Michaela Coel's *Chewing Gum*: Redefining 'Unruliness' in London's East End

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Introduction

Chewing Gum's (E4 2015-2017) title sequence is visually vivid. As the name of the British comedy series is spelt out in rapid succession, each bold and bright letter is accompanied by an image that celebrates a multicultural East End estate in London. In one shot, the main character and creator of the series, Tracey (Michaela Coel), comically dances in a corner shop; in others, she laughs gleefully with her racially diverse friends and family. These scenes are accompanied by sunny vignettes of council housing in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Soft-focus lighting is used to soften the representation of estates, literally and metaphorically, as dismal, dilapidated, and depressing. As is made evident by the series title sequence, the creative force behind *Chewing Gum* set out to reinterpret and reconstruct what television has problematically made 'commonsense'[i] to audiences – that the lower classes reside in dreary spaces/places.

Chewing Gum first aired in August 2015 on the British broadcaster E4, a channel that is, according to Faye Woods (2016), 'imbued with youthful irreverence',[ii] targeting 16–34-year-olds by presenting itself as a 'bizarre, ironic or anarchic presence within British landscapes or mundane spaces'.[iii] *Chewing Gum* embodies E4's ethos through its playful and comedic focus on 24-year-old Tracey Gordon (played by Coel), a naïve and sheltered shop assistant who sets out to lose her virginity through her awkward but headstrong determination. Complicating matters, Tracey lives with her strict religious mother (Shola Adewusi) and her highly-strung sister Cynthia (Susie Wokoma). Repressed by her religious upbringing, she only finds solace at the home of her sexually experienced best friend, Candice (Danielle Walters). *Chewing Gum* exuberantly explores themes of sex, relationships, friendship, and religion in London's East End, a place in which Michaela Coel has articulated resistant narratives through her semi-autobiographical show. She argues that the TV series is set on a council estate that isn't "sad or morbid like a lot of shows portray working class life to be".[iv] I, in turn, argue that East London has been positioned as a site of difference in Coel's *Chewing Gum,* which is complemented by the ways in which she creates a colourful and complex depiction of working-class life for a young black woman in Tower Hamlets.

Through this analysis, I contend that Coel offers fresh and contemporary representations of black women on-screen by subverting the comic tradition of the 'unruly' woman that was initially conceptualised in the 1990s by Kathleen Rowe (1995). Rowe argues that this figure – from Roseanne Barr to Miss Piggy the Muppet – was presented as 'too fat, too funny, too noisy, too old, too rebellious', and *too much.*[v] The 'unruly' woman thus deliberately draws laughter from her rebellion. She showcases an 'alternative view of female subjectivity, making a spectacle of herself by using specific performative techniques to undermine patriarchal norms.[vi] However, if the 'unruly' woman is 'too much', Rowe has not considered

how black women have historically been represented on-screen. Coel has deconstructed pejorative stereotypes that have plagued the portrayal of black women, who are often presented as sexually aggressive or angry Jezebels – negatively characterised as 'too much'.[vii] Coel demonstrates a different form of 'unruliness' by subverting the qualities that Rowe argues are evident in representations of white female comedy stars – to play with notions of the grotesque in transformative ways.

Nevertheless, notions of the grotesque have been central to understanding female transgression. In his book *Rabelais and His World,* Mikhail Bakhtin (1965) argues that the novels of François Rabelais use grotesque bodily functions to signify the symbolic destruction of authority.[viii] Feminist scholars have revised this distinctly masculinist approach to literary theory. For instance, Mary Russo (1994) notes that the grotesque body can be liberating for women, suggesting that the female body is associated with 'low' culture because it is open, dynamic, boundless, and above all, excessive when compared to the normative, classical body that is perceived as 'transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek'.[ix] Through this dichotomy, Russo believes that the grotesque female body becomes a source of political struggle because its transgressive corporeal actions are situated outside cultural norms. In her history of the 'unruly' woman in popular culture, Kathleen Rowe similarly uses this notion of the grotesque to explore subversive female bodies and women whose laughter 'color[s] them with the demonic or the grotesque' in film and television comedy.[x] These women have the potential to break boundaries, be disruptive, and challenge gender binaries through their comic performances.

For Kathleen Rowe, Roseanne Barr and Miss Piggy are congruent with 'unruliness' because of their inelegant and undignified excess. Yet Rowe also analyses a more socially acceptable version of comic female 'unruliness' in romantic comedy films. Actors such as Cher, Katherine Hepburn, and Barbara Stanwyck form a significant part of her analysis, showcasing how the 'unruly' woman has typically been a white woman. When discussing these racial dynamics, Linda Mizejewski (2007) argues that though 'unruliness can be a liberating quality of female individualism' for the white women outlined here, 'for the black woman in white culture—someone who is already under suspicion as part of an "unruly" subculture—the opposite occurs: her subjectivity diminishes as she slides into racial stereotype'.[xi] Michaela Coel, I argue, is thus an important black female voice on/in television to examine the ambivalences, contradictions, and uncertainties surrounding 'unruliness' in its current form.

As I contend throughout this chapter, Coel undermines the concept of 'unruliness' posited by Rowe via her depiction of London's East End and its inhabitants. I propose that intersectionality is a theoretical concept that should be used to analyse Coel's series since Rowe's subjects of analysis are predominantly configured as white women, and representation cannot be considered by examining gender alone. Intersectionality, as a concept, has become increasingly important to feminists and critics in the second decade of the 21st century and is often linked back to black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw who, in an interview with Katy Steinmetz (2020), argues that it is 'a prism for seeing the way in which

various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other'.[xii] However, it has also been discussed, in many forms, by other black feminists of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, such as Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins, when they 'demanded an antiracist, antisexist, and anticlassist analysis of oppression'.[xiii] Throughout the 2010s, intersectionality has become an important term in creating solidarity among contemporary "fourth-wave" feminists whose movement focuses on rape culture, humour, digital technologies, and social media.[xiv] A focus on social media justice has been the most significant change in feminism over the years, and according to Tegan Zimmerman (2017), '[i]ntersectionality, with its consideration of class, race, age, ability, sexuality, and gender as intersecting loci of discriminations or privileges, is now the overriding principle among today's feminists, manifest by theorizing tweets and hashtags on Twitter'.[xv] Indeed, these contemporary feminist concerns are also reflected in the comedy genre. As Helen Davies and Sarah Ilott note (2018), '[q]uestions related to comedy and the representation of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, class, and disability are becoming increasingly prominent in contemporary political debate and news journalism',[xvi] and the rise of intersectional activism and representation in comedy is echoed in Michaela Coel's semi-autobiographical series *Chewing Gum*.

Coming from a Ghanaian immigrant family in Tower Hamlets, the anxieties surrounding race, class, and a sense of belonging are particularly poignant and prevalent in Coel's world, given that she grew up on the dividing line between Hackney and Tower Hamlets with her sister and mother. As a child, she attended an all-girls Catholic school in East London where she was the only black pupil, a transition she reveals was difficult for her in an interview with *The Independent* (2016): "Growing up on our estate, we were all different colours but we were all really poor. I never really realised that black was a problem for some people".[xvii] Coel later enrolled in the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in 2009 – the first black woman to be accepted in five years. She was surrounded by an overwhelming number of white and upper-middle class students, an experience exemplified during a class exercise in which 'students whose families owned their houses went to one end of the room; those whose families didn't went to the other. Coel was the only one who went to the latter side'.[xviii] She mixes cultural forms in straddling these disparate spaces: Ghana/Britain, Hackney/Tower Hamlets, and upper-middle class/working-class cultures. Her intersectional experiences have affected how contemporary racialised, gendered, classed, and spatial politics overlap in her work. As I argue in this chapter, the two critical analytical categories of 'unruliness' and intersectionality - including the tension between them - can be used as new interpretative tools in examining female-authored and female-centred comedy, specifically *Chewing Gum*.

Having established the framework for this analysis, I now move on to identify the 'unruly' woman and how this concept has shifted and changed from the 1990s to the 2010s. I then explore how the East End is a significant space and place to explore intersectionality, as well as the ways in which Coel's concerns with region, heritage, and community anchor her series and shift traditional notions of London's East End. As I further suggest, Coel imbues

this space with new meaning for black women by subverting what it means to be 'unruly' in the 2010s.

Situating the New 'Unruly' Woman

According to Rowe, eight key characteristics of the 'unruly' woman can be traced back to the early modern European culture of carnival. The 'unruly' woman dominates, or tries to dominate, men; her body is excessive or fat, and her speech is similarly excessive; she makes jokes or laughs at herself; she draws attention to the social constructs of gender; she may be old or masculinised; her behaviour is associated with looseness; she may be pregnant; and she is associated with dirt, liminality, and taboo.[xix] These traits are primarily concerned with the 'unruly' woman's visibility, which is why they have been instrumental in analysing film and television as forms of visual communication and representation. First conceptualised and applied to film/television by Rowe, her two main case studies are the feminine yet domineering figure of Miss Piggy and the fat, white working-class writer/performer Roseanne Barr. These traits can also be seen in iterations of female-authored and female-centric comedy today, specifically in American comedians such as Melissa McCarthy, Amy Schumer, and Lena Dunham. However, there have also been noteworthy changes in popular culture that have not been accounted for over the past few decades since the 'unruly' woman was theorised in comedy studies. Rosie White (2018) contends that the 'complex landscape of television comedy […] in the twenty-first century challenges many of the grounding assumptions of early academic work on gender and comedy',[xx] and Faye Woods (2019) has specifically referenced the excessive use of Rowe's 'unruly' woman in academic discourse. Though significant, she believes this concept has become 'something of a theoretical straight-jacket. Overused culturally to the point of abstraction […] it has become the wearing default frame through which to discuss women in comedy'.[xxi] These reflections on scholarship around women and/in comedy signify a crucial conceptual shift in the second decade of the 21st century.

From these definitions, it is clear that Michaela Coel (the performer) and Tracey Gordon (the character) display 'unruliness' on and off-screen. Coel laughs loudly and often, gesticulating wildly as Tracey on *Chewing Gum.* She is also 'transgressive' in body and speech through her use of direct address in the series and "talking back" to the television industry. For instance, Coel became the youngest and first non-white industry figure to deliver the prestigious MacTaggart Memorial Lecture at the Edinburgh TV Festival. She revealed she had suffered racism and sexual assault while working in the industry. Since these experiences, Coel created, wrote, and performed in the BBC series *I May Destroy You* (BBC, 2020), which documents these incidents of abuse and questions of consent. Put simply, Coel proclaims: "I'm here".

This spotlight on Coel has been exacerbated by the popularity of intersectionality in TV criticism. Now commonplace internet vernacular, the term intersectionality signals a change in feminist activism and indicates why Michaela Coel's series, and the writer/performer herself, have been celebrated by critics and audiences in recent years.[xxii] One of Kathleen

Rowe's key figures of 'unruliness', Roseanne Barr, has not embraced these changes in the second decade of the 21st century. In the 1980s and 1990s, her comedy series *Roseanne* was lauded for its realistic portrayal of a working-class American family, and it was rebooted to impressive figures in 2018.[xxiii] Though the series was renewed for an eleventh season after its premiere,[xxiv] ABC cancelled *Roseanne* just one week after its finale aired. The television network reversed its renewal decision after Barr left a slew of racist tweets likening former President Barack Obama's aide to an ape -– with the network's president describing her comments as 'abhorrent, repugnant, and inconsistent with our values'.[xxv]

According to Jessica Ford (2018): 'Barr's tweet and the cancellation of *Roseanne* […] highlight the limits of nostalgia and Roseanne/Barr's particular brand of white feminism […] the political landscape has shifted since the 1990s, with the rise of third and fourth-wave feminisms and intersectional activism'.[xxvi] Coel embodies this new shift, with her focus on black British femininity and intersectional approach to televisual storytelling differing vastly from Rowe's focus on the white female body in 1980s/1990s America. This begs the question: where do these changes leave Rowe's model of 'unruliness' and Barr's embodiment of said 'unruliness'? In popular film and television, the female body does not have to be transgressive and challenge the status quo to be subversive – nor does there need to be a focus on the body at all. As such, an updated model of 'unruliness' needs to account for changes in popular culture, focus on deeper textual/authorial analysis, and explore cultural changes in comedy representation that, as of late, have showcased an interest in overlapping social issues.

Representations of Intersectionality and Diversity in London's East End

As a space/place, it is clear why London's East End is an important backdrop for Coel's focus on intersectionality in *Chewing Gum*. Sarah Fox (2015) argues that 'the traditional East End of London has undergone a dramatic upheaval in the last 50 years or so […] This was once an area that was traditionally and predominantly associated with a white working-class community – the homeland of 'Cockneys' but is now an area of diversity'.[xxvii] More specifically, she argues that this began in the 1950s when London attracted 'large-scale immigration of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian communities, the first large groups of 'non-white' peoples. There were large inflows from the former British colonies of Jamaica, Trinidad and Guyana alongside those from India and Pakistan (including what is now Bangladesh)'.[xxviii] In other words, London's East End has been diverse for decades.

Despite its diversity, Anne J. Kershen (2007) argues that the East End is still seen as 'a place where the names of Jack the Ripper and the Kray Brothers are indelibly inscribed on the area's criminal ledger'.[xxix] London's East End has historically been considered a traditional, white working-class area because of the popularity and critical acclaim of two disparate sub-genres and their televisual offerings: historical, gothic programming and contemporary social realist drama. According to Charlotte Brunsdon (2007), series such as *Ripper Street* (BBC & Amazon Video, 2012-2016), set in the 1800s, need 'only a gas street lamp, a cobbled street, a horse-drawn carriage and a wisp of mist to be identified, and

begins to demonstrate the ways in which landmarks signify genre as well as time and place'.[xxx] The drama's traditionally bleak aesthetic demarcates the East End as visually depressing, and its historical focus on Jack the Ripper brings the representation of whiteness to the fore. Programmes such as *EastEnders* (BBC One, 1985-), which follows the everyday lives of working-class inhabitants on a traditional Victorian square, are associated with domestic concerns and harsh realism by contrast. While *EastEnders* is an ongoing soap, Paul Newland (2008) believes that it 'evokes a localised working-class spatial idea of the East End of the past',[xxxi] given that it was initially created in the 1980s and has changed little since its inception. These two representations of the East End are distinctly antiquated and archaic, then – a problem that *Chewing Gum* seeks to rectify.

Indeed, media representations of diversity in the East End have shifted over the 2010s, with comedy TV series such as *Chewing Gum, Youngers* (E4, 2013-2014)*,* and *PhoneShop* (E4, 2010-2013) representing the contemporary population of East London's modern and ethnically diverse working-class youth. Though the setting of *Chewing Gum* covers much of the traditional East End, it does not bear the conventional markers of other notable and widely seen British TV series set in the same area. It offers something different for television viewers in the second decade of the 21st century. There is no heavy grey sky, no ominous mist, and no distressing signs of abject poverty. This is perhaps because, as Brett Mills (2008) argues, 'for traditional sitcom, the visual signifiers of realism and believability – such as certain lighting styles, a complex narrative space and naturalist performances – have often been sidelined in the name of comedy'.[xxxii] As such, there are no clichéd signs of the East End. While Jonathan Bignell argues that in *EastEnders* '[t]here is a sense that there is no escape from Albert Square',[xxxiii] in *Chewing Gum,* one cannot imagine why the residents ever *would* want to escape. Michaela Coel has stated that she decided to create an estate "where people would want to live", and she speaks highly of her home in an interview with Gabriel Tate (2015).[xxxiv] This is reflected in the sunny, bright visuals and overall positive outlook of *Chewing Gum* that has differentiated it from other bleak series about council estates in East London, such as *EastEnders* and *Top Boy* (Channel 4 & Netflix, 2011-2013, 2019-).

Top Boy is a particularly important series in that it also documents the experience of black youth in East London, offering an in-depth look at the rivalries between drug gangs operating out of the fictional Summerhouse Estate in Hackney (significantly, Michaela Coel herself has appeared in the series). Yet while Sarita Malik and Clive James Nwonka (2017) maintain that *Top Boy* has been praised because it shows that 'oppressed groups possess moral failings like anyone else',[xxxv] they further suggest that critical responses to the series have appropriated and decontextualised its representations to perceive 'Hackney as a remote but dangerous place where 'black' and 'crime' appear as almost synonymous'.[xxxvi] This feeds into perceptions of the East as a space of 'crime and criminality'.[xxxvii] Though East London is typically perceived as stagnant and monolithic in this regard, *Chewing Gum's* televisual techniques differentiate it from other series. As Faye Woods (2019) contends, this included visual codes such as: filming the series 'in summer […] flooding Tracey's council estate with bright high-keyed colors and window boxes full of plants. Wide shots [also] centralized the

open space that the estate's balconies open onto, with establishing shots set to a background of children's laughter, depicting a welcoming, open community'.[xxxviii] The welcoming, open community can also be seen in the colourful cast of characters in the series, the melting pot of different cultures, traditions, and ethnicities and how they 'intersect' with one another and overlap. Tracey's best friend Candice is a blunt, sexually adventurous mixed-race woman living with her white nan Esther (Maggie Steed) - who throws the best parties on the estate. Another of her closest friends, Ola (Olisa Odele), is a Nigerian-born flamboyant diva who has been living in London for ten years with his adoptive Irish parents.

Complicating 'Unruliness' and Framing Intersectionality in *Chewing Gum*

This focus on intersectionality and intersecting identities can be seen throughout *Chewing Gum's* first and second series, as well as how Coel undercuts qualities of the 'unruly' woman proposed by Kathleen Rowe. Here, I analyse two key scenes/episodes: the first from series one when Tracey decides that she is going to have sex with her crush Connor (Robert Lonsdale), who lives on her estate, and the second from series two when Tracey begins seeing a white man outside of the estate who fetishises her blackness.

In *Chewing Gum*, Coel highlights the similarities and differences between Tracey, a working-class black woman, and Connor, a working-class white man, who live in the same block of flats and later become boyfriend and girlfriend. In the second episode of *Chewing Gum's* first series, Tracey decides to lose her virginity to Connor at Candice's party. Dressed in her conservative pastel pink and white striped pyjamas, she joins him in the bedroom and straddles him, kissing him passionately. This sounds intense and romantic, but Tracey begins stressing out when her nose starts bleeding. She reassures Connor that she has a nosebleed because she "really likes" him and then proceeds to dry hump him while licking his eyelids, sucking on his nose, and sticking her tongue in his ear. Pushing him down to sit on his face, Tracey turns to the camera and clearly wants to ask us a question we all know the answer to: "I don't remember if I was supposed to wear clothes for this bit or not. Was it…? No, it's too late". In this scene, Tracey awkwardly tries to navigate Connor's form in a surreal and exaggerated manner via her comically grotesque actions.

Yet Michaela Coel's decision to dress Tracey in pink and white pastel, long-sleeved pyjamas – that is, refusing to show her body – is a visual display of sexual innocence that negates the imagery of black women as (sexually) aggressive. Black women are often, as Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden argue (2003), 'routinely defined by a specific set of grotesque caricatures that are reductive, inaccurate, and unfair',[xxxix] and so Coel has utilised an excessive and different form of 'unruliness' by transgressing social respectability: licking, sucking, and mounting Connor to exacerbate Tracey's naivety instead. This subversion of traditional and stereotypical notions of the grotesque – and what the grotesque represents - is further undermined by the racial dynamics at play here as Tracey, a black woman, straddles Connor's white, alien body. At the beginning of the episode, she explains how she initially feared kissing a white man, stating: "I always thought white people were bad kissers and it's not their fault; it's just that they've got really small lips… and then they try to

compensate for the lack of lips with the tongue, and then the tongue just ends up everywhere just flapping about, you get my drift?". As Kathleen Rowe suggests, the grotesque may be used to interrogate and ultimately subvert patriarchal notions of masculinity and authority. Yet here, it is distinctly *white* notions of masculinity that are questioned by Tracey's description of white men's tongues as 'flapping about'. In her eyes, *they* are grotesque. Historically absent in cultural discourse, this black female point-of-view is presented as both legitimate and logical in popular comedy's representations.

Similar representational strategies are utilised in the second series when Tracey begins dating an affluent white man - Ash (Jonathan Bailey) - after she breaks up with Connor. While there are racial differences between Tracey and Connor, there are glaring racial *and* class differences between Tracey and Ash. To make matters worse, Ash fetishises black women. He exoticises Tracey's skin, and because she has been kicked out of the family home and needs somewhere to stay, Tracey attempts to appeal to Ash's sexual fantasies. Dressing in traditional garb, she channels "tribal Africa" and performs a ritualistic dance in his living room while he masturbates. Filipa Jodelka (2015) contends that Coel's 'incredible timing, warmth and gift for physical comedy basically make her […] the second coming of Lucille Ball',[xl] star of American 1950s sitcom *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951–1957). Indeed, when Tracey dances for Ash, it is hilariously over the top, ridiculous, and *de*sexualised. While the audience laughs at Tracey and her get-up here, her actions are so exaggerated that they point to the preposterousness of Ash's fantasies. Through this, Coel reconfigures how black women are perceived: that is, they can be awkward as opposed to being stereotyped or typecast as the "Angry Black Woman" - a trope that characterises black women as ill-tempered and ill-mannered.

Coel's decision to display Tracey's sexual innocence in both scenes is significant because she intervenes in the pervasive ideology surrounding hypersexual black womanhood. As April D. Lundy (2018) suggests, '[i]n the 1700s and 1800s, in books and other forms of literature, Europeans habitually depicted African men and women naked and possessing unusually large sexual organs. Belief in their unrestrained sexuality can also be seen in art depictions.[xli] The 'unruly' woman has been defined in similar terms. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's terminology, Kathleen Rowe suggests that she is associated with the grotesque, arguing that '[w]here the classical body privileges its "upper stratum" (the head, the eyes, the faculties of reason), the grotesque body is the body in its "lower stratum" (the eating, drinking, defecating, copulating body)'.[xlii] Rowe further argues that this notion of the grotesque body 'bears most relevance to the unruly woman, who so often makes a spectacle of herself with her fatness, pregnancy, age, or loose behavior'.[xliii] Yet she fails to recognise how this has functioned across sexual and racial lines, given that black women have often been fetishised, exoticised, and demonised through their 'sexual organs' and lower body parts. Instead of revelling in stereotypical notions of the grotesque, Coel has instead displayed power over the black female body by reconfiguring how she is perceived, presenting herself as awkward instead of sexually aggressive through, paradoxically, a racialised stereotypical image in her "tribal" outfit. Through this, Coel demonstrates how racial groups' distinctive

and hierarchical relationships operate while simultaneously subverting them via her comic performance.

This awkward characterisation is not to suggest that Tracey has relinquished control in *Chewing Gum* - she remains visually dominant throughout – but Coel's new approach to televisual storytelling has shifted depictions of working-class black women and what it means to be 'unruly'. In turning to the camera and speaking to the audience directly in these moments, *Chewing Gum* is concerned with what Tracey sees and does not see via direct address. According to Faye Woods (2019), this technique intensifies 'comic abjection and affective intensity',[xliv] but it also allows women to take back some degree of control of how their bodies are presented, playing with our expectations as both voyeur and confidante. The audience is heard, and the female protagonist feels their presence. This can be seen in other contemporary British comedies by women - such as *Fleabag* (BBC Two, 2016; BBC One, 2019) and *Miranda* (BBC Two, 2009–2010; BBC One, 2012–2015) – but these are told from distinctly white, middle-class viewpoints. Direct address in *Chewing Gum* fuels empathy for Tracey, who has typically been seen as a British cultural 'other' inspiring both fascination and fear. In fact, she is triply demarcated as 'other' through her race, gender, *and* class. In *Chewing Gum,* however, Ash is the outlier - a rich man outside the council estate who attempts to take advantage of Tracey as a working-class black woman from an East London borough.

Michaela Coel does not only showcase awareness of intersectional thought by contrasting Tracey with white male characters in the show. When Ash's ex-wife Judith (Ayesha Antoine) walks through the door and catches Tracey with her former husband, the viewer, seeing both women are black, immediately recognises that Ash fetishises *all* black women. Yet there are significant differences in costume between Judith and Tracey. Judith is dressed in a professional, navy pencil dress, which starkly contrasts with the indigenous outfit Tracey is wearing at that moment and the colourful ensembles she typically wears. This highlights class differences between the two, as well as Ash's absurd homogenisation of black women's cultural identities. To overcome this homogenisation, Tracey and Judith join forces against Ash. After rummaging through his kitchen, Tracey angrily pours red wine and smothers marmite on his white sofa, exclaiming, "Would you like some wine with that, sir? Yes, black and white, just like you want". Calmly handing the marmite over to Judith, Tracey utters a thank you before leaving. Judith smirks, squeezing more marmite on Ash's sofa in quiet yet exultant glee. The two women's 'unruly' comedic excess here is used as a grotesque form of communication to achieve agency. Kathleen Rowe argues that '[t]he grotesque body is above all the female body, the maternal body, which, through menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, participates uniquely in the process of "becoming"'.[xlv] This grotesque female body is seen as overflowing and leaking. Although Tracey and Judith use fluids that are not bodily, they *stand in* for the body because, as Tracey asserts, they are 'black' like their skin. By refusing to use fluids *from* the body, Michaela Coel again refuses to adhere to traditional notions of the grotesque. Wine and marmite are instead used as emancipatory symbols to repudiate attempts to possess ownership over their figures from white males like Ash. The grotesque here – that is, the

hyperbolic, liberating spray of fluids over the white symbol of patriarchy, capitalism, and toxic masculinity (Ash's sofa) – gives these women the opportunity to harness comedic and chaotic energy.

Though Tracey and Judith share similar life experiences and racial fetishisation from Ash, *Chewing Gum* focuses on class in conjunction with race and gender, which complexly shifts Rowe's notion of 'unruliness' again. Indeed, class differences between the pair are alluded to when Judith refers to Candice (who is waiting downstairs) as a "Peckham princess", to which Tracey replies: "Judith, my best friend is not a Peckham princess; we are from Tower Hamlets". The differentiation between these two areas is important for Tracey – with Tower Hamlets in East London and Peckham in South London. From the 1960s onwards, with mass immigration into London from black and Asian people, Gillian Evans (2010) argues that

> [t]he lack of a strong collective vision governing the integration of immigrants into white working-class neighbourhoods led, in some cases, to the forming of racial and ethnic enclaves [...] Peckham become known as a 'black peoples' manor''.[xlvi]

Images of South London have been depicted in comedies such as *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC One, 1981-2003) and ***Desmond's*** (Channel 4, 1989-1994), the latter being one of the few black 'shows to successfully reach a mainstream comedy audience in Britain', according to Sarita Malik (2002).[xlvii] Though Peckham shares similarities with Tower Hamlets because it is also a space where working-class black families have settled and put down their roots, Tracey is offended that they have been homogenised and conflated by Judith. In her eyes, they cannot be compared. Places perform a crucial function in anchoring people's lives and identities, and for Michaela Coel, working-class communities are separate and distinct. The classed differences between Tracey/Judith and the gendered and racialised differences between Tracey/Ash thus highlight Michaela Coel's concerns with multiple social issues and how they intersect in *Chewing Gum's* East End. Through this, she complicates 'unruliness' and grotesqueness in the process.

Conclusion

The argument established initially by Kathleen Rowe - that female comic performance is a form of social/cultural unruliness as well as grotesque in nature – is ultimately inadequate in exploring Coel's black female comic performance in *Chewing Gum.* Instead, I have contended that a new analytical conception is required to interpret the text. Intersectionality, which has become a central topic in academic and activist circles alike, is a powerful conceptual framework for examining how 'unruliness' has shifted from the 1990s to the 2010s. As I have argued throughout this chapter, it has emerged as a vital lens through which to explore the structural identities and social inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality for feminist scholars and female-authored/female-centred comedy. More specifically, I have suggested that Tracey's working-class, black femininity and Michaela Coel's over-the-top comedic performance in *Chewing Gum* demonstrate that there has been

a shift in popular culture, a shift that has produced spaces for subversive black female voices.

Though on the surface, Tracey's actions *appear* stereotypically 'unruly', as a character, she points to the grotesqueness of white male characters and instead emphasises her own innocence via ridiculous excess. As a writer/performer, Michaela Coel does not confine this examination of social issues to white men. She emphasises class differences between female characters to highlight the multiple and multifaceted identities that reside in East London. A vibrant and vivacious space where Coel has expressed the intimacies of her life, it is clear that Tower Hamlets is "her London", or in Coel's own words, the "unspoken character of the series".[xlviii] In *Chewing Gum,* London's East End is an essential character in exploring regional comedy's contemporary representations.

References

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