

Kathy Cacace  
MALS 70000  
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**Oh, How Hack! Oh, How Unnerving!  
Subverting the Double Taboo of Menstruation in Stand-Up Comedy**

*So, many of us menstruate, with great frequency and skill. But the most we see about it is TV commercials in which a gaggle of skinny, somber women in tailored suits gather on a rotating platform to pour blue water on a single, state-of-the-art maxi pad. We don't even have proof that these women are menstruating. Yet, we are not free to make raucous bloody tampon jokes in front of important clients at sales meetings.*

--Sharon Wachsler<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

Amy Schumer, in her 2012 televised stand-up comedy special *Mostly Sex Stuff*, riffs on semen for approximately two minutes.<sup>2</sup> She refuses to swallow it during oral sex (“I have a nut allergy!”). She refutes the claim that it is good for her skin (“Fuck you, guys!”). She notes the copious amount produced by her sexual partner (“Did you just get out of jail?”). She dissects what she sees as the universal male desire to see his female partner covered in semen (“If it were up to them, we’d all look like Carrie in the prom scene at the end.”) Similarly, Louis C.K. on his album *Hilarious* ascribes to semen a certain metaphorical heft as a symbol of male sexual frustration (“Those are the most dangerous guys, the dudes that didn’t get laid...just full of cum coming out of their eyes.”).<sup>3</sup>

While it may seem counterintuitive to begin discussing the taboos surrounding menstruation in stand-up comedy with a catalogue of jokes about semen, it is critical to first

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Wachsler, “A Bloody Good Topic. Period,” *Off Our Backs* 35, no. 11/12 (2005): 25.

<sup>2</sup> Amy Schumer, *Mostly Sex Stuff*, Comedy Central, 2012, television special.

<sup>3</sup> Louis C.K., *Hilarious*, Comedy Central Records, 2011, compact disc.

understand how the body and its functions and fluids serve as an endless source of fuel for comedy. Further, it illustrates *which* bodies and *which* fluids are deemed acceptable topics by the institution of American stand-up comedy, and by wider American popular discourse. Within the bounds of casual conversation, even a non-comedian might easily joke about throwing up, about runny noses, about having to pee. The bawdier among us may punctuate a sentence with a “jerk-off” motion. Even children learn to use their bodies to create a symphony of faux flatulence. But, as Sharon Wachsler notes in *Off Our Backs*, it is considered taboo to mention one’s bloody tampon in virtually any setting outside a doctor’s office or a conversation between the most intimate of intimates.<sup>4</sup>

Female—particularly feminist—stand-up comedians who do choose to discuss their period<sup>5</sup> as part of their act must reckon with this entrenched cultural taboo, but also with a secondary comedy taboo that categorizes menstruation as a hacky<sup>6</sup> topic, and therefore unworthy to explore on stage. The goal of this essay is to shed light on both of these taboos in order to understand how three contemporary female comedians break them. Schumer, Margaret Cho and Cameron Esposito each broach the topic of menstruation with the intent to subvert gendered assumptions about women’s experience, status, and agency both inside and outside the comedy world.

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<sup>4</sup> Wachsler, “A Bloody Good Topic,” 25-26.

<sup>5</sup> It is not the goal of this paper to equate menstruation with womanhood. Many women do not menstruate due to age, illness, biology, pregnancy, physical and mental stress, or even by choice, through use of birth control drugs or other medical interventions. Alternatively, transgender men and other individuals who do not identify as women can and do menstruate. My focus is on menstruation as a culturally gendered biological process. For an excellent first person account of non-female menstruation, see Wiley Reading’s “My Period and Me: A Trans Guy’s Guide to Menstruation” published on the *Everyday Feminism* blog: <http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/11/trans-guys-guide-menstruation/>

<sup>6</sup> “Hacky” is defined by Merriam-Webster as unoriginal or hackneyed. For an extended meditation on hack comedy, see comedian Joe Fernandez’s “Definition of a Hack,” published on the *Comedy of Chicago* blog: <http://www.comedyofchicago.com/2013/01/definition-of-hack-by-joe-fernandez.html>

### **Menstrual Technology, Advertising, and the Creation of an American Cultural Taboo**

Prior to the wide availability of the modern sanitary napkin in the early twentieth century United States, menstrual technology for nearly all American women was rudimentary at best. Though wealthy women might have been able to invest in pricey, hard-to-find rubber undergarments that would protect one's expensive outer dress from menstrual blood, most women rigged a homemade system of rags to absorb their menstrual flow or used nothing at all.<sup>7</sup> This lack of adequate menstrual technology, existing cultural shame surrounding women's bodies and their functions, and a biased medical model of menstruation created a closed circuit of isolation. Shame rooted in religious tradition and patriarchal social mores caused women to want to hide their menses. Poor menstrual technology prohibited women from doing so, which in turn caused them to remain in the domestic sphere during menstruation, if possible. The medical establishment reinforced self-quarantine by pathologizing women's bodily functions as an illness requiring bed rest, indicative of the general weakness and inferiority of women's bodies, thus creating further shame.<sup>8</sup>

Twentieth century advances in menstrual technology are strongly linked to women's ability to move beyond the home and more fully participate in modern American society—a link that was created as much by consumerism as it was pragmatism. The invention of cellulocotton bandages during World War I led to Kotex's development of the first modern sanitary pad, the

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<sup>7</sup> Elissa Stein and Susan Kim, *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation*, New York, St. Martin's Griffin, 2009: page 92.

<sup>8</sup> Roseann M. Mandziuk, "'Ending Women's Greatest Hygienic Mistake': Modernity and the Mortification of Menstruation in Kotex Advertising, 1921-1926," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 3/4 (2010): 42-62.

affordability and disposability of which did provide a significant advantage to menstruating women over a knot of old towels.<sup>9</sup> Setting aside practical benefits of the sanitary pad like comfort and convenience, Kotex's marketing of its new product invented the American public discourse around menstruation—a dialogue limited by secrecy and the subordination of women's bodies and experiences to social seamliness.

Early Kotex print ads in women's magazines like *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal* were the first widespread acknowledgement of menstruation in the public sphere, since information about menstruation and menstrual technology had previously passed privately from mother to daughter or between female peers. In order to sell sanitary pads, Kotex had to devise ways to reference menstruation that would not violate entrenched cultural aversion to the topic. Kotex advertisements run in magazines between 1921 and 1926 succeeded by replacing the invisibility of menstruation in public discourse with the more socially significant promise of invisible physical menstruation for an individual woman. Yes, an advertisement might wincingly hint at absorbency and therefore at menstrual flow, but in turn American women were able menstruate secretly both inside and outside the home, in the company of men and women alike, and with confidence that she would cause no one discomfort by exposing a taboo bodily function.

Thus, menstruation crept into public discourse not through women or for the benefit of women, and only as far as was needed for Kotex to profit. In fact, one of these early advertisements insisted that a woman need not ever utter the words "menstruation" or "sanitary napkin" out loud. A woman need only ask a store clerk for Kotex, thereby turning

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<sup>9</sup> Mandziuk, "Ending Women's Greatest Hygienic Mistake."

their brand name into the secret password for access to the sphere outside her home.<sup>10</sup> Once the connection between public discourse of menstruation and consumerism is laid bare, it is particularly insidious that women have for generations learned to speak about menstruation from advertisements presented as educational material.

Beginning in the 1940s and continuing through the present, many girls first learn about menstruation through corporate sponsored health education films screened in schools and accompanied by a free branded sanitary pad. Sharra L. Vostral's "Advice to Adolescents: Menstrual Health and Menstrual Education Films, 1946-1982" notes that while there were also unsponsored public health films shown to school girls, films sponsored by Kimberly-Clark, Johnson & Johnson and other menstrual product manufacturers were more frequently viewed in schools across the country, and more enduring.<sup>11</sup> Sponsored films particularly stressed stocking up on menstrual products prior to a girl's first period and frequent changing of those products, but both sponsored and unsponsored films communicated problematic ideas like avoiding physical activity and resisting mood swings for the benefit of a girl's family and friends.

Vostral uses the language of "passing" to explain how a girl was taught by these films to conceal any potential discomfort in order to present as her "normal" self during her period. Following the script originated by Kotex in the 1920s, menstrual education films taught girls prior to the onset of menses that a silent and invisible period was desirable, key to maintaining one's femininity, and possible only with branded modern menstrual technologies. Advertising

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<sup>10</sup> Mandziuk, "Ending Women's Greatest Hygienic Mistake."

<sup>11</sup> Sharra L. Vostral, "Advice to Adolescents: Menstrual Health and Menstrual Education Films, 1946-1982," in *Gender, Health, and Popular Culture: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Cheryl Krasnick Warsh (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2011), 47-64.

created the expectation that a woman could and should menstruate with good cheer, orienting the definition of successful menstruation toward the outside world and away from the woman herself. And despite visibility in the twenty-first century of menstrual technology in print, online, and on television, any expansion of cultural dialogue provided by these advertisements is illusory at best because it is based on a blueprint that values secrecy surrounding women's actual bodies, their actual symptoms, and actual menses. It is within this framework that we still see television advertisements use unnatural blue liquid to demonstrate the effectiveness of sanitary pads. It is within this framework that even Judy Blume's young adult book *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret* (1970), a book meant to wrangle with fears about the onset of female adolescence, dispatches the main character's first period with the cursory description, "There was blood on [my underpants.] Not a lot—but enough."<sup>12</sup>

What is a lot? What is enough? What is too much? What color was it? What did it feel like? For more than a century, advertising has dictated the boundaries of what may and may not be discussed with regard to menstruation, reinforcing instead of overturning historical attitudes and creating a taboo that even the most well-meaning among us—Judy Blume included—find it difficult to break. It is here that the role of comedy, with its inherent lack of regard for social decorum, becomes an important tool.

### **Gendered Roles and Hack Jokes: Comedy's Menstrual Taboo**

There is little question that American stand-up comedy has been a traditionally male-dominated art form, and the contemporary dialogue surrounding women in comedy has

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<sup>12</sup> Judy Blume, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1970), Kindle edition.

sometimes placed the blame for this disparity squarely on the shoulders of women themselves. Since its publication in *Vanity Fair* in 2007, Christopher Hitchens' essay "Why Women Aren't Funny"<sup>13</sup> has become the cultural touchstone for contemporary arguments against (and backlash in favor of) female comedy.<sup>14</sup> Hitchens accepts as fact women's unfunniness, and early in the essay supports his view with a venomous pseudoscientific argument that borders on social Darwinism. Discussing a study on the brain's responses to humor, Hitchens explains:

"'Women appeared to have less expectation of a reward, which in this case was the punch line of the cartoon,' said the report's author, Dr. Allan Reiss. 'So when they got to the joke's punch line, they were more pleased about it.' The report also found that 'women were quicker at identifying material they considered unfunny.'

Slower to get it, more pleased when they do, and swift to locate the unfunny—for this we need the Stanford University School of Medicine? And remember, this is women *confronted* with humor. Is it any wonder that they are backward in generating it?"

Problematic as this piece was—and remains—Hitchens both voiced an existing belief that women are unfit for stand-up comedy and helped spur a groundswell of support in favor of women's comedy over the ensuing eight years. The 2011 film *Bridesmaids* is widely cited<sup>15</sup> as a watershed moment in acting roles for funny women, as is the work of Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Kristen Wiig, and Melissa McCarthy. Notable too is the recent successful viewer-driven campaign to cast an African-American female performer on *Saturday Night Live*, which resulted

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<sup>13</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "Why Women Aren't Funny," *Vanity Fair*, January 2007. Accessed via The Wayback Machine, [web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org).

<sup>14</sup> Its staying power is exasperating for at least some female comedians and comedy writers. In a recent interview with comedian Jen Kirkman in *VICE Australia*, journalist Courtney DeWitt exclaims "Can we stop writing thinkpieces on *Vanity Fair* bullshit from ten years ago?" (Source: [http://www.vice.com/en\\_au/read/this-jen-kirkman-interview-is-not-about-rape-jokes-being-dirty-or-acting-crazy](http://www.vice.com/en_au/read/this-jen-kirkman-interview-is-not-about-rape-jokes-being-dirty-or-acting-crazy))

<sup>15</sup> Dana Stevens, "Bridesmaids: The raunchy women's comedy we've been waiting for," *Slate*, May 12, 2011, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2011/05/bridesmaids.html>

in the 2014 hire of both Sasheer Zamata<sup>16</sup> and Leslie Jones. Despite these incremental steps, and a cultural climate that has relegated overt screeds like Hitchens' to YouTube comment sections, the accounts of Twitter trolls, and other fringe platforms, the historic association between men and stand-up comedy remains a subtle, pervasive, and powerful force.

This masculine gendering of comedy becomes visible if one unpacks the ways in which contemporary comedians discuss their art form. A poignant example is the widely praised keynote address at the 2011 Just for Laughs comedy festival, in which veteran comedian and acclaimed podcaster Marc Maron admits the redemptive power of comedy saved him from suicide.<sup>17</sup> His paean to the art form describes the job of the comedian as:

“...the opportunity to be funny in front of as many people as possible and share our point of view, entertain, tell some jokes, crunch some truths, release some of the tension that builds up in people, in the culture and ourselves.”

This concept of comedy as a vehicle for human truth is one that caught traction in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly with the groundbreaking and political work of Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor, and George Carlin—comedians who flaunted social decorum to tackle difficult topics like race, obscenity, and politics. In fact, Maron's own podcast *WTF with Marc Maron* helps to perpetuate a hagiographic image of the truth-telling comedian. Though its scope has broadened since its inception to include many types of performers, *WTF* began as a one-on-one interview show between Maron and other comedians as a chronicle of their lives and craft. It is

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<sup>16</sup> Kevin Fallon, “Finally! ‘Saturday Night Live’ Hires Sasheer Zamata, First Black Female Cast Member in 5 Years,” *The Daily Beast*, January 6, 2014, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/01/06/finally-saturday-night-live-hires-sasheer-zamata-first-black-female-cast-member-in-five-years.html>

<sup>17</sup> Marc Maron, “First Things First,” Keynote address, Just for Laughs Comedy Conference, 2011. Accessed via Sean L. McCarthy, “Marc Maron's Powerful Keynote Address at Montreal's JFL 2011,” <http://thecomicscomic.com/2011/07/28/marc-marons-powerful-keynote-address-at-montreals-jfl-2011/>

telling, then, that the first three hundred episodes, arguably the most comedy-focused, feature 252 different male comedians and just forty-two female comics.<sup>18</sup>

While Maron's guest list may point to the relative rarity of the successful or influential female standup comedian, a more troublesome merging of masculinity with the very identity of the stand-up comic comes later in his keynote address. Maron's poetic description of the average comedian's daily grind reveals this bias:

"We risk all sense of security and the possibility of living stable lives to do comedy. We are out there in B rooms, dive bars, coffee shops, bookstores and comedy clubs trying to find the funny, trying to connect, trying to interpret our problems and the world around us and make it into jokes...We are out there fighting the good fight against our own weaknesses: battling courageously with internet porn, booze, pills, weed, blow, hookers, hangers on, sad angry girls we can't get out of our room, Twitter trolls and broken relationships."

While any person of any gender might identify with how he evokes addiction or isolation, here Maron also implies that "we," the universal comedian, is both heterosexual and male. In contrast, the only women in his portrait of the comedy world are sad, angry prostitutes and groupies.

Because comedy has historically been controlled by men and produced for an audience that is presumed to be male,<sup>19</sup> the merit of individual jokes or topics is also subject to gendered bias. In a beloved *National Lampoon* satire called "The Hack's Handbook: A Starter Kit," comedian Andy Kindler, tongue firmly in cheek, instructs the wannabe hack that "you'll be getting laughs—*big* laughs—for material you thought was tired years ago."<sup>20</sup> Kindler walks the

<sup>18</sup> This statistic was gathered via Maron's Episode Guide on his website, [www.wtfpod.com](http://www.wtfpod.com).

<sup>19</sup> For an in-depth discussion of gendered presumptions about the stand-up comedy audience, see M. Alison Kibler's "Gender Conflict and Coercion on A&E's An Evening at the Improv," *Journal of Popular Culture* 32, no. 4 (1999): 44-57.

<sup>20</sup> Andy Kindler, "The Hack's Handbook: A Starter Kit," *National Lampoon*, February 1991, 34-36.

reader through overused comedy chestnuts like airline humor and “dick jokes.” However, in “Lesson III: Race, Creed, and Sexual Orientation,” Kindler lists “basic references” for the hack comedian to employ while joking about particular ethnic groups, racial groups, genders, and sexual orientations. The list includes “Gays,” “African-Americans,” “Women,” “Iranians,” “Chinese,” “Japanese,” and “Greeks.” This section is notable for two reasons: first, because positions the white, male comedian against these “others” who might be a target for his (admittedly bad) jokes, and second, because the only reference listed for women is “P.M.S.”

Here, Kindler explicitly categorizes menstruation as the definitive hack topic regarding women, and classified as such, menstruation becomes a comedy taboo for any performer concerned with producing material considered to be original. Kindler’s categorization is particularly interesting given the lack of any significant history of menstrual humor in mainstream stand-up comedy. This is a difficult thing to quantify, both because there is no central repository for stand-up comedy and because so much of it is performed unrecorded in clubs and will never make it onto an album or televised set. Even so, a search on Comedy Central’s website turns up just thirteen video clips with jokes that reference P.M.S. and twenty-five that reference menstruation, compared to 336 jokes about airlines, 638 about masturbation, 2,417 about dating, and 3,076 about parenting.

If stand-up comedy is typically a transaction between a male comic and an audience he presumes to be mostly male, menstruation is hacky not because of its overuse, but because of its obviousness to men as a female phenomenon that requires no further inquiry because it evokes no personal resonance on either side of that relationship. Women—comedy’s groupies, hookers, punch lines, and pre-menstrual straw women—are not seen as primary producers or

admirers of comedy, and so their concerns are not primary to the form. Even given this structural disadvantage, some women have found a way to strategically incorporate jokes about menstruation into their acts in ways that are as political as they are funny.

### **Subverting the Menstrual Taboos: Three Case Studies**

Though Margaret Cho, Cameron Esposito, and Amy Schumer are not the only three comedians ever to reference menstruation on stage, each has performed a particular joke that mischievously violates cultural and comedic taboos to destabilize gendered social expectations. It is important to highlight that, unlike Kate Clinton and other early feminist comedians who performed in front of almost universally female audiences, these jokes were performed within traditional comedy theaters and clubs, broadcast on television, released on compact disc, and distributed online to audiences of both men and women.<sup>21</sup>

Korean-American comedian Margaret Cho has made a career out of pushing sexual, racial, and gender boundaries in stand-up, along the way fostering more diverse representation on television and appealing to audiences previously left on the fringe. Though it only aired for one season, her 1994 sit-com *All American Girl* featured the first Asian-American family on network television. Her avowedly feminist<sup>22</sup> stand-up is both autobiographical and political,

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<sup>21</sup> Linda Pershing, "There's a Joker in the Menstrual Hut: Performance Analysis of Comedian Kate Clinton," in *Women's Comic Visions*, ed. June Sochen, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 193-236.

<sup>22</sup> Margaret Cho, "Our New Columnist Margaret Cho Speaks Out On Why Calling Yourself a Feminist Is More Important Now Than Ever," *xoJane*, November 8, 2012, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.xojane.com/issues/new-xo-jane-columnist-margaret-cho-speaks-out-on-feminism-to-xojane>

tackling topics as wide-ranging as body image, race, sexuality, and equality, and her shows draw a mixed-gender audience with a notable range of sexual identities.<sup>23</sup>

Two tracks on Cho's 2002 comedy album *Notorious C.H.O.: Live at Carnegie Hall* are dedicated to imagining what men, both straight and gay, might do if they had a period.<sup>24</sup> At the outset, she explains that straight men often "freak out" when she talks about her period and how little she talks about it relative to how frequently she experiences it. Cho then adopts a deep, dopey timbre to portray a menstruating straight man who is dismayed when his "heavy flow day" lines up with the Super Bowl. His description of his wildly variable emotions is peppered with no fewer than eighteen instances of the word "dude." In her own voice, Cho envisions bachelor pads filled with bloody socks and coffee filters used in a pinch because—here poking fun at men's stereotypical aversion to condom use—"they would never have protection."<sup>25</sup> At the close of the bit, Cho admits she wasn't sure she was going to talk about her period on stage until she realized, "...if Richard Pryor had a period, he would talk about it. So I felt justified."

Cho's embodiment of a male persona while discussing menstruation is a particularly subversive move that punctures women's imposed silence and men's relative freedom to discuss their bodies, and subtly parodies the male comedian who, in her position, might discuss menstruation without pause. Cho normalizes the female experience and recalibrates the skittish straight man as the clueless outsider to her joke, instead of as its intended audience.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Margaret Cho, "Margaret Cho Talks About Her Pride in Being Called a 'Queer Icon' In Light of Michelle Shocked's Anti-Gay Rant," *xoJane*, March 21, 2013, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.xojane.com/issues/margaret-cho-talks-about-her-pride-in-being-called-a-queer-icon-in-light-of-michelle-shocked-s-anti-gay-rant>

<sup>24</sup> Margaret Cho, *Notorious C.H.O.: Live at Carnegie Hall*, 2002, Nettwerk Records, compact disc.

<sup>25</sup> For full text of Cho's joke, see Appendix.

<sup>26</sup> Kibler, *Gender Conflict and Coercion*.

Having already transgressed the general cultural taboo by discussing menstruation at all, Cho uses her closer to explode the gendered menstrual comedy taboo by equating her honesty with venerated comedy legend Richard Pryor. Both average men and comedy luminaries would discuss this, she insists, and demands her right to do so. Cho's period joke claims authority for women's voices and women's experiences by aping the space already claimed by men's.

Like Cho, comedian Cameron Esposito's work is explicitly engaged with feminism, sexuality, and representation of more diverse experiences on the comedy stage.<sup>27</sup> Esposito is a headlining comic who came up through Chicago's open mics and comedy clubs in the early 2000s. She eventually landed a convention-defying debut on *The Late Late Show with Craig Ferguson* in 2013 during which she ribbed fellow guest Jay Leno and was called to the couch before her set was done, where Leno called her the future of comedy and shouted "Lesbians rule!"<sup>28</sup> She has also released an album titled *Same Sex Symbol* and signed a book deal with Hachette/Grand Central Publishing.<sup>29</sup>

Cameron Esposito's joke about menstruation went viral online via a *Jezebel* post titled "Here It Is: The Greatest, Realest, and Grossest Period Joke of All Time."<sup>30</sup> Seconds after mentioning her period within a discussion about getting pregnant as a lesbian, she attacks the presumed hackiness of the topic:

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<sup>27</sup> For more on Cameron Esposito's views on comedy, including a direct response to the Christopher Hitchens *Vanity Fair* essay cited earlier, see her biweekly *A.V. Club* column "Who in the World is Cameron Esposito?" found here: [http://www.avclub.com/search?feature\\_types=who-in-the-world-is-cameron-esposito](http://www.avclub.com/search?feature_types=who-in-the-world-is-cameron-esposito)

<sup>28</sup> Cameron Esposito, "Craig Ferguson 9/3/13/E Late Late Show Cameron Esposito XD," uploaded September 4, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mp4AzWjow0>

<sup>29</sup> "Bio," accessed May 25, 2015, <http://cameronesposito.com/bio>

<sup>30</sup> Mark Shrayber, "Here it is: The Greatest, Realest, and Grossest Period Joke of All Time," *Jezebel*, February 15, 2015, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://jezebel.com/here-it-is-the-greatest-realest-and-grossest-period-j-1684840865>

“And yeah, I’m a female comic. And I’m standing up here and I just said the word ‘period.’ Oh, how hack! Oh, how unnerving! Oh, how disgusting. There’s gonna be some guys out there: ‘Oh, period? Oh, how disgusting!...’ If you think periods are disgusting, you have no idea how disgusting periods actually are. You shouldn’t even be able to say the word disgusting without a little vomit rising up into your throat.”<sup>31</sup>

Esposito’s joke unfurls from there as a punishment. It is a grueling, feisty, gleefully gory description of her period, from the “crime scene” bleeding out of her body at night to the “non-organic, pesticide-ridden, grocery store strawberry”-sized clots she passes, to her own horror and fascination. Delivered in the key of an angry teacher, Esposito’s joke functions as detention for any man who has ever described a period as “disgusting” without perceiving the hidden physical and social discomfort of menstruation that constantly goes on around him. She makes visible what even Judy Blume could not inside a safe, educational context—the texture and color of menstrual blood.

Where Cho equated her truth-telling with Richard Pryor’s, Esposito wholly rejects the validity of comedy hierarchies because they have traditionally been delineated by men, who are comparatively ignorant about her life experience. In that way, Esposito’s joke is a protest. Like Cho, Esposito uses the brief embodiment of a male voice to address the cultural and comedy taboos she knows surround menstruation. But while Cho’s joke touches on these taboos to normalize the female experience, Esposito’s joke positively revels in the discomfort of discussing a taboo topic to expose the imbalance between how little men understand about women’s lives and yet how much control they exercise over the visibility of these lives within comedy and in the wider culture. She succeeds in performing a delicate maneuver that

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<sup>31</sup> For full text of Esposito’s joke, see Appendix.

foregrounds the female experience while pointing out the absurdity of the traditional arrangement of a stand-up comic addressing an audience that is presumed to be male, an idea about which Esposito has written:

“Female comics are spoken about as if we overcome an obstacle in relatability when in reality half the audience absolutely understands period jokes from personal experience. The day our culture won’t need feminism is the day women are spoken about as if we are actually in the room.”<sup>32</sup>

Amy Schumer is perhaps one of the most visible faces of feminism in contemporary comedy. Trained both as an actress and a stand-up comedian, her first big breaks were her appearances on Comedy Central’s *Live at Gotham* and NBC’s *Last Comic Standing* in 2007. She has since toured extensively, appeared in a number of comedic acting roles, and eventually went on to create, star in, and executive produce the critically acclaimed sketch comedy series *Inside Amy Schumer* on Comedy Central.

Her 2012 stand-up special *Mostly Sex Stuff* contains a small but striking period joke. Speaking about how she is often asked whether or not it’s difficult to be a woman in comedy, she turns to a female audience member and asks, “What do you think the hardest part is?” The woman’s answer is inaudible but quickly unimportant, as Schumer then explains, “Well, it’s the *rape*.”<sup>33</sup> Schumer diffuses the loaded moment by returning to the reporters’ inane question about whether it’s “harder” for female comics. It’s not, she insists. “Like they think we just get up here and bleed all over the stage,” she says, flopping helplessly. “Uuuugh, my ovaries, how do I keep them in my body?”

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<sup>32</sup> Cameron Esposito, “The Three Questions,” *The A.V. Club*, March 13, 2015, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.avclub.com/article/three-questions-216494>

<sup>33</sup> For full text of Schumer’s joke, see Appendix.

With this joke, Schumer demolishes the comedic and cultural taboos of menstruation by invoking a larger taboo: rape, and women's experience of rape culture. Though jokes about rape are often fraught, I believe this one succeeds because it does not try to mine comedy from the perpetration or survival of a sexual crime. Instead, it points out the absurdity of a culture that presumes it is difficult for a female comedian to perform her job because of her gender—here illustrated by Schumer's ridiculous impression of a comedian who cannot tell her jokes because her period gets in the way—but does not want to meaningfully engage with very real threats to her bodily autonomy.

One of the most peculiar aspects of the comedy's menstrual taboo is that it inflates the assumed importance of menstruation to women because of its obviousness to men as an example of a female concern. This is true of any hacky, stereotypical topic that applies to a specific group of people. Reaching back to Kindler's list, "large sexual appendages" are an immediate go-to for (racist) jokes about black men.<sup>34</sup> The obviousness of this stereotype helps to perpetuate the cultural coding of large genitalia as a black male concern, but black men themselves are of course no more interested in genital size than men of any race or ethnicity. Schumer's quick period joke helps to dismantle this type of problematic association, pointing out that neither managing her period nor telling jokes concerns her, despite how her gender associates her negatively with both things. What is truly difficult for women to bear is the threat of rape.

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<sup>34</sup> Kindler, *The Hack's Handbook*.

## Conclusion

Turning once more to Amy Schumer, whose jokes about semen served as our introduction to graphic humor about bodily fluids, there are two fascinating examples of this sort of joke on recent episodes of her sketch comedy show *Inside Amy Schumer*. In “Celebrity Interview,” Schumer parodies the often-uncomfortable dynamic between female celebrities, male late night talk show hosts, and men who watch these shows.<sup>35</sup> After Schumer writhes in her chair suggestively, flirts with the host, and declares her love for domestic nudity, comic books, and *Star Wars*, furiously masturbating male members of the audience soak Schumer in gallons of a white fluid meant to be their ejaculate. She ends the sketch smiling and waving, dripping wet, spitting the liquid out of her mouth.

In contrast, the sketch “Babies and Bustiers” sends up the bizarre world of child pageants as seen on shows like *Toddlers & Tiaras*.<sup>36</sup> Schumer plays a six-year-old girl with “Fetal Red Bull Syndrome,” which has caused her to precociously age to look like a woman of thirty. Her pageant performance is ruined when she stops mid-sentence, looks down, and says “Uh-oh.” The audience gasps. The scene cuts to a bathroom, where it becomes apparent that Schumer has gotten her period. And yet, despite the ocean of faux semen in the “Celebrity Interview” sketch, there is no visual representation of menstrual blood.

Schumer is a savvy cultural critic in addition to a gifted comedian, so it is too simple to assume her network demanded that no depiction of menses make it to air. Rather, there are

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<sup>35</sup> Amy Schumer, “Celebrity Interview,” Comedy Central video, 4:09, from Season 3, Episode 4 of *Inside Amy Schumer*, aired on May 12, 2015, accessed May 25, 2015, <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/zicf1f/inside-amy-schumer-celebrity-interview>

<sup>36</sup> Schumer, Amy. “Babies and Bustiers.” *Inside Amy Schumer*. Executive produced by Amy Schumer. May 19, 2015. New York: Comedy Central. Television episode.

likely different forces at play: decency standards rooted in cultural menstrual taboo, the menstrual comedy taboo, Schumer's interest in really digging into other topics like sexual consent and sexism, and *Inside Amy Schumer's* unique and perhaps precarious status as one of just ten shows created by and starring women ever produced by Comedy Central—a network with over 140 original shows since 1991, and which is mainly marketed to men.<sup>37</sup>

While there remains work to do in normalizing menstruation in American culture, each step taken by comedians like Schumer, Cho and Esposito has a real world impact on women and girls. Studies have shown that girls who internalize shame about menstruation are more likely to have a negative body image, less likely to seek information from other girls or women about normal or abnormal menstruation, and more likely to take risks with their sexual health.<sup>38,39</sup> If comedy is indeed an opportunity to “release some of the tension that builds up in people, in the culture and ourselves,” as Marc Maron so eloquently stated, then further dismantling of menstrual taboo through humor is a valuable contribution to the wellness, and happiness, of American women.

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<sup>37</sup> Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_programs\\_broadcast\\_by\\_Comedy\\_Central](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_programs_broadcast_by_Comedy_Central)

<sup>38</sup> Theresa E. Jackson and Rachel Joffe Falmagne, “Women wearing white: Discourses of menstruation and the experience of menarche,” *Feminism & Psychology* 23, no. 3 (2013): 379-398.

<sup>39</sup> Deborah Schooler et al, “Cycles of Shame: Menstrual Shame, Body Shame, and Sexual Decision-Making,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 42, no. 4 (2005): 324-334.

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## Appendix Period Joke Transcriptions

**Margaret Cho**

**Album: Notorious C.H.O.: Live at Carnegie Hall**

**Year: 2002**

**Tracks: “If Straight Men Had Periods” and “If Gay Men Had Periods”**

Sometimes straight men freak out when I talk about my period. I don't talk about it that much, considering how much it happens. I barely mention it. But I guarantee, if straight men had a period you would never hear the end of it.

*Aw, fuck man, fuck man, I can't believe I fucking got my period again dude, that's fucked up, dude. Fuck! I already got it last month, what the fuck? Dude, I fuckin' knew I was gonna get it too, I fuckin' knew I was gonna get it. I fuckin' knew. I fuckin' knew I was gonna get it dude, I fuckin' knew. I fuckin' knew I was gonna get it, dude. I was all bloated, right? My fuckin' emotions were like up here, and down here, right? I was fucking eating everything, I was like, dude, what the fuck, right? I got my period I was like [yells]. Fuck, dude. Nah, dude, dude, dude, check it out. Dude, I fucking—dude, I fucking got my period, right? Fuckin'....the next day was Superbowl Sunday. How fucked up is that? No, 'cause c'mon, that means that falls on my second day. You know that's my heavy flow day. That's the day I gotta wear a tampon and a pad. Aw, dude, dude, dude. Dude. Dude. Dude. You got a tampon in your truck?*

Because you know they would never have protection. They would be using old socks. Coffee filters. Tucking their shirts in over it. Every bachelor apartment would look like a murder scene.

And if gay men had a period? What do you mean, if?

There would be huge period circuit parties happening. Come on down to the Red Party at Club Menses! [*Disco noise.*]

*Me and my boyfriend are on the same cycle. It is not pretty, okay?*

I didn't know if I was going to talk about menstruation, and then I thought: I bet if Richard Pryor had a period, he would talk about it. And so I felt justified.

**Cameron Esposito**

**“The Greatest, Realest, and Grossest Period Joke of All time**

**Via Jezebel, beginning at 3:35**

<http://jezebel.com/here-it-is-the-greatest-realest-and-grossest-period-j-1684840865>

I think the great thing is...listen, I don't want to make a promise to you, like that I'm for sure gonna have a baby. I don't know if that's gonna happen. Don't hold me to this. But I just want you guys to know there would be a positive aspect—I mean, besides the child, that I would obviously love enough that they eventually took care of me. No, I mean there'd be an amazing side effect in that for once, in my goddamn life, my period would not be completely fucking useless to me, because I have never had a pregnancy scare. And yeah, I'm a female comic. And I'm standing up here and I just said the word “period.” Oh, how hack! Oh, how unnerving! Oh, how disgusting. There's gonna be some guys out there: “Oh, period? Oh, how disgusting!”

Listen. If you're a guy out there and you think periods are disgusting, I don't believe you've ever had an honest conversation with a woman. Because if you think periods are disgusting, you have no idea how disgusting periods actually are. You shouldn't even be able to say the word disgusting without a little vomit rising up into your throat. That's how disgusting periods are.

I wake up in the night! And I am bleeding! Out of my body! A crime scene! My body is bleeding out of my body. My body is smashing my body out of my body--using my body! My body is wringing itself out like a hotel washcloth you might use again. Oh, and it doesn't come out in an easy, clean and pourable substance, so clear. Chunks of my body are coming out of my body. Chunks of my body are being smashed out of my body--by my body! Sometimes the chunks are so large the only logical thing to do is to pick it up and hold it in your hand just so you can marvel at it. It's the size of a strawberry! A non-organic...pesticide-ridden...grocery store strawberry...piece of my body.

And this is not just happening to us at home, in our beds. This is happening to us on planes! We are on planes, and a chunk of our body is falling out and we run to the bathroom, whip out a dirty thing and stuff it in the wall and take a clean thing out of our pocket and shove that in—it's very painful—and then go sit back in our seat for three and a half more hours. And this is happening to us at work! At work we're just like "Yeah, I can have that report for you by tomorrow [*groans slightly*]." So if you think periods are disgusting, you can go fuck yourself. You have no idea the hell we're living with!

**Amy Schumer**  
***Mostly Sex Stuff***  
**Year: 2012**

*What's the hardest part about being a female comedian? What is iiiit? What's the hardest part? [Speaks to a female audience member.]* What would you guess? Well, it's the rape.

No, but they ask, and I guess it's a normal question. *Is it harder for female comics? Is it harder?* And it's not. Like they think we just get up here and bleed all over the stage. Like "Uuuuugh, my ovaries, how do I keep them in my body?"