Title
Indulging and Divulging: Exploding Expectation in Stand-Up Comedy by Women of Color

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Author
Nittrouer, Christie

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Women in stand-up comedy face the challenge of negotiating a place for their body as they are immediately marked as other, different, and foreign to the stand-up stage. Often female stand-up comedians adhere to self-debasing material and personas; easing into formulaic punch lines and pleasing the audience with recognizable tropes, structures, and gimmicks. Particularly for women of color, the stand-up circuit tends to demand stereotypical depictions of racial humor, fulfilling expectations but binding these performers according to the problematic terms of representation. This article is part of a larger dissertation project that explores the ways that female stand-up comedians tamper with a notion of belonging through their bodies, foul language, and comedic structure and timing. The two comedians that I explore in this article tend to rely on audience expectation initially, and, to a certain extent, they fulfill this call. However, they succeed only momentarily and as means to establish a context that they immediately mock through their stand-up. Here I expose the way that Maysoon Zayid, a Palestinian-American comedian, and Suzanne Whang, a Korean-American comedian play with the possibility of inhabiting multiple identities to suggest that gender is unstable and representation is unstable.

Maysoon Zayid

Maysoon Zayid, after realizing she would “never be seen on TV” as a “Palestinian, Muslim, virgin, with Cerebral Palsy from New Jersey,” adopted comedy as a way to renegotiate the terms of her visibility. For Zayid, the “American Dream” is realized through comedy as a less-literal way to “buy in” or assimilate with American culture by way of humorous critique. Comedy, in Zayid’s case, becomes a currency that affirms one’s
place through physical and vocal presence as well serving as a psychical linkage between Americans in a multi-racial and multi-cultural nation. To problematize the process of place-making in America, Zayid plays with what scholar Indepal Grewal calls the “post-9/11 hyphen” in “Transnational America: Race, Gender, and Citizenship after 9/11,” as an unstable signifier that functions as both assimilation to and a contestation of American culture. Grewal defines it as such: “the hyphen ceases to be a sign of resistance to the American Nation but rather becomes the marker of a contingent ability of those with such an identity to switch from one side of the hyphen to the other but at other times to challenge the American nation with this contingency” (538). Zayid’s performance is located on both sides of the hyphen, especially in regard to her access to language, where she splits a thick Jersey accent with jokes and anecdotes in Arabic. Switching between languages and dialects (when imitating her mother) displays Zayid’s ability to both “challenge” and endorse American values. It can also be viewed as her allegiance to the local; both as a Jersey girl and a Palestinian.

Zayid humorously discusses her transitory allegiance to both the US and Palestine, though her interactions with Israeli military at the airport are delightfully satirized. On tour in Seattle with the Arab American Comedy troupe, she performs in a familiar way with her audience understanding her troubled positionality. Though outside the US, the global aspect of Zayid’s performance kicks in as she performs herself as a New Yorker trying to “package” herself humorously for the Israeli soldiers who place her as Palestinian. Zayid again references an American game show in an ironic tone; where she does not state answers, instead she destabilizes with the question mark:

There is this misconception that Israelis don’t love Palestinian. That is not true. They love me so much that they keep me in the airport for like 8 hours when I land. And I’m a New Yorker, so I can’t be stuck anywhere that long and not multitask. So when I go into my interrogation with the Israeli soldiers I like to multitask and what I do is practice for a very popular American game show – not Fear Factor, I know that’s what you’re thinking. I practice for Jeopardy. So what I do is answer all questions in the form of question, so when they ask me (in Israel accent), “What is your name?” I go “ding” (hits imaginary buzzer), “What is Maysoon?” “Where are you going?” I go “ding, what is my land not yours? (beat) I pick up my teeth from a pool of blood and go to get searched.

In this performance, “what is my land?” and “what is Maysoon?” are not definitively located or defined. They are posed as possibilities, thus troubling the essential insider/outside relationship and the boundaries that define those of and with abject status. Zayid performs a humorous questioning of her own identity as an abject refugee, picking up her teeth in a pool of abject blood. As the routine continues, Zayid points to her position as an outsider in an American context as a way of establishing a connection with the Israelis. She takes a brief aside to include her mother’s rejection of her as an abject girl with a disability:

And when they search me, as I said I grew up around Catholics so I never ever had Christmas, like all my friends would be like “What’d Santa Claus bring you?” and I’d say (crying) Nothing, I asked my mom “why doesn’t Santa come to our house” and she’s like (in a Palestinian accent) “because he doesn’t like little shaking girls...he wants a son.” So it makes me deal with soldiers, so I bring Christmas to Tel Aviv. What I do is wrap every article of clothing in my suitcase in festive Christmas paper. So, every sock every panty; wrapped, festive! And they gather everything up and put it back in the suitcase and take it away...and I go “you’re getting nothing for Christmas because Santa Claus is mad at you.” (in a demanding tone) Now give us back Jesus’ birth place!

Zayid’s mother is marked with a thick, sharp accent. In Zayid’s portrayal her mother is without emotion with the declaration that she “wants a son.” Zayid brings a stereotype of ideological value by sarcastically ignoring her mother’s misogyny and projecting it onto the Israel soldiers. Zayid uses her mother’s limitations to “deal with soldiers” thus a valuable tool in her resistance.
Effectively, Zayid, as she is deemed “repulsively other” by dominant systems of representation, destabilizes the structures that bind representation of Arab-Americans.

Zayid establishes several subject positions by conflating “borders” of homeland. This construction of identity, as it is produced by consumer citizenship and the ideology of the “American Dream,” is thus never complete. Hence, the iterative nature of a comedy routine provides the platform for Zayid to make visible the supposedly “stable borders and subjects” that attempt to compartmentalize belonging. Zayid uses excess Christian wrapping paper as a convention from Christians, to draw attention to an abject product, tampons, which is ironically something that men lack. Zayid humorously outs herself as abject on many levels, as a shaking (physically disabled) girl (no phallus) that does not celebrate Christmas in the US (does not participate in “buying into” commercial/holiday citizenship).

**Suzanne Whang**

Suzanne Whang is a politically driven performance artist, or as she labels herself playfully on her website performance artist refers to: “actor, television host, stand-up comedian, author, public speaker, dessert topping, and floor wax.” As a stand-up she took playful activism to the stage after she found casting directors ordering readings that commanded her to be more “oriental.” Whang plays into this desire for an orientalized performance by creating a hyperbole, an alter-ego that is a “F.O.B.” (Fresh of the Boat) Korean woman named Sung Hee Park. As her alter ego Sung Hee, Whang shocks her audience with provocative racist jokes and shticky humor, using the N-Word, the G-Word, or calling out certain audience members as “homos.”

Perhaps most exciting about Whang’s performance is that while she maintains an exaggerated character she has enjoyed a long run as the host of Home and Garden Television’s (HGTV) highest rated show *House Hunters*. The show follows potential home buyers and their selection among three different homes. Whang’s role on the show is to summarize their experience as an accent-less “American.” Capturing a distinctly American experience (home buying) and perforating the domestic sphere where viewers watch the show, Whang appeals to the bind that requires people of color to assimilate to American culture on the one hand. On the other hand she indulges racist stereotypes that are recycled in fictional television and film programming on stage. The conflation between Suzanne and Song Hee is a delightful one; where audiences are set up to invest in the myth of Song Hee and thirty minutes into the set Suzanne appears with an intelligent, crass, and critical voice that is so neutralized (in terms of regional accent) that it is no surprise she has become an emblem of a “household” network.

Whang’s career in stand-up has been paired with the task of responding to criticism of her act and articulating a keen understanding of the theoretical impetus behind the character Song Hee Park. Whang succinctly describes the act on her website reminding her viewers that the performance is an “act”: “the act is a satire of racism in America, reminiscent of Archie Bunker’s character in *All In The Family*. The comparison suggests the terms for when we tolerate racism; when it is performed by a lovable patriarch. Whang can attest to the ironic statement she bravely makes on stage, as it grew from years of demands from casting directors to be more
“oriental.” Recalling the interactions Whang jokes, “I thought I couldn’t even do the accent because I would go to auditions and people would say, “Could you do that more Oriental?” What does that mean? I’m 100% Korean. What do you mean do that more Oriental?” (Interview 2003). Whang’s truth, “I’m 100% Korean,” is the irony and she identifies as 100% whatever “oriental” might mean, though the demand she responds to is one that nurtures a prevalent stereotype in the U.S. Song Hee Park was born out of an experimental acting class where Suzanne playfully (and “safely”) created a character that is an “endearing” immigrant who uses naiveté to garner audience acceptance and support. When describing the construction of this character Whang notes the possibilities:

What if she doesn’t even write her own material? What if she doesn’t even understand what the jokes mean? She just sort of wrote them out phonetically but she really wants to do good and she’s so nervous that she’s like shaking and crying behind the fan. I started to like the idea of this. And she would tell these horrific, racist, politically incorrect, inappropriate, sexual, anything goes jokes to the point where she’s a fish out of water and she’s an underdog and there’s something endearing about the character that people really root for her, even though she’s saying these horrible things. So people end up being uncomfortable but then laughing and then really wanting her to do well. (Interview 2003)

Clearly understanding the intentions behind the character Song Hee, Whang ingeniously locates the agency in a character that seemingly has no agency as a meek, shy, “fresh of the boat” immigrant from Korea. Recycling jokes that are not her own, Song Hee further distances the impact of offensive content. In one example Sung Hee performs a recycled joke though she emphasizes her otherness by laying a thick Korean accent on: “how do you know a Korean broke into yo’ house? (nodding and smiling) Dog isss missing and home wohkk is done.”

Called onto the stage, Sung Hee Park is given a coveted welcome by the host—“it’s her first time performing on stage”—garnering audience sympathy and leveling the distinction between audience and performer. Clad in a traditional Hanbok dress in a bright rose pink, Sung Hee hunches her body over and shuffles her feet, making her appear older and smaller in size. Toting props that play to Asian stereotypes, a kitchy pink purse that has a spout on the end (so as to resemble a watering can) and a Buchae fan that has a Korean flag on it. Heightening an emotion such as nervousness allows Sung Hee to take extra time in setting up the audience’s expectations for the performance, drawing out tension for a great release when the jokes begin. Sung Hee hides behind the fan from the moment she enters the stage, in this way the fan serves as a setup for the punchline (which would be the
expression on her face); meanwhile her efforts to set up for the performance are hindered by the use of only one hand (as the other hand holds the fans) to adjust the microphone, move a stool closer, and unfold her notes. Adjusting the microphone, which is intentionally placed far above her head (Whang is actually quite average height in the comedy world), Sung Hee breathes nervously through the fan and into the microphone. Finally ready to reveal her face, she slowly lowers the fan to a nervous but genuinely beaming set of bright white teeth. The reveal is an outrageous leveler of the tension evoked. Still nervous, she immediately puts the fan back to cover her face. Gathering her confidence for a moment, she extends two fingers into the shape of a peace sign. Her offering performed so desperately that it again garners the audience’s pity. Cautiously she unfolds a piece of paper with notes on it. Playing to the standard crowd work (where a comedian interacts with audience to establish a live, shared context), Sung Hee asks: “Are there any gooks in the house?” Upon hearing the slur uttered so naively the audience erupts in laughter, confused by what appears to be a self-identified racist. Continuing with this trope, she enthusiastically recalls another joke for her audience: “Last night my boyfriend ate me out and half latuhhr (later) he hungry again (big smile, covering face with fan).

Exploiting the audiences’ own feelings of vulnerability toward such a nervous character, Whang locates the possibility for a shared community through stand-up, one that is critical of the racist characterizations recycled in mass media. As Whang describes it, Sung Hee is the endearing “underdog,” a subject position that Americans tend to root for and support vehemently. Enhancing the emotion behind her character, playing Sung Hee as a “bad stand-up comedian,” and using stuttering, slippages, and misinterpretations, Whang exposes the problematic behind stand-up as one might see it in Vegas or more “traditional” stand-up clubs. By inviting audience members to interact with the character she is required to play in auditions, Whang establishes a context that she may counter as Suzanne Whang—a poised, articulate, and enthusiastically raunchy “self.” Though stand-up comedy certainly has an international presence, it is a distinctly American art form, as it encourages and welcomes diverse subject positions. Despite the idealism behind stand-up as a platform for critical thinking, it can also call attention to audience expectation and upon doing so, reject stagnant stereotype. Both Zayid and Whang play to audience expectations as presumed “others” and through their comedy they suggest the way race and citizenship can be performed, whether dabbling on both sides of the hyphen in Zayid’s case or “exploding” the hyphen in Whang’s.

Christie Nittrouer is a PhD candidate in Performance Studies at UCLA and a recipient of the Irving and Jean Stone Dissertation Year Fellowship as well as a CSW travel grant. Her dissertation looks at the ways that diverse female comedians tamper with a notion of belonging through their bodies, foul language, and comedic structure and timing. She is also a stand-up comedian.

**Works Cited**


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