2019-09-02

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10.1080/13528165.2019.1579022
Performance Research: a journal of the performing arts
Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Roberta Mock (roberta.mock@plymouth.ac.uk)
School of Humanities and Performing Arts, University of Plymouth
Article accepted on 28 December 2018 for *Performance Research*, Vol. 24 (2019): 'On Ageing (& Beyond)'

Ageing, Temporality and Performance:

Joan Rivers' Body of Work

Best known for her caustic and aggressive wit, which was directed at both herself and other celebrities, as well as her extensive cosmetic surgery, Joan Rivers was a pioneer of stand-up comedy and one of its most visible woman practitioners. When she died in September 2014, of complications during a routine throat operation, the Anglosphere media reacted with an overwhelming expression of collective surprise. This is at least partly because, despite being 81 years old, Rivers maintained a relentless schedule of live performances and televised appearances up to almost the moment of her death. In January 2014 alone, for instance, she appeared live four times on the shopping network QVC, selling her own branded products; recorded three episodes of her internet talk show, In Bed With Joan; and performed seven full length, hour long, solo concert shows as a stand-up in casinos, theatres and supper clubs as far apart as Arizona and Michigan. According to her website that month, her schedule also included two stand-up sets at the Laurie Beecham Theatre in New York where she tried out new material with a club audience. Demanding attention, timing, technique, skill and stamina (the latter leading many to assume the preclusion of an older performer), stand-up is a particularly high risk performance genre due to the level of engagement required with audiences. The unpredictable and often combative nature of this encounter is embedded in its very vocabulary. When a comedian does well and works with an audience to get them completely behind her, she 'kills'; if the energy and rapport aren't there, she is likely to 'die' on stage, thus metaphorically linking aesthetic, professional and physiological processes.

In stand-up, both originality and continuity are paradoxically valued in equal measure. Success – that is, (usually) laughter – is largely determined by the extent to which these align coherently with the comedian's bodily presence and her onstage

social, cultural and political positioning. We might consider such a body, as Elizabeth Grosz suggests, 'as a kind of hinge or threshold' which is 'placed between' a 'lived interiority' and a 'more socio-political exteriority that produces interiority through the inscription of the body's outer surface' (1995: 33, emphasis in original). Grosz also notes that the biological processes of lived bodies – such as, for women, menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation and menopause – 'result in very different kinds of meanings, depending on the type of (sexed) materiality to be inscribed' (1995: 36). Although this article focuses on the expression of Joan Rivers' public persona via a variety of mutually reinforcing cultural texts in the final three years of her life, her performing body had been made present through its sexual difference and attendant gendered ageing processes from the very start of her career.

A Piece of Work

Working at the Second City in Chicago in 1961,[1] Rivers alighted on the character of a desperate single girl who was approaching her marriageable shelf-life. As she noted later, 'Though I did not imagine it then, she was to become my stand-up comedy persona' (in McCrohan, 1987: 80), one that lived on to negotiate the biopolitical realities of a middle aged and, eventually, elder woman. By 1967, two years after coming to national attention via a late slot on The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson, Rivers was performing televised stand-up sets like this one on The Ed Sullivan Show:

> I'm from a little town called Larchmont where if you're a girl and you're over 21 and you're not married, you're better off dead. It's that simple, y'know. And I was the last girl in Larchmont! [Shouting at the audience:] D'you know how that feels? … When I was 21 my mother said, 'Only a doctor for you.' When I was 22 she said, 'Alright, a lawyer, a CPA.' At 24 she said, 'We'll grab a dentist.' 26 she said, 'Anything'. If he can make it to the door, he's mine, y'know. [As her mother:] 'Whattaya mean you don't like him? He's intelligent, he found the bell himself. Whattaya want?' (Rivers, 1967)

[1] The Second City is a hugely influential improvisational comedy company and venue that opened in 1959.

By then she had married for a second time (her first marriage had been annulled years earlier) but, drawing on experiential acquaintance and affect, Rivers established a presence that blurred distinctions between mimetic representation and her performing body. Although her professional practice constantly emphasised – and, some would argue, reinforced – the power of the binaries and boundaries of sex/gender matrices, Rivers also continuously destabilized both their grounding and firm recognition. Her comedy was personal and visceral: 'I am every woman's outrage,' she told one writer, 'And that's why I am screaming onstage. We have no control! I am furious about everything. All that anger and madness comes out onstage' (Rivers in Van Meter, 2010).

In Phenomenology of Perception, Maurice Merleau-Ponty compares the body to a work of art. Like the human body, a novel, poem, painting or piece of music can be considered 'a nexus of living meanings' which are only accessible through direct contact. Although they refer to other times and places, these cultural products radiate to the recipient with 'no change of their temporal and spatial location' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 175). For a performance-maker like Joan Rivers, however, the body is not simply like a work of art; it is where and how her work operates as art. The distance between mythic body and lived body is highly compressed. Indeed, Rivers herself suggested that her body, work and performance merged as and in an extended and finite professional practice: at the end of the documentary, Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work, she tells us that 'I am a performer. That is my life. That is what I am. That's it' (in Stern and Sundberg, 2010).

Performance then, for Rivers, is work that simultaneously produces the body just as it is produced through it, and the 'piece of work' of the film title refers to Rivers' body-as-self: that is, a body-in-process. The phrase is a reference to plastic surgery ('Has she had a little work done?') and is ambivalent, often used as a way of describing, or perhaps warning, that a person is unpleasant or nasty ('Ach, she's a piece of work'). Formed, or perhaps accumulated, over time, such a piece of work lives both in and as a body – even if it seems deceptively sneaky in its externality, not unlike Dorian Gray's portrait in the attic. And, just as for Oscar Wilde's protagonist, the sum total of the work is usually outed in the end – or rather, in the denouement that is ageing.

Central to Joan Rivers' persona was the way she constantly outed herself. Through the 1960s and early 1970s, her stand-up shtick revolved almost exclusively around her own undesirability (for example: 'I was so desperate I wrote my phone number on men's rooms walls. All I got were calls complaining there were no paper towels'). During the 1980s she began to combine expressions of self-loathing with vicious critiques of other celebrities; using current terms, the latter would be considered 'slut-shaming' or 'fat-shaming'. In many ways, she was rehearsing for, or even inventing the terms of, Fashion Police, a television series which Rivers hosted from 2010 to her death. In its 'Starlet or Streetwalker' feature, for instance, she and her panellists discussed a photo, usually of a woman with her face blocked out, and tried to decide whether she was a celebrity or a sex worker. Even as Rivers' persona was positioned as an arbiter of supposedly good taste, she simultaneously revelled in coarseness, vulgarity and a carnivalesque fixation with what Mikhail Bakhtin called 'the material bodily lower stratum' (Bakhtin, 1984: 240). In her memoir, Still Talking, she proposes that one of the reasons she is funny onstage is because of the juxtaposition of her look – 'a piss-elegant woman who should be talking about the latest sale at Christie's' – and the 'commonness' of 'what comes out of my mouth' (Rivers with Meryman, 1991: 126). Rivers played to women and told the jokes she said they wanted to hear about her body, their bodies and those of women in the public sphere. Working through her ambivalence, The New Yorker television critic Emily Nussbaum observed that, 'Among women, the pugilistic brutality can be delicious' and Rivers used celebrity 'goddesses … as shorthand: conduits for taboo emotions like envy, disgust, fear, the anxiety of falling short' (2015).

The vulva was the liminal sweet spot of Joan Rivers' comedy. In the 1980s, she asked women in her audiences what size Tampax they wore and if they, like her, sniffed the crotch of their pantyhose before deciding whether or not to wash them. Toward the end of the life, she was joking about how she knew that the actor Jennifer Aniston didn't douche or wax her pubic hair because they shared a gynaecologist and could thus smell when Aniston's appointment preceded her own. As importantly, the vagina was symbolic of Rivers' own relationship with ageing. The following routine about vaginal prolapses appears in her final concert show video, Don't Start With Me. This 'special' was filmed in Chicago in 2012 but it scaffolds hyperbolically on versions that she had been performing for at least five years:

> Vaginas fall. You can't get upset. Oh grow up! Vaginas drop. I had no idea. I had no idea. Eight years ago I looked down, I said, 'Why am I wearing a bunny slipper?' [She looks down.] It is… [She peers out at the audience, as if confused] And why is it grey? [Pauses for audience laughter.] I had no idea. My friend Margie didn't know, didn't know either, and she's starting to lose her eyesight. And she was in the kitchen. She thought it was a mouse. She went [Suddenly stamps on something on the floor. Screams. Bends over and mimes picking up her squashed vagina and holding it in the palm of her hand. Staggers across stage]. And I had to take her to the hospital. And we had a 26 year old nurse in the ER. [As the nurse:] 'So what happened?' [As 'herself':] 'She stepped on her vagina.' [As the nurse:] 'What?!' [As herself:] 'Show her, Margie.' [As Margie, holding out hands towards audience in a pathetic manner.] But now we use it for good. She lives in California. We use it for earthquakes. 'Here comes an earthquake! Quick, suction!' [She spits in her hand and mimes sticking the 'vagina' to the floor. Stands waving to the crowd from this secure, fixed position.] (Rivers, 2012a)

For Merleau-Ponty, the 'aesthesiological body' is neither a thing nor an idea (1968: 152). It is – like the one signalled through Margie's vagina in the above routine – a disposition or a dimension and the cohesion of its parts mirrors the cohesion of the body with the world. He chose the word invagination to designate how the visible surface of the body is extended 'with an invisible reserve' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 152). Through 'provisional partitioning', invagination creates the possibility of and condition for the operation of the sensible. The use of this particular term, to describe the 'doubled up over' relationship between interior and exterior 'horizons' of 'flesh' as one of 'refolding', seems particularly apt in the context of a discussion about the work of Joan Rivers.

The Labouring Menopausal Body

In The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt notes that work is a process of fabrication, of making things, and that it has definite beginnings and endings. Labour, on the other hand, revolves around the body's cyclical life processes and therefore lacks a clear-cut starting or finishing point (Arendt, 1958: 144). As a performance-maker, Rivers fabricated a living, inscribed body in specific historical moments, but it was simultaneously a labouring body subject to organic cycles of growth, metabolism, reproduction and death. In 1968, Rivers announced her pregnancy on The Tonight Show; she went into labour while performing the first of two sets at the New York nightclub, Upstairs at the Downstairs; by the time her daughter, Melissa, was twelve

days old, she was back on television, being interviewed by Johnny Carson about her experience (Rivers with Currie, 2017: 83-84). One of her last interviews before she died was with gynaecologist Pamela Dee Gaudry for the documentary Love, Sweat and Tears (Jacobs, 2016), made to promote sexual health and intimacy during and after menopause. Gaudry explains that she is 'on a mission to save menopausal vaginas in America.' 'Well, sign me up,' says Rivers in response, but she had actually enlisted long before.

It is 1984 and Rivers is mid-way through her three year stint as the first permanent guest host of The Tonight Show, replacing Carson when he was unavailable. She is 51 years old, the average age of US women at the time of menopause. Many would consider Rivers to be at the height of her career in terms of achievement, recognition and reach. Wearing a sequinned zebra-patterned tunic and enormous swingy earrings, she speaks to both the studio audience and the popular heart of 'late night' America. This is part of her opening monologue:

> I'm getting a little older. [To an audience member she had previously been talking to:] You can't see that, can you, Judy? [Without waiting for a response, while sweeping her hand in faux narcissism through her hair:] Oh thank you. [Begins stuttering. Back to Judy:] How old are you? [Judy answers.] 27. Me too! [Audience starts laughing] And yet [She frowns sternly at audience:] Oh shut up! [Pointing to her face:] Pollution did this! I had a hot flush yesterday so bad that it melted my IUD. I'm at the age [Pauses and makes a 'yech' face as if catching up with her joke.] Y'know [Suddenly looks down at the floor. In shocked surprise, as if she notices a puddle at her feet:] Ohhhhhhh! [Then stands up laughing]. (Rivers, 1984)

In this moment, Rivers is a (relatively) powerful woman with cultural capital speaking from, through and about a perimenopausal body to mainstream America: a body she's explicitly associating, via a (presumably soon to be unnecessary) intrauterine birth control device, to sexual activity. Despite the perfectly crafted one-liner at its centre, this is a performance text that relies as heavily on her speaking body as spoken words to convey an individual subjective sense of time based on biological experience. Moreover, running alongside the temporality of the body's processes of transformation and obsolescence – a material, labouring, body that is overtly presenting itself as sexed – is the constructed aesthetic-cultural time of a stand-up 'routine'.

Stand-up comedy tends to be dictated by a system of what Richard Schechner calls 'set time', in which a fairly arbitrary time pattern is imposed on an event that – echoing Arendt's understanding of 'work' – must begin and end at certain moments (Schechner, 2003: 8). Participants therefore shape their activity to maximise efficacy within this frame and it is probably no coincidence that the performance forms Schechner identifies with set time are competitive sporting events. When we refer to a stand-up set or routine, the terminology implies that audiences are experiencing work that is constructed fundamentally with a fixed time period in mind and also that it has been and will be repeated. The latter is reinforced through the periodic appearance of live recordings or 'specials', consolidating a comedian's most recent material. What this means is that stand-up audiences are almost always already aware of multiple temporalities at play: a set or routine is not simply 'one of a succession of instances of now' (Merleau-Ponty, 2002: 479, original emphasis) – that is, Heidegger's theory of time that Merleau-Ponty rubbished – but also a smooth duration that characterises a performer's career as a whole in its becoming. Performance events and performing bodies, in specific moments, thus activate the ghostings, reanimations and accumulations of previous performances – in other words, a single performance by a practitioner like Rivers does not just stand in for, but manifests, her body of work. Repetition of material is acceptable for as long as the body of the performer communicates coherently in its nowness. Similarly, new material must speak to and from a perception of bodily reality, or what Grosz would characterise as 'the mutual relations between bodily inscription and lived experience' (1995: 232).

In 2012, thirty-eight years after joking about the strength of her hot flushes on The Tonight Show, Rivers employed the same mannerisms and gestures as a postmenopausal woman (looking down, activating her audience's visualisation of a scene she has just conjured, followed by mock horror/surprise: 'Ohhhhhhh!'). Once again, she is extending a scenario that had been central to her act for some time:

> [M]en like women with periods. Every woman here, if you go through menopause, don't talk about it. To this day, to this day, I carry a tampon in my purse. [Responding to the audience:] No no no. If I'm at a party, and nobody's paying attention, I open my purse and drop it. [Jumps back in faux surprise and looks down at floor:] Ohhhhhhh! [Covering her face, cringing and smiling] 'I could just die! I'm having such cramps'. [Unconvincingly:] 'Oo oo oo'. And if

> they still don't notice I'll take it out of my purse and swing it around. [Lassoing with imaginary tampon string above her head.] And if they still don't notice, I stick it in ketchup and then I swing it around [Mimes flicking tampon on string above her head as if splattering the room]. (Rivers, 2012a)

This is a routine about the subjectivity of the postmenopausal body, about the disappearance of older women and their desire, about the heteronormative conflation of fertility and attractiveness, and about recognising the changing nature of women's bodies over time.[2] As a trickster creating interference in the visual field through fantastic auxesis, Rivers forced her audiences both to imagine absurd detail and to recognise the scopic regime which limits how older female bodies are read, and thereby erased, in the public realm. At the same time, she was consolidating a world around and through spatio-temporal experience, exemplifying how a body in the field of performance can be both subject and object, operating at the centre of 'an ambiguity between the perceptual and the habitational' (Garner, 1994: 4).

Interior and Exterior Horizons

A year before her death, the Mail Online (the website of the sensationalist British tabloid, the Daily Mail) published a short article to accompany a series of photographs of Rivers driving a mobility scooter on a Hollywood pavement. She is presented as 'a comedy legend' who is 'clearly loving the privileges that come with age' (Dodge, 2013). It is never implied that, as an octogenarian (a fact which is repeatedly reinforced), Rivers might need the scooter; its use is always presented as a whim or perhaps even a faintly undeserved favour. Foreshadowed by a rather subtle allusion to cosmetic surgery in its headline ('Now that's a lift!'), and with no reference to the photographs, the article then quotes the father of Lindsay Lohan who – apparently angry about the way Rivers ridiculed his celebrity daughter while Lohan was in rehab the previous month – said that Rivers had 'more embalming fluid in her body than most mortuaries have on their shelves'. While the first part of the article disassociates the codification of Rivers' body as elderly from its constitution as

[2] I discuss an earlier version of this routine, recorded in 2007 for the BBC's Live at the Apollo, in these terms (Mock, 2012: 17); this is situated in an article that explores how a number of older women comedians such as Rivers, Roseanne Barr, Phyllis Diller and LaWanda Page, explicitly refer to their vaginas as a playful discursive strategy.

a living subject, the inclusion of Lohan's joke/insult serves as an attempt to reassert the relationship between physiological interior and surface exteriority.

This dialectic is echoed in Rivers' own self presentation as old but not *an old person*. The narrative conceit of the full-length show Rivers was performing throughout 2012 (billed in the UK as the 'Now or Never' tour) was that she had reached the age at which she was free to choose to whom she will perform:

> So some of you are going to be asked to leave. So please go fucking quietly. I don't want you to make a scene. Old people, let's start with you. Get the fuck out. I hate old people. I mean [She makes a 'stupid-looking' face with her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth]. And you know who you are. You're sitting there damp. Ach. I hate you and I hate you ahead of me on a checkout line. And they sign a cheque! – oh don't do this! I'm double parked and this bitch says [in 'old' quavering voice:] 'I'll give you a cheque'. [She mimes slowly and shakily signing a cheque.] (Rivers, 2012a)

Thus, in a recording of a live show marketed with the title Don't Start With Me, Rivers starts with 'old people' who are othered in the second person as explicitly not her. However, in the book published the same year, I Hate Everyone…Starting With Me, she tells us in the opening chapter that – now that she is no longer fat, as she was as a child – what she hates about herself is her 'decreptitude'. This is immediately associated, again, with the dampness of the aged body: 'Getting old sucks! Everything is confusing. Sometimes late at night I wake up with this hot, moist feeling and I'm not sure if I'm having an orgasm or a stroke' (Rivers, 2012b: 8). I Hate Everyone… includes a chapter entitled 'Tick-Tock' which begins by categorising four types of old people: 'Regular', 'Old and annoying', 'Old and infirm' and 'Just not dead yet' (2012b: 36). The nine pages that follow (in addition to the next nine, which focus on death) feature a selection of the thousands of jokes in her immaculately catalogued filing cabinets; Rivers appears in the first person across all four categories, although most frequently as what we might interpret as a 'regular old person'.

Don't Start With Me features an extended routine in which Rivers mimes pushing a wheelchair up a ramp – back and forth and back and forth across the stage, taking time and taking space – because its user refuses to attempt to walk up 'three fucking steps'. She claims a right to joke about such matters in the show (which also mocks

blind and deaf people) because her former partner was an amputee. Perhaps she was, uncharacteristically, staving off potential criticism. There's an extraordinary scene in A Piece of Work during which Rivers is performing live in Wisconsin when she is interrupted by a heckler. He is offended by a joke about Helen Keller, who was a deaf mute, and after a brief exchange, challenges her to explain 'what comedy's about'. Rivers responds:

> Comedy is to make everybody laugh at everything and deal with things, you idiot. My mother is deaf, you stupid son of a bitch…. 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. (Rivers in Stern and Sundberg, 2010)

Rivers' voice – the normally highly controlled engine of her professional mastery – breaks and wavers in attack mode when her professional judgement is called into question.

For Merleau-Ponty, speech is a bodily expression which is both spatial and temporal: 'the intention to speak can reside only in an open experience. It makes its appearance like the boiling point of a liquid, when, in the density of being, volumes of empty space are built up and move outwards' (2002: 228). He goes on to quote neurologist and psychologist Kurt Goldstein, for whom the use of language to 'establish a living relation' with yourself or others is 'a revelation of intimate being' (in 2002: 228, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis). However spontaneous and interactive stand-up appears for a performer like Joan Rivers, it is a highly crafted genre in which interactivity and spontaneity are the effects of technique and extended practice. When Rivers begins to respond to the heckler, we witness a complex phenomenological process of externalisation. It overrides Rivers' professional bodily control before being conquered, or submerged, when she is able to access and return to the scripted jokes in her memory archive. We may certainly argue about the ethical implications of Rivers' response in this moment of exchange – given what might be interpreted as the audience member's evident emotional rawness and her own agentive status in that space – but she did meet this pain with her own embodied openness, the only 'truth' she could articulate in that moment.

It is perhaps an understatement that Rivers polarized opinion, even toward the end of her life. For some, by then, she was an ubiquitously present elder who refused to conform to long-standing stereotypes of asexuality, comfortably able to thrive in a rapidly shifting cultural landscape of surgically enhanced bodies, surveillance as entertainment and public confession. For others, Rivers was both over- and inappropriately constructed, and also narcissistically or jealously mean-spirited. Often, interpretations of interior motive – echoing Goldstein's characterisation of speech as 'revelation of intimate being' – inflected judgements of her physical attractiveness. As Elizabeth Grosz has discussed, when bodies are considered constructions of subjectivity, they tend to be '"read" by others as expressive of a subject's psychic interior'. This is especially the case for the medicalized body that is 'pliable to power, a machinic structure in which "components" can be altered, adjusted, removed, or replaced' (Grosz, 1995: 35, original emphasis).

As she aged, Rivers was increasingly exemplary of a population of older women who *take care of themselves* by disciplining their bodies and yet still believe that they are rendered invisible in a youth-obsessed sexual economy. In 2009, she published a book entitled Men are Stupid and They Like Big Boobs: A Women's Guide to Beauty through Plastic Surgery, comprising fifteen chapters which each focused on a different type of process or procedure. She helpfully placed asterisks beside chapter titles in the table of contents to indicate if she'd had this work done herself; at that point, she acknowledged eleven procedures in total, starting with an eye lift in 1965. In the introduction, she writes that 'I've been the (lifted) public face for cosmetic enhancement since the Stone Age…. My abiding life philosophy is plain: In our appearance-centric society, beauty is a huge factor in one's professional and emotional success – for good or ill' (Rivers with Frankel, 2009: 2, original emphasis). A pragmatic acceptance that quality of life, especially for women, is dependent to a greater or lesser extent on one's attractiveness was at the heart of Rivers' work for over fifty years. It is this that underpinned one of her signature catchphrases, 'Oh grow up!', spoken with exasperation after an audience groaned or expressed disbelief.

For Rivers, growing up – ageing, at whatever stage in life – was not about niceties or conforming to 'age appropriate' behaviour; rather, it was about fostering a steely acknowledgement of cultural and social capital that begins with the body, often within

an acute understanding of specifically gendered class structures. While Rivers' staged body was libidinal, it never prioritized male pleasure. Sexual activity was a transaction. This is from Don't Start With Me:

> Can we talk anal sex for just one second? Oh, for a busy woman. I mean multi-tasking at its finest. It is so great. You can have a man fucking you away and you can do your internet. It is so good. [Leaning over stool and looking down at imaginary phone.] You can answer all your emails. [Pretends to scroll down screen while still being fucked from behind:] And now that you can get Netflix! Oh! [As if to person she's having sex with, watching a movie still bent over:] 'Take your time!' (Rivers, 2012a)

Emily Nussbaum noted that, for Rivers, 'there was little use in trying to change, or even reason with, men: you just needed to find a way to get their attention, then harness their power as your own' (2015). Like sex, her cosmetic surgery consciously performed a fluid moebius strip of self-affirmation and self-commodification. A body, such as Rivers', that is produced to 'speak social codes' inevitably becomes what Grosz describes as 'intextuated [and] narrativised' (1995: 35).

Invagination

Following Merleau-Ponty's articulation of a somatic ontology that locates perception in the indeterminate spaces between interior/exterior and subject/object binaries, Jacques Derrida (1980) claimed the word 'invagination' as textual strategy. Derrida, unlike Merleau-Ponty, acknowledged its association with sexual difference and, by frequently employing the 'hymen' as metaphor, those sex traits associated with women's bodies. The word for gender, in French, is the same as for genre, the ostensible topic of his essay. Although Derrida's focus is on literature, he claims that his modelling can apply to any generic categorisation; all genres, like bodies, are involved somehow with 'engendering, generations, genealogy, and degenerescence' (Derrida, 1980: 74) and all are predicated on a line, or 'trait', which marks belonging. By folding the outside edge in on itself (so that the trait is both within *and* delineating the border of a single text), invagination both defines and contaminates generic inclusion through excess, disrupts 'spatial or temporal sequentiality' (Derrida, 1980: 70), and destabilizes the narrative 'I'. If such effects are noticeable in Joan Rivers' enfolding of her talk show and reality television persona – that is, her intextuated and

narrativized body – into her formal stand-up 'act', they are even more pronounced in representational genres of performance characterised by their use of 'symbolic time'.

This is perhaps most evident in the made-for-television movie, Tears and Laughter: The Joan and Melissa Rivers Story (also released as Starting Again). Filmed in 1994, it is a dramatised reconstruction of the events of 1987, Rivers' annus horribilis, with Rivers and her daughter playing their slightly younger selves. Inserted within the narrative, presumably in the present tense, is Rivers performing a faux stand-up routine to camera. The first time she appears in this mode, she explains that, in 1987, she had a hysterectomy, was fired from her talk show, and her husband, Edgar Rosenberg, had triple bypass surgery, then a nervous breakdown and then committed suicide. The effect of this metaperformance, without a mediating 'live' audience in the space with her, is disconcerting; Rivers lacks coherence 'as text' even as she plays 'herself'. In the 2012 stand-up routine discussed earlier in this article, in which she mimes sticking her friend's vagina to the floor, she is impossibly both 'now' and 'then'; at no point in this movie does she seem to be either.

In similar contrast to Tears and Laughter is the apparent authenticity of her appearance on the comedian Louis C.K.'s 'fictional' sitcom, Louis, in 2011. In this episode, Rivers and C.K. are performing in the same Trump casino. After he 'dies' on stage, turns on the audience and quits the gig, C.K. watches Rivers' act in the 'big room' from the wings; she's killing with her vaginal prolapse 'bunny slipper' routine and jokes about how things aren't much better for ageing male bodies ('Their balls, you put a man over 50 on the toilet, it looks like he's making a cup of tea'). After the show, having a drink in her room, Rivers tells C.K. that he has to start acting like a professional, to stop blaming the audience and 'whining like a little bitch', and to remember that careers change over time: 'It goes up and goes down. I thought I had the lock on old. Lock on old. And then guess what? Back from the dead: Betty White. Dusted off her old dumb tits and trotted them out' (C.K., 2011).

A year later, Rivers made her final sitcom appearance, with White, in the series Hot in Cleveland. Although neither played 'herself', it was a performance that responded to and reinforced their extended star texts as elder women in the public sphere. One of the most common rhetorical questions surrounding Rivers was articulated by a Mail Online below-the-line commentator who wondered 'what she would look like

without all the plastic surgery and if she just aged naturally' (Dodge, 2013). The Hot in Cleveland episode offers an answer, via the body of Betty White. When it was filmed, White was 90 years old and yet she and Rivers, a decade younger, play twin sisters. Their characters have been separated, following an argument neither can remember, for forty years:

> Betty/Elka: What have you done to our face?
> Joan/Anka: Me? What about you? Natural ageing! Disgusting! (Trainer, 2012)

It is a scenario that echoes Rivers' appearance on the medical drama set in a cosmetic surgery clinic, Nip/Tuck (a phrase which itself resonates with Merleau-Ponty's 'folding back' of the flesh to exhibit a condition of visibility), in which, using her birth name, Joan Alexandra Molinsky, she asks the surgeons to undo all the work she has had done as Joan Rivers (Murphy, 2004). Rivers well understood how her enhanced body signified and, especially in her later years, strategies of generic invagination enabled her experimentation with alternative scenarios and futurities that centred on and extended this body as text.

Death was one such future occurrence: for Rivers, it was nothing less than what Mark Taylor described as the inaccessible 'gaping wound' formed by Merleau-Ponty's 'process of folding and refolding' (Taylor, 1987: 72). At the end of the episode of Louis, C.K. lunges at Rivers, attempting to kiss her. At first, she seems angry and horrified, but then agrees to have sex with him subject to a number of caveats, among them that – for his own sake – he must not tell anyone: 'Nobody likes necrophiliacs,' she explains as they head off to bed. Rivers referred to her own death frequently, simultaneously separating and reinforcing its association with ageing. Her work – conflated with her lived and living body – fed off its inevitability and was constituted through mortality. Rivers equated retirement with death: 'I make deals with God all the time. "Give me ten more good years and I'll call it a day." Age is the one thing that is absolutely coming at you…. My manager was just here today. He said, "There's very little left, timewise." But I can do it!' (in Van Meter, 2010). When she died, tickets were on sale for a series of UK stand-up dates marketed as the 'Quick...Before They Close The Lid (Seriously...this one could be IT!)' tour.

The last time I saw Rivers perform live, in 2012 (at Colston Hall in Bristol), she asked us, 'If I dropped dead on this stage, would you get your money's worth?', making explicit Herbert Blau's famous articulation of the defining paradox of theatre, that 'the person performing in front of you is dying in front of your eyes' (2004: 158); it's just a matter of time and timing. The Guardian critic who saw Rivers' show the same week reflected that, 'At 79, Rivers is ageing heroically, getting nastier and livelier where others are stoical. This isn't raging against the dying of the light – it's throwing yourself headlong into the darkness and coming back with a supernova' (Logan, 2012). Rivers always refused to perform her own obituary tribute act, one neatly smoothed out in its looking back. If she had died on that night, she would have been very much in the present, in flux: a difficult, inscribed, desiring, working body that she told us was failing, but was very much alive. It is also significant that, although she did not end up literally dying on stage, her death was directly linked to the servicing and maintenance of the tool of her professional discursive practice, that of giving voice.[3] In emphasising the tensions between interiority and exteriority that operate as seams, folds and fault lines, Rivers enabled deep vertical connections to the historicity of her performing body, as well as affective horizontal ones with audiences in the moment of reception.

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[3] Erroneously, although not unrelated, it is regularly stated that Rivers died during routine cosmetic surgery.

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