious about everything. Good things don't always happen to good people, and I'm very angry about it. But if I didn't have the anger, I wouldn't be a comedian. Anger fuels the comedy. (*Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*)

Right after Rivers' voiceover ends, the documentary audience sees a montage of Rivers in the night club saying everything she hates: everybody, old people, ugly children, fat people, China, whiners, dead people, and the three wise men. Then, Rivers tells the club audience that she loves anal sex because you can do many things while having it. She bends at the waist over a stool, resting her elbows on the seat and mimes different activities such as ironing, reading a book, and checking emails on a smartphone. This

scene sends the audience into peals of laughter and even Rivers begins to laugh at her own joke. Rivers' chooses to perform comedy that is sexual, angry and offensive to general audiences but Rivers' audiences go to see her perform because they know that vulgar comedy is her schtick.

The first post-credit scene of the documentary shows Rivers at the small nightclub performing her stand up comedy routine. She tells the audience how disappointed she is in her daughter, Melissa Rivers (b. 1968) for having morals and refusing \$400,000 to pose nude from the waist up on the cover of *Playboy* magazine. The audience laughs as Rivers continues the joke by saying that when Melissa called her for approval what Rivers really wanted to say was, ““What do I think, you stupid fucking cunt? What do I think? I think you should ask for \$200,000 more and show your pussy. That’s what I think”” (*Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*). By the end of the joke, the audience is laughing wildly as Rivers doesn’t break the look of absolute disappointment in her own child for doing the morally right thing.

This performance has many layers that work simultaneously to produce a senior woman’s performative intervention. Rivers’ joke is pulled from a personal and intimate family experience. She is essentially gossiping about her daughter to an audience full of strangers. After telling the personal story, Rivers then gives her “real” opinion of her daughter’s decision to the audience, one she has presumably kept secret from her daughter. At this point, the audience is able to experience a part of Rivers’ personal life and feel more intimate with Rivers than she is with her own daughter. Audiences feel privy to Rivers’ inner life and performance of self. River’s joke has constructed a space

in which audience members can feel comfortable and this constructed intimacy makes audiences more comfortable while allowing Rivers to further constitute her sexual persona.

Constructing an intimate space allows two things to happen to Rivers' audience. First, audiences begin to view Rivers as a real person with whom they could be having a drink. This view of Rivers' allows her sexual persona to be understood as organic and real rather than a scripted or constructed performance. Second, the intimacy that Rivers creates allows her jokes and performances of sexuality have more impact on her audiences. The more comfortable Rivers makes her audience feel, the greater the shock of her sexual performance. Rivers eases her audience into the normal stand-up comedy routine with jokes about her family and other celebrities. She manipulates the audience into investing in the stories about her personal life and laughing at the run-of-the-mill jokes about things that make Rivers angry. Just when her audience expects to hear another joke about Victoria Beckham's weight, she hits them with a joke about her vagina being so droopy that she doesn't know where her new grey slippers came from. Audiences expect Rivers to be obscene and rude but do not necessarily expect her to discuss personal experiences with sex and sexuality. This confession about her sexual body parts jolts audiences because throughout the stand-up performance they have come to think of her as their mother or grandmother. Rivers may be their vulgar mother or grandmother, but she is their grandmother nonetheless, and nobody wants to be reminded of their grandmother's vagina. Importantly, Rivers is not explicitly intervening

in the discourse of senior women's sexual incapability, but rather her casual inclusion of sexual anecdotes complicates that discourse.

Stand-up comedy as a space of sexual confession has become normalized in society. It is not abnormal to watch a younger comedienne confess sexual encounters to audiences. Rivers' sexual confessions queer stand-up comedy because they are abnormal confessions for her age. Rivers' confessions of sexual activity position themselves against and in conflict with the larger discourse of senior women's incapability. Whereas senior women's sexuality was relegated to the margins of heteronormative society, Rivers queers stand-up comedy by bringing senior women's sexual performances to the forefront. Not only does she confess that senior women live sexually active lives, but she details them in her stand-up performances.

The stand-up comedy scenes are shown throughout the documentary. The interspersing of this performance reminds the documentary audience that at her heart Rivers is an entertainer. It is her job to make audiences laugh as well as shock them. When attending a Rivers stand-up performance, audiences should expect to be pushed to and beyond their limits. Some audience members, however, are not always prepared for Rivers' sexuality and vulgarity.

At a show in Mukluks, Wisconsin, Rivers told a joke about how Helen Keller would have been the only child she ever liked because she didn't talk. An audience member heckles Rivers yelling, "not very funny." The man in the audience reports that he has a deaf son and was offended by Rivers' joke. Rivers puts the man in his place, however, by directly addressing him:



Yes it is and if you don't [like it], then leave! ... I happen to have a deaf mother. Oh you stupid ass, let me tell you what comedy is about. ... Oh, please you are so stupid. Comedy is to make everybody laugh at everything and deal with things, you idiot. My mother is deaf, you stupid son of a bitch. Don't tell me. And just in case you can hear me in the hallway, I lived for nine years with a man with one leg. Okay, you asshole? And we're going to talk about what it's like to have a man with one leg who lost it in World War II and never went back to get it, because that's fucking littering. So don't you tell me what's funny. Comedy is to make us laugh. (*Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*)

Just as the audience becomes uncomfortable with the acknowledgement of and confrontation with the heckler, she eases the audience back with her obscene language and joke. This moment demonstrates how Rivers gets almost too intimate with her audience.

It may be entertaining to listen to Rivers discuss senior citizens having sex, but when an unscripted member of the audience becomes directly involved in the performance, a relaxed audience quickly becomes nervous. After the show Rivers addresses the audience tension from that moment:

that was a very difficult moment. It throws you terribly because you know the audience is so nervous and so scared to laugh. Your mind is going a mile a minute. "Where am I going to go? What am I going to do? Where am I going to take them?" So there are two things going on, your mouth

and your head. Luckily, I was able to get them back. (*Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*)

When Rivers responded to the heckler, she crossed a boundary between entertainer and performer. She shared the personal details of her deaf mother with the audience without using comedy as a buffer. The rawness of her confession, even if it was only to prove a point, brought her and her audience closer together. It was an unscripted moment of in which Rivers confessed her mother's illness in reaction to the disruptive force of the heckler. He disrupted Rivers' act by confessing his son's disability and condemning her for telling a politically incorrect joke. Both the heckler and Rivers' experience Foucauldian confession. The heckler experiences a moment of cathartic confession in which he feels compelled to tell Rivers and the audience about his son's disability. In reaction to the heckler's confession, Rivers confesses to her mother's disability. This confession enables the heckler to "know" himself. His desire compels him to end Rivers' offensive joke by confessing to his son's disability. To absolve herself from the sin of the politically incorrect joke, Rivers feels compelled to reveal her mother's deafness. By confessing to her mother's disability, Rivers appears to be making a personal joke as well as a politically incorrect one. Finally she brings the audience back to a comfortable place of laughter with the confession of a one-legged lover.

### **Rivers' Intimates**

*Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work* furthers Rivers sexual persona by showing a less acidic and more vulnerable side of the senior woman. Much of the documentary is shot in

Rivers' home as well as several scenes with Rivers in her car having discussions with her assistant, managers, and agents. A particularly moving segment of the film shows Rivers preparing for her appearance as the guest of honor on Comedy Central's *Roast of Joan Rivers*. In this segment, we see Rivers talking with her assistant about her hesitation to be the star of the roast.

Save your money when you're younger so that you don't have to whore yourself out when you're old. To be roasted, Comedy Central ... the money is extraordinary. I am so depressed. ... This is the cherry on the cake. ... Oh, do you know the jokes? Every joke is going to be plastic surgery or old. It comes back at you, doesn't it? (*Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*)

Audiences are used to seeing Rivers on stage, and this conversation with her assistant inside her town car shows Rivers having a private reaction to what will be a publicly personal performance. As Rivers sits in her dressing room at home getting her hair and makeup done, she makes it clear that if it were not for the money she was getting paid by Comedy Central, she wouldn't do the show, "they keep telling you it's an honor. I'm telling you that if I had invested wisely, I wouldn't be doing this" (*Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*). Rivers makes this confession without the familiar laughter and smile seen throughout the documentary. For a brief moment, audiences are able to see a different, more serious side of Rivers, one without comedy.

Documentary audiences' emotions are heightened when clips from the roast are shown in the film. Rivers is sitting in the hot seat as several comedians make jokes about

her appearance. Actor Brad Garret jokes that Rivers' "face has been lifted so many times that when she sneezes she has to blow her clit" (*Joan River: A Piece of Work*). As the jokes keep coming, Rivers keeps smiling and even laughing at her own expense. The background music for this segment is soft and slow and the documentary audience hears a voice over of Rivers say "I get mad at myself. I think, at this age, you've been doing it since 1966 and you shouldn't let them upset you anymore, but they do" (*Joan River: A Piece of Work*). This moment of sadness that Rivers performs for the documentary audience ultimately advances her persona and sexual senior woman intervention. Showing a more emotional side encourages the audience to feel for Rivers and to see her not just as a celebrity but as a human being. No matter how old she is, Rivers has feelings that can be hurt. Audiences who empathize with her personal sadness are also more likely to believe in her personal stories of sexual desire and sexual escapades. Her sadness makes her more than a celebrity. It makes her a person who is capable of emotions, sexual or otherwise.

Rivers' emotional performance shows audiences that she "matters." Following from Butler, Rivers may not be able to produce the physical matter of a child to society but she is able to contribute emotional matter. Rivers contributes abstract emotional matter to her fans, which makes Rivers "matter" to them. As a senior woman, Rivers matters to her audience despite her inability to create reproductive matter. Instead, through the confession of her sexual life she produces entertainment that is consumed by audiences and justifies her sexual exploits outside of the realm of reproduction.

The issues of money raised in this segment are present throughout the documentary. This is another space in which Rivers is intimate with the audience. She shows the cameras her lavish, gold gilded, New York City apartment and describes it by saying that if she had money, this is how Marie Antoinette would live. While giving a tour of the apartment, Rivers recognizes that she could live more cheaply, but she likes her “comforts” and would rather work to keep them than retire and live on a budget. Echoed through the documentary is how Rivers is always working or has to keep working so that she can keep making money. All of these intimate insights into Rivers’ financial situation might put audience members off: why should they feel bad that Rivers has to keep working if she lives in an apartment that Marie Antoinette would envy? As a way to keep those questions from being asked, the audience sees the private ways in which Rivers gives back.

Audiences watch as Rivers signs checks for all her employees as she discusses how she supports family members and sends the children of her employees to private schools. The audience is meant to understand that Rivers is working for more than just herself. If she were retiring, all of the people she supports would have to find other means of supporting themselves. The audience sees Rivers sharing Thanksgiving dinner with her immediate family as well as “strays” who are friends and neighbors who have nowhere else to go. Rivers also takes her grandson Cooper to participate in “Gods Love We Deliver,” a charity which delivers meals to people who are too ill to cook or go out on Thanksgiving day. The camera shows Rivers and her son in her town car and Rivers grabs her grandson’s hand and tells him how much she loves his hands. Once again, the

audience is privy to an intimate moment, humanizing Rivers. This intimate moment is interrupted as Rivers, never being the one to let a joke get by her, asks Cooper, who has been telling a story about his friend who has three hand held video game players, if his friend has a “single grandfather” (*Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*).

In this moment, Rivers simultaneously puts up a guard against showing too much emotion and intimacy but also makes a joke of sexual desire that can and should be read by audiences as serious. Rivers laughs off her joke to her grandson (who doesn't get it), but this moment should not just be read as a joke. Rivers makes the single grandfather comment for the documentary audience and not for Cooper's benefit. She knows that he is too young to understand the joke but uses the comedy to mask what might appear as real feelings of loneliness. The intimate emotional space constructed by the close up shot of Rivers hiding behind large, dark sunglasses and the imagined emotions that a grandmother should have for her grandson allow Rivers' discussion of possible intimate companionship appear as a legitimate question. Rivers' does not want to appear too vulnerable, however, and laughs off her comment so that audiences will read it as a joke and not the “desperate” desire of a senior woman for a relationship.

Rivers' contributes to charity and portrays herself as self-sacrificing in order to support her employees, but this also supports the creation of a persona that audiences can read as organic and not constructed. Audiences watch as Rivers goes about her daily life, her actions confessing her kindness. These performances of charity and general kindness are seen outside of the framework of a traditional performance. They are being performed in Rivers' everyday life and filmed for the documentary. Audiences are

meant to assume that these same acts of charity and kindness would occur because they are a part of her “real” life. Audiences’ understanding of these charitable performances as real and outside of a script produces a persona that audiences feel they can connect to.

Seeing Rivers so vulnerable and giving makes it easier for audiences to accept her sexual performances as reality. Given Rivers ability to show “genuine” emotion, the “unscripted” off stage performances of sexuality must also be “genuine.” Thus, audiences should take these performances more seriously. Understanding her sexual persona as unscripted but also part of her performance of self allows that sexual performance to be more productive in the senior woman’s intervention into the discourse of incapability. There is a growing space for this acceptance to happen. Following from Lois W. Banner:

The coming into existence of [a fluid life cycle] may be breaking down prevailing ageism. As women in their fifties attend college with their children, as they divorce husbands and engage in dating behavior, as they raise young children born to them in their late thirties and forties, they move outside of older cohort generational patterns. They create a bond with others at different stages of the life cycle. (319)

Senior women’s performances of sexuality can be taken more seriously within Banner’s construction of a fluid life cycle. If more senior women’s performances of sexuality are being taken seriously, they become less queer and more acceptable by heteronormative society. Paradoxically, if senior women’s performances of sexuality become less queer they also have less of an impact on the discourse of incapability.

## Plastic Rivers

If audiences don't know Rivers for her comedy, they know her for her plastic surgery.

People want to look at pretty women. Nobody wants an old woman, so I started with the plastic surgery, little bits and tweaks. Then I got very angry because nobody would admit it. I really became a big advocate of it. And so then I became the poster girl for it, and then I became the joke of it. (*Joan River: A Piece of Work*)

*Men are Stupid... and They Like Big Boobs* is a plastic surgery tell-all and advice book written by Rivers and ghost writer Valerie Frankel. Again, Rivers creates a space in which she can be intimate and sexual with her audience. Rivers explicitly details several anti-aging procedures (with help from a board certified surgeon) from wrinkle-filler injections to “boob jobs” and “vagina lifts.” She also provides colorful commentary on why a person might be interested in a certain procedure.

When the baby boomers get as old as I am, they will learn the hideous truth that I wish my mother had warned me about: one day, your vagina will fall out. ... It can be a good thing though. When you get a hot flash, you can wipe your forehead with your vagina. When you're sixty, you can have sex in the bedroom and watch TV in the living room—at the same time. If these prospects don't appeal to you, however, you can have your vagina retooled. And I don't mean by the hunky handyman. (Rivers 262-263)



Rivers' candor with her readers about why she had a procedure done and its consequences is educational, but also opens a space for Rivers to perform the same sexual humor that she does in her standup comedy. Rivers not only talks about a female sex organ, she encourages aging women to look into the surgery so that they can improve their sex lives. She is making the assumption that senior women not only have sex but want to have good or even great sex. Although Rivers does not confess to having her vagina lifted, including it in the book as a viable surgery option for aging women implies that Rivers advocates good sex for herself as well as other senior women. In the context of her other plastic surgeries, which appear to be motivated by a desire to *look* youthful, this surgical intervention allows her to *feel* youthful.

In 2011, Rivers appeared in a Super Bowl commercial for the Internet domain name web-hosting site Go Daddy. The commercial revealed Rivers as the new Go Daddy girl.<sup>2</sup> What stunned viewers was Rivers' flawless, stereotypically sexually appealing body. Her arms and legs were thin and toned, breasts perky, hips shapely, and entire body tan and wrinkle free. Immediately questions and speculation circled the gossip blogs, questioning whether it was possible that Rivers could have had that much work done to her body or if she'd used a body double. After the commercial aired, Rivers took to her Twitter account saying "How do you like that body? That took a lot of hard work dieting and exercise! And I never once puked up my lunch" (Weiss). At first Rivers does not explicitly claim the toned and tan body as her own. She praises the body for its beauty and tells the truth by saying that hard work and exercise were involved in its creation. Audience might infer from her vomiting comment that she claims the body

as her own but she is actually telling the truth: Rivers did not throw up to get that body. After *Access Hollywood* host Billy Bush tweeted that Rivers had a body double, Rivers' Twitter performance became a little confusing (Weiss). Rivers responded to Bush by tweeting, "Double? What Double???" (Weiss). Eventually it was made known that model Tabitha Taylor, who shares Rivers love of plastic surgery, provided the body onto which Rivers' head was digitally transposed. Many of the gossip blogs and news outlets were disturbed by Rivers' reluctance to give Taylor credit for her own body. They were not sure if Rivers was joking or if she really thought it was her body. It is humorous and safe to audiences when Rivers pretended to have such a sexually desirable body without actually claiming it as her own. When she started to deny that a body double was involved, however, the comedy became desperate and scary.

Rivers' or Taylor's body was put on display by Go Daddy for sexual consumption. Rivers' claiming of Taylor's body is simultaneously a joke and a desire to be viewed as sexy and sexable. Rivers' persistence in claiming a sexable body as her own is her way of demanding to be viewed as a body to be desired and not just laughed at. Bringing senior women's discourse of sexual capability into the larger discourse on senior women's sexuality is significant for Rivers. Most of the time however, this is accomplished through audiences laughing at her own confessions of sexuality. If audiences were to view Rivers as a body to be desired, that would mean bigger changes to the discourse of senior women's sexuality. If a senior woman is viewed as capable of having a sexable body that disrupts the larger discourse of incapability entirely. Following from Banner,

appearance, more than any other factor, has occasioned the objectification of aging. We define someone as old because he or she looks old. Initially we overlook the subjectivity of their (sic) own reality. It is in this context that aging women especially become double “the other.” Trivialized because they are not young, they are also derided because they stand outside of standard conventions of beauty. (Banner 15)

If Rivers’ body was sexually desirable she would physically matter to heteronormative society again. Even though she could not reproduce material, her body would be considered a vessel for productive heterosexual desire. Furthermore, Rivers attempt to claim the sexually desirable body is an attempt to change the performatives of aging. Senior women don’t have to have bodies that sag and are wrinkled. Instead, older women can be sexually desirable with their fit, tan and sexable bodies. Rivers’ identity disorder not only intervenes into the discourse of senior women’s sexual incapability but also attempts to change the physical performatives of aging. Through this performance, she pushes both senior women and heteronormative society into rethinking what senior women’s bodies can look like. Further, as seen with senior actresses Susan Sarandon and Helen Mirren, a sexagenarian body can be desirable.

Rivers’ desire to be viewed sexually is contradicted by her choice of outfits. Most of her ensembles cover the majority of her body. Rivers wears three-quarter-length sleeve blouses and pants or skirts that cover all of her legs. She hides her body under loose fitting pantsuits and gowns. Rivers understands her own body as undesirable by common standards and therefore covers it up and claims the body of another woman so

that she might appear “sexy.” She dresses age appropriately but apparently wishes that she had a body that she could show off. Thus, though she may complicate discourse of female aging and sexuality, she is constrained by their representational limits. Her intervention, then, is always only partial.

In October 2004 Rivers appeared as herself on the controversial FX drama *Nip/Tuck*. Rivers’ appearance was the C-plot of the show, starting and ending the episode. Rivers’ goes to the plastic surgeons because she wants to undo all of the plastic surgery operations she has had over the years and look more natural. The reasons for undoing her surgeries are two fold. The first, more sincere reason given is so that her grandson Cooper would understand that there is nothing to be ashamed of when it comes to the natural order of appearance and aging. The second reason given, in classic Rivers style, is so that she can make the cover of *People* magazine (“Joan Rivers”). Both of these reasons show a softer, more intimate Rivers. First audiences read her concern for her grandson Cooper as true love; second, they see her vulnerability and desperation to do something that will put her back in the celebrity spotlight. Again, audiences view Rivers as trying to find a reason for her to matter both to her grandson and to popular media. If getting several plastic surgery procedures made her matter once, getting them undone will make her matter again.

At the end of the episode, Rivers returns to the doctors’ office so that they can show her a computer rendering of what she would look like after they undid all of her plastic surgery. The result is an image that makes Rivers give up on the idea because she wants to look like a “grandmother for Cooper, not a piece of shit.” Rivers decides that

her grandson doesn't live in the Stone Age and will understand that the evolution of instruments of plastic surgery is natural. Then before she leaves, she schedules a "lift" for the next day because, "what the heck. I'm in town anyhow. It will kill a couple of hours." Rivers' determination to not only stick with the surgeries she has had but to add on to them reifies her need to be viewed as young or at least younger than she actually is. It reiterates her message about plastic surgery always being an option for women who want to feel better about themselves and reconstitutes her sexual persona.

Rivers' appearance as herself on the scripted drama allows audiences to conflate her already vulgar performance of self with the sexual and vulgar words of the *Nip/Tuck* script. The scenes Rivers performed in the show could have come straight out of her documentary. This is important to note because ultimately, Rivers' "real" life and her performances on television and film are indistinguishable from one another. The Rivers that is seen in the media, no matter what the frame, always performs her sexual persona. This performance interrogates and ultimately intervenes in the discourse of senior women's sexual incapability at a constant rate. Her persona and performance continually pushes and crosses the boundaries of acceptable senior woman performance set up by heteronormative society. Rivers is a forceful sexual persona who demands recognition for the work she has done and is still doing for other women comics. She also demands attention be paid to her performances of sexuality. She has mastered the creation of a persona that fans relate to and empathize with, thereby making her matter most in the sexually active, senior actresses' intervention.

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Notes:

<sup>1</sup> This biography is a composite biography of undisputed facts about milestones in Joan Rivers' personal and professional life. The biography is composed of Rivers' Wikipedia entry ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joan\\_rivers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joan_rivers)) and her New York Times Biography entry (<http://movies.nytimes.com/person/108387/Joan-Rivers>). As in all cases of popular culture figures, Wikipedia can be legitimately used for verifiable data. Information found on Wikipedia should always be corroborated by other scholarly sources but Wikipedia should be cited as a reference when it is used.

<sup>2</sup> While not relevant to the product they are selling, Go Daddy girls are stereotypically attractive women. Other Go Daddy girls are celebrity trainer Jillian Michaels and race car driver/model Danica Patrick.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

*In 1989, [Meryl Streep] turned 40. "I remember turning to my husband and saying, 'Well, what should we do? Because it's over.'" The following year, she received three offers to play witches in different movies. She saw the subtext pretty clearly: "Once women passed childbearing age they could only be seen as grotesque on some level." (Streep in Woods)*

Senior actresses' performances of sexuality publicly intervene into the discourse of incapability that hovers over senior women's sexuality. These performances display senior women practicing sexual desire and availability. While some performances, like those of Cloris Leachman and Joan Rivers, are more marginalized than others, they still make their sexually active voices heard. Senior women's sexuality has always been a topic of comedy. The women of this thesis are using a queer genre to unqueer themselves. They want their sexuality to become a mainstream phenomena so that they are no longer regulated to the margins of society.

Medical discourse on menopause is at the foundation of senior women's discourse of sexual incapability. Its ability to reproduce the stereotype of the sexless senior woman has created material consequences for senior women. Medicine states that through biological changes in the menopausal and post-menopausal body, senior women are no longer expected to have sexual desire or be capable of sexual activity. The senior

actresses in this thesis are attempting to complicate medical discourse through their performance interventions.

Some of the senior actresses' performance interventions are more successful than others. Because Betty White is popular and mainstream, it is more difficult for her performances to be transgress gender and age norms. Further, only she is able to perform sexually out of the margins because she works within the discourse of incapability rather than against it. Kirstie Alley, Cloris Leachman and Joan Rivers shout their vulgarities from the margins of society because their performances complicate dominant discourse and intervene into the discourse of incapability. These women are considered vulgar and brash because they stand against heteronormative society. All of the senior actresses of this thesis are not actively trying to change the discourse of sexuality and aging but their framed performances and performances of self all include performances of sexuality that complicate the current discourse of incapability

Meryl Streep understands that the performatives of age are connected to medical discourse. She also understands that heteronormative society and the film industry find the bodies of post-menopausal and senior women to be inappropriate vessels of and for sexual desire. Once actresses reach senior status, their bodies and sexual performances are marked as queer, pushed to the margins of society, and only seen as grotesque.

The larger question at hand points toward future performatives of aging. If these senior actresses interventions are unable to effect change in the heteronormative discourse of senior women's sexuality, what are the performance options for young female performers? Britney Spears, Lady Gaga, Megan Fox, and Lindsay Lohan are just



a few of the young, sexualized performers whose performances rely on their youth and desirability. What will happen to these women when their bodies are slowly aged out of representational frames? Will their bodies become fodder for *SNL* writers or will the interventions of the senior women of this thesis be successful? If the work that Alley, Leachman, Rivers and White have done (and continue to do) is successful, younger women will be able to age gracefully and still be sexually desirable. If discourse about senior women's sexuality does not change, young female performers will have to either cite previous performatives and performances of senior women, or not perform at all. Ultimately, it is the audience that decides whether these young performers will succeed as they age. As Mae West's *Sextette* illustrated, senior bodies perform sexually but audiences choose whether or not to be aroused.

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