Firespitters: Performance, Power, and Payoff in African American Women's Humor, 1968-Present

By

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Abstract

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This study considers the social, cultural, and political production of black women's humor, making the case that humor becomes more than merely a technique of entertainment. Instead, I argue that humor is a mode of literacy and site of self-authorship for African American women across a variety of discursive fields, including literature, sketch comedy, stand-up comedy, and electoral politics. Usually described as a "routine," the professional stand-up comics of this study are in fact presenting new ways of thinking about race, class, sex, culture, and power. Using archival research, ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and close readings of performances, this dissertation engages several questions: how do black women use humor to express emotions like desire, anger, and contempt? What are the effects of black women's public performances on their own identities? What do their performances tell us about black culture? How do ideas about black womanhood and feminism factor into their dialogue? What personal, political, and economic opportunities does stand-up comedy offer African American comediennes? Finally, how do black women engage in practices of self-fashioning in and through stand-up comedy? A deeper understanding of the affective and political dimensions of black women comedians' practices highlights stand-up comedy as a renegade space in which performers move literally and figuratively from outrageous comics to become audacious thinkers and potent social critics.

For Grandma.

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Chapter 1
Ghosts in the Machine: An Introduction

"Certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them." – Toni Morrison, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* (1988)

"*It's as if there's an elephant in the room, and it's spraying out elephant diarrhea all over everyone, and no one's mentioning it. It's surreal. My impulse is always to call people's attention to the situation.* Uh, the elephant? Shitting on you?" – Paul Mooney, *Black is the New White* (2009)

Ebony magazine rolled out "The Biggest, Baddest Comedy Issue Ever" in April 2011, for the first time dedicating an entire issue to the sacred (and profane) art form, which according to editor-in-chief Amy DuBois Barnett, has "always been a part of the Black experience, largely because it has allowed us to smile through some of the worst times."[1] Six feature-length articles laid out the significant contributors to the African American comic tradition. Acting as arbiter of the canon, *Ebony* magazine became "the boom of power announcing an 'officially recognized set of texts.'"[2] Forty-four black male comics grace "The Biggest, Baddest Comedy Issue Ever," while a mere eight women garner mention; even then, the majority are subjected to perfunctory and lazy analysis contained in three sentences or less.

In a salon-style interview, comedian Cedric the Entertainer tried to get at the gaping silence surrounding black women comics', asking the group, "Can you name me *one true Black example* of, say, Carol Burnett or Roseanne?" Sheryl Underwood's response, "Whoopi would probably be that *one*,"[3] reminded me of Toni Morrison's important work on the "willful oblivion"[4] of black people in the American literary canon, the search for the "ghosts in the machine," who have "shaped the choices, the language, the structure— the meaning of so much American literature."[5] Indeed, Underwood's statement and the entire April 2011 issue of *Ebony* capture the insidiousness of black women's critical erasure in the African American humor tradition. Additionally, it points to what Nancy Walker characterizes as the paradox of women and humor in American culture, the "invisibility of the tradition, not merely to the dominant culture, but to the women themselves."[6]

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the history, techniques, and efficacy of black women's humor. The goal of such a task is not merely the suggestion that black women humorists "were there," though that is a significant result of this study. Bearing in mind Peggy Phelan's critique of "the ideology of visibility,"[7] which is the idea that marginalized people can attain political power via more visibility, we will see that identifying and recognizing black

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1 "Wit and Wisdom," *Ebony*, Vol. LXVI, No. 6 (April 2011), 16.
2 Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, University of Michigan (1988), 123.
3 *Ebony*, Vol. LXVI, No. 6 (April 2011), 88, italics mine.
4 Morrison, "Unspeakable Things," 136.
5 Ibid, 135-136.
6 Nancy Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of MN Press, 1988), 122.
7 Peggy Phelan: *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 7.

women as co-creators of the African American humor tradition is in fact political. As Morrison reminds us, "canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature, and range…is the clash of cultures. And *all* of the interests are vested."[8] More specifically, my aim is to identify and analyze black women's humor as a mode of literacy facilitating personal, intellectual, and political expression in the public sphere. I begin by defining the terms and concepts germane to this study. I then discuss readings of black humor, including its roots in folk culture and function as a survivalist technique. Next, I locate black humor as a mode of literacy that is part of the ongoing struggle for literacy in the African American experience. To conclude, I review readings of gender and humor and lay out the methodology and structure of the dissertation.

Theories of Humor and Comedy

Before proceeding, it will be helpful to define some important terms. For the purpose of this study, comedy refers to a broad genre of narrative practices featuring humor as the primary mode of expression. Humor is a *subjective* mode of expression intended to incite laughter, which because of its rootedness in particular cultural and historical contexts, may or may not be perceived. That is to say, what rouses laughter in one may be met with silent impassivity by another. Laughter, on the other hand, is an *objective*, discernable social act. Lawrence Levine notes that laughter "assumes the presence of at least the rudiments of an already existing sense of identification,"[9] pointing to humor as a social phenomenon following the work of French philosopher Henri Bergson, who in the early 20th century indicated the performativity of laughter. "Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo,"[10] Bergson argued. For literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, laughter's subversive potential is important for understanding how the black women humorists evoke it from their audiences. "Laughter degrades and materializes," Bakhtin posits, and "degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth…To degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place."[11] Black women humorists often elicit more than laughter, depicting for their audiences the potential for alternative and/or new social and cultural relations.

The social function of humor is central to many theories of humor and comedy. For example, Henri Bergson argued "to understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine the utility of its function, which is a social one."[12] Humor is a socially and culturally contingent phenomenon that "affords

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8 Morrison, "Unspeakable Things," 132, emphasis in original.

9 Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. Second edition (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 [1977]), 359.

10 Henri Bergson, "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic," translated by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1914), cited in Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 358.

11 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 20-21.

12 Bergson, "Laughter," qtd. in Mel Watkins, *On The Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying- The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture From Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 41.

insights into power relationships,"[13] as Joanne Gilbert points out. In fact, centuries before Sigmund Freud's famous monograph on the psychological function of joking (which I will discuss below), Thomas Hobbes noted, "the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others."[14] For black women humorists, the "others" are often those who keep them representationally and ideologically bound and silenced, and affirmation of their subjectivity is a corollary of the laughter evoked at the "other's" expense.

Humor as a manifestation of low culture undergirds several theories of comedy going back to Aristotle, who, in *Poetics* characterizes comedy as "an imitation of characters of a lower type," which "consists in some defect or ugliness which is painful and destructive."[15] Mikhail Bakhtin has one of the most robust theories of folk humor focusing on Rabelais' use of it in the medieval period, "a boundless world of *humorous forms* and manifestations *opposed the official and serious tone* of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture."[16] Bakhtin further illustrates folk humor as the *carnival* type, played out in the rites and rituals of festivals allowing people of lower rank and status to mimic and mock official civil and social ceremonies. Belonging "to the borderline between art and life," carnival folk humor "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order," and "created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life."[17] In this sense, folk humor functioned as a method of folk cultural formation and a means of exerting control, if fleetingly, over unpredictable, unequal, and often brutal environments.

Following this line of thinking, theories of humor have taken seriously Freud's psychoanalytic theory of joking as the sublimation of aggression, to point out the obvious example, the trope of "laughter as the best medicine," or, laughter to "keep from crying." Tendentious humor, as Freud calls it, is a means of managing social relations within the context of social and political inequality. Tendentious jokes cut to the core of the joker's aggression via the "principle of economy," where jokes "allowed economy in the expenditure of that energy used for the purposes of inhibition or suppression by liberating feelings which normally had to be contained."[18] Freud's theory of tendentious humor looms large in studies of black humor[19] evidenced in the tendency of foregrounding its resistant and survivalist qualities, which will be discussed later.

Black Culture, Performance and Performativity

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13 Joanne Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), xvii.

14 Norman N. Holland, *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), 44.

15 Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by S.H. Butcher. Internet Classics Archive by Daniel C. Stevenson, Web Atomics: 1994-2000. http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.mb.txt, Part V.

16 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 4, emphasis in original.

17 Ibid, 7-10.

18 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Translated by J. Stachey (New York, W.W. Norton, 1960 [1905]), 100.

19 Not to be confused with the literary genre known as black humor, or gallows humor, though it often employs satire and grotesquery. For the purpose of this discussion, I use the terms black humor and African American humor synonymously.

As a critical study of black cultural expression, it is important to establish the history and context of black cultural formation. Lawrence Levine suggests continuity between the past and present after the moment of rupture the Middle Passage embodied, arguing that enslaved blacks did not spawn a culture entirely anew. Instead, enslaved Africans exploited and transformed elements of the old and new in the formation of what would become African American folk culture. For Levine, the notion of folk signified traditions and practices of the "masses" of black people constructed through "strategic cooptation of cultural expression."[20] Following the work of Levine and Joseph Roach, it is important to distinguish between culture as "the *product* of the interaction between the past and present,"[21] and culture as "the social *processes* of memory and forgetting."[22] Both Levine and Roach's interpretations of culture make significant contributions to the study of black humor, insisting on performance as a primary vehicle of black cultural formation. This is especially evident in black humor's ability to transmit history and facilitate the development of a racially particular collective consciousness. Because blackness and laughter can both be performative phenomena, before moving to an examination of black humor, the terms "performance" and "performativity" should be elucidated.

Richard Schechner makes a distinction between performance "as" and "is."[23] *As* events, performances function to "mark and bend identities, remake time and adorn and reshape the body, tell stories and allow people to play with behavior that is restored, or 'twice-behaved."[24] Performance *is* enacted in "how people play gender, heightening their constructed identity, performing slightly or radically different selves in different situations."[25] This is particularly evident when black women revise and remix their lived experiences in constructing and enacting their humorous expressions. As Norman K. Denzin points out, "performances are embedded in language,"[26] and phenomena like race, gender, and humor do not exist independently, but must be manifested through performance.[27] Black women fully exploit and maintain the elasticity of such categories, the laughter they generate often troubling ideals and ideologies about their racialized and gendered bodies.

Performativity refers to "the reiterative power of discourse to reproduce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains,"[28] as Judith Butler defines it. For example, Adele Givens and asks her audience in a 1993 routine on the HBO comedy show *Def Comedy Jam*, "Do I look like a fucking lady, or what?" after which she delivers a bawdy routine enacting the "fucking lady." Givens declares, "I'm sick and tired of people saying what a *lady* can and can't do, can and can't

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20 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 24.

21 Ibid, 5, emphasis mine.

22 Joseph Roach, *Cities of The Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), preface.

23 Richard Schechner, "What is Performance Studies Anyway?" in *The Ends of Performance*, edited by P. Phelan and J. Lane (New York: NYU Press, 1998), 361.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Norman K. Denzin, "The Call to Performance," Symbolic Interaction, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2003), 189.

27 For fuller discussion of performativity, see J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words.* Second Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975 [1962]); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); and Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

28 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

say. I feel like this: if a woman can suck your dick, then damn it, she can talk about it."[29] Here, we can see how black women comics can both problematize traditional representations of race, class, and gender in which they may not quite fit, and produces an alternative one at the same time.

Scholars of black culture have continuously linked race, experience, and performance. "It is not skin color which makes a Negro American," Ralph Ellison remarked, "but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament."[30] When I use the term *black* or *African American*, I follow E. Patrick Johnson's anti-essentialist assertion that racial blackness is performatively produced, "historically, socially, and politically contingent upon terms of its production."[31] As Johnson notes, "blackness does not only reside in the theatrical fantasies of the white imaginary that is projected onto black bodies, nor is it always consciously acted out; rather it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the "living of blackness" becomes a material way of knowing."[32] This is not to say that blackness is not also rooted in corporeality, because as Jayna Brown reminds us, the black body is a site of race and racism, and "race and racist regimes are made out of flesh—muscle and ligament, blood and bone."[33] However, Toni Morrison draws up a beautifully contingent and supple definition of blackness that is useful for this project, which she harnessed to create the character Sula in the eponymous novel. Morrison's notion of blackness captures its dynamism and simultaneous manifestation in biology, culture, and individual choice.

> I always thought of Sula as quintessentially black, metaphysically black…which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe. She is New World black and New World woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things. Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable.[34]

The political efficacy of black performance is a running theme in African American studies, scholars addressing race through the lens of performance. W.E. B. DuBois, for example, famously argued, "all art is propaganda,"[35] advocating for an all-black theater as a weapon against racism and white cultural hegemony. In the 1960s, Amiri Baraka called for "The Revolutionary Theatre," intended "to show victims so that their brothers in the audience will be better able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and that they themselves are blood brothers."[36] Angela Y. Davis links performance and working-class black feminism, exploring how blues women shaped American popular culture. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998)

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29 Adele Givens. "Adele Givens on Def Comedy Jam." Online video clip, 29 July 2012. Visited 15 December 2012. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gMUbECjSK4.

30 Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964), 131.

31 E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

32 Ibid, 8.

33 Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 60.

34 Morrison, "Unspeakable Things," 153.

35 W.E.B. DuBois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis*, Vol. 32, October 1926, 290.

36 LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," in The Making of African American Identity, Vol. 3. http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/protest/text12/barakatheatre.pdf. Visited March 20, 2013.

not only points out how blues women "addressed urgent social issues and helped shape collective modes of black consciousness," in their musical performances, but her work also points out the fact that "feminist traditions are not only written, they are oral."[37] Following Davis and bell hooks, my goal is to locate "black performance as a site of resistance,"[38] while taking seriously E. Patrick Johnson's warning that even though "performance must provide a space for meaningful resistance to oppressive systems…black performance is not beyond the reaches of ideology and the power struggles that such battles ensue."[39]

Locating Black Humor

Black humor emerges at the nexus of the cultural and social construction of blackness and the performativity of laughter. Scholars of black humor locate its development in the experiences of cultural transformation precipitated by the Middle Passage and centuries of enslavement, manifested as a process of what Joseph Roach calls "surrogation," where "into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure, survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternatives."[40] As Levine notes, black humor was forged through surreptitious cooptation and transformations of Old and New World cultural idioms, approximating what James Scott calls "hidden transcripts," which are "not just behind-the-scenes griping and grumblings; [they are] enacted in a host of down-to-earth, low profile strategems designed to minimize appropriation."[41] Like Levine, Mel Watkins' extensive study *On The Real Side* (1994) traces black humor to folk cultural expressive practices forged in slavery. Much of the recent scholarship on black humor situates it in the particularities of black folk culture. "A substantial percentage of Negro humor, even had it been revealed to whites," notes Levine, "would simply not have struck them as funny."[42] African American humor began as an in-group form of communicating based on the specific needs and experiences of the community, and was often incomprehensible to white people, with whom they shared a bifurcated racial existence.

As a mode of self- and cultural-reflexivity, early black humor "functioned to foster a sense of particularity and group identification by widening the gap between those within and those outside of the circle of laughter,"[43] suggesting the link between the performativity of laughter and the construction of blackness and black culture. Further, since this project is concerned with the *public* performance of humor, Victor Turner's concept of public liminality is germane to our understanding of black humor and comedy. "Public liminality," Turner argues, "can never be tranquilly regarded as a safety valve, mere catharsis, "letting off steam," rather it is comunitas weighing structure, sometimes finding it wanting, and proposing in however

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37 Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1998), xiv-xix.

38 bell hooks, "Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition," in C. Ugwu (ed.), *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 210.

39 E. Patrick Johnson, "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures," in eds. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera, *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2005) 461, 447.

40 Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 2.

41 James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 188.

42 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 313.

43 Ibid, 359.

extravagant a form, new paradigms and models which invert or subvert the old."[44] The foundation of black folk humor is orality, which undergirds Levine and Watkins' focus on "the materials of oral expressive culture"[45] in their characterizations of black humor.

Watkins describes the elements of black humor: the aesthetic of the laugh itself; black folk cultural idioms, especially African American Vernacular English; the ritual of insult, or, the dozens; trickster tales, known as lying and/or signifying; and a gestural repertoire in the form of bodily movements, posture, body language, and recognizable expressions reflecting the particular styles of common black people.[46] Saunders Redding argues that black humor "is very often true—and the truth strikes deep into the follies, paradoxes, the ambiguities, and pulpy moral fiber of American life."[47] The trope of realism, or, truth telling in black comedy is a self-reflexive and reflective tool where humorists might draw attention to the problems of everyday life.

W.E.B. Du Bois concept double-consciousness, that African Americans are "gifted with second-sight in this American world,"[48] is a pervasive trope in theories of black humor. Double-consciousness is, in fact, a fundamental trope of folk culture in general, as Bakhtin illustrates in his discussion of medieval folk humor. "A carnival atmosphere…offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less---a two-world condition."[49] This "two-world condition" is exemplified in the practice of masking in black humor. Indeed, the idea of the black comic mask leads to my next point, that much of black humor studies take seriously Freud's psychoanalytic theory of jokes as circumlocution to alleviate aggressive feelings toward people in positions of superiority.

Levine lays out a three-pronged theory of black survivalist humor hinging on Freud's notion of tendentious jokes. Inversion jokes, Levine argues, were a way for enslaved blacks to feel superior to their white masters by figuratively and non-threateningly elevating themselves above them, a means of controlling whites via laughter.[50] Regina Barreca points out jokes as a mode of personal empowerment, that "making your own jokes is equivalent to taking control over your life—and usually that means taking control away from someone else."[51] Absurdist jokes, Levine argues, enabled blacks to mock and ridicule whites by way of gross exaggeration, functioning to unveil the absurdity of a situation, and unmasking humor worked to reveal the distance between appearance and reality.[52] In this sense, black humor started out functioning as a

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44 Victor Turner, "Frame Flow, and Reflections: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," in Michael Benamou and Charles Caramello, eds., *Performance in Postmodern Culture* (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1977), 33.

45 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 444.

46 Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side*.

47 Saunders Redding, "Escape into Pride and Dignity," in Philip Sterling, *Laughing On the Outside: The Intelligent White Reader's Guide to Negro Tales and Humor* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965), 18.

48 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam, 2005 [1903]), 3.

49 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 6.

50 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 303.

51 Regina Barreca, *They Used to call me snow white…but I drifted: Women's strategic use of humor* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 110.

52 Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 309-316.

survivalist technique and site of resistance, but developed into an important conduit of social, cultural, and historical development and transmission.

However, despite black humor's transgressive and survivalist impulses, black laughter had paradoxical implications. Outside of the culture and context of its origin, "laughter reveals a body out of order," argues Peter C. Kunze, "a body that is transgressive, disruptive, and disrespectful to social propriety."[53] Specifically, black laughter became associated with racial blackness, and with white people unable to grasp their humor, black people laughing in public became marked as clowns and fools.[54] There is a widely circulated tale about Southern blacks having to put their heads in a "laughing barrel"[55] when they felt the urge to laugh to avoid offending white people. Daryl C. Dance discusses the impropriety of black women's public laughter, presumably for middle-class black women who are the main subjects of her study. "It was not considered ladylike to tell jokes or even to laugh too loudly publicly,"[56] Dance claims. Even when black humor operated under the radar, as scholars have noted its tendency to do, it facilitated the processes of black cultural transformation—it transmitted historical material, entertained and educated, opened space for resistance to racial oppression, and set a foundation for collective consciousness and racial particularity. Ultimately, I want to fold my project into the broader discourse where the social function of black humor is central, but further, to situate it as a mode of *literacy*, a manifestation within the ongoing struggle in African American history for literacy.

Black Comic Literacy

"Jokes are the original Internet," comedian Paul Mooney points out, getting at the idea that black humor as a mode of literacy in his memoir *Black is the New White* (2009), "they connect people. Jokes travel through time, too. A joke dies and it lies there asleep and then someone comes along and spills water on it and it becomes alive again."[57] I want to introduce the concept of *black comic literacy* (BCL) as a way to tie together the social, cultural, and political efficacy of black humor, especially its facilitation and transmission of socioculturally influenced knowledge via public performance. BCL includes practices of reading and performing that takes up Ngugi wa Thiong'o's notion of *orature*, which "comprises a range of forms, which, though they may invest themselves variously in gesture, song, dance, processions, storytelling, proverbs, gossip, customs, rites, and rituals, are nevertheless produced alongside or within

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53 Peter C. Kunze, "The Tears of A Clown: Masculinity and Comedy in Contemporary American Narratives." PhD diss., (Florida State University, 2012), 12.

54 The impropriety of laughter was not reserved for blacks, Kunze notes, citing a 1748 letter from Lord Chesterfield to his son directing him on the proper performance of a gentleman. Lord Chesterfield wrote his son, "Having mentioned laughing, I must particularly warn you against it: and I could heartily wish that you may be often seen to smile, but never heard to laugh while you live. Frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners; it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things; and they call it being merry." Cited in Kunze, "Tears of a Clown," 6.

55 Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 18. Folklorist Alan Dundes' important collection, *Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel: Readings in the Interpretation of Afro-American Folklore* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1990), also makes reference to the laughing barrel in black folk culture.

56 Daryl C. Dance, *Honey, Hush!: An Anthology of African American Women's Humor* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), xxiii.

57 Paul Mooney, *Black is the New White: A Memoir* (New York: Gallery Books, 2009), 26-27.

mediated literacies of various kinds and degrees."[58] BCL practices are based in the black folk cultural idioms and techniques as laid out above, along with their dynamic transformation based on emergent social and historical contexts. Paul Mooney alludes to BCL's efficacy and its centrality in the trajectory of black folk cultural expression:

> "Comedy, it's uh, it's religious. We can be reborn by listening to comedy. You know, you can find yourself. You don't feel alone. You feel that someone else thinks the way you think. You feel that you're not out there by yourself. It's like hip-hop. It's a form of hip-hop…Hip-hop is an extension from comedy. Hip-hop is like playing the dozens. That's where that comes from. It's just a, an octopus. It's part of an octopus. All that stuff has a lot of arms."[59]

BCL practices are eminently social, but Sonja L. Lanehart reminds us that "literacy neither imprisons nor frees people, it merely embodies the enormous complexities of how and why some people live comfortably and others do not."[60] In developing the concept of BCL, my goal is to illustrate how black humor' features, functions, and techniques shift according to the context from which they originate. I want to go back to Paul Mooney's memories of the development of his sense of humor to discuss more fully the critical intervention his narrative makes in studies and theories of black humor.

Mooney dedicated his memoir to Aimy Ealy, his maternal grandmother he affectionately refers to throughout the text as "Mama." Mooney talks at length about the development of his comic literacy, especially its rootedness in his grandmother's sense of humor and mode of conveying it to the community around her. "Mama wakes up every morning pondering whose ass she is going to whoop," Mooney remembers. "Mama is always whooping ass. My ass, your ass, the neighbor kid's ass. That's her reputation."[61] His grandmother's stories, which are shot through with black folk humor, are at the heart of his comedy. She tells him about running away from home as a child and being caught and spanked, which causes him to erupt with laughter. "Hearing that story makes me laugh the hardest I ever laugh as a kid…the idea of Mama, the ultimate ass-whooper, getting a whoopin' herself, makes me laugh until my gut hurts. I think its what makes me a comic. The world going upside down and butt backward plants the seed of all my comedy, still to this day."[62]

Mama's stories and their humor conveyed her particular knowledge to Mooney, not merely the stories themselves, but it was "her whole attitude, the way she talked to people, the way she, um, the way she responded to people."[63] Mooney critically locates his grandmother as the leading communicative agent in the development of his comic literacy via her exploitation of *mother tongue*, a concept signaling how "mothers transmit their language into their children who develop facility with it…how we know what we know."[64] I am not implying that mothers

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58 Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 11.
59 Paul Mooney. Personal Interview. San Francisco, CA. 21 March 2010. (Mooney)
60 Sonja L. Lanehart, *Sista, Speak!: Black Women Kinfolk Talk About Language and Literacy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 8.
61 Mooney, *Black Is the New White*, 39.
62 Ibid.
63 Mooney.
64 Elaine Richardson, "'To Protect and Serve': African American Female Literacies," *College Composition and Communication,* Vol. 53, No. 4 (June, 2002), 677-678.

imparted all black humorists' senses of humor. Mooney's narrative is an outlier in the discourse of black humor studies, because unlike Levine, Watkins, and most general studies of black humor, Mooney's account recognizes and analyzes not only black women's existence as humorists whose performance practices helped shape black expressive culture, but also the critical role that comic literacy plays in black women's individual lives, and in the people who are their audiences. This project, follows Mooney's project of recovery, examining black women humorists as "ghosts in the machine" of black expressive culture who are often ignored, devalued, or discredited, along with the power and payoffs derived from their public performances of their humor.

Gender, Humor, and Power

Black women's experiences are particular in the broader context of black life and culture, especially since they have historically been subjected to racial, economic, and gender oppressions enabling unique ways of seeing and being in the world.[65] As such, their standpoint and consciousness enables them to develop unique techniques within the framework of BCL. Experiences of marginality create the conditions for "the humor of marginality,"[66] Joseph Boskin and J. Dorinson argue, and many black women humorist use creative expressive tactics to exploit their marginality. Even in a shared historical, social, and cultural context, black women's literacies have been developed out of the necessity to "counteract White supremacist and economically motivated stereotypes conveying subhuman or immoral images."[67] As Richardson contends, "African American females communicate these literacies through storytelling, conscious manipulation of silence and speech, code/style shifting, and signifying, among other verbal and nonverbal practices."[68] This project is an analysis of gender, humor, and power, foregrounding the techniques, functions, and efficacy of black women's humor from the late 1960s to the present. How poets use language and imagery to create comic moments, how politicians exploit irony and wit to move "out of place," and how stand-up comedians use the public stage as a site of self-making and political expression are three considerations facilitating such an analysis.

Following recent readings of women's humor linking performance and power relations, one of the central claims of this project makes is black women's public performance of humor and comedy is eminently political. "Whether performing in a comedy club or out stumping for votes," Joanne Gilbert argues, "humorists engage in a power play with real or imagined targets, entertaining audiences as they promote agendas."[69] The subversive potential of women's comedy is a broad theme in scholarship on gender and humor because humor has been until recently, understood as a mode of power for men. As Peter C. Kunze notes, humor, masculine

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65 For a fuller discussion of intersectionality and black women's standpoint, consult the anthology *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. Edited by Beverly Guy-Scheftall, (New York: The New Press, 1995); Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Stanford Law Review, Vol. 43, No. 6 (Jul., 1991); and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

66 Joseph Boskin and J. Dorinson, "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival," in ed. A.P. Dussen, *American Humor* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 167.

67 Richardson, "African American Female Literacies," 677.

68 Ibid, 680.

69 Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*, 13.

performance, and power are intimately linked, as evidenced in "the masculine comic persona…they drink, smoke, curse, and womanize. They are cool. To incite laughter is to cause others to lose corporeal control, which empowers men."[70] When women humorists publicly perform, Judy Little maintains, their routines become "renegade comedy…mocking the deepest possible norms, norms four thousand years old,"[71] and black women comics can use public performance to snatching a bit of empowerment for themselves. When they stand on the stage and perform in roles hegemonically carved out for men, their comedy is necessarily subversive.

While black women humorists are woefully neglected in most of the studies and anthologies of African American humor, recent scholarship has emerged in response to this critical void. Like studies on women and humor in general, the scholarship on black women's humor tends to foreground its radical and transcendent potential. Daryl C. Dance's anthology *Honey, Hush!* (1998) is a corrective anthology examining African American women's humor, especially literary appearances. Dance's work is commendable, yet its focus on mostly respectable middle-class iterations of black women's humor ignores working-class black women's humor, imposing a silence of certain enactments of black women's humor she hoped to combat with her study. In *Babylon Girls* (2008), Jayna Brown explores how black women's expressive culture was crucial in the making of the modern body in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Brown analyzes black women's humor on the variety stage as a form of criticism, where they exploited the "tools of farce" to "disrobe authority."[72] *Babylon Girls* engages the subversive impulse of black women's humor, and this project explores contemporary iterations of black women's jokes and laughter that enable them to literally and figuratively move "out of place."

Bambi Haggins explores humor and American culture in *Laughing Mad* (2007), discussing how black comic personae have become embedded in American popular cultural consciousness. Haggins treatment of black women stand-up comics focuses on how race, gender, and sexuality are played out and "how the construction of their personae are inextricably tied to tropes of black femininity—for better or for worse."[73] LaMonda H. Stallings (2007) employs a vernacular analysis of black women comics' "blue" material, explaining how "oral mechanisms of desire shape black female cultures,"[74] a reading of black women's humor that reads a politics of resistance in black expressive culture. Finally, DoVeanna S. Fulton (2004) explores how black women stand-ups in the 1990s mobilize black oral traditions rooted in folk culture to engage in practices of self-making.[75] I want to fold my project into these intellectual projects by elucidating a theory of black women's humor that helps us answer questions about how contemporary black women use the public performance of humor.

Pursuing that goal, I use archival research, ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and close readings of performances to engage questions about the cultural politics of

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70 Kunze, " The Tears of a Clown," 8.

71 Judy Little, *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 1.

72 Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 7.

73 Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 133.

74 L. H. Stallings, *Mutha is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), 27.

75 DoVeanna S. Fulton, "Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comediennes," *Journal of American Folklore*, 117 (463): 81-96.

contemporary black women's performance. Stand-up comedy is popularly known as a form of entertainment and leisurely enjoyment. However, as we will see in this study, when black women enact performances that challenge, transform, and/or undermine discourses of abjection and shame that circulate about their bodies and intellectual capacities, they enact a pleasurable politics of redress. The act of standing up in public and being paid to be heard—not simply seen—gives black women comedians a space to demand recognition of their humanity. Additionally, the project examines how humor facilitates feminist politics and performance, highlighting stand-up comedy as a renegade space in which black women move literally and figuratively from outrageous comics to become audacious thinkers and potent social critics.

The first chapter lays out the theoretical framework of black women's comic literacy (BWCL), first examining black women's uses of humor in a variety of public milieux including black women's poetry of the Black Arts Movement and in Shirley Chisholm's acerbic wit during her presidential campaign in the early 1970s. I then read the comic oeuvre of LaWanda Page, an iconic performer who embodied radical new directions in black women's stand-up. The second chapter grapples with notions of freedom in black women's comic performances, arguing that black women become post-soul aestheticians who use performance to explore and transgress boundaries of blackness and femaleness. Although very few black women comics were successful during the repressive 1980s in which black women were popularly represented as "welfare queens," more black women than ever before became professionally successful in the 1990s by performing on the groundbreaking cable television shows *Def Comedy Jam* and BET's *Comic View*. The third chapter considers the cultivation of the black comedy audience, the rise of hip-hop culture, and the mainstreaming of BWCL. Chapter four offers ethnographic readings of contemporary black women's stand-up performances, where I think through how black women use humor in their struggles to come to terms with shame and abjection, and ultimately present diverse narratives of race, gender, and sexuality that are interlocking of black women's everyday lives. The final chapter uses autoethnography to illustrate how the author uses stand-up comedy as a mode of self-definition and a forum to express feminist politics.

Coda

"Humor is about risk and privilege; for groups exiled from the centers of power, comedy can signal the transformation of speechless outrage to persuasive, vocal, and joyous audacity. Humor works by bending or breaking the rules; it always has."[76]

76 Nancy Walker, "Afterward," in *Performing Gender and Comedy: Theories, Texts, and Contexts*, edited by. S. Hengen, (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach, 1998), 267.

Chapter 2
"Preach On Sister, Preach On!": Artistic Expression, Politics, and Black Women's Comic Literacy in the 1970s

For a birthday present when he was three
I gave my son hannibal an elephant
He gave me rome for mother's day
My strength flows ever on
Nikki Giovanni: "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)," 1970

Introduction

Humor was an essential mode of criticism in Nikki Giovanni's poetic masterpiece, a witty remix of Black Nationalist feminist[1] aesthetics, blues poetics, and the reframing of Western narratives. Giovanni's use of inversion humor[2] in "Ego Tripping" provides a crucial lens through which we can explore what humor brought to bear on the multivalent quality of black women's new public voices during the 1970s. Shedding light on the major attributes of BAM poets, literary historian Daryl Dance describes their work as a link to a long-standing history of African American women using humor to assert a "positive sense of self-identity, a healthy ego, and a sense of superiority."[3] Employing a kind of humor that was sometimes subtle, at others times audacious, biting, and confrontational, "Ego Tripping" provides a moment where we can think through black women's use of humor as cultural performance.

Jon McKenzie describes "cultural performance" as practices that produce social efficacy—mutual engagement of performer and audience where collective myths and histories are dramatized, alternative visions of self and society are presented, and the possibility of social and/or cultural transformation is offered up.[4] Ultimately, Giovanni's ode to black women serves as an avenue through which we can explore other voices that mirror and expand on what is most significant to this study—black women's humor as a creative expressive resource and as a performative labor. Black women humorists not only survive, but at times *thrive* despite their systematically marginalized conditions.

This chapter is about how black women came to use humor in cultural, political and professional arenas. In order to fully understand how stand-up comedy becomes a professional career option for black women in the 1970s, it is necessary to frame the foundations from which it arises. Thus, this chapter anchors the dissertation by exploring how the late 1960s and early 70s transformative political and cultural climates influenced the development of professional

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1 Kimberly N. Brown's conceptualizes Black Nationalist feminism as a hybrid of nationalist and feminist discourses that "resulted from awareness...of the intersectionality between gender, race, and class." *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva: Women's Subjectivity and then Decolonizing Text* (Bloomington: Indiana U Press, 2010), 73.

2 Inversion humor is an important comic method employed by those who are located in lower positions of power, as a mechanism that enables them to elevate themselves. Inversion, according to Lawrence Levine, was a major method of survivalist humor employed by the enslaved, in the form of trickster tales like Br'er Rabbit. For a full discussion of survivalist humor see Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*.

3 Dance, *Honey, Hush!,* 2.

4 Jon McKenzie, *Perform, or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 31.

black women comedians. It is through the work of women like Nikki Giovanni and other BAM poets, along with the political ascendancy of Shirley Chisholm, that a new landscape of black women's voices entered popular culture and public discourse during this dynamic period. Their use of humor, directly and obliquely, confronted racial and sexual oppression. And evidence indicates that humor functioned for some black women to keep them "from crying and killing...to speak the unspeakable...to strike out against enemies...educate...correct the lies told on them, and ultimately to bring about change."[5] More specifically, humor was an expressive resource that black women exploited to mediate the negative emotions they experienced emerging from their marginal political, economic, and social statuses. By exploring the ingenuity of black women's humor across a variety of discursive fields (cultural, political, and professional), we are exposed to the concerns of black women faced during this period, many of which reflected broader issues in American society.

Black Women's Comic Literacy

In light of black women's struggles to be heard, I attempt to theorize the strategic functions of humor by writers, politicians, and professional entertainers. Developing a theory of "black women's comic literacy" (BWCL) to explicate these performative and emancipatory strategies allows us to see humor as a serious creative resource for black women in public culture. I analyze the practices of a variety of black women whose creative expression and cultural production publicly enact black female subjectivity. I aim to acknowledge, but move past, an analysis of black women using humor to "keep from crying," an overused trope that fails to capture humor's productive capacities that lie beyond its survivalist roots in black culture.

We will see humor as an emancipatory strategy where black women tried to kill ideas and actions that threatened to silence and constrain them. I examine the humor in the poetry of Nikki Giovanni and Carolyn Rodgers, two of the most popular poets of the BAM, whose distinctive styles and poetic humor set them apart during one of the most prolific periods of black women's literary output, as well as the personal humor of trailblazing politician Shirley Chisholm. I then analyze the humor of Jackie "Moms" Mabley in her last film*, Amazing Grace* (1974), before turning to professional comedienne of the 1970s par excellence, LaWanda Page. Taken all together, the humor of these icons during the 1970s help us understand how black women comedians become legible as a professional entertainers and popular cultural figures.

As a radical expressive strategy, black feminist theory forms the theoretical foundation of BWCL, requiring a critical examination of lived experiences of black women and the interlocking systems of race, class, and gender oppression that underlying them. I borrow from literary theories of reading across difference and humor theory. BWCL mobilizes these theoretical frameworks as conceptual bases, acknowledging their fissures and their potential to facilitate important discussions about the expressive capacities of black women's humor. VéVé Clark has analyzed the separate, and overlooked literary tradition of Caribbean women novelists that arose in the mid-twentieth century beside the prominent New Letters Movements, largely recognized by the literary production of male writers that enabled new ways to think about the *diaspora.* In her study "Developing Diaspora Literacy and *Marasa* Consciousness," (1991) Clark examines how comprehension of cultural differences in the literatures of Caribbean women writers relies upon a command of what she terms "diaspora literacy," defined by:

5 Dance, *Honey, Hush!*, xxii.

> "the reader's ability to comprehend the literatures of Africa, Afro-America, and the Caribbean from an informed, indigenous perspective[...]This type of literacy is more than a purely intellectual exercise. It is a skill for both narrator and reader which demands a knowledge of historical, social, cultural, and political development generated by lived and textual experience."[6]

Extending Clark's study beyond literature to consider black women's performance practices, as I see it, black women's humor operates in a "sphere of cultural difference."[7] Black women are particularly attuned to its elements, functions, and performative capacities from their own perspective— this is the essential foundation of black women's comic literacy. BWCL takes on several distinctive qualities and techniques and is what bell hooks (citing Freire) calls a "praxis," a combination of black women's reflection and action in their world to transform it.[8]

Black comic literacy (BCL), as defined in the Introduction has its roots in survivalist humor and black folk cultural idioms of enslaved African Americans. Within classical humor theory, whether employing the techniques of inversion or absurdity, marginalized groups are generally considered to be expressing Freud's concept of tendentious jokes, which according to Levine, enabled enslaved people to vent their aggressions and claim authority without much risk of violent repercussions. Tendentious humor cuts at the heart of authority and is an important element of BWCL.[9] An expressive resource that facilitates tendentious jokes for black women is the fraught element known as "sass," which can be described as a defiant manner of speaking and behaving, for which black women have been alternately praised and socially maligned.[10]

Used in a humorous context, sass is a subversive tool, like irony and satire, in which one can defiantly, even if figuratively, assert authority and superiority over those considered to be in a higher position. More than a stylistic convention of performance, or, "attitude," sass is an

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6 VéVé Clark, "Developing Diaspora Literacy and Marasa Consciousness," in *Comparative American Identities*, Hortense Spillers, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 42.

7 Clark, "Diaspora Literacy," 41.

8 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 48.

9 There has been some debate regarding the pitfalls of using classical psychoanalytic theory to describe and analyze the experiences of African Americans. Hortense J. Spillers, for example, asks the question, "does tradition, then—depositories of discourse and ways of speaking, kinds of social practices and relations—enable some questions and not others?" Though she lays out a scenario where psychoanalytic theory is ill-equipped to account for non-Western narratives of psychological pathologies, she believes in the ability of scholars to "unhook the psychoanalytic hermeneutic from its rigorous curative framework and try to recover it in a free-floating realm of self-didactic possibility that might decentralize and disperse the knowing one." Hortense J. Spillers, "All the Things You Could Be By Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Were Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Summer, 1996), 714, 733-34. I agree with Spillers that in using psychoanalytic theory, as a tradition, can conceal and silence questions about the subjects of analysis, but also, that "the psychoanalytic offers a discourse that opens up possibility, which both looks back towards something that I have nostalgia for…and forward where I am now and where I think we have to go." Hortense J. Spillers, Interview for the *Black Cultural Studies* web site collective. Interviewer: Tim Haslett, Ithaca, NY (Feb., 4, 1998). http://www.blackculturalstudies.org/spillers/spillers_intvw.html. Visited March 28, 2013.

10 Daryl Dance argues that sass is a one of the most distinctive markers of black women's speech and behavior. According to her, a sassy woman is "impudent, saucy, vigorous, lively, smart, and stylish." Sassing is commonly associated with a behavior performed in response to an authority figure, like a master or a parent. (*Honey, Hush!* p. 2- 3.)

embodied performance strategy of separation that can enable black women to both sidestep the constraining politics of respectability and to marshal it if deemed necessary. Sass is a performance technique igniting black women to move "out of their place," detaching themselves from people or ideas they find irritating, insulting, confining, or degrading. Sass becomes a multivalent and particular manifestation of inversion humor for black women.

Along with sass, personal experience is central to BWCL, and is set apart and punctuated with gesture—teeth sucking, eye rolling, and particular ways of moving that are legible as a "dynamic vocabulary of their own."[11] The most important part of this method of communication and mode of using it is black women's language. The use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) imparts a shared sense of community and cultural particularity to black women's humor, as do biblical references and the propensity for braggadocio.[12] AAVE is an important element in BWCL, but even if that particular element is absent from a black woman's humor, she still carries a particular style. For example, comedian Moms Mabley liberally used black vernacular speech in her stand-up as a means of establishing a cultural connection, while humorist Pearl Bailey did not.

Pearl Bailey performed an outdoor summer concert series in the late 1960s at a hotel, becoming so familiar with her audience that they called out to her while she was performing. The consummate ad-libber, she worked the playful banter into her act. One night a man with a heavy Southern drawl nearly ordered Bailey to "Sing 'Dem Golden Chairs,'" which Bailey replied she did not know. Bailey chastised the man on the spot for daring to push her into a kind of black performance in which *he* believed she belonged. "Dearheart," she called to him, "I don't know 'Dem Golden Chairs.' I think what you want is "Them Golden Slippers.' By the way, I spell that word, T-H-E-M, not D-E-M."[13] Both the audience and the Southern man laughed at Bailey's sassy act of self-making. As Kimberley N. Brown argues and Bailey's humorous aside demonstrates, black women humorist's style can function as black feminist agency in a number of ways: it represents a survival strategy, performance, and subjectivity.[14]

BWCL, then, is a theoretical concept for teasing out black women's creative libratory strategies. It borrows from feminist scholarship on emotional expression. BWCL enables the enactment of what Patricia Yaeger calls "redemptive language games," ways that black women use humor to construct "an emancipatory relation," to traditions they are often excluded from, maligned in, or to simply unrestrainedly represent themselves. A number of feminist scholars have noted the political consequences of women's emotional expressions, especially anger, bitterness, and contempt.

Sue Campbell brings attention to a group of negative emotions associated with women that she calls "diseases of the affections," arguing that women are effectively silenced by being diagnosed as having one. Once "diagnosed," women's concerns are precluded from being taken

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11 Dance, *Honey, Hush!,* xxxiii.

12 According to sociolinguist William Labov, AAVE is the linguistic system used by African Americans in everyday life. It is a unique, with its own specific rules for sounds, grammar, and meaning. The most complete account of AAVE features can be found in J.R. Rickford, *African American Vernacular English: Features and Use, Evolution, and Educational Implication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999). Cited in "Summary Statement on African American Vernacular English," Chapter 9, "Criteria for Evaluating Instructional Materials: Kindergarten Through Grade Eight," (UPenn: 2007), *Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools, Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve*, (2008).

13 Pearl Bailey, *Talking to Myself* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), 11-12.

14 K. Brown, *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva*, 17.

seriously, thus limiting their "effects on the world."[15] As a remedy, Campbell proposes a "theory of affect," for women to have negative emotions seriously engaged—women must *publicly* convey significance using a range of socially acquired and interpretable resources like *language*, *gesture*, and *action*—securing responses frequently enough that meaning can be formed.[16] BWCL can be understood in terms of a theory of affect that facilitates the comprehension of black women's emotional expressions, especially negative emotions. In fact, MacAlester Bell argues that women's negative emotions have currency in limited circumstances, noting greeting cards and joke books as the exception where "women's contempt is perfectly intelligible."[17] While taking Bell's concerns seriously, we should consider women's humor as a space where emotions are apprehended precisely because it is one avenue where negative emotions are "intelligible and given a certain amount of uptake."[18] Humor is a complicated expressive resource for black women and becomes powerful as a means to lay out heartfelt concerns about sexist and racist oppression.

All black women humorists do not fall in line with the conceptual framework of BWCL. It is important to note that some have severed their humor from the African American tradition, or never considered their cultural output in line with it.[19] There are, however, particular characteristics that distinguish black women's humor. BWCL is an evolving concept that includes these distinguishing elements and provides a thematic thread throughout the dissertation. BWCL is not always emancipatory, but it signals a comprehension of, and intimacy with a particular cultural and historical knowledge that has the potential for libratory performances and readings of black women's humor. It is a concept that names the dynamic and shifting nature of black women's humor in American and African American culture.

BWCL involves performance and practices of reading humor; it is particularly concerned with how black women humorists and their audiences understand themselves and their world through humor. Therefore it is important to briefly explore the social dynamics of who, why, and how audiences and performers come together to engage in performance events engaging BWCL. In other words, how can we locate "the audience" in an examination of BWCL, especially since jokes "may be made out of very specific cultural terms that are deeply embedded in history, language, place, and identity or at a moment specific to time and place."[20] Mutual cultural competence and historical context are significant *material* factors in generating laughter based on BWCL, but the element of *temporality* is equally important to understanding how audiences manifest around BWCL. There are some audiences already competent and literate in reading black women's humor before a joke is uttered, while at other times, audiences are created in the moment of laughter. If Alice Rayner's notion of "the temporality of humor" is correct, that "the joke makes the audience, if only at the mundane level at which those who do not "get" the joke are not the audience for the joke," then BWCL is a dynamic communicative tool facilitating both

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15 Sue Campbell, "Being Dismissed: The Politics of Emotional Expression," *Hypatia*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Summer, 1994), 49.

16 Campbell, "Being Dismissed," 55.

17 MacAlester Bell, "A Woman's Scorn: Toward a Feminist Defense of Contempt as a Moral Emotion," *Hypatia*, Vol. 20, No. 4, Analytic Feminism (Autumn, 2005), 87.

18 Ibid.

19 For example, Pearl Bailey and Whoopi Goldberg are two humorists who have publicly privileged being American and their humanity over black racial identity, as the distinguishing features of their performance practices.

20 Alice Rayner, "Creating the Audience: It's All in the Timing," in Judy Batalion, Introduction to *Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences* (Anderson, S.C: Parlor Press, 2012), 32.

ephemeral and enduring audiences that "[do] not inevitably exist prior to the event that creates the laughter."[21] In other words, the content and context of black women's humor can create conditions for BWCL to thrive before the audience and performer come together, but it is also possible to create those two elements that signify mutual understanding, as well as the pleasure of laughter, in the moment of the expression.

Humor and Contempt in BAM Women's Poetry

Against the backdrop of the dynamic late 1960s and early 70s, when the black liberation struggle was moving from Civil Rights to the Black Power era, divergent groups of black women—poets, comics, and even politicians—used humor to manipulate and negotiate their worlds. These women would ultimately revise popular representations trapping them in their physicality, and voicelessness. Their comic sensibilities were tools of representation. Literally and literarily, a segment of black women writers and thinkers thrived under hostile conditions. During that period, a sense of responsibility propelled artists, writers, and intellectuals to use "their public voices to address the nature, aims, ends, and arts of the black world,"[22] argues Cheryl I. Clarke. The BAM was a movement in letters where ethics and aesthetics converged to confront and tear down what Larry Neal called "the Euro-American cultural sensibility."[23] Poetry, especially when performed, served as a driving mechanism in this cultural, political, and aesthetic confrontation. In fact, Neal called poetry "a concrete function, an action...transformed from physical objects into personal forces."[24] With the goal of cultivating a new "authentic" blackness, it was an embodied imagery and linguistic repertoire promoting critical thinking and heightened political consciousness. Poetry served the radical cultural function to incite the black urban masses to revolutionary action, via aesthetic practices, that lauded the unapologetic use of black vernacular styles, articulated through the voice or written on the page.

Black women writers produced 199 volumes of poetry between the years 1968-1976.[25] While that might seem like only a few books in the broader scheme of literary output, for black women, there had never been a more prolific period and their poetic work served a variety of functions. Most significantly, poetry was a platform where imagination and "truth" collided on the page, where black women represented life as they saw it, and as they envisioned its could be. Amiri Baraka urged black men and women to behave in purportedly traditional "African" gender roles arguing, "We do not believe in the 'equality' of men and women…We could never be equals…nature has not provided thus."[26] Responding to the prevailing attitudes that black women should have complementary roles in the liberation struggle, Toni Cade (Bambara) compiled *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970), not only as a response to rampant

21 Ibid, 33-34.
22 Cheryl I. Clark, *After Mecca: Women Poets and the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 21.
23 Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, eds, *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (Press, 1968), 55-57.
24 Ibid, 58.
25 Ibid, 19.
26 bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York: South End Press, 1999), 95.

chauvinism, but as an enactment of agency that incarnated the black woman as a central figure in the movement.

Poetry, short stories, and essays by women who were as Cade described "alive, [and] Black," showed the heterogeneity of their lives "in a collection that for the first time truly lets [the black woman] bare her soul and speak her mind."[27] As a pivotal text in black women's studies, it enabled a new literary and radical space for black women to write themselves into existence, in their own words. I would like to return to Giovanni's "Ego Tripping," because her speaker enacts her insubordination to both white *and* black male hegemony, so that a black woman can live in a world of her own making. A melodramatic narrative inflected with the empowering resources of BWCL, poetry is one of the most socially practical and accessible mechanisms for redressing sexual and racial marginality at Giovanni's disposal.

The very idea of black women as creators of the world civilizations was laughable to most Americans in 1970. That year, however, famed poet Nikki Giovanni of the Black Aesthetic[28] Movement (BAM) brazenly glorified black women as just that in her poem "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)." An unmistakable signification on Langston Hughes' 1921 poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Giovanni crafted an epic narrative of genesis, writing a revisionist history of black women.[29] Originally written for little girls, as a counternarrative to traditional gender roles instilled through children's games,[30] the poem became a captivating celebration of black womanhood that invested them with the "power to (re)make history."[31] When Giovanni wrote the poem, black women were popularly and politically demonized as castrating matriarchs and/or irresponsible mothers usurping public funds. In fact, they had borne the brunt of problematic stereotypes that were at the epicenter of representations of the breakdown of the black family.[32] Yet her performance of the poem on her 1971 recorded album *Truth is on Its Way*, had a subtle, yet rich, comic voice that shook loose from degrading notions of black (non)womanhood. Highlighted by the line which Giovanni spoke over an accelerated

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27 Toni Cade, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library, 1970), xi.

28 I use the term "aesthetic" as Kimberley N. Brown uses it in *Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva* (2010), to refer to the Black Arts Movements movement that was not only about arts and culture, but also about cultivating an aesthetic sensibility of blackness as beautiful in all aspects of life. In the BAM, one could transcend ideals of respectable blackness, embodying radical forms of blackness like wearing natural hair, embracing black speech, and donning clothing that reflected African and African American cultural sensibilities.

29 "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was Langston Hughes's first poem published in *The Crisis* in 1921. It's simple, elegant narrative style evoked a sense of proud black heritage, where the ancient is connected to the present. Like Hughes, Giovanni depicts Africa as the origin of human civilization. Giovanni, like Hughes uses markers of a glorious African past—the Congo, the sphinx, pyramids—and links them directly with contemporary black life, its richness and depth. The speakers in both poems are black agents in the creation of civilization; the pyramids stand as a representation of it. Blackness becomes a proxy for humanity in each poem and Africa stands at the center of its manifestation. Each poem's final line demonstrates the invariable relationship between humanity and nature. Hughes firmly roots humanity in the earth; "My soul has grown deep like the rivers," while Giovanni's speaker finds humanity in the ability to move from it and within it, "like a bird in the sky."

30 Barbara Reynolds, *And Still I Rise: Interviews with 50 Black Role Models* (Washington: Gannett New Media Services, 1988), 94.

31 Clark, *After* Mecca, 120.

32 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," United States Department of Labor (March 1965).

drumbeat: "I designed a pyramid so tough that a star/that only glows every one hundred years falls/into the center giving divine perfect light/I am bad,"[33] the poem brought forth calls from the audience of "Right On!"

With its play on excess, Giovanni used performance poetry as a site of radical self-making. In addition, she employed a "blues poetics," an aesthetic style rooted in a "sound-based poetics" wherein a sermon is blended with blues idioms to "create a popular people's poetry."[34] Tony Bolden suggests that "blues poetics" is a critical methodology that can be used to analyze BAM poetry, especially the process of writing and crafts(wo)manship. In fact, when one listens to Nikki Giovanni's recorded performance of "Ego Tripping," it sounds like a radical sermon backed by the driving beat of drums, hand-claps, and tambourines. Giovanni recites the poem as a litany without breaks, blurring the line between church preacher and a rapper on the corner as the choir shouts feverishly, "Right on! Yeah!" The participation of the audience evokes both the scene of a high-spirited church service and the liveliness of a juke joint, incarnating Giovanni as what Tony Bolden and Jayne Cortez call a "secular priestess," she who possesses the ability to use her "magical art to promote healing by infusing sensations of freedom into the consciousness of her listeners, stimulating them to convert feelings into new realities."[35] Hence "Ego Tripping" was a creative act of insubordination against the sexist attitudes and actions of men in the BAM and the general Black Nationalist discourse of male supremacy. Moreover, Giovanni's politically conscious poetics encouraged black women to "revise the terms in which they view[ed] themselves, so that they [could] move, at least psychologically, from the margin to center."[36]

The black woman heroine of "Ego Tripping" is sassy and witty, "I am so hip even my errors are correct." She imagines a world where black women possess the intellectual and material capacities to be the primary creators of wonders of the world, like the Egyptian pyramids. Referencing an African origin of civilization, "I was born in the congo/I walked to the fertile crescent and built/the sphinx,"[37] the speaker embarks on a journey spanning space and time that weaves the histories of Egypt and Rome, Noah's Ark and Newark, New Jersey, firmly establishing the "reason why" black women are on an ego trip. Even though the poem has a celebratory tone, part of the positive feelings it evokes emanate from an underlying humor steeped in contempt, robbing the status quo and thus briefly freeing black women from it.

Contempt is distinguished as an expressive emotion, according to MacAlester Bell, as particularly unpleasant, based on a judgment that the contemptible person has failed to meet an interpersonal standard, marked by a positive self-feeling that holds the contemptor as superior to the object of contempt.[38] In "Ego Tripping," the objects of contempt are white men who are traditionally cast in the roles of great historical figures, and black men, who during the BAM attempted to constrain the gender roles and voices of black women by prioritizing black masculinity and leadership within the movement. "Ego Tripping" laughed in the face of the

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33 Nikki Giovanni, "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)" in *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni.* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996), 92.

34 Larry Neal, "And Shine Swam On," *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 1989), 20-21. Quoted in Tony Bolden and Jayne Cortez, "All the Birds Sing Bass: The Revolutionary Blues of Jayne Cortez," African American Review, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring 2001), 62.

35 Bolden and Cortez, "All The Birds Sing Bass," 69.

36 Ibid, 66.

37 Giovanni, "Ego Tripping."

38 Bell, "A Woman's Scorn," 83-84.

hegemony of Western traditions by casting black women as Gods and leaders. As Giovanni retold historical narratives with black women as the central figures, her inversion humor obliquely cloaked her contempt; it was an enactment of emotional insubordination in which black women could claim moral superiority over all men. This defiance illustrates Giovanni's marshaling of BWCL to "indicate [her] refusal to obey sexist norms and constraints."[39]

Jokes and humor do not fully get at racial and gender repression, but Richard Schechner reminds us that they are "indirect, dense actions" in which "obstacles are... circumvented. Repressed material is liberated. The listener is bribed by pleasure into helping the joker get at the forbidden object."[40] The power of BAM poetry for those who practiced it, and for those who were its audience, was its ability to transmit the revolutionary messages of black love and black power, inciting people to act according to those imperatives, what Geneva Smitherman hails "The Power of the Rap."[41] "Ego Tripping" is located within the rap tradition and the genealogy of African American performance practices that Saidiya Hartman calls a "subterranean 'politics' of the enslaved," practices that do not necessarily produce "freedom," from enslavement or a remedy to the condition, but a "context for the collective enunciation of [that] pain."[42] It is precisely in the space of subterranean politics, and in the collectivity of responsive listeners, that we can locate the power of BWCL.

Yet, humor and jokes are not merely romantic acts of resistance, "innocent amusements and harmless pleasures."[43] Black women's comic performances are provisional, local, and constrained practices that establish "other terms of sociality, however transient, that offer a small measure of relief from the debasement constitutive of one's condition."[44] For BAM women, poetry was a site where they would use humor in political ways that pushed beyond subterranean survival tactics, to include a highly visible and playfully inventive performance repertoire. Toni Morrison describes the labor(s) involved in black women asserting their subjectivity:

> "True the black woman did the housework, the drudgery; true, she reared the children, often alone, but she did all of that while occupying a place on the job market, a place her mate could not get or which his pride would not let him accept. And she had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of a profound desolation of her reality she may have well invented herself."[45]

In "Ego Tripping," the speaker playfully invents and locates the wealth of the world within her body, unmasking an alternative vision that brings forth shouts of "Right on!" in her 1971 musical/spoken word performance recording from her listeners. The speaker articulates the new narrative of the origin of wealth:

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39 Ibid, 81.

40 Richard Schechner, "Speculations on Radicalism, Sexuality, & Performance," *TDR*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Summer 1969), 105-106.

41 Geneva Smitherman, "The Power of the Rap: The Black Idiom and the New Black Poetry," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (October, 1973).

42 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 50-51.

43 Ibid, 49.

44 Ibid, 61.

45 Toni Morrison, "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib," *New York Times Magazine*, August 22, 1971, 14-15. Cited in Stallings, *Mutha' is Half a Word*, 33.

I sowed diamonds in my back yard
My bowels deliver uranium
the filings from my fingernails are
semi-precious jewels
On a trip north
I caught a cold and blew
My nose giving oil to the arab world[46]

The waste products of everyday life are transformed—bowel movements, fingernail clippings, and mucus—become assets, an inversion of the racialized and gendered abjection historically projected onto black women's bodies. The black woman becomes more than merely a disposable laborer who builds up the wealth of the nation and the world *with* her body. Instead, the world's riches are located directly *within* her body. The abject—those parts of the body and its functions that seem alienable—reappear, transformed into objects that can be manipulated and controlled.[47]

Giovanni's speaker is a *diva* in the black feminist tradition, characterized by her distinctive voice, "her transgressive co-option of a public space usually designated for men; her style; and her familial connection to her audience."[48] "Ego Tripping" performs what Daphne Brooks terms an "afro-alienation act," figuratively defamiliarizing the black woman's body "in order to yield alternative racial and gender epistemologies."[49] The inversion of the black woman's abject body via techniques of BWCL is an act of dissent that opens a space for new narrative and aesthetic possibilities for black women in the 1970s.

"So perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal," Giovanni riffs, "Ego Tripping" is an enactment of countermemory or, a re-presentation of history's master narrative. As Joseph Roach argues in *Cities of The Dead* (1996) following theorist Michel Foucault, countermemories are acts of memory *and* forgetting that attend to "the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by the bodies that bear its consequences."[50] When the black woman found herself alienated in literary and material landscapes, countermemory allowed her to shovel disregard and disrespect aside. Through practices of countermemory, black women cultivated particular ways of reading the world and rendering their experiences through humor.

Besides confronting the sexist and racist practices of black and white men, BAM women poets aimed their critiques at black women too, especially to explore generational antagonisms. The 1970s saw a younger generation of black women, militant and anti-white, attempt to break away from the more traditional ideals of black womanhood anchored by Civil Rights discourse of the politics of respectability. Carolyn Rodgers poem "JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED, or It Must Be Deep (an epic pome)" is an autobiographical dialogue and reading of black women's humor[51] that represents the ruptures in the relationship between traditional mother and radical daughter. "JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED" incarnates Patricia Yaeger's notion of the "honey-mad woman," a

46 Giovanni, "Ego Tripping," 92.
47 John Limon, *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000), 4.
48 Brown, *Revolutionary Diva,* 17.
49 Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.
50 Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 25.
51 Clarke, *After Mecca*, 69.

strategic discursive position "in which the woman writer appropriates language 'racked up' in her body and starts to sing."[52]

Specifically, Rodger's constructs a libratory relation to Civil Rights political rhetoric and the constraining politics of respectability emanating from its prevailing social demands. She highlights the conflict between the older generation of black people tied to the Christian, middle-class, respectable Civil Rights Movement and the younger generation of activists who had more radical ideals of what black liberation meant and how it could be achieved. Rodger's employs what Yaeger terms "subversive multivoicedness," a dialogic structure that has the power to "subvert past silences and refashion the terms of a repressive discourse."[53]

In the poem, Rodgers's mother attempts in vain, to convince her daughter that the Bible can heal not only her sick body, but her mind too, and that not *all* white people are evil. She tells her "in yo heart you know it's true." Rodgers shoots back wryly, "(and I sd)/it must be d/eeeep," to which her mother replies "U gon die and go tuh HELL." Rodgers's quips are filled with a defiance that performs the distance between her generation of self-possessed, radical black women and those who came before—respectful, obedient daughters who would not dream about back-talking their mothers: "and I sd/I hoped it wudn't be NO HUNKIES there/and she sd/what do you mean, there is some good white people and some/bad ones, just like there is negroes/and I says I had neva seen ONE (wite good that is)"[54]

In this conversation, we see Rodgers's contempt for "hunkies," as well as for her mother couched in the context of playful, if uncomfortable banter. Her insult establishes her feelings of superiority over white people, and the act of "sassing", or talking back to her mother signals the moral chasm that has grown between her and her mother. Moving the conversation along, Rodgers continues to narrate a dialogue between her mother's outdated views on Christianity, insisting on demonstrating that she has grown and transformed, that her version of black womanhood is *better* and freer than her mother's, with her unfailing belief in a white, Western Christian doctrine. Rodgers uses "JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED" to demonstrate to her black audience (including her mother) that "systems of oppression preclude relationships of mutual respect and engagement between oppressors and oppressed."[55]

she sd, I got tuh go so I can git up early tomorrow
and go tuh the social security board to clarify my
record cause I need my money.
Work hard for 30 yrs. and they don't want tuh give me
$28.00 once every two weeks.
I sd yeah...
don't let em nail u wid no technicalities
git yo checks...(then I sd)
catch yuh later on jesus, I mean motha!

It must be

52 Patricia Yaeger, *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 28.

53 Ellen E. Berry, "Polysemy and Playfulness," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (Winter, 1989), 221.

54 Carolyn Rodgers, "JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED, or It Must Be Deep," *How I Got Ovah: New and Selected Poems* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1974), 9.

55 Bell, "A Woman's Scorn," 86.

deeeeep....[56]

Rodgers sarcastically indexes her mother's struggles with those of Jesus' redemptive suffering, acknowledging the mettle, yet fruitlessness of her "working hard for 30 yrs." Inevitably, her mother meets the same sacrificial fate as Jesus—both are "nailed wid...technicalities." Rodgers takes her mother's blind faith in the Bible to its logical end—her unwavering belief in a government that refuses to make good on its promises, leaves her faithful but broke. "JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED" exposes the absurdity of her mother's complicity in her own oppression; as she jokingly calls her Jesus, Rodgers unmasks Christianity, the Bible, and the American political system as illusory symbols from which black people must extract their blind faith if they are to move to a new social and political order.

Absurdist humor and sarcasm are effective resources to think through how women of different generations might come to understand each other's experiences within the context of the shifting social and political landscape of the 1970s. Rodgers's inversion as the authority figure in the mother/daughter relationship is played out through the sassy way she addresses her mother. This exchange is the locus of the comic scene in "JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED." Inversion, or, as John Limon puts it, "the resurrection of your [mother] as your child,"[57] is a functional, pedagogical resource in Rodgers's poetry.

Women in the BAM used poetry as a form to express the personal and political interests of black women; in doing so they challenged the notion that the intellectual work of generating a new black consciousness was solely a job for, and aspiration of, men. Elements of BWCL saturated some of the BAM women's poetry—most importantly, humor helped the poets *publicly* break down male authority and craft images of themselves as more than just survivors, but as creators of worlds in which they could thrive. Moving beyond poetry, some black women mobilized BWCL in *interpersonal interactions* as a way to maintain their self-respect. Politician Shirley Chisholm is a perfect example of how humor can function to demonstrate one's refusal to yield to sexist and racist norms. Chisholm's quick wit in a racist political climate is the subject of the next section.

Shirley Chisholm's Humor

In 1972, a black woman running for political office, let alone winning a presidential election was a joke that needed no punch line. Shirley Chisholm was a black woman and her campaign materials, "Shirley Chisholm For President," must have read, to some, like America's biggest one-liner. Chisholm remembered the laughter her campaign evoked, "People had a wonderful time guffawing...[s]o they had to find a reason why she was doing it...she's crazy. She's half-crazy...You know, because you just didn't think of doing anything like that. You're a black woman running for President?"[58] Even as the first black woman elected to the House of Representatives, Chisholm was assumed to have no real political power—she was but a tiny token within a vast landscape of white supremacy in post-Civil Rights America. Chisholm was a

56 Rodgers, "JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED," 74.

57 Limon, *Stand-Up Comedy In Theory*, 4.

58 Shirley Chisholm, "Interview: Chisholm Selects from Chisholm '72: Unbought and Unbossed," (2004) The Shirley Chisholm Project of Brooklyn Women's Activism from 1945 to the Present, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, box 10. (Hereafter, Chisholm).

well-known political figure in the early 1970s, yet the general assumption in public discourse was that electoral politics was a white man's game and she had no chips to play with. Her audacity assumed that she *did* have a political voice, shattered truckloads of political assumptions and demonstrated Chisholm's sense of entitlement to be dealt a hand in the game of American electoral politics. Notwithstanding, the idea of a black woman President was preposterous, hilarious even.

In a similar way to BAM women poets' struggles within American political, literary, and popular cultural discourse, Shirley Chisholm's campaign for the Presidency represented the embodiment of a new self-consciousness, new possibilities of who a black woman could be, and what she was capable of accomplishing. In February of 1972, *Newsweek* ran a story on Chisholm's campaign for the Presidency titled "A New Kind of Candidate—She's Black," speaking directly to her novelty. Describing Chisholm as "sometimes-grandiloquent, sometimes-bombastic," the story creates a sharp picture of the blatant disrespect the presidential-prospect would come to face from the media, as well as the other candidates.[59]

It was unfortunate, but necessary in that historical moment, for a black woman—or any woman seeking public office—to actively demonstrate that she was rational, that she was not a hotheaded and emotional person. Chisholm's humor was one mechanism showcasing her rationality, allowing her cool-temper to shine through. Chisholm described herself as "having confidence...being aggressive, no-nonsense person at all, articulate to the *n*th degree," and her sense of humor may have been the most vital tool enabling her to endure the disdain of her colleagues and the public, who were reluctant to respect a black woman who dared to get out of place. "I could curse them out," Chisholm remarked about her critics, "but I didn't believe in that. Because I believe in being humorous and I believe in embarrassing them."[60] Chisholm's sense of humor in political encounters allowed her to gain the upper hand over her detractors, and many were surprised that a black woman possessed the kind of intellectual acumen, mental toughness and clarity that was necessary to carry out a successful mainstream political career.

Constantly barraged with racist and sexist insults, Chisholm had many reasons to be angry. The way she controlled her emotional response, tempering it with humor, demonstrates anger as a productive political tool that can lead to social change. Audre Lorde reminds us that "anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences, and who are our enemies."[61]

On numerous occasions Chisholm directed the sharp jab of her wit at Southern white male politicians (unnamed by Chisholm), focusing her anger to defiantly quiet their insults against her. A Congressman from South Carolina[62] was constantly reminding Chisholm that she was lucky to hold a governmental seat, outraged that a black woman could earn a salary equal to his. "Shirley, you outta [sic] kiss the floor when you come into this Congress. You know why you outta kiss the floor?" he asked. "Because you getting forty-two-five like me." Annoyed by his sustained disrespect, Chisholm conducted her own investigation into the Congressman's

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59 *Newsweek Magazine*, February 14, 1972, 24.

60 "Interview Selects," section 102, (Chisholm).

61 Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Fall, 1981), 8.

62 After the 1968 House of Representative elections, six Congressmen represented South Carolina: L. Mendel Rivers, Albert Watson, William Jennings Bryan Dorn, Thomas S. Gettys, and John L. McMillan, and James R. Mann.

background, finding that he had a heart condition. As he started in one day with his "forty-two-five" barb, Chisholm fired back, "I want to tell you something...Be careful...Because one of these days when you open your mouth...you gonna fall down on the floor with your forty-two-five." The Congressman's weakness had been exposed and Chisholm claimed the Congressman never insulted her again.[63]

In that moment, she sassed the Congressman in an act of insubordination to the racist and sexist conventions of the time, which would have ordinarily silenced a black woman being insulted by a white man. Yet, her audacity to speak back signaled her regard for herself as no less than his equal. She armed herself with personal information and used it as a way to connect with the Congressman in terms of their mutual human frailty. Chisholm's retort moved them beyond existing as a white man and black woman and its attendant racial baggage—to two mere mortals with expiration dates. Here, we can see how a black woman in the 1970s used humor as a defensive resource to confront racist and sexist insults, *and* as a pedagogical tool that can shift social relations.

On one occasion, Chisholm used her sense of humor to handle an insidious series of insulting episodes with an Arkansas Congressman. Brock Adams, a white Congressman from Washington and a group of other members of Congress noticed and alerted Chisholm, who was apparently oblivious, that every time she entered the chamber of the House and passed the Congressman from Arkansas[64], he began a ritual of coughing, lifted a handkerchief to his face and spit in it, almost in Chisholm's face. Adams told her, "A group of us sitting in the back, say, when is Shirley Chisholm going to take care of that gentleman?" The towering disrespect and nastiness of the Congressman's behavior was enough to send many over the edge and produce a spontaneous, emotional reaction. Chisholm, however, responded with a calculated, sharp, and thought out performance of her own. She went out and purchased her own handkerchief.

As the Arkansas Congressman began his fit of coughing and spitting, Chisholm coughed in unison, pulling out her handkerchief as she approached him. As he spit in his handkerchief, Chisholm spit in hers, close to his face, mimicking his attack. "Beat you to it today," she quipped. Members of the news media caught the encounter from the balcony and as she recalled, "they almost fell over the banister."[65] Chisholm's mimicry of the Congressman's ritual of insult put her on equal footing, at least for that moment. The scene was captured by the members of the news media, an institution with the ability and forum to sway public opinion, although it is unclear if any paper dared put this episode in print.[66] Chisholm's performance kidnapped authority in that *moment*. Even though it was funny and empowering, her renegade gesture was concealed from the public, prohibiting her rhetorical disruption of a *paradigm*.

Her playful, yet potent claim on authority indicates the reach of humor in black women's new public voices in the 1970s, and how that reach can be obstructed. "Although they do not allocate resources or single-handedly transform existing social structures," Joanne Gilbert reminds us of the interventionist potential of women's humor, "by performing a subversive discourse they depict and exert pressure upon existing social conditions. Through humor, they

63 "Interview Selects," section 120 (Chisholm).

64 After the 1968 elections, four Congressmen represented Arkansas: William Vollie Alexander, Jr., Wilbur Mills, John P. Hammerschmidt, and David Pryor.

65 Interview Selects," sections 121, 121b (Chisholm).

66 After combing the Shirley Chisholm archive at Brooklyn College about her political career I did not come across news article that made mention of this incident.

call attention to cultural fissures and fault lines."[67] Chisholm's sense of humor was the conduit through which she enacted her humanity, falling in line with Sue Campbell's theory of affect. Chisholm publicly used the socially intelligible resource of humor to facilitate the comprehension of and engagement with her negative emotions about racist and sexist treatment.

Her gag enacted a social politics that temporarily disarmed the Congressman, and at the same time *created* an audience in the reporters whose laughter indicated they "got" the joke, suggesting that BWCL is not merely intelligible to a pre-existing audience, "but also a consequence arising from the very gap in the fabric of thought and perception identified by a joke, making the joke itself a generative tool for creating an audience."[68] Chisholm's joke evoked unexpected laughter from an ephemeral audience, but that laughter was not the moment of intervention. The Arkansas Congressman's *silence* after the gag signaled the transformation in social relations and the immediacy of BWCL's interventionist potential.

Unfortunately, humor was also a weapon used to degrade Chisholm's appearance and sexually objectify her—ploys to discredit her political stature and capabilities by refocusing attention from her brain to her body. As she became more outspoken and popular, the news media, with some prominent black male public figures following suit, did their best to discredit Chisholm in predictable ways. In fact, it was not strange to read a news article about Chisholm's campaign and see her praised and insulted in the same sentence. For example, a *Newsweek* reporter wrote of her in 1972, "Despite a lisp, she is a polished orator whose ad libs are often punctuated with cries of "Right on, sister!" from her audiences."[69]

Chisholm's crooked teeth were the most noted and scrutinized element of her physical appearance, though she was meticulous and particular about how she looked in public. "It was such a thing with my family that we should always look presentable. And when I say presentable, that means your shoes must be shined, your dress must be ironed, your hair must be combed right. And you must walk erect...Walk as if you're going after a goal, you're going after an objective and that became a part of me, part of my life."[70] Chisholm was confident and had a positive self-image, yet the attacks on her appearance were relentless. A writer for *Boston After Dark* reported on a speech Chisholm gave in front of more than 1000 University of Southern California students, setting the scene for readers with the line "Ms. Chisholm grins broadly showing her poor teeth."[71] Nora Sayre's history, *Sixties Going on Seventies* (1973), chronicles the tumultuous transformations the nation was undergoing at the time. The ridicule of women at the Democratic Convention in Miami in 1972 was highlighted with a nasty comment she had heard about Shirley Chisholm: "When Chisholm arose to speak, the man behind me laughed and said, 'If only she could fix her buckteeth!'"[72]

While Chisholm was widely recognized for her fiery political speeches and being a voice for the dispossessed, her appearance and oratorical style came under constant attack in popular culture, most significantly, from the very constituents she claimed to represent, black men. One of the main focuses of the 1960s and 70s black political movements was the push for manhood rights, a call that Chisholm took seriously. In 1969 she told *The New York Times Magazine*, "Of course we have to help black men…But not at the expense of our own personalities as women.

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67 Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*, 177.
68 Alice Rayner, "Creating an Audience: It's All in the Timing," 33.
69 *Newsweek Magazine*, February 14, 1972, p. 25.
70 " Interview Selects," section 72 (Chisholm).
71 *Boston After Dark*, January 25, 1972, p. 11.
72 Nora Sayre, *Sixties Going on Seventies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1973), 388.

The black man must step forward, but that does not mean *we* have to step back."[73] In 1978, comedian Redd Foxx performed live at the Silverbird Hotel in Las Vegas, making a joke about Chisholm that became very popular. Foxx's joke is illustrative of how she was viewed during the 1970s by black men. Basically, the joke went, "Shirley Chisholm may run for President, but I'd still rather fuck Raquel Welch."

This joke not only reflects a deep disrespect for her, but it also highlights Chisholm's sexuality as another point of attack for black men. Foxx's joke calls attention to some of the challenges confronting black women as they struggled to gain a new public voice; the public performance of certain kinds of power marked them as unfeminine and less sexually desirable. Chisholm's public performance of political power did not cause Foxx to rob her completely of her sexuality, but just diminished it.

Phil Bertelsen, producer of the 2004 PBS documentary *Chisholm For President '72*, believed the joke was so widely recognizable as a touchstone for that moment, that he requested to use the clip of Redd Foxx performing it in a documentary chronicling Chisholm's bid for the White House. In a letter to HBO executives, he claimed the clip could "bring levity to an otherwise serious historical documentary."[74] Even though it was a joke, Foxx's statement was a serious reflection of the obstacles that stood before Chisholm as a black woman who was also a presidential hopeful. Michelle Wallace succinctly sums up Chisholm's treatment by black men in the struggle for liberation: "For [black men], when it came to Shirley Chisholm, being black no longer came first at all. It turned out what they really meant all along was that the black man came before the black woman. And not only did he come before her, he came before her to her own detriment."[75]

Amidst the insults, disrespect, and unlikelihood of her election, Chisholm never showed a sign of backing down from the task she set out to accomplish. Her instinct to survive, coupled with the ability to smile was clear in her competence in and deployment of BWCL. At every point in her political career Chisholm's blackness and womanhood made it necessary for her to invert her position from the proverbial bottom. She took the idea of a black Congresswoman from a one-liner to a reality; in the process she used her destabalizing wit as a tool that could literally do the work of inversion in ways that complemented the political and cultural work of the BAM women poets.

While Nikki Giovanni's speaker in "Ego Tripping" figuratively moves from the margins to the center with a well-crafted and empowering reversal of roles, Shirley Chisholm embodied the "great woman" of Giovanni's narrative. Chisholm's highly visible mainstream political triumphs and travails opened up a new space for black women to be taken seriously as intellectual and political agents. The cultural and political work that made black women's new public voices possible signaled a paradigm shift. During the 1970s audiences became familiar with black women as authority figures on public stages, and humor was a sweetness that eased this new pill down.

Black Comediennes In The 1970s

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73 *New York Times Magazine*, April 13, 1969, np.

74 Personal correspondence from Phil Bertelsen to Samira Ali dated 2003, box 10. (Chisholm)

75 Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and The Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: The Dial Press,1979), 29.

A study of stand-up comedy would be incomplete without the mention of Jackie "Moms" Mabley, widely accepted as the first African American woman stand-up comedian.[76] Mabley enjoyed a vaudeville and stand-up comedy career that spanned over 50 years. She was a mainstay of popular black theaters like the Apollo Theater in Harlem, the Regal Theater in Chicago, the Uptown Theater in Philadelphia, and her down-home Southern humor made her hugely successful in smaller venues throughout the nation that catered to African American audiences. Before 1961 when she made appearances and a recording of her performance at Hugh Hefner's *Playboy Club* in Chicago, Mabley was not widely known as a mainstream entertainer.

Although Moms Mabley has been thoroughly discussed in the scholarship on African American stand-up comedy, *Amazing Grace* (1974), her last film, has been viewed as a throwaway piece, and it is noticeably absent from serious analysis of her comedic career. The film tells the story of an old, toothless, Mammy figure and her journey from North Carolina to Baltimore, MD where she organizes the political campaign of a black man and fights against corruption to win the mayoral seat with honesty and integrity. The film's political tone is preachy and heavy-handed, but its narrative structure, visual imagery, and character references effectively stage the transition from the old generation of black stand-up comedy that was folksy, segregated, and accessible mostly to black audiences, to a genre that was more in tune with the dynamic political and social climate of the 1970s—a style more radically outspoken on subjects formerly considered taboo. Mabley's rise to visibility in the film role echoes the course of her actual career.

The film's narrative plays out the struggle for racial equality, while at the same time commenting on the shifting roles of black women in popular and political discourse. The story follows a clear trajectory from old to new politics, from regressive roles expected of African American women to that of more liberated social agents who engage mainstream politics as authority figures. For example, the opening credits roll with a train zipping through cotton fields, and before Grace Tisdale Grimes, who is portrayed by Moms Mabley boards, Fortwith Wilson, who is a porter portrayed by the chitlin' circuit fixture Slappy White. Fortwith passes out pillows and playing cards to the passengers, singing that this is his *last trip*—not so subtly signaling the advent of a new era in African American comedy. As the well wishers bid Grace farewell on her trip north, Stepin Fetchit, the famed and somewhat ridiculed comedian of the blackface era, asks the conductor to delay the train so that a woman of Grace's stature can be properly seen off. The white train conductor attempts to hurry Grace along, but she sassily refuses his request, repeatedly showing him to be impotent in front of the assembled black crowd, "I *said* don't move this train!"

As they roll away, Moms Mabley, Slappy White, and Stepin Fetchit say their goodbyes, pointing to a transformation in the genre of black comedy. Fortwith the porter performs a tap dance, a gesture he would repeat throughout the film, remaining sentimental as he tapped away the bygone days, longing for the time when his dances were received with thunderous applause that made his audience fall over with laughter. On the train though, his throwback performance is

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76 Elsie Williams wrote a well-researched study on the life and humor of Moms Mabley, *The Humor of Jackie "Moms" Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition* (1995). Further, Mel Watkins argues that Mabley was a pioneer of contemporary stand-up comedy, she "foreshadowed the shift to direct social commentary and stand-up techniques that would define humor by the late 1950s." *On The Real Side*, 392.

scorned by a young man in a Morgan State sweatshirt as embarrassing, something only an "Uncle Tom" would do; their tussle is a literal enactment of the clash of political and cultural ideology in the 1970s between accommodationist strategies on one hand, and the idea of black self-determination of more nationalist groups on the other.

Grace exits the cab with Fortwith in tow, spying a banner on her neighbor's porch declaring "Welton J. Waters for Mayor," and the two agree the name "sounds colored." They believe they are being tricked, as Grace laments, "Ain't no colored man running for mayor. That don't sound right, I know that." In this historical moment, with two older black people coming from the South who were used to only white men in political power, even though the 1970s saw the election of a number of black mayors and even the Presidential candidacy of Shirley Chisholm, the idea of a black mayor might have still seemed strange. As the film moves through some of the obstacles in the way of successfully electing black politicians—racism, corruption, distrust, self-hatred, and lack of organization—the acknowledgment and exploration of the issues throughout the film make them seem possible to overcome.

The film culminates with the black community in Baltimore expressing pride in their race, united in its vision for self-determination, and underdog Welton J. Waters wins the election for mayor. The storyline in *Amazing Grace* seems like a simple representation the rise of Black Nationalist politics and new cultural impulses, but if given a closer look, we can see it as an excellent period piece that reveals transformation at deeper levels, specifically how black women become agents of political and cultural change by using their public voices in unique ways.

In the film, Grace is comfortable and familiar with black people, speaking in the idioms and rhythms of a heavy Southern black vernacular, repeatedly referencing soul food—fried chicken, potato salad, and collard greens—to build rapport with the people with whom she shares cultural traditions. By the end of the film, she has seemingly organized and united all of black Baltimore to elect the mayor and she becomes known and respected by all. Mabley used these same techniques, black vernacular speech and evoking black cultural material, in her stand-up routines. By the end of her career in the 1960s and 70s, her comedic material was increasingly political as she frequently attacked Southern racism. Mabley had a popular bit about performing in the segregated South: "Now they want me to go to New Orleans...It'll be Old Orleans 'for I get down there. The Greyhound ain't goin' to take me down there and the bloodhounds run me back. I'll tell you that."[77] Her role becomes more politicized as she steps outside the wise keeper of the culture to an active political agent of change in her community, a shift that Shirley Chisholm's iconic run for President foreshadowed.

For example, when Criolla Waters, the self-hating wife of the mayoral hopeful who is trying to pass for Puerto Rican insults Graces folkways as backwards, Grace chases her into the house and lets her know that no one is fooled by her attempts to pass, pushing her to the ground and knocking her wig (disguise) off. Criolla's bushy Afro is revealed propelling her to the brink of an intense, but hilarious psychotic break. In this moment, Criolla performs an exorcism of the legacy of racism that underpinned her attempts to pass. Barging in on a political meeting between Waters and the white politicians who were trying to pay him off, Criolla throws off her self-hatred, promising to love herself for who she truly is, a black woman. We see here the birth of a new kind of black woman, no longer mimicking the styles and politics of the past; she is proud of her blackness and ready to use her brain instead of her body to achieve her goals. Grace

77 Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 392.

forced Criolla to confront and love her true black self, facilitating a transformation to a new consciousness and idea of black womanhood.

Mabley's role as Grace is regressive. Her character evokes a combination of the Mammy and Matriarch stereotypes, both servile, powerful, and negatively impacting black families. Even as Mabley and the character Grace embody stereotypes that some people say pigeonhole black women, she plays the role as the leading lady. The role is trailblazing. In fact, Mabley the comedian was able to enjoy a career on the stage as one of the few women stand-ups, critiquing at times the racist policies of the American government and actions of private individuals, precisely *because* she embodied a non-threatening, familiar character. Her grandmotherly appearance functioned as a social mask, a way of playing the fool that enabled her to politick without being immediately detected as getting "out of her place." There is an occasion in *Amazing Grace* when Mabley calls attention to the utility of this tactic of social masking.

Grace calls up an old friend for a favor, played by the comic actress Butterfly McQueen, to find out who the maid is for the corrupt mayor. After a few moments of malapropisms and squeaky-voiced, slapstick foolery characteristic of McQueen's comedic style, Grace finds out who the help is and stands in for her the next day, a switch the mayor either does not notice or finds insignificant. The corrupt mayor's feet are kicked up on his desk as he openly talks on the phone about his plan to use Waters to take the black vote from his main competition, another black candidate. Grace cleans with an over-sized, goofy feather duster, looking for the smoking gun right under the mayor's nose. As a black maid, Grace is not regarded as a person who is capable of doing harm, and she takes advantage of the image and idea she conveys as a common black maid. She spots an unlocked cabinet with damning evidence and enlists the porter Fortwith as a furniture mover to lift the file cabinet. In the cabinet they come across enough damaging evidence to hang the mayor, and Grace's find precipitates Waters' ultimate victory. Playing the expected domestic role led to the unexpected inauguration of a political role, and Grace was actually cunning and intelligent to have used the representational materials she had on hand as political tools.

Welton J. Waters is the politician in the film, but it is Grace who conducts the actual politicking that wins him the mayoral seat. Grace is the locus of political agency around which all activity is motivated and carried out. As the film ends, Grace breaks the proverbial fourth wall, speaking directly to her audience as her comic persona, Moms Mabley. "That's all children," she says with a hopeful smile. "Yall can go home now, that's all." Using herself as a link between the past and the future of black women in the public sphere—between culture and politics—Mabley warns, "But watch me. No telling where I might be next. Liable to be in the White House. They *need* me there, believe me. You better hurry up and believe me, they *need* me." The audacity of Shirley Chisholm's political career in the late 60s and early 70s presented a new context in which black women could be understood, and Mabley's final statement testifies to the shifting social and political positions black women come to embody. Neither Chisholm nor Mabley were viable candidates for political office, but Chisholm's actual political campaign provided a context in which Mabley's fictional one seemed achievable. The link between culture and politics is a space where black women gained a powerful public voice and *Amazing Grace* is a microcosm of the 1970s, particularly important as a moment in the genealogy of black women's stand-up comedy and BWCL.

LaWanda Page is well known for her role as the loudmouth church lady on the hit sitcom *Sanford and Son*, which starred comedian and fellow chitlin' circuit entertainer, Redd Foxx. The show ran from 1972-1977 on NBC, and during that same period Page released five comedy albums, which have received less scholarly attention. Much of the discussion of Page has focused on her TV role, however scholar L.H. Stallings highlights the significance of Page as a stand-up act and the ways African American comediennes use vernacular expressions—especially blue material—as a way to "annihilate heteronormative prescriptions of gender and sexuality."[78] Stallings cogently establishes black women's stand-up as an expression of radical subjectivity, a site where performers do not simply reverse negative stereotypes, but "destroy systems of gender and sexuality that make the stereotypes possible."[79] Page broadens the shape of what and who a black woman *can* be by publicly performing a version of black womanhood that references and transforms ways of doing gender and sexuality that had previously been taboo.

Page is a trickster, Stallings argues, who uses extravagantly blue material to challenge the way dominant society thinks about how womanhood and sexuality should play out. Page is what Stallings calls a sacred/lewd bricoleur, a radical subject where "the Black female stand-up comic configures blue material so that it becomes a verbal cross-dressing to counter her performance as woman."[80] Indeed, you can hear Page's audience howl with laughter throughout her performances in the bluest moments when she breaks cultural taboos. It is important to recognize, as Stallings does, the impact of Page's stand-up on her own subjectivity, but more significantly, we must look at her comedic oeuvre as *public* performance events that invited audiences to embrace the black church as a site of women's liberation; to consider the explicit expression of sexuality as a mechanism of redress; and, recognize black women's stand-up comedy as an unconventional forum for political discussions.

The black church was arguably the most powerful institution in the black community where women were reluctant to be given an equal voice, if one at all. Religious institutions have been traditionally socially conservative regarding issues of gender roles, making it an unfriendly site for black feminist penetration. Stallings does important work with her analysis of LaWanda Page and Moms Mabley as sacred/lewd bricoleurs, women who used blue material to "dismiss the problematic constructions of gender and sexuality."[81] I want to explore how Page dealt with women's silence in the church by transforming the sermon into a radical secular form via BWCL and blues idioms. Page's comedic sermons on her albums *Watch It Sucka!* (1972), *Preach On Sister, Preach On!* (1973), and *Pipe Layin' Dan* (1977) creatively articulate black women's authoritative voice in the church, and she performs as a secular priestess commanding the attention of her congregation.

Like a church service, Page begins *Watch it Sucka!* with what could either be a blues or gospel tune. The audience claps along, enjoying themselves most noticeably when they hear the last lines of the song: Page croons, "My ass is an open door. My secret is no secret anymore." Page creates the atmosphere of the church and the nightclub by encouraging call-and-response,

78 Stallings, *Mutha' is Half a Word*, 115.
79 Ibid, 2.
80 Ibid, 139.
81 Ibid.

referring to her audience alternately as "Honey," and "brothers and sisters." Page extends the end of her words in a preacherly cadence, punctuating her statements with the archetypical "hah!" the audience encouraging her with calls of "Right On!" "Aw shit!" and "Amen," intertwining the space of the church and the club. Throughout her routine, Page delivers sexually explicit readings of Biblical stories and verses, exciting her congregation to a frenzy, "We gon' get on down in the scripture a little taste!"[82] Page employs what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism," the essential principle of which is "degradation… the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity."[83] As Page degrades the church and its cosmic principles, she inaugurates "something more and better."[84]

Page, like Giovanni, is a secular priestess, who created a distinctive stand-up comedy style with "an affective poetics similar to affective preaching, which allows the listener to experience the [performance] sensually and thereby gain understanding through memory."[85] Page also employs "terms of rememory" in her stand-up, an element that facilitates the enactment of BWCL, defined as "allusions, words, and/or images that recall important aspects of the black cultural experience."[86] By thinking of Page as a secular priestess we can see how her grasp of BWCL, blended with other black cultural idioms, encouraged her audiences to publicly celebrate aspects of their lives that were formerly only discussed in private.

"Welcome to the church of the open door hoes," Page invites her audience. "Can I get a amen for the hoes?" Page delivers her interpretation of a lesson she learned from "the good book," the reason why she "don't wear no damn draws." It says "Be ye all so ready..." the congregation breaks up in laughter anticipating Page's raunchy, but accurate conclusion. "Cause you never know when the son of man is *coming*!" Working in the call-and-response tradition in African American culture and fashioning it to fit her needs, Page repeatedly calls on the crowd to sanction her sexual sermon, "Can I get a amen for the *come*,...the *lips*,...the *freaks*." Using wordplay and pun, Page reinterprets the preacher identity, liberating herself and her audience/congregation from the strictures of religious values that keep black men as preachers in the pulpit and black women as members of the faithful, voiceless congregation. As a secular priestess with a captive and enthusiastic audience, Page helps her flock enter the church as a space where women command attention and discuss life processes like sexuality that are usually reserved for discussion at home.

Page's explicit sexual imagery in her stand-up "remind[s] us of pleasure in the sex act."[87] As Stallings persuasively argues, "blue material develops in response to systematic oppression based on [black women comedian's] racialized gender identity and minority sexual orientation as asexual and hypersexual representational others."[88] It is not only that Page and her crowd find pleasure in talking about sex, but also in its extravagant explicitness, to which I now want to turn to think about the public performance of sexual explicitness as a form of social redress.

Throughout her stand-up career, in all except her last album...*Sane Advice* (1979), Page uses hyperbolic sexual imagery, an obscene technique that can liberate the performer and

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82 *Watch It Sucka!* Laff Records, 1972.
83 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 20.
84 Ibid, 21.
85 Bolden and Cortez, "All the Birds Sing Bass," 63.
86 Ibid, 64.
87 Ibid, 116.
88 Ibid, 115.

audience to enjoy that which is prohibited. Obscene humor is part of Freud's theory of tendentious jokes, which he argued cut to the heart of "what authority keeps for itself and enjoys it."[89] Page not only tells jokes, but also delights in taking language about the body and bodily functions to the extreme. Her jokes exploit a grotesque concept of the body where "all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable."[90] Page has a background as a stripper, an occupation that put her on the margins of sexual propriety early in her career, and as a person alienated from the mainstream by way of her race, gender, and sexualized occupation, the vulgarity of her stand-up comedy was a way to bring her audience to the margins with her so they too could confront sex as a natural, normal, dirty, pleasurable and regular part of life that could and *should* be discussed openly.

Most of Page's comic material is about sex, but at several points her jokes are so explicit they become over the top. In reading her work we must remember, "vulgarity delights in excess."[91] For example, Page uses poetic, rhyming toasts to describe sexual encounters in several routines that stage what I term "corporeal orature," a mode of expression in which the sensuality of the body is the focal point of a narrative performance, with a style and intent meant to publicly redress marginal sexualities.

Corporeal orature borrows from Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's theory of orature, which is based on the work of Ugandan linguist Pio Zimiru and refers to "the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression."[92] If orature "realizes its fullness in performance,"[93] as Wa Thiong'o argues, reading Page's corporeal orature is a critical methodology that helps us better appreciate the poetic achievements and potential for social transformation of LaWanda Page's comedy. Structurally and thematically, her stand-up relies on "affective poetics" of the body, which equips the audience to experience the sensuality of the narrative and access a particular knowledge based on memories it conjures.[94] Page verbally creates scenes of the body with layers of imagery, sound, and gesture that compose a text of redress. Her routine "Suck it Dry" on the album *Watch It Sucka!* is an example of stand-up as corporeal orature:

> I'll suck it dry, honey. That's what she said. That mothafucka likes it when she give him some head. Her lips are as smooth as a new babies ass, and suck like a plunger, honey, this bitch got class. Talented is the word, honey, best describing her tongue. It feels like a corkscrew going deep in his buns. His balls how they swell with that hot load of cum. Yeah, baby. Then she wraps her lips around it, and then stick it in the bum. Can you dig it? Whew! Yes honey, like a dog with [inaudible] he lays there and shivers. His pecker is throbbing, honey. And his asshole it quivers. Honey, he faints from the pleasure that she just has given. And she waits there patient, for that sumbitch to re-stiffen. Now the first drop of juice is there for her to sip. Honey, that's when she back off and just lick the tip. You hip to the tip? Whew, honey shit! The head is bright red. And his shaft is all swollen. His nuts feel the need to unload the liquified colon. So she cut out the

89 Freud, "The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious," 100.
90 Ibid, 19.
91 Schechner, "Speculations on Radicalism," 104.
92 Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, "Notes Towards a Performance Theory of Orature," *Performance Research*, Vol. 12, Issue 3 (September 2007), 4.
93 Ibid, 7.
94 Bolden and Cortez, "All the Birds Sing Bass," 63.

> teasing honey, and she works on the pole. And she gently inserts her fingers up and down his asshole. Haaa! But it hurts so good! With expert maneuver she sucked hard and fast. Hell, that thrashing and crying tell me that sumbitch ain't gon' last. And then he goes off honey, and the juice hit her throat. Hell, it's enough of the batter to fill up a boat.[95]

At first, the audience laughs because Page's narrative is titillating and shocking, but once Page has repeatedly barraged them with such explicit imagery of sex, especially a male receiving anal sex during heterosexual relations, the audience laughs because its evocation becomes familiar, comfortable, and unashamed in its celebration of pleasurable sexual practices. Page enacts a form of Bakhtinian grotesque realism where "the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people."[96] The bodily function of sex is a referent that takes the sex act from the ideological and moral discursive fields that make the hypersexual black (wo)man stereotype possible, into the material realm of human relations.

As Page continues with her narrative descriptions of sex, like the borderline pornographic story of "Sister Bessie," and "Brother Harold," on *Preach on Sister, Preach On!* (1973), the audience is invited to engage in an aural sexual feast that is no longer sensational, but ordinary. "The body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character," argues Bakhtin, "the material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed."[97] As expressions of black female sexuality become ordinary, the distance contracts between the performer and the audience—between normalized sexuality and that of the "representational other."[98] It could also be the case that LaWanda Page was so sexually explicit in her comedy because of the political and cultural atmosphere at the time, when women began to openly discuss sexuality as a technique of liberation from outdated taboos. Moreover, the 1970s moment of Black Nationalism demanded authentic black cultural expression, based on the needs and desires of a particular community. Richard Pryor's outrageous comedy routines that evoked unapologetic sexuality as a part of his performance of an ideal of black urban authenticity helped to generate a market and desire for a black woman comedian who would also "tell it like it T-I-is."[99]

Page enjoyed a long career on the stage in which her body and sexuality provided the source material for entertainment. She moved from a job as an exotic dancer billed "the Bronze Goddess of Fire," to working in a chorus line in tent shows on the chitlin' circuit. Her humor was inflected with the black urban vernacular expression that permeated those places of entertainment. Unlike the women of Daryl Dance's study, *Honey, Hush!,* Page's comedy "refus[ed]silence and invisibility" provocatively brushing middle-class codes of respectability to the side.[100] Page's style of humor, with its campy, vulgar theatricality (like most other comedy acts who honed their skills on the chitlin' circuit) catered to lower-class black people—it was

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95 *Watch It Sucka!* Laff Records, 1972.
96 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 19.
97 Ibid.
98 Stallings, *Mutha' is Half a Word*, 115.
99 One of Page's catchphrases is "I'm gon tell it like it T-I-is."
100 Stallings, *Mutha' is Half a Word*, 4.

"indubitably soulful."[101] Page indexed subject matters like sex, alcohol, drugs, and the accouterments of black urban pleasures as defining features of her comic style. L.H. Stallings' work on Page is crucial because it places "Blue-black comedy" within a broader context of the transformative potential of black women's cultural practices. However, Stallings neglects to mention or analyze Page's last comedy album, ...*Sane Advice* (1979), which is interesting in its almost complete departure from the graphic sexual imagery of her previous four offerings.

...*Sane Advice* is remarkable for Page's minimal use of curse words, though understated allusions to sex remain. This time, Page performs stand-up in a more traditional way, with less singing, puns, and wordplay. ...*Sane Advice* blends social commentary and proselytizing. Page no longer plays the role of the preacher who interprets the Word, but she is the Bible-thumping evangelist trying to steer the wayward from lives of sin. There is not much biographical material on Page's life, but a 1977 spread in *Jet* magazine on her life and career after *Sanford and Son* provides some speculative information as to why her comedy changed so drastically.

Page is represented in *Jet* as a compassionate member of her community with strong relationships with the children in her neighborhood, to whom she was still known as "Aunt Esther." The article includes several snapshots of Page engaged with children, and when asked what she was going to do with her new-found fortune she declared, "I'm going to build a home for retarded children...It will be a real home for them, a place they can call their own."[102] Page is pictured sitting on the trunk of her car (with a "LWANDA" license plate) with dozens of (mostly black) children. We can assume that her comedy on ...*Sane Advice* was affected by, and reflected the rapidly changing conditions of the neighborhood where she made her home in Watts, CA. Several reference points in ...*Sane Advice* give us insight into why Page's comic persona and material shifted so profoundly, how she comes to embody one of her most popular characters, the converted whore in church.[103] In fact, the material on ...*Sane Advice* raises questions about how we can talk about BWCL that is not always socially and/or politically progressive, especially if audience members lack the cultural knowledge required to appreciate the humor of her social critique.

Before ...*Sane Advice*, Page's previous four album covers are humorous, over-the-top, scenes where she playfully performs a rendition of the album titles. For example, on the 1971 record *Mutha' is Half a Word,* Page is shown at the doctor's office in the late stage of pregnancy declaring "B-B-BUT I'M A VIRG...!" as the nurse confusedly exclaims, "A What?!" The album *Watch It Sucka!* features Page in the role of Aunt Esther from *Sanford and Son,* where the saying was popularized. *Pipe Layin' Dan* and *Preach on Sister, Preach On!* are styled with ridiculous, but humorous comic scenes meant to give a taste of the raunchy humor on the album. The album ...*Sane Advice*, however, signals a change in Page's comedy and in her economic status.

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101 The announcer calls her to the stage and describes her comedy as indubitably soulful on...*Sane Advice*. Laff Records, 1979.

102 Bob Lucas, "'Aunt Esther' Finds A New Life Without Sanford and Son," *Jet*, Johnson Publishing Co. (Oct. 6, 1977), 61.

103 One of Page's more popular jokes on *Watch It Sucka!* is about a woman who can't make money in the streets anymore, so she goes to church to get saved. Another prostitute doesn't believe her, so she goes in the church with her, and the pastor seems like he doesn't believe she wants to change her life either. She stands up to testify, declaring "One night I was laying in the arms of a sailor, the next night I was laying in the arms of a soldier. But tonight, I'm laying in the arms of Jesus!" And the other whore jumped out of her seat and said, "That's right bitch, fuck 'em all!"

By the time her last album was released, Page had become successful and visible on TV via her role on *Sanford and Son*, and she appears as a full-blown Hollywood star. Wearing a flowing, translucent peach colored gown, Page leans against a white Rolls Royce with rings adorning all her fingers. Green palm trees line the background to the album cover, which looks like a Polaroid photo. Under her name reads "The Queen of Comedy," which is on all of her albums, but for the first time in her comedic oeuvre, Page performs a visual representation of royalty. As the show opens, Page delights her audience in a familiar fashion, with a blues/gospel song--"Glory Hallelujah, I've laid my old man down. Peace and no more sorrow, since I laid that sucka down." As she signifies on a Spiritual and insults her old man as a "sucka," a familiarity sets in with the audience, who have certain expectations about what she might talk about in her routine.

Instead of immediately jumping into the topic of sex, Page comments on some of the social change of the day. "We gettin' wiser," she says. "These heathen scientists won't let nature be...They birthin' babies from a test tube, without the benefit of a man, boy, or beast. What good is being conceived if you don't get relieved?" This joke is still blue, yet Page uses muted imagery to talk about sex and society. A fundamental difference between her first four albums and ...*Sane Advice* is that she usually only talked about sex in terms of its pleasure or the trouble it caused in personal relationships. She couples conversations about sex with social commentary that changes the tone of her humor, and possibly caters to a broader audience beyond black working-class people. After nearly ten years of talking about virtually the same subject, perhaps stand-up audiences, and she as a performer, wanted fresh material. For example, she goes on at length about welfare mothers in one of her more comical and less preachy moments, critiquing non-heteronormative childbearing, "young girls who want babies just to get on welfare—what are they gon' do on Father's Day? Send cards to the chemical company? Most of these girls can't keep a checkbook straight, let alone worrying about being overdrawn at the sperm bank." The seeds of negative representations of the black welfare mother had been planted in the 1960s and 70s[104] and Page responded in a surprisingly conservative way to this discourse, considering her apparently progressive attitudes about sex.

Page rose to popularity because of her role on *Sanford and Son,* and she discusses and enjoys her success in ...*Sane Advice*. "Here I am, honey, famous! A star, honey! They got a wax figure of me on the east coast and the west coast." She goes on signifying, "Thank god almighty, I'm a star at last!" Her TV fame presented a new platform for discussing subjects other than the tried and true, and recognizing this power she declares, "Since I got the floor, honey, let me give you some sane advice." She touches on the ghetto as a site of death and pathological sexuality but she gives special attention to welfare mothers. "I ain't never leaving Watts," she says. "I know it's a Los Angeles ghetto...Honey, it's so bad if you ain't home by 9 o'clock you can be declared legally dead...We got ourselves a big new industry in Watts. It's making babies. The more babies, the more welfare money. Everybody that's got pockets has got money...and honey, when the babies come the government sends you money every mother's day: the 1st and the 15th of every month..." Her observations about welfare mothers might have emerged from her experience living in a neighborhood with high rates of governmental assistance,[105] and Page felt

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104 For a full discussion of the evolution of negative representations of African American women on welfare, see *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (2001); *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform* (2003); *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (2004).

105 After the Watts Riots in August of 1965, *The McCone Commission*, headed by John A. McCone

compelled to address the topic as the "pastor's angel," which she called herself throughout *...Sane Advice*. Page gets the audience to laugh at the "welfare queen" stereotype and instead of critiquing its perpetuation of the social, political, and structural inequalities that make it possible, draw the boundaries around it, a boundary that Page and her audience stand outside of based on their shared pleasure in the laughter at the "welfare queen's" expense. In other words, Page's joke illustrates BWCL as a performative mode of communication, which depending on the audience has the potential to degrade and uncritically silence the objects of humor, sometimes the very people it is intended to empower.

What is also telling is the biographical material embedded in her last record, information that might help us understand why Page's comedy changed so drastically in her later years. Page tells her audience the story of leaving Cleveland after seeing a 1943 production of *Cabin in the Sky* with Lena Horne, who was "light, bright, and damn near white," as Page described her. It was at that moment that Page decided she wanted to be in show business, travelling to St. Louis and joined a minstrel outfit, "Sugarfoot Green from New Orleans." Page takes us briefly through what life was like on the chitlin' circuit, the hardships of working in segregated, sometimes rural conditions.

She describes the excitement, but she did not know what lay ahead:

> It was August child. It was hot, hot, hot, hot HOT! Honey, 40 people, bags, costumes, all of us riding and living in the same bus. Before we got out of St. Louis my six-day deodorant pad had died. Child, travelling on a tour bus is like no trip you ever took before. Baby, if you hear a loud noise in the back, it's the luggage trying to get out. I opened the window, and child the fumes from that bus killed a whole crop of wheat in Kansas. And honey, it sure wasn't easy to find the colored hotel. Jenny and me, we walked half the day, til I found a boarding house and it had a nice sign over the porch. "Sleep here, the angels watch over you." We did, and one of 'em bit me.[106]

As Page takes us through her life on the chitlin' circuit, the hot, segregated, sometimes dangerous conditions, we see her desire for a change of scenery. We can also see that Page lived a life on the margins (as a stripper and chitlin' circuit performer), and in her later years, she seemed to have wanted to find different kinds of pleasure in the role of the righteous choir lady instead of the whore in church. Her biographical testimony, along with her more modest humor and conservative social commentary were means of publicly transforming herself, reclaiming the qualities of a god-fearing Christian. Her transformation at the end of her career demonstrates the dynamic nature of humor for black women—in it their political and social ideals can be remade and refashioned. LaWanda Page literally made and remade herself in and through stand-up comedy, illuminating it as a generative cultural practice for marginalized people, whose public

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released a report after an investigation about the causes of the violent uprising entitled Violence in the City—An End or a Beginning?: A Report by the Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, 1965. The section "Welfare and Health," stated these facts about welfare recipients in "the curfew area" during the riot: In the Watts area 24% of the population received public assistance versus only 5% of the national population.

106 ...*Sane Advice*. Laff Records, 1979.

images are usually represented, and sometimes distorted, by more politically and socially powerful entities.

Conclusion: BWCL and "The Politics of Play"

The BAM women poets' sizeable literary output, the feminist, and Black Nationalist movements of the 1970s, and Shirley Chisholm's meteoric rise in American politics made it possible for black women to enter and be successful in stand-up comedy. Moms Mabley was able to portray a (covert) politician in her last film in 1974 because the black woman as politician and stand-up comic—careers requiring a sharp intellect and tongue—came to be viable options for black women. Comedians like Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby, Flip Wilson, Redd Foxx, and Richard Pryor brought black comedy to the mainstream in the late 1960s and in combination with the shifting political landscape and new styles, sensibilities, and subject matter defined the new black stand-up. Richard Pryor's urban, unrestrained, and style of stand-up became a roaring success in the 70s, and alongside him, was a black woman who also redefined the contours of the genre: Alberta Peal, former stripper and chitlin' circuit entertainer better known by her stage name, LaWanda Page.

Page's comedic production in the 1970s is definitive of, and sets the foundation for, contemporary African American women's stand-up comedy. As we have seen, African American women used humor in seemingly disparate discursive fields as a mechanism to claim authority over their own lives. Employing techniques of BWCL, these poets, politicians, activists, and entertainers fashioned themselves, and their audiences were forced to (re)consider the contours of blackness, womanhood, and humanity in general. The humorists of this study are "honey-mad women," in the sense that their humor evokes the kind of playfulness Patricia Yaeger believes can motivate libratory projects in which the black woman "introduces 'free energy into the 'bound' energy of her culture's text."[107]

Poetry opened up a space for black women to directly confront and publicly speak back to power—to use a verbal assault to air out their anxieties and displeasures. As Carolyn Rodgers reminds us, it was "a way of saying the truth that hurt with a laugh." Shirley Chisholm's campaign for the Presidency and the humorous techniques she used to defend her humanity and claim the authority and respect due an elected politician represented the embodiment of a new self-consciousness, and new possibilities for who the black woman could be. And finally, LaWanda Page's comedic production in the 1970s represents the foundation of contemporary black women's stand-up comedy. It exists in its own historical and cultural context, transforming and shifting with the times and environment. BWCL is a politics of play that goes beyond a survival tool. It is a resource black women use to enjoy and change lives. It is here that we see the social efficacy of humor, where collective myths and histories are dramatized, alternative visions of self and society are presented, and the possibility of transformation of the norm is offered up.

107 Yaeger, *Honey-Mad Women*, 208.

Chapter 3
"Unlearning Not to Speak": Black Women Comics in the Post-Soul 80s

"You tell me how people can refuse jobs and take government checks…They work eight weeks and quit and get government checks. Do you realize that the guy with the welfare check is the one who is buying steaks?" –Pearl Bailey[1]

"Poverty is no excuse for dirt. You can be a queen in an alley." –Pearl Bailey[2]

Introduction

Pearl Bailey retired from performing in the late 1970s, yet her public statements about social issues and her practices of self-making in those articulations signal some of the most salient features and shifts of black women's humor in the 1980s. In this chapter, I suggest that as desegregation enables more black women to gain access to broader educational and cultural opportunities outside of explicitly black communities, black women's humor becomes more self-reflective and reflexive. It also responds to prevailing social, economic, and political conditions of the 1980s, specifically Ronald Reagan's pushback of civil rights legislation from the prior decade, and popular and political representations of the black woman as "welfare queen." Pearl Bailey's quotes point to some of the dynamic issues black women in the 1980s faced using their humor; and interestingly enough, Bailey's political commentary turns seemingly conservative welfare discourse that becomes ubiquitous during the Reagan years on its head—it assumes (some) welfare recipients are male and celebrates the virtues of queenly living, even in poverty. Bailey unwittingly gets at the roots of power, and we can read her statements as inadvertent irony.

Like LaWanda Page, Pearl Bailey expressed conservative social politics that framed welfare recipients as irresponsible citizens who did not deserve public aid. Page and Bailey publicly presented themselves as wise old women; sages even, which had the effect of making their conservative ideology come off as "common sense." Bailey did not express her political leanings directly as Page did, but her stage persona, "Pearlie Mae," was a vehicle that created a public trust in Pearl Bailey, who supported Republican candidates Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford. What is compelling about Pearl Bailey is not only that she marshaled a comic persona that "never targeted the status quo"[3] in order to maintain crossover success, but also that the character "Pearlie Mae" opened a space for Bailey, one of the handful of professional African American comediennes, to publicly make and examine herself via public statements and in her several bestselling memoirs.

Bailey intimately linked her stage persona with her private self in her four memoirs,[4] illustrating to her readers and fans that "Pearlie Mae" and Pearl were two parts of a whole. In an essay she wrote in 1980 while an undergraduate student at Georgetown University, Bailey

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1 Betty Beal, "Pearl Bailey Wants to be President," *The Washington Star* (Jan. 16, 1975), 51.
2 Julia Badal, "Pearlie Mae Comes Back," *Iranian-English Paper* (June 14, 1973).
3 Haggins, *Laughing* Mad, 163.
4 Bailey wrote 4 memoirs between 1968 and 1989; *The Raw Pearl* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968*); Talking to Myself* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1971); *Hurry Up, America, and Spit* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976); and *Between You and Me: A Heartfelt Memoir on Learning, Loving, and Living* (New York: Doubleday, 1989).

responded to an op-ed piece in the *Boston Globe,* "Being Versus Behaving," which contemplated the questions "when you are being yourself on stage, are you acting? Does your life become a role you are playing?"[5] Bailey concluded in her response, "One most of the time behaves as the written word calls for (script), but it takes a great deal of "being," to do it sometimes." Furthermore, she argued, "in a true artist Being and Behavior are never at war."[6] Bailey's commentary on the nature of performance and identity foreshadows black women's open discussion in the 1980s of their personal experiences and politics in their comic performances.

Bailey came of age in Philadelphia and the small coal-mining towns of eastern Pennsylvania in the 1940s, and reflected on the struggles of being taken seriously as an actress in an essay she wrote while earning a BA in theology at Georgetown University while she was in her late fifties. When she started performing onstage, Bailey lamented, "someone else always had the lead and I was always in a character role and it was 'Be funny, Pearl' and no one ever started looking for this woman's depth. I'm not a comedienne. I'm a humorist."[7] Though Bailey was "a vaudevillian and proud of it," she recognized the limitations and constraints of the sometimes superficial comic roles vaudeville theater relied on for its humor. Still, she struggled to prove her depth as a performer and person, insisting she was a humorist with a true knack for craft, not merely a comic clown with talent. This battle for intellectual and artistic autonomy and affirmation is mirrored in black women's comedy during the 1980s.

Alongside emerging black feminist literature and advocacy in the 1980s, black women's comedy becomes shot through with personal politics and shifting ideals of freedom vis-à-vis the political comedy of Moms Mabley from the previous generation, which was mostly concerned with freedom from racial oppression. The shifting notion of freedom from collective to individual is a fundamental component of "post-soul aesthetics" (PSA), argues Mark Anthony Neal (2002), which he lays out as a set of practices and stylistics that come to define the cultural production of black artists in the 1980s and 90s. Neal offers the idea of a post-soul aesthetic (PSA) and locates its genesis after the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (438 U.S. 265) in 1978. Tentatively postmodernist, Neal's aesthetic theory hinges on the idea that new approaches to black expressive culture developed as a result of fractures in American society, following Nelson George (1992), in the forms of deindustrialization, desegregation, globalization, and new "meta-identities" that came to replace "traditional tropes of blackness"[8] of the soul era, embracing the elastic potential of blackness—it challenges, appropriates, and is even a parody of these tropes. In this chapter, we will see how ideals of freedom shift to broader notions of independence and autonomy, played out in black women's stand-up and character-based comedy, which catapulted several black comediennes to crossover success in the mid 80s. As I see it, black women humorists in the 1980s are post-soul aestheticians who use performance to explore the boundaries of blackness, femaleness, and the social and political conditions under which they live.

Bambi Haggins situates Pearl Bailey as a direct predecessor of post-soul comics, linking her to Whoopi Goldberg. Haggins explores how Bailey and Goldberg mobilize their comic

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5 Ellen Goodman, "Behaving Versus Being," *The Boston Globe*, March 8, 1980.

6 Pearl Bailey, "Behavior Vs. Being," unpublished essay, 1980. *Bailey-Bellson Collec*tion, African American Museum in Philadelphia.

7 Joyce Wagner, "Pearl Bailey: I'm a vaudevillian and proud of it," *The Kansas City Star*, Jan. 16, 1971, 5.

8 Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3.

personae, defined as performance identities "constructed by acculturation, individual choice, and industrial imperatives," to "navigate crossover waters."[9] As "black comic divas" of the 1970s and 80s, Bailey[10] and Goldberg exploited elements of BWCL—they were outspoken, irreverent, and to the extent it was possible—defined the terms under which they labored. I begin with a review of theories of the post-soul aesthetic. Secondly, I offer a reading of Debra J. Robinson's 1984 documentary on black women stand-ups, *I Be Done Been Was Is*, and Danitra Vance's *Saturday Night Live* sketch where she plays the role of a professional teenage mother. Lastly, I discuss the comic career of Thea Vidale, the first African American woman to play the lead in a sitcom that was in her own name on a major television network.

Post-Soul Aesthetics

The idea of post-soul is a temporal descriptor of a set of cultural and aesthetic breaks from the Civil Rights and Black Power era, especially traditional scripts of blackness that congealed during the 1960s and 70s. Trey Ellis penned an important essay in the mid-80s to codify this "New Black Aesthetic," (NBA) framed as a movement in the arts where black people's cultural work became more concerned with individual freedom. Their art itself and the processes of making it, were the most important aspects of NBA, Ellis argued, as opposed to dealing with struggles for freedom from racial oppression, like much of the work of BAM artists.[11] The NBA was a set of aesthetic practices that functioned to expand the boundaries of blackness, enabling artist, who were products of desegregation efforts of the CRM and who had been exposed to multiple cultural influences, to be black in new and divergent ways. The idea of NBA was heralded as ushering in a new era of theorizing and performing black identity.

The idea of expanding the boundaries of blackness through cultural production is not new[12], but the term post-soul was first articulated by cultural critic Nelson George in a compilation of essays from his *Village Voice* column, titled *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (1992). George's essays focus on black media culture in the 80s and early 90s, musing on the fragmentation, commercialization, and transformations of black culture and identity via music, movies, and television. George argues that since the release of Melvin Van Peeble's pivotal blaxploitation film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* in 1971, "the tenor of African American culture has changed…today I live in a time of goin'-for-mine materialism, secular beat consciousness, and more diverse, fragmented, even postmodern black community."[13] Post-soul black cultures, argues George, birthed four novel urban characters. With increased access to formal education and material wealth, these post-soul archetypes play on traditional notions of blackness and appropriate ethnic expressions heretofore unavailable to them, setting the stage for emergent multicultural black identities and practices.

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9 Haggins, *Laughing Mad*, 132.

10 Bailey was active as a professional entertainer from 1946 when she debuted in the play St. Louis Woman, until her official retirement in the late 1970s, when decided to engage in diplomatic work, first under President Richard Nixon then Gerald Ford.

11 Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 12.1 (1989), 233-43.

12 See Alain Locke, *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Touchstone, 1999) and James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990).

13 Nelson George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps and Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Culture* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2001), 1.

Post-soul culture arose from the conditions of black life in the 80s—deindustrialization, urbanization, and the commoditization of black culture, which generated new social locations of blackness that manifested the "buppies, b-boys, baps, and bohos" chronicled in George's post-soul theory. Post-soul culture was as much about black style shifting as it was about black people making and spending money. In the 1980s, black people gained access to corporate industries more than ever before. Brooding BAM poets gave way rapping DJs who would inaugurate a new era in global popular culture; Richard Pryor's narratives of urban debauchery ushered in Eddie Murphy's unapologetically mysogynistic style of comedy; Jean-Michel Basquiat's urban abstractions replaced Emory Douglas's representations of proud, militant blackness; Spike Lee took up the role as gate-keeper of the authentic black status quo; and the Evans family of *Good Times* was supplanted by the Cosbys as the televisual representation of the quintessential African American family.

Lisa Jones, the biracial daughter of Amiri Baraka, waxes long in *Bulletproof Diva* (1994) about the many ways she "invented multiculturalism." Like Nelson George, Jones also used her column in the *Village Voice* to theorize African American identity and the politics of style in the post-soul era. But unlike George, black women—bulletproof divas to be sure, drive Jones's narrative of postmodern blackness, drawing its contours at the nexus of consumerist impulses and a dynamic and culturally diverse expressive pool from which black (women's) culture is produced. Jones writes herself as a fragmented, complex, and highly politicized "soul baby":

> "I hail from the Afro-rainbow tribe. Papa's black by way of Newark and South Carolina. Mom's Jewish by way of Brooklyn and Eastern Europe. Ethnically I'm African American. Politically I'm a person of color. My resume: Womanist-theater producing circa the eighties; day jobbing at an alternative newspaper, looking to define the role of a race woman in the multiculti nineties. My faith is strictly rhythm and blues. Still hung up on soul music, poetry and jazz, sixties girl groups. Air guitar to the Isley Brothers and Living Colour. Marley heals my soul. Al Green and Sting wake me up every morning. I go to Aretha and Joni Mitchell when I need to cry."[14]

Jones's articulation of a multicultural black self suggests the post-soul identity as one which is partially inherited and historically contingent, but otherwise chosen. She is a heroine of her own invention, much like the protagonist in "Ego Tripping," with "the lip and nerve to raise up herself and the world."[15]

As Mark Anthony Neal sees it, the key element of PSA is the sense of familiarity of black expressive culture generated from practices of post-soul cultural production, "a familiarity that is exploited by post-soul artists to convey their own sensibilities in a way that heightens the sense of fracture and difference, generationally at least, experienced within the black community, simply because something that was so familiar is rendered 'vulgar' and unintelligible."[16] The "post" in PSA a temporal framework that captures the sense of cultural rupture underlying all that is post-soul. It reflects and refracts on that which came before it, reworking old paradigms within new conditions. It plays with, and sometimes mocks standard ideals of blackness; and, the post-soul idea opens space for us to think about blackness as an unfolding narrative that facilitates radical ways of being and creating that shifts within the context of the times.

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14 Lisa Jones, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 54.
15 Ibid, 3.
16 Ibid, 15.

Before I discuss how the work of black women comedians fits into PSA, I would like to adopt a theoretical framework for PSA based on the work of Bertram D. Ashe and Paul C. Taylor, two scholars who contributed useful commentary and critique of the post-soul aesthetic in a 2007 special edition of *African American Review*. Taylor's essay "Post-Black, Old Black," interrogates the impact of postmodern theories of black life in the late 20th century and is particularly concerned with finding more suitable ways to utilize postmodern theory in moves to "posterize"[17] black identity and culture so that it is useful beyond the art world.

Artist Thelma Golden introduced the idea of "post-black" in her introduction to the *Freestyle* exhibition catalogue in 2001. Post-black artists according to Golden, were "adamant about not being labeled as "black" artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness,"[18] no longer constrained by black vernacular styles and subject matter that once signaled authentic blackness. Taylor takes Golden's postulation as an opportunity to consider what the "post" really indicates: a new pluralism, a new sensibility, or, an alteration of racial conditions? Taylor asks, do black people *really* desire to distance themselves from traditional tropes of blackness?[19] African Americans are not simply escaping older notions of blackness he claims, but "what is happening is an expansion of the boundaries of blackness."[20] Taylor riffs on art critic Arthur Danto's reading of Hegel's idea of *Geist*[21] and the end of history.

As Taylor explains, "now that classical racialism has given way to critical race theory, race-thinking has been stripped of those illusory goals," and "having lost its historical mission, it is free to do or be anything, without historical consequence."[22] In this sense, racial history is over because it has been sufficiently proven a useless category (scientifically and culturally), yet racial practices continue with altered "contexts, meanings, and significance."[23] What is most useful from Taylor's neo-Hegelian approach to PSA is its basis in a self-conscious praxis. In this sense, we can think of post-soul as process-driven and not merely a condition or state of being. It becomes a continuous set of reflective action upon the self and the world in order to achieve a higher level of consciousness and/or transform the world. Essentially, I am suggesting PSA as a mode of cultural performance where we can read race and sex as "emancipated from [their] historical burdens and empowered by self-knowledge."[24] Blackness comes unhinged from a teleological impetus for historical progress, and aestheticians become free to explore independent and creative projects of personal freedom and autonomy.

Bertram Ashe takes a more concrete approach in "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction," laying out PSA as a three point matrix. For Ashe, post-soul is "art produced by African Americans who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement," who

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17 Paul C. Taylor, "Post-Black, Old Black," *African American Review*, Vol. 41, No. 4, Post-Soul Aesthetic (Winter, 2007), 626.

18 Thelma Golden, "Freestyle," (New York: Studio Museum of Harlem, 2001), 14.

19 Taylor, "Post-Black, Old Black," 634.

20 Ibid,635.

21 Geist, which is originally Hegel's idea of history "as the itinerary or biography of a self-positing spirit," (636) according to Taylor, Geist can be applied to the idea of race. "Just as the seed actualizes its potential by unfolding itself into forms that grows increasingly adequate to its genetic blueprint," Taylor argues, the idea of blackness "actualizes its potential by unfolding itself into forms that are increasingly adequate to its underlying animating spirit" (ibid).

22 Taylor, "Post-Black, Old Black," 638.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid, 640.

have no nostalgia for the CRM because they "have no lived, adult experience" with it.[25] Notions of freedom are the main difference between those who participated in the CRM versus those ensconced in the post-soul condition—earlier generations of African Americans were concerned with freedom from racial oppression and white supremacy, while soul babies "are exploring blackness from within contexts markedly different from their forbearers."[26]

The PSA matrix has three points, Ashe argues: (1) post-soul artists must grapple with the cultural mulatto archetype[27] (see Jones' fragmented narrative above, for example); (2) PSA artists have a penchant for troubling blackness, or, engage in "blaxploration," "holding it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous—and necessary—preoccupations with struggling for political freedom;" and, (3) they signal "allusion-disruption gestures" in their texts via parody, mockery, or appropriation of traditional tropes of blackness in order to expose and explore difference.[28] For Ashe, post-soul texts need not fit all "requirements." PSA is a theory with artistic freedom as its foundation, but "post-soul art will, indeed, have to 'stick' somewhere in the post-soul matrix to be credibly seen as post-soul."[29] Ashe's exploratory matrix of PSA provides a framework with which to explore black women's comedy in the 80s, especially the elements that fall through the cracks and complicate how we understand black feminist cultural production and their interactions with PSA.

One of the earliest critiques of PSA was its male-centeredness. Tera Hunter, for example, critiqued Trey Ellis's "New Black Aesthetic" on the grounds that middle-class blacks were the privileged architects of these new practices of blackness, for her "conflate[ing] class status and class origins."[30] Additionally, women, Hunter argued, were no more than appendages to black race men's novel aesthetic expressions, especially purported race men like filmmaker Spike Lee and rappers Public Enemy. Lee's inaugural film *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) is often lauded as the quintessential post-soul text, but Hunter intervened in its unproblematic celebration: "Not only is this an unoriginal cinematic and literary image of black women, but Lee fails to take this character to new heights. Nola Darling never achieves sexual autonomy—she never establishes her body or her person as her own."[31]

Still, Hunter recognizes the possibilities of NBA as a basis for conversation and critique. Lisa Jones' *Bulletproof Diva* is but one manifestation of the interaction between PSA and black feminist practice, the result of which draws the contours of a black feminist aesthetic. As Jones poignantly put it, "for black women without access to a room of one's own to make leisure-time art, our bodies, our style became the canvass for our cultural yearning. It has been, in recent history, not just a place of self-mutilation, but a place of healing."[32] A black feminist aesthetic refers to these embodied racial and gender-specific productions of images and symbols that open up the possibility "to appreciate old things in new ways and to assimilate new things that would

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25 Bertram D. Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction," *African American Review*, Vol. 41, No. 4, Post-Soul Aesthetic (Winter, 2007), 611.

26 Ibid, 617.

27 Trey Ellis describes a cultural mulatto as "educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures," this person can easily navigate both black and white worlds. See Ellis, "New Black Aesthetic," 235.

28 Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic," 613-614.

29 Ibid, 613.

30 Tera Hunter, "'It's a Man's Man's Man's World': Specters of the Old Re-Newed in Afro-American Culture and Criticism," *Callaloo*, 12.1 (1989), 247.

31 Ibid, 248.

32 Jones, *Bulletproof Diva*, 92.

be excluded by traditional aesthetic theory."[33] As Hilde Heine points out, a feminist aesthetic "promises to yield positive and practical consequences in non-aesthetic dimensions because it illuminates and corrects certain imagery that has exerted a powerful influence upon our conventional understanding of the world."[34] For the black comediennes of this study, we will see post-soul aesthetics as a means by which they gain access to individual artistic freedom that is intimately bound up with political processes.

Academic and artistic black feminism took shape around the same time PSA emerged in the 70s and 80s, and black women's personal freedoms were intimately linked to political projects. Whoopi Goldberg became the embodiment of the intersection of black feminist praxis and PSA. Goldberg is one of the most visible black comediennes in history, but I want to take a look at lesser-known comics in the post-soul era because then, we can look at how PSA operates on a lower frequency than Popular Culture proper. Lisa Jones signals a change in black women's media and self-representation in the 80s: "Not fond of the rigid "positive image" approach, I still crave heroines. In art and fantasy I want to win. I want power, even as I ride off a cliff. I want art to show me what I can do, not what I can't."[35] The black comediennes of the 1980s take up this challenge.

I Be Done Been Was Is (1984)

I Be Done Been Was Is[36] is a post-soul text and black women are the chief cultural producers who shed light on how the social conditions of the 1980s usher in new conversations about the politics of race and sex. The film is the first film documenting the struggles and triumphs of black women comedians and explores how black women's voices become audible in popular culture and new ways they express politics, publicly. Most importantly, the film provides a clear picture of the comedy stage as a space to *be oneself* by universalizing the individual narrative; in addition, we see how comics use the stage and the relationship between performer and audience to *become* the ideal person.

The title of the film comes from a character created by Jane Galvin-Lewis. Clad in a feathery church hat, black gloves, and pink lipstick worn slightly outside the lines, the character introduces herself to the audience as "Dr. Q. Anita Bizwell, Ph.D., BF, MA, DDF, DED, MD, and MS…W. I is. I done was. I be done been was is." The film's title is a representation of the multidimensional, multigenerational layers of black female subjectivity. Robinson's choice to use this grammatically complex title sets the record straight about the impact of black women on American life and history. "It kind of sums up black women comedians," Robinson explains, "but black women period, in everything we do. I'm past, present, and future…you may not know that, but that's who I am."[37] The title of the film is "a brief, clever comment on the failure of European languages and Western metaphysics,"[38] argues L.H. Stallings. Robinson presents a discourse of black women's subjectivity without homogenizing their experiences. Instead, she

33 Hilde Hein, "The Role of Feminist Aesthetics in Feminist Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 48, No. 4, Feminism and Traditional Aesthetics (Autumn, 1990), 284-86.
34 Ibid, 286.
35 Jones, *Bulletproof Diva*, 72.
36 *I Be Done Been Was Is*, Women Make Movies, Dir. Debra J. Robinson, 1984.
37 Debra J. Robinson. Telephone interview with author, June 27, 2012. (Debra J. Robinson).
38 Stallings, *Mutha' Is Half a Word*, 131.

lets the four women's experience guide a narrative of difference, exploring how each woman plays with and on representations of black womanhood.

Black Feminist Performance

In the early 1980s, black women intellectuals and political organizers struggled to pull together a coherent strategy to anchor the nascent black feminist movement. Black feminism became a necessary political strategy for black women who were silenced or delegated background roles in black liberation struggles and the women's liberation movement in the 1970s. As academic black feminism became codified in several early 80s texts,[39] one of the main issues it addressed was the historical silence of black women in other struggles against oppression. Audre Lorde's 1984 collection *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* signaled new political imperatives for black women, presenting a theoretical and practical guide for breaking silences that halted their political and social progress. Lorde's work was steeped with poetic emotion and feminist verve. This moment of urgency coincided with the release of *I Be*, and I believe shares some of the same political and performative concerns.

Like Lorde, Robinson is also concerned with "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action." As a young film student at Columbia University, Robinson thought she would end up working as a traditional filmmaker making Hollywood movies until she volunteered to work on a documentary about domestics who were in a union in the Bronx. She worked on a documentary called "Resurrgents: The KKK versus Equality," about union organizing in a chicken plant in Laurel, MS where she learned that one could make films from one's own perspective in independent films. "I usually am very political. I'm always aware. You're involved in whatever movement, so you end up going to their meetings. You become an advocate. I think that influenced this film—there was a bit of advocacy in it."[40] After working on the union films, Robinson believed the only way she could truly *be* a filmmaker was to actually make a film.

> "I had a friend named Alice Arthur, who is actually in the film, who was working on being a comedian. I was like, I don't know any black women who are out there working as comedians. I went to comedy clubs with her sometimes and I didn't see anybody but her. There were lots of men, but she was the only one. I think unconsciously it was kind of the same reaction about black women being filmmakers. It suddenly hit me, they may be having a different experience within the industry…that put black women aside from all the other people. And that turned out to be my first film, and then I was a filmmaker."[41]

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39 For examples of black feminisms' diversity, see Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (London: The Women's Press, 1981); *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. Edited by Barbara Smith (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983); Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt, 1983); *But Some of Us Are Brave: All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men: Black Women's Studies*. Edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith (New York: The Feminist Press, 1981); bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1981); *This Bridge Called My Back: Writnigs By Radical Women of Color*. Edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Persephone Press, 1981).

40 Debra J. Robinson.

41 Ibid.

As an independent filmmaker, Robinson sets the stage for black women to speak back to their systematic erasure in black political and expressive culture. Essentially*, I Be* is a self-reflective documentary history of black women comedians that carries out a project of "unlearning to not speak," as poet Marge Piercy put it, "starting with I."[42] *I Be* performs Lorde's imperative for black women to transform silence into language and action by bringing black women comedians into view, and Robinson's insistence throughout the film that "the women were *there*." As the film progresses, it becomes more clear that "tongues untied"[43] is a running theme and an emerging trope in BWCL. The idea of the tongue-tied black woman is a metaphor for a larger conversation about black women's historical silence, and if we look closely at some of the material in *I Be*, we can see how black feminist performance pushes back on and complicates PSA.

Unlearning Not To Speak

"I used to wanna be a singer," begins comedian Marsha Warfield. "What stopped me is that I grew up in the sixties. And most of the black women singers in the sixties were tongue-tied. And I wasn't fortunate enough to have a speech impediment, so I couldn't be a singer." The audience is hushed, awaiting the punch line. "You remember those old songs, don't you?" Warfield smiles and giggles to herself before getting a laugh. She sings the nasally, garbled lyrics of "A Lover's Concerto," the 1965 pop song by the girl group The Toys. "How gentle is the rain, that falls softly on the meadow…" continuing into another tune after a chuckle, "Tonight you're mine, completely," she coos, mocking The Shirelles song "Will You Love Me Tomorrow."[44]

Warfield distances herself from the African American girl groups of the sixties, because even though they helped integrate mainstream popular culture and signaled new expressive possibilities for black women, their jumbled speech represented a murky incoherence of their voices. Warfield refers to this incoherence as a "speech impediment," pointing to the emerging commercialization of the ultra-feminine, saccharine brand of black womanhood in sixties girl group recordings as a form of silence that she simply refuses to replicate. During this routine Warfield calls attention to and parodies Civil Rights era politics, when it was still customary for women to be seen and not heard.

Warfield's mockery of girl groups opens a conversation about the black woman's social and political location within the context of the soul era, when she was present but at some critical moments, voiceless. During the post-soul era, the idea of the tongue-tied black woman is

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42 Marge Piercy, *To Be of Use* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969) cited in M.A. Paget, "Unlearning to Not Speak," *Human Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (1990), 147.

43 "Tongues Untied" is a reference to the 1989 film by Marlon Riggs, *Tongues Untied* (Frameline's Lesbian and Gay Cinema Collection (1989), which explores the lives and experiences of American gay black men. Riggs uses documentary, personal narrative, and archival footage to raise questions about the ways gay black men are silenced in the gay rights movement, mainstream white culture, and in black communities. Riggs film attempted to illustrate the particularity of gay black identity. In fact, the film enacted the theory of black gay particularity, and the notion of "tongues untied" is instructive about the ways black women comics in the 1980s came to represent themselves vis-à-vis structures of deeply embedded historical silence.

44 *I Be Done Been Was Is*.

troubled and obliterated as Marsha Warfield brings it to light then rejects it, pointing out tongues untied praxis as a strategy of redress in black women's performance. The notion of "tongues untied" praxis points to the work of transforming "silence into language and action," implying an active struggle toward the recognition of black women's intellectual capabilities.

Stand-up comedy became a space in the 1980s that allowed Warfield, who got her start doing stand-up at the famed *Comedy Store* in LA with iconic male comedians like Richard Pryor, Robin Williams, David Letterman, and Jay Leno, to fulfill her desire to be a performer whose words and ideas were heard. Having an intelligible voice was a political imperative of black women in the 1980s (and before), and also an element of PSA unique to black women. Despite popular ideas of who a black woman was and could be in the 1980s, Warfield envisioned and performed the kind of black woman she *wanted to be*, and stand-up had a great impact on her identity. "The person I wanna be is the person I project onstage, a strong individual who can handle anything that's thrown at her," she explained, but "the person I am is like, sickening. It's the person like, "I love you, don't leave me."[45] Even if it is fleeting, stand-up is a place where Warfield and other black comediennes crafted and embodied their ideal selves.

Warfield's parody of tongue-tied black women singers in the 1960s (and implicitly, the record labels for which they worked and crafted their public image) echoes the critique Michelle Wallace lodged at Black Nationalist groups, where the freedom of a "new blackness" was closed and limited to males. Wallace lamented the closely monitored boundaries of blackness during the Black Power struggle in her 1975 essay "Anger in Isolation," noting that "any sign of intelligence, boldness, aggressiveness, [or] independence," cast black women out of the fold of militant blackness.[46] Anger at perceived powerlessness, then, is a constitutive element of being a black woman, argues Wallace, marked by "frequent spells of impotent, self-consuming rage."[47] This anger must not be wasted, Audre Lorde would famously argue a few years later, because as she saw it, "focused with precision it [could] become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change."[48] In spite of the possibility of being narrowly cast as an "angry black woman," many African American women during the 1980s incarnation of black feminism responded to racism and silence, with anger.

Both Wallace and Lorde make an important point that distinguishes anger as a generative emotion and not merely an end itself. For Wallace, anger is self-revelatory, causing reflection and enabling her to envision the black feminist work she must carry out. Wallace's angry praxis reveals how one of the main tenets of (black) feminism plays out—the personal is political. For Lorde too, anger is a personal strength that enables women to talk about perceived differences—racial, sexual, and class-based— and bridge them to "define and fashion a world where all our sisters can grow, where our children can love."[49] Anger as a progressive personal and political emotion is manifested in a number of ways in *I Be Done Been Was Is.* We see it in the director's composition of the film as "tongues untied praxis." We also see that anger as more than a singular expression, but that "meaning collects in developing exchanges, allusions, asides, and silences. It is neither out here nor in here but between us."[50] Tongues untied praxis suggests that

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45 *I Be Done Been Was Is*.

46 Michelle Wallace, "Anger in Isolation : A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 225.

47 Ibid, 227.

48 Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Fall, 1981), 8.

49 Ibid, 10.

50 Paget, "Unlearning to Not Speak," 152.

for black women, the PSA was a stylistic convention about expanding the boundaries of blackness and womanhood, and for them, it was necessarily a political project.

Making Politics Funny: Post-Soul Style and Character Comedy

It is important to analyze the impact of the lives and art of black women, especially their struggles to define themselves and we must take care to do so in the context of the social conditions of their times, as Margaret Wilkerson reminds us, "because they are by definition and legacy political entities."[51] Until the 1960s and 1970s, politics was a man's field and when women like Shirley Chisholm stepped onto it into a position of public power and influence, to some extent, taking themselves out of the realm of respectable womanhood. The women's liberation movement was a moment when women engaged in politics were castigated as unfeminine, man-hating, and/or lesbians. For some black women in the black power movements, association with white feminist was risking being labeled as such. For this and other more complicated reasons, some black women refused to call themselves feminists or represent their work and lives "political," even if they believed in the fundamental equality of the sexes and/or were engaged in struggles for rights and resources. When Debra Robinson asked if her material was political, Marsha Warfield responded, "I try not to be political at all, as far as government...I try to hit a human cord."[52] For black women, who are routinely marginalized in America, the very act of humanizing and making their experiences universal is political.

Melissa Harris-Perry's definition of politics is useful for this discussion because even if black women comedians did not consider their comedy to be political as scholars and audience members might, as we listen to and watch the narratives unfold on stage, "it is our job to make politics out of it."[53] Harris-Perry sets out in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (2011) to frame the performance of the "strong black woman" archetype as a narrow definition and "shame management strategy,"[54] black women employ to combat historical misrecognition of their public image. "The struggle for recognition," argues Harris-Perry, "is the nexus of human identity and national identity, where much of the most important work of politics occurs. African American women fully embody this struggle."[55]

As black culture is mainstreamed in the 1970s and 80s, black women struggle against the commercialized representations of themselves as Sapphires, mammies, and "welfare queens," women who not only drive the fathers of their children away, but who also thrive on undeserved government aid. During the 1980s, some black women make politics funny by confronting and counteracting racial and sexual stereotypes through the stories their on stage characters tell. Confronting and redressing negative stereotypes about black women is a hallmark of both black feminist politics and BWCL in the 1980s. Those practices of redress also mark a distinctive way in which black women enact PSA.

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51 Margaret B. Wilkerson, "Excavating our History: The Importance of Biographies of Women of Color," *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring, 1990), 75.

52 *I Be Done Been Was Is*.

53 Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), 23.

54 Ibid, 29.

55 Ibid, 4.

I Be is a post-soul text and the comics in it are post-soul artist, transforming and transitioning from the soul era and aesthetics of Moms Mabley and LaWanda Page. Mabley looms large in the documentary, as comedian Rhonda Hansome reflects, "she is hovering around, she is our foundation."[56] After each comic performs an introductory joke, Moms Mabley's distinctive voice booms as that of a preacher and "I Be Done Been Was Is" rolls across the screen. We hear one of her classic bits about Southern racism:

> "I'm gonna praise the lord in the white man's church and I'm gonna swim in the white folks pool. I'm gonna vote, and vote for whoever I please. And I'll thumb my nose at the Klan and I double-dare 'em to come out from behind them sheets, and face me like a man. They don't scare me with their bum threats. I'll say what I *wanna* say and ain't a damn thing they can do about it! Cause I ain't goin' down there no way..."[57]

Soul was a trope of black identity borne out of the conditions of segregation and the ideology of white supremacy and a stylistic convention meant to counter racist notions of black inferiority by celebrating elements of black vernacular culture and traditions. Soul was attached to food, music, "brothers and sisters" as yardstick of black authenticity, "a type of primal spiritual energy and passionate joy available only to members of the exclusive racial confraternity."[58] It was a stylistic means of celebrating the beauty and uniqueness of blackness that in the 1960s became according to Neal, "interconnected with the marketplace and the consumerist desires of black and white audiences alike."[59] Moms Mabley is the quintessential soul era comedienne, using elements of black folk culture (most notably her thick Southern accent and frequent references to soul food) to connect with her audience and lodge incisive social critique. In the post-soul era, social and political critiques remain a staple of BWCL, yet the issues and comic aesthetics shift with the social conditions.

The post-soul condition—marked by desegregation, deindustrialization, and new ideas about what it meant to be black—required new ways of talking about politics that spoke to new manifestations of racism and sexism in the 1980s. Black women comedians' in the 80s framed their comedy about racism and sexual inequality in more ironic and sarcastic tones, often using characters to condense complicated political imperatives into tight, entertaining narratives. For post-soul comedians, performances were informed by a multiplicity of racial influences and were less reliant on narrow archetypes of black womanhood, like the asexual mammy or the bitchy jezebel, and comedic character work made it possible for black women to representationally distance themselves from those "controlling images."

Alice Arthur

Alice Arthur is tall and wiry thin, with long hair and bangs. Her nails are painted burgundy the character she portrays is a drunken older black woman holding a glass of wine unsteadily, as if she is a few drinks past tipsy. "I know what you're thinking," she stammers,

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56 *I Be Done Been Was Is*.
57 Ibid.
58 Neal, *Soul Babies*, 4.
59 Ibid, 7.

"you're probably saying, 'Look at [her]. She don't have no class.' I beg to differ witcha…Class is in the mind of the one who has it." Arthur's character rearticulates Pearl Bailey's statement at the beginning of this chapter that a poor woman "can be a queen in an alley." Arthur is the only one of the four comedians featured in *I Be Done Been Was Is* to attribute her career choice to something other than her personal choice. "I am a comedian," Arthur explains, "because the almighty God of this universe saw fit to allow me to come across the circumstances that put me in this position. I am thankful because I truly enjoy what I do, to the very depths of my soul."[60] Comedy is a personal and spiritual endeavor for Arthur; and, it is also political.

As Arthur sees it, her public performance is a representation of herself and of black women in general. "Whatever it is I do, whatever it is I say, whatever concepts I create, they must reflect the God-image in me…I believe that as I walk in this profession, I have to realize who I am." One of the ways Alice Arthur manages to realize herself through stand-up comedy is to redress stereotypical images of black women in the mainstream media. No longer confined to all-black audiences, black comediennes in the 80s have a unique forum in which to perform alternative representations of black womanhood. Arthur's critiques are direct:

> "I get so jealous when I see those commercials with ethnic stereotypes, right, because I want to do everything in commercials. Like, the white lady gets to sing opera: [In a perfect opera singing voice] "I'm going to Sara Lee." If it was a black lady, they'd go: [Snaps sassily, and flips her hair to the side] "Hit it mama!" She goes: [With a throaty, bluesy drawl] "I'm gonna Sara Lee love my husband, I'm gonna pound cake love my man!" Now, can you see this guy waking up in the morning? Uh, gee babe, I really liked the way you pound caked me last night."[61]

In her "Sara Lee" bit, Arthur enacts the politics of representation, calling into question the commercial images of black women's sexuality. Television commercials become ubiquitous in the middle of the 20th century and the selling of products should be universal, Arthur argues, but she notices that for some reason, the opportunity for universality is trumped by commercialized images of racial stereotypes. In particular, Arthur is concerned with the fact that black women are often represented to be incapable of mastering musical genres associated with technical expertise, such as opera; yet, Arthur's perfect soprano destabalizes that representation. The down-home, folksy blues singer is a traditional trope of black womanhood in popular culture and the "Sara Lee" piece attempts to both pay homage as Arthur accurately embodies it, while at the same time bringing to light the absurdity of the assumption that all black women think about is sex—so much so that even in a seemingly innocuous commercial selling pound cake, a scene is *invented* to conform to and perpetuate the entrenched stereotype of black women's frivolous hypersexuality.

All of Alice Arthur's material, she claims it "has elements that would reflect specifically, an experience that black women have had."[62] As a comedian, she creates meaning between herself and her audience by making her personal experience, in this case dealing with the misrecognition of racial stereotypes, funny and accessible. When she points out the absurdity of racial stereotypes, we can see one of the ways that sassiness transforms in the 80s. Arthur's

60 *I Be Done Been Was Is.*
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.

political commentary is cutting, but her non-threatening signification ensures a level of connection with her audience where she is more likely to be *heard*. As Hortense Spillers points out, signifying "enables the presence of an absence and registers the absence of a presence,"[63] enabling Arthur to moderate social critique. For comedians like Arthur, sass still implies the performative gestures of getting out of one's assumed place. But as racism took on new shapes and forms during the Reagan era, comedians employed a sassy humor that enabled them to get out of their *representational* places.

The Politics of Disgust

The most ubiquitous misrepresentation of black women in the 1980s was that of the "welfare queen," an idea that came into public parlance in the late 1970s, when at a New Hampshire campaign speech, presidential-candidate Ronald Reagan sensationalized a story about a woman on the South Side of Chicago who was arrested for welfare fraud. Reagan described the woman as one who "has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards and is collecting veteran's benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free income is over $150, 000."[64] Reagan simultaneously evoked popular images of welfare scammers while directly linking them to urban women of color. It was not simply Reagan's ideological misrepresentation of black women as "welfare queens" that enabled that trope of black womanhood to become entrenched, but also the media discourse that gave life to the representations.

For example, after Reagan's campaign speech in 1976, the *New York Times* ran at least two articles that fed on and perpetuated the idea of the "welfare queen," humiliating and punishing her with the headlines, "'Welfare Queen' Loses Her Cadillac Limousine," and "Chicago 'Relief Queen' Guilty." During the 1980s, Ange-Marie Hancock argues, the idea of the "welfare queen" comes to represent the public identity of all black women on public assistance, an image with deep political consequences for them. Hancock argues in *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (2004) that the public identity of the "welfare queen,"—the idea that welfare recipients are "all or mostly single mothers who are poor and African American," interacts with a term she identifies as the "politics of disgust," an "emotion-laden response" to embedded beliefs about the "welfare queen" stereotype that encompass all recipients of welfare programs— and produces "legislative outcomes that are undemocratic both procedurally and substantively."[65] The "welfare queen" archetype became a mainstay of black women's representation during the 1980s, despite the plethora of representational resources available to media outlets, because that public identity conjured centuries-old tropes of black womanhood—laziness, fecundity, and hypersexuality—*and* transformed them into a contemporary figure that was already "known," despised, and easily reproduced in popular culture.

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63 Spillers, "All the Things," 712.

64 "'Welfare Queen' Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign," *The New York Times* (Feb. 15, 1976), 51.

65 Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: NYU Press, 2004), 5.

In response to the ubiquity of the "welfare queen" discourse, some black comediennes can be read as combating and redressing the politics of disgust. For one, in their public performances the women featured in *I Be Done Been Was Is* performatively redress the politics of disgust by refocusing the lens through which they are viewed, essentially using their comic performances as a space to enact black womanhood that does not fit with "welfare queen" discourse. Alone on stage, the comedian is *independent* and must, by the nature of stand-up comedy, *work* to make her audience laugh, a counternarrative to notions of laziness. Stand-up comedy is a profession and art form dominated by white males. One of its the main elements is pushing boundaries, and at this point in the 80s, pushing boundaries is still not a quality encouraged in women. When black comediennes step on the stage, they have automatically pushed the boundaries of acceptable womanly behavior, and as Marsha Warfield lamented, "you've taken yourself out of the realm of desirable women."[66] To willingly extract oneself from the pool of available sexual partners can be understood as a coincidental redress to the stereotype of the over-sexed black woman. I am not implying that being undesirable to men is something black women strive for, or is good or bad, but I do want to make the point that the most important aspects of stand-up comedy—independence, intelligence, hard work, and universality—are the antithesis of the "welfare queen" trope of black womanhood, and black women comics performatively exploded that stereotype.

Debra Robinson was attracted initially to stand-up comedy, she remembers, because "it's a very naked art form. It's really the person turning themselves inside out and making it universal to people."[67] In this way, we can think about black women, performance, and nakedness in a new way. Rather than using *nudity* as a means to profit from their physicality, which underlies the idea of the "welfare queen" as a sexual object, black women stand-ups mobilized the nakedness of their personal experiences to lay claim to their humanity, in the process redressing dangerous images that threatened to flatten them into objectivity. As they step on the stage, black women comics unname themselves in terms of historical discourses of black womanhood, which L.H. Stallings argues, is a radical act of self-definition where black women can claim, "I'm not what you say I am."[68] Further, it is not always the literal *saying* at work in black women's unnaming practices, but as Alice Arthur and Marsha Warfield demonstrate, black womanhood is performative and is manifested in and through performance.

Unfortunately, not every person believed in the radical potential of stand-up comedy because it was such a new art form that black women were taking up professionally in the 1980s. Even some African American women, who entered the corporate world at unprecedented rates during that time, did not take stand-up seriously as a political or professional option for black women. *I Be* was broadcast by the PBS network, but funded through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). This is where Debra Robinson ran into problems making and distributing the film. "I could not get a national broadcast," Robinson remembered, "and oddly enough, it was a black woman who came to review it. When she came to review it, it was a bit about the blue [material], but also at that time…black people were considering themselves very corporate and professional. And these women [the comedians] did not seem like that to her. They were

66 *I Be Done Been Was Is*.
67 Debra J. Robinson.
68 Stallings, *Mutha' Is Half a Word*, 37.

talking from their hearts, and I think there was something in there that rubbed her the wrong way."[69]

The reviewer was perhaps what Nelson George would call a "buppy," who was simply responding the post-soul condition that enabled more opportunities for African Americans access to the middle and upper-classes. It could be argued that the woman was invoking a (neo)conservative politics of respectability, or, perhaps she was familiar with traditional tropes of black comedy and was attempting to use her newly acquired corporate and cultural cache to (police and) expand the boundaries of blackness in a fashion that she saw as progressive. Other women still, chose to confront the public identity of the "welfare queen" head on, by actually embodying the character, simultaneously giving life to it and destroying it in the process.

Saturday Night Live

Comedian Danitra Vance, the first black woman in the repertory cast of the iconic sketch-comedy show *Saturday Night Live* (1985-86), began performing stand-up based on her experience as a teacher of inner-city students, at the famous *Zanie's* comedy club in Chicago, IL. Vance became somewhat well-known for a recurring character on *SNL*, "Cabrini-Green Harlem Watts Jackson," a professional welfare mother who gave advice not only on how to avoid becoming a teenage parent, but if you had the misfortune to have become one, Cabrini-Green could also instruct you on becoming a "better one." Vance employs a problematic technique in African American comedy and within the framework of BCL of enacting stereotypes of race, calling attention to their absurdity, and thereby diffusing and/or destroying them in the process. The effectiveness of such a strategy is questionable, especially because breaking down stereotypes through comic parody relies on a particular facility with black culture in America, a type of literacy comedians on mainstream television shows cannot control. Taken the wrong way, this kind of character work could be understood as perpetuating, instead of destroying racial stereotypes. In fact, Vance quit *SNL* after only one season because she was unable to go beyond what she saw as stereotypical roles for black women.

In one of her last skits, Cabrini-Green Harlem Watts Jackson is brought to life. She is in the tenth grade, 17 years old with 2 children, and attending an alternative high school in Chicago. Vance's character is introduced to the assembly before her, clad in jeans, a 50s style letterman sweater embroidered with the name "Mike," wearing micro-braid pigtails and bangs. The stylistic elements of her costume represent the confluence of old and new imagery, the mechanism that makes the "welfare queen" idea intelligible. As she introduces herself, "Most of y'all know me, I'm Cabrini-Green Harlem Watts Jackson," Vance illustrates the ubiquity of the "welfare queen," always embodied by the urban, poor, young black woman. "I have two children, my son's name is Kwanzaa Uhuru Razack Jackson. And I have a little girl; her name is Taimei Tequila Watusi Jackson…anyway."[70] Cabrini-Green's naming practice reveals her immaturity, but at the same time parodies cultural nationalist names of the 1970s in which African Americans sought to celebrate the difference of blackness, yet sometimes, the names ended up being as problematic as those that were traditionally Western. Vance's performance technique of embodying a representation of a representation to distance herself from the

69 Debra J. Robinson.

70 *Saturday Night Live*, Season 11, Episode 17 (1986).

stereotype/character is a postmodern performance technique and invokes PSA. Postmodern comedic techniques, according to Glenda Carpio "flaunt their seams, thus bringing attention to the process of making fiction while commenting on the overt familiarity of the scenes they parody."[71]

Vance, as Cabrini-Green Jackson, performs a scene in which PSA and black feminist politics collide. Cabrini-Green speaks at the assembly at her high school as the "international spokesperson" for the new group she and her friends came up with after talking about their sexual experiences with boys, "S.T.O.P in the Name of Love." She unbuttons her sweater to reveal a baby-blue t-shirt with red capital letters reading "S.T.O.P," which stands for "single teenagers oppressed by pregnancy." Vance's satire mocks the *D.A. R.E.* (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program, a federally funded educational curriculum first enlisted in the 1980s as a strategy in the "War on Drugs." Cabrini-Green embarks on a fundraiser, promoting and selling "S.T.O.P" merchandise in the same way that *D.A.R.E* products were peddled in urban communities, drawing attention to teenage pregnancy as an urban problem on par with drugs and violence that deserved federal dollars. The teenage welfare mother becomes a black feminist activist fighting for reproductive rights and resources, and an ironic representation of a politically astute and responsible citizen. Ultimately, Cabrini-Green and her back-up singers, "The Melo White Boys," try to get members of the audience to join and support the group by teaching them the theme song, which in PSA fashion, parodies the synonymous Motown tune, "Stop in the Name of Love."

> "Sitting in the backseat, kissing on my neck. He tried to touch my bra, I let him for the heck. We were quickly reaching the point of no return. He said that he could teach me. I didn't wanna learn. I told him "No!" (Girl, what's wrong with you?) I told him "No!" (Now, this is somethin' new!) The teenage Casanova said that he's gonna cry, he kicked and screamed and pulled his hair and then he asked me "Why?" Why, why, why? Now, you girls know that when you're in a situation with a young man, and you've already gone more than half the way, and he wants to go ALL the way, you can't say no without a really good reason, because they have a name for girls like that. They tell all their friends, and you can never get a date again. Am I right? Now, all you girls about 12 or 13 years old can use the excuse that I use. "It's about the future, and the future of the future." It works. Just tell 'em what I told you. "I don't want a baby, it will drive me crazy. I'm just too lazy, to care for a baby. We do everything when we kiss and play, so there's really no need to go ALL the way. I'm not gonna buy a spermicide, a diaphragm, foam, or contraceptacide." If that don't work, then I'm a jerk. I told him "No, no, no, noooo!" I'm not wasting my allowance on the pill. It jumbles up my hormones and it makes me ill. I told him "No, no, noo!" There's no guarantee against pregnancy. Hey, I'm a product of an IUD. Say, girls, when you make a mistake, the accident will live with YOU. So if you love him, don't make him beg. Just don't let his little sperm near you little egg. Or. Tell. Him. No!"[72]

71 Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit To Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 106.

72 *SNL*.

While the skit parodies the image of the inner-city teenage mother who is irresponsible, its narrative humanizes the "welfare queen," bringing her to life and universalizing her experiences of adolescent sexual coming-of-age and the struggle to overcome the immature urges to have sex before one is ready for the responsibility it entails. Vance does not break down stereotypes by making the "welfare queen" into a representation so outrageous that it could not possibly be true. Conversely, Cabrini-Green Harlem Watts Jackson is a young woman grappling with distinctly American sexual and gender relations, confronted with the decision to either play the prescribed role of submissive and passive sexual object, or, be a sexual subject with the consciousness and autonomy to make the choice about what happens to her body.

Vance's character-based performance plays out the ways young girls are pressured into sexual activity by deeply entrenched gender expectations, so much so that when "you've already gone more than half the way…you can't say no without a really good reason, because they have a name for girls like that." Vance stakes a (black) feminist claim on women's sexualities, suggesting that some black women become pregnant so young not simply because they are promiscuous, lazy, and irresponsible, but because their sexual choices are circumscribed by traditional notions of sexual power, inadequate access to birth control, and the deeply held belief that young, urban black women who have babies are not people, but problems. Vance's black feminist politics are transparent as she conjures the "welfare queen" and enacts her humanity. The character of Cabrini-Green Jackson is distinctly an evocation of PSA; it is a "blaxploration" technique that uses humor to flip the script on traditional representations of black teenage mothers, allowing us to view them simultaneously as feminist activists and political advocates for reproductive rights. "Twice-behaved"[73] characters become a prominent technique of BWCL in the 1980s because in one person with vast expressive resources, they become cultural performances that enable complex conversations that expand ideas of black womanhood in popular culture.

"Breasts is Breasts": The Political Comedy of Jane Galvin-Lewis

Jane Galvin-Lewis adamantly and explicitly deals with American political culture in her performance comedy. Prior to performing as a comic, Galvin-Lewis was a lecturer and feminist activist alongside Gloria Steinem, travelling across Europe and the U.S. delivering talks on racism and sexism, "which is not funny," she said.[74] Technically, she is outside of post-soul because she did directly participate in the Civil Rights Movement, specifically as a member of the second set of Freedom Riders out of Boston. Her political activist resume is extraordinary. "I worked with the Women's Action Alliance," Galvin-Lewis recalled. "I worked with *MS* magazine, peripherally. I lectured with Gloria Steinem…I was her co-lecturer. I worked with the National Council of Negro Women. With Margaret Sloan, I founded the National Black Feminist Organization in 1976."[75] Essentially, Galvin-Lewis's political organizing was directly in the thick of some of the most pivotal activist work spanning the 1960s to the 80s, especially her

73 Richard Schechner describes performance as "twice-behaved behavior," having no original and "always subject to revision," and incapable of being repeated the same exact way twice. See Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia. University of Pennsylvania, 1985), 36-37.

74 *I Be Done Been Was Is*.

75 Jane Galvin-Lewis. Telephone interview with author, August 6, 2012. (Jane Galvin-Lewis.

work to link the struggles of black feminism and the women's movement in general.[76] As a lecturer, she had a particular academic audience, but her sense of humor created the opportunity to bring the political, social, and intellectual issues that were most important to her to a crowd that might not have otherwise had access or interest in listening.

"There was a club in New York called Snafu, and I knew the owner very, very well." Galvin-Lewis got her start doing performance comedy because the owner believed that "entertainment should always be educational."[77] Her start in comedy happened not because she was passionate about performing or humor, but by a confluence of circumstances that turned out to alter the way Galvin-Lewis staged and expressed her politics. "I was with a lecture bureau at the time. He [the owner of Snafu] called the lecture bureau to get a lecturer for his Sunday night session…they referred me…I said well, I don't really want to do a lecture if I'm gonna be in the club. I'd like to try some comedy. We set a date, I started rehearsing and trying to get a little act together, and I did a one-woman show there. And that was it, I was hooked." Galvin-Lewis is adamant that she is not a stand-up comic, but a performance comic who "build[s] the comedy into the character's personality."[78] Like Pearl Bailey, Galvin-Lewis insists on a more nuanced label than "comedian," to describe her comic craft. Both humorists exploited elements of BWCL "through storytelling, conscious manipulation of silence and speech, code/style shifting,"[79] and other comic techniques enabling them to artfully develop visions of their world.

Irony and satire are Galvin-Lewis's chief techniques because her sense of humor emerges from her analysis of society as paradoxical. She relishes "playing with paradoxes."[80] Independent filmmaker Ayoka Chenzira directed and produced a film about Galvin-Lewis' character work entitled *Sentry at the Gate: the Comedy of Jane Galvin-Lewis* (1996), showcasing six characters. The characters are motivated by her personal experiences and political opinions, but she is more comfortable expressing them through characters, not with the nakedness of stand-up.[81] As she puts it, when you perform as yourself "you're out there with your own face, your own clothes, and you have to stand behind that stuff."[82] The costuming of performance comedy allowed

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76 Kimberly Springer documents the emergence of black feminist organizations in *Living For the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). Springer interviews Galvin-Lewis about her experience as co-founder of the NBFO. Other texts that discuss Galvin-Lewis' role in the black feminist movement include Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America's Second Wave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1999); *Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1975*. Edited by Barbara J. Love (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Elaine Richardson, ""To Protect and Serve'," 680.

80 Ibid.

81 Simply defined, stand-up comedy is the act of standing (or sitting) on stage before an audience and telling jokes to elicit laughter. There are many approaches to stand-up comedy, from the purist form described above, to comic monologues, one-person shows, etc. Stand-ups generally employ a comic persona that is their avowed "real" self, or an elevated version of their own personalities and mannerisms, while others use props, costume, and voices to embody characters whose humor comes from the stories they tell. For a formal definition of a stand-up comic see Lawrence E. Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Spring, 1985), 71-80.

82 Ayoka Chenzira, director. *Sentry at The Gate: The Comedy of Jane Galvin-Lewis*, Red Azalea Films, 1996.

Galvin-Lewis to "hide," and when she first started working in clubs, her two most controversial characters, Wilhelmina Brown, an older, toothless black woman who is the "sentry at the gate, watching out for blackness," and Lionel Tilden, a Vietnam vet with a "PhD in poverty, hunger, and deprivation," were in Galvin-Lewis' opinion, "a little bit out there for people."[83]

Wilhelmina (Willie) Brown was Galvin-Lewis' first character, a woman who is the connecting point for all other characters in *Sentry*, and "everybody knows [Willie]...Every black community has a woman who sits in the window and watches over everything. And minds everybody's business, and has an opinion about everything." Willie is a sage old woman who delivers observations on political and cultural issues that mostly affect black people. She touches on everything from diet fads, contemporary sexuality, and the commoditization of blackness. Willie's main comic technique is irony, as Galvin-Lewis illuminates, "Wilhelmina is not lettered, she doesn't speak so well but she is extremely bright. She is very bold, very daring."[84] Willie recalls the character of Grace Tisdale Grimes of *Amazing Grace*, both women whose vernacular speech belies their wisdom and who, perhaps, wear the mask of ignorance to accomplish political imperatives under the radar. In the case of Willie, her malapropisms and drunken diction allow the audience to laugh at her follies while she slips in important messages. In essence, Willie talks politics with her audience without it coming off as a lecture.

Willie delivers the headlining monologue at the end of *Sentry*, punctuating her performance with an incisive critique of the consumption of blackness by white people, which, while not a new phenomenon, manifested in disturbing ways during the 1980s. Willie's large bosom is buttoned into a red and orange crocheted sweater, her wig is blondish-gray and matted, and her earrings dangle with her enthusiastic rant:

> I can't get my hand on white people. I tried time and time again. Let me tell you. They will not let us be black in peace. Will NOT let us be black in peace. But they will turn around, lay out in the sun, get blacker than we are, and brag about it. And make money off it. They got more suntan oils and lotions and creams down the drugstore for sale. They got the under-tan, the pre-tan, the post-tan, the over-tan, and the suntan lotion. Talkin' bout, "Oh, I'm getting tan!" They got these tanitoriums, see. Black people only know about sanitoriums. But see, white people got tanitoriums, where they go in there and they pay their money, lay down in the box and they lay in there and they say "Oh, I'm getting tan!" And they come out saying "I'm darker than you." I went down there, they got one by my house, it's called "Tan-fastic," so I went in there, and I said to em, "I'm tan, why don't you let me advertise for you." Now, they told me no. I can't get my hand on this. They told me, they said, "You, is not dark enough to be white with a tan." It's alright to be black...if you are really white. But it's not alright to just go on and be black and be any old color that you is. And they won't let us have nothing to ourselves.[85]

Galvin-Lewis condenses a complicated narrative about racial politics into one short, tight performance piece. Through Willie, Galvin-Lewis is able to uncover the paradoxical nature of white people's desire to cultivate in themselves the same physical qualities for which they

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83 Jane Galvin-Lewis.
84 Ibid.
85 *Sentry At the Gate*.

denigrate black people. In the 1980s black women comedians increasingly used comic characters to start conversations about how the physicality of blackness had been abased. Whoopi Goldberg emerged in the mid-80s as a master at comedic character work when her one-woman show *Whoopi Goldberg: Live on Broadway* (1985) swept the nation with its insightful, disturbing commentary on American cultural politics. In particular, the piece "Little Girl" featured a nine-year-old black girl who bathed in bleach and pretended that a white piece of cloth was her blond hair so she could be on the TV show *The Love Boat*. Galvin-Lewis made the link between Goldberg's little girl and Pecola Breedlove, the tragic black little girl of Toni Morrison's 1970 novel who wished for blue eyes.[86] The two narratives, separated by a generation, were intimately connected Galvin-Lewis insists, "a lot was happening in the 80s. We were having the aftermath of the 70s."[87] "When I get big," Goldberg's little girl insists, "I'm gonna have blond hair, blue eyes, and I'm gonna be white. I told my mother I don't wanna be black no more."[88] Goldberg performs an intertextual and multi-generational reading of Morrison's literary rumination on the hegemony of white standards of beauty and its insidious affects on black girls' mental health. Goldberg's signification on the character Pecola Breedlove suggests the desire to foreground and overcome issues of self-hatred remains a trope of black women's lives in the 1980s, engaging a tragi-comic narrative that elucidates its continuing gravity.

"There was so much happening that was of such a serious nature that people began to express it through a character," and performance comedy allowed Galvin-Lewis, a seasoned lecturer, to express political imperatives in short, provocative pieces. Willie's commentary on racial politics, while it comes off as a quasi-lecture, is different because "Even though Jane is motivating her and Jane is putting her out there, Jane is not out there. They [the audience] are not looking at me, they're looking at her." Jane Galvin-Lewis is a black feminist political activist who wants to move her audience think critically about race and blackness, and Willie's humor is a space where people go to "have fun," and provides an opportunity for Galvin-Lewis to point out the absurdity of racism without delivering a long, academic lecture that might be so inaccessible and boring that the audience does not hear the message. And for her, "the message is what's most important."[89]

Lionel Tilden is a character who "graduated from Harlem," and for him, "that's the same thing as graduating from Harvard. It's expensive. But you get an education."[90] Lionel plays the role of the organic intellectual, the ghetto philosopher who stands on his corner soapbox and delivers social and political commentary. The character of Lionel is nothing new—he evokes images of Richard Pryor's junkie character "Mudbone" and Whoopi Goldberg's "Fontaine," a drug addicted PhD in English. However, Galvin-Lewis elevates Lionel by imparting a sense of feminist politics in his character. Performing the "other" is an American comic technique, most associated with minstrelsy and male-to-female cross-dressing a lá Flip Wilson's famous character "Geraldine," but this comic technique is not usually employed by women comedians because laughter is usually evoked in the topsy-turvydom of those in power being degraded, not vice versa. Comics like Goldberg and Galvin-Lewis were audacious to embody men, and Galvin-Lewis even more so, because her black male character expressed feminist politics during a time

86 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).
87 Jane Galvin-Lewis.
88 Whoopi Goldberg, *Live on Broadway*. Geffen Records,1985.
89 Ibid.
90 *Sentry At the Gate*.

when most men, especially black men, castigated black feminists for what they saw as reinforcing negative stereotypes of black men in literature and film.[91]

Lionel wears a military style jacket with several decorations, a tie, dark sunglasses, and a leather beret style hat. His clothes are evocative of the Black Panther Party uniforms of the 1970s and he carries a cassette radio through an ally, speaking his gospel. Although he claims his "specialty is race relations," what jumps out most about his commentary is the conversations he has about women. In this sense, Galvin-Lewis' performance falls within the PSA because as Lionel, there is no presupposition that black masculinity rules out feminist politics. Through Lionel, she explores the possibility of black male participation in feminist politics in a number of interesting ways. As she performs black maleness without veiling the femininity of her large breasts, she plays with the contours of black masculinity, critically destabilizing it.

Lionel's feminist critiques direct:

> I'm going to court and I'm representing myself. I got a couple of truth in advertising cases coming up. I was home one day watching television. They had this car on there. There was advertising this car, I call 'em up, I said, I want that car. I said is the car ready? They said yeah. I said is the heat working? They said yeah. I said are the windshield wipers working? They said yeah. I said is the *woman* there? They said, what woman? I said every time you advertise this car on the television or at the car show they got a woman sitting on the hood or behind the wheel. I thought she was an accessory, she don't come with the car?[92]

Galvin-Lewis uses satire to get at the commoditization of women's sexuality. Lionel subtly points out how capitalism can lead to women literally becoming property, and how the images of them as accessories to men become real expectations with real effects on women's lives. Lionel's character is real, yet absurd. For instance, his narrative about his relationship failures conjures actual conflicts in black communities about the role of the sexes. "You can't make a black woman mind," Lionel complains, "she ain't gon' do what you tell her to. I went off, I fought for my country, my woman should mind me. And then she be asking you hard questions, like, Where's the rent? Did you pay the phone bill?"[93] Galvin-Lewis initiates a critical dialogue about black manhood, using Lionel as a conduit through which we can question gender politics in everyday life.

Lionel's most cutting feminist critique comes when he discusses the racial politics of images of female nudity. "You get in the movies and you see black or brown breasts, and the movie is R-rated. You see white women's breasts, and the movie is X-rated. See, that's because on the Discovery Channel and all that, channel 13…see, black and brown breasts is educational. White breasts is provocative. I'm here to tell you, cause I know. Breasts is breasts."[94] Galvin-Lewis was a seasoned lecturer on feminist politics, and that labor was not only difficult because of the nature of the work, but it's not hard to imagine to psychological and physical toll feminist

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91 Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982) and Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975) are two of the most iconic literary works that earned the scorn and derision of some black male intellectuals.

92 *Sentry At the Gate*.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

consciousness could take on a person. Character-based performance comedy was an outlet that enabled black women with the weight of feminist consciousness to have a creative release while delivering powerful political messages. In Lionel, the possibility of a black man with feminist consciousness was offered, which has the stamp of PSA.

Galvin-Lewis alluded to humor as her way of decompressing when she recalled a conversation she had with Margaret Sloan, with whom she founded the NBFO. "Margaret said girl, you gotta get Richard Pryor's new album…she said you need to put all that stuff down…you can fool around and let consciousness ruin your life! And she was so right. Just put all that away and have a good laugh."[95] Ultimately, for Galvin-Lewis, "feminism has always been about choice," and further, "what we need to do is develop our full potential." For post-soul black women artists, that imperative to have unencumbered choices was an integral part of the PSA. Lisa Jones was a member of a black feminist theater collective in the 1980s, and for her, theater was a space of rebellion and relief. "Our need was to get out in public and act up; to toss off the expectations laid by our genitals, our melanin count, and our college degrees."[96] In short, the 1980s saw not only new expressions of blackness in performance and art, but the contours of womanhood and sexuality were also thrown into flux. Black women comics made the political (which was also deeply personal) funny.

Thea Vidale

Performance comedy was the route through which black comediennes made their way to the mainstream (Goldberg and Vance), but there were a handful of black women comics in the 80s who did purely stand-up work. Marsha Warfield was a pure stand-up who conjured Dick Gregory on stage. She smoked cigarettes and stood still while she wryly delivered her jokes. In fact, Debra Robinson remarked that Warfield was "different" than the other comediennes in *I Be*. "Marsha, you knew she was a woman," Robinson explained, "but you didn't think that. You could put her next to any man, there was something about the way she worked her material."[97] Warfield was an entertainer but she was not theatrical. Stallings sums Warfield's image up as gender-neutral, "wearing pants, a natural afro, and a less-than-soft demeanor coupled with a polished and made-up face. She conveys soft butch."[98] Her stage presence was that of a stand-up comic without a schtick, but with a set of personal experiences she wished to share with her audience to "strike a human cord."[99] Warfield's purist stand-up comedy led to her role on the NBC sticom *Night Court* (1986-1992) as Roz Russell, a tough-faced bailiff with a dry sense of humor.

Like Warfield, Thea Vidale was also a purist stand-up comic who would eventually convert her stage persona to a television character. The show *Thea*, which ran for one season on ABC (1993-1994) was the first sitcom on a major network to feature a black woman with her own name, and was based on Vidale's philosophy of parenting.[100] I will conclude this chapter with an interview with Thea Vidale, whose life and comic work exemplifies some of the most

95 Jane Galvin-Lewis.
96 Jones, *Bulletproof Diva*, 126.
97 Debra J. Robinson.
98 Stallings, *Mutha' is Half a Word*, 134.
99 *I Be Done Been Was Is*.
100 Thea Vidale. Personal interview. Los Angeles, CA. 29 April 2012. (Thea Vidale).

salient features of what being a post-soul comedienne in the 1980s meant. In April of 2012, Vidale lectured and headlined at the first annual Females in Comedy Association (FICA) Convention in Los Angeles. For four nights in a row, Vidale performed two hour-long sold out shows. To conclude, I will turn to our interview, which was conducted on convention's last day.

Thea Vidale has been touring nationally and internationally as a stand-up for the better part of 28 years, since 1984. I take the elevator to her room, nervous that I am about to have a conversation with one of the longest performing black women comedians who are still alive. She has made her hotel room at the Four Points Sheraton in Los Angeles, CA comfortable as only a person accustomed to long stays on the road can. Her panties are hung up to dry in the bathroom and it smells like she's been smoking. "Sometimes there's nothing better than smoking a joint and washing your panties out in the sink," she offers, "It's the simple things."[101] Clad in a nightgown and slippers, Vidale greets me warmly and invites me into her sanctuary. The giant king size bed makes the dimly lit room seem cavernous. I remove my shoes and I am invited to join her on the bed and share the fragrant, and generously portioned Chinese food. Thea's glasses sit just on top of her nose, giving her the air of a sage. She serves us food with measured and comfortable movements, and I can't help but watch her. I become more comfortable after she revealed that she, like me, grew up in a Podunk town in Texas.

"I've been silly all my life," she told me, but it was actually white people who introduced Vidale to stand-up. "Some rednecks took me to a comedy club. They said I shouldn't be where I am, I should be making people laugh."[102] There were very few "black rooms" back in the 1980s where black stand-ups could showcase their talent to black audiences, so most worked white or mixed rooms. Galvin-Lewis made this same point in *I Be Done Been Was Is*, she recalled, "I've never had an all-black house."[103] Because there were no guaranteed black audiences at the time, Thea developed her act in white clubs, alongside mostly white comics and audiences. "My goal," she said, "was to work the white rooms because that's all there was." In that integrated, yet isolated environment, Vidale was forced into the position of a "cultural mulatto," a black woman "educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures,"[104] who developed and honed her expressive repertoire to communicate with white audience members not necessarily equipped to read her sense of humor. "You know what, it was a battlefield. You bust your ass, and people will move the goal post. It was hard to be made headliner."[105]

Eventually, Vidale did become a headlining act at "hotels, bars, anywhere I could get up. And they paid me, so that made it better." Even though she struggled with some of the same issues other women comics faced, like being taken advantage of by booking agents and promoters, Vidale was able, in the space of the "white room," to craft her act in ways that distanced her, before the eyes and consciousness of her white audiences, from negative images of black womanhood, which I believe was a strategy for succeeding in a mostly white profession. One thing she learned was that "you don't have to holler to get your point across."[106] On stage at the FICA convention, Vidale sat in a chair, approaching her audience not from above, but almost on their level. She rarely raised her voice, and almost never moved beyond gesturing with her hands for emphasis. Vidale's strategy of stillness and non-theatricality, and I believe the same is

101 Thea Vidale.
102 Ibid.
103 *I Be Done Been Was Is*.
104 Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," 235.
105 Thea Vidale.
106 Ibid.

true of Marsha Warfield, were acts of "gender passing," which Signithia Fordham argues black women in the academy employ in order to "be taken seriously," thereby increasing their chances of academic success.[107]

In the early 80s Fordham conducted a long-term anthropological study in a public high school in Washington D.C. to analyze "the impact of gender diversity on school achievement."[108] Her culminating essay, "'Those Loud Black Girls': Black Women, Silence, and Gender 'Passing' in the Academy," (1993) argues that black women's academic success relies on them being inculcated with a particular kind of knowledge that prepares them to thrive in a spaces organized by and for males, and craft their identities "in such a way that the resulting persona makes the female appear not to be female."[109] I am not arguing that Vidale intentionally played down her womanhood, but that her quiet and still stage presence can be read as "an act of defiance, a refusal on the part of high-achieving females to consume the image of 'nothingness'."[110] There were very few black women comics in the 80s, comparatively speaking, and in her performance, Thea worked hard to avoid being pigeonholed and forced into a ready-made mold. "Men bookers think all black women comics are angry, fussy, bussy, busy, brassy. Some of us are not like that. Some of us are quiet and still. Some of us are uplifting and Christian. Some of us are gay. Some of us are straight. Some of us are diff-er-ent. But the people that's making the choices, they label us. And you can't label a whole group of people."[111]

It takes "lip and nerve," as Lisa Jones puts it, to expose your emotions the way stand-up sometime requires, and it is remarkable that Vidale was able to express her emotions and opinions to a group of people who were radically different from her (white rednecks) and create a communal space between them. Even though as she insists "Shit ain't changed—white people are the same as they've always been: sneaky, dirty, and covetous," through humor, the lines of communication and mutual understanding remain open. "All these different races and genders, they're laughing and it's us being of one mind. And it's a beautiful, erotic thing."[112]

For almost an hour Vidale shares with me what it was like to feel alienated and lonely as a black woman comic in the 80s. A melancholy mood is draped around the hotel room and she speaks with a sedate cadence. Two weeks ago Vidale lost her mother and she has recently spent a lot of time reflecting on her life. "I talk about what I see," she tells me about how she develops her material, "about my life. About being a battered woman. About my four kids. Just telling them how I feel." Not only has stand-up comedy sustained Vidale and her family financially, it is an emotional salvation for her. "This is my saving grace," she says, sipping a cup of soup. "When I'm sad and feel lonely, and I get up on that stage, it's like God saying, "Go head on girl, I'm here. You can never know, some days it gets so lonely on the road. But when you get on that stage and people bust out laughing, it's an amazing feeling."[113]

Vidale's comedy career has come full circle, in a sense. She started off as a road warrior, made a detour to do television and a USO tour in Kosovo, and continues to headline shows all over the nation. Compared to the 80s when her career began, there is an abundance of black

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107 Signithia Fordham, "'Those Loud Black Girls': (Black) Women, Silence, and Gender 'passing' in the Academy," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Mar., 1993).
108 Ibid, 3.
109 Ibid, 4.
110 Ibid, 10.
111 Thea Vidale.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.

comediennes, and that makes Vidale "feel nice, but it's weird. Cause for so many years it was just us five: Marsha Warfield, Shirley Hemphill, Just June, Simply Marvelous, and me." There were obviously more African American women performing comedy, but they were few and far between that they easily missed each other. Vidale remembered how fun it was to see other black comedienne road warriors, "when black women comics would see each other, we would just be so glad to see each other."[114]

During the 1990s, black women comics emerged in greater numbers than ever before, due in part to the changing social and cultural conditions in which women gained greater access to male-dominated institutions, and most importantly, a market and audience for black stand-up comedy developed in the 1980s and created more opportunities for black women to showcase their talent. In Los Angeles, a businessman named Michael Williams opened the *Comedy Act Theater* (CAT), which ushered in a new era of black stand-up comedy. In Chicago, Mary Lindsey opened another black comedy club, *All Jokes Aside*, which Vidale described as "terrifically run and it was successful like a business. The audience was trained. The show started at 8 o'clock, have your ass there at 8 o'clock. Don't be late cause Mary was the barbarian at the gate! "[115] Both iconic clubs made way for two of the most successful comedy showcase television shows on which a generation of black women stand-ups became visible. In the next chapter I will explore the black women's comedy on Russell Simmons' *Def Comedy Jam* and BET's *Comic View*.

114 Ibid.
115 Ibid.

Chapter 4
HARDCORE: Aesthetics of Abjection in Black Women's Stand-Up Comedy During the 1990s

"To become a woman in power, you have to be hardcore."—Luenell[1]

Introduction

In the previous chapters I explored how black women comics such as LaWanda Page narrativize the sensuality of their bodies as a means of redressing sexual repression and oppression, and how shifting ideals of freedom from collective to individual played out in the early 1980s in black women's comedy. I made the case that black women comics of the 80s were post-soul aestheticians who explored and pushed the boundaries of race, class, and gender norms by using both traditional stand-up techniques and character-based comedy. I also argued that they employed gender-passing techniques, such as stillness and non-theatricality in their performances to distance themselves of denigrating stereotypes of black womanhood.

In this chapter I will analyze the performances of black women who emerged during the black stand-up comedy boom of the 1990s to think through their use of the stage to explore and transform their abjection, and the unique knowledge and consciousness gleaned from it. Their performances, combined with interviews that shed light on their political acumen, unmask the social bonds of laughter that characterizes BWCL during the 1990s. If stand-up comedy is "what you do with your abjection,"[2] as John Limon speculates, black comediennes are escape artists, tricksters who use imagination, guile, and the experiences of everyday life to repudiate their abject, marginalized experiences. Essentially, black women working the stage demonstrate the centrality of abjection in the aesthetics of their stand-up comedy.

The questions that animate this chapter are: what happens when stand-up comedy becomes a viable career opportunity for more than just a handful of black women? How does the emergence and mainstreaming of hardcore hip-hop culture and the hardcore pornography industries shape urban comedic performances? Finally, how do black women, as marginalized citizens and cultural producers, navigate the personal, political, and economic imperatives of this nascent form of artistic expression? More specifically, I want to explore how black women comics draw on the very experiences and practices stereotypically portrayed by the mass media. That is, how do they exploit the racist notion of black women as hypersexual "Others" in their routines? Indeed, their self-making practices and modes of articulating their sexual politics are in dialogue with the cultural landscape of the 1990s.

The idea that black women are mired in "controlling images" has gained so much currency in black feminist discourse that it has become almost obligatory to theorize black women's popular cultural practices through that lens. In fact, theories that help us talk about black women's continued devaluation and the structural inequalities that constrain their life choices are germane, especially in light of what Patricia Hill Collins calls the new racism of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In *Black Sexual Politics* (2004), Hill Collins explores the contours of black sexual politics and their role in the perpetuation of the new racism, arguing, "the mass media has generated class-specific images of Black women that help justify and shape

1 Luenell. Personal interview. Fairfield, CA. 18 August 2011 (Luenell).
2 Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory,* 8.

the new racism of desegregated, colorblind America."[3] To this end, she examines the transformation of the "controlling images" of black femininity, theorizing representations of the "bad bitch," "black lady," and the "bad black mother," archetypes that shifted in the contemporary American context from historical ideas of black women as mammies and "welfare queens," to justify racial inequality. There has been significant pushback of the controlling image rhetoric by scholars of black sexuality. These writers are attempting to redefine the terms in which black sexual practices and politics are understood, particularly regarding desire and pleasure.

L.H. Stallings, for example, calls for a new politics of black women's sexuality that embraces sexual desire "as the context for rebellion from the beginning, as opposed to its presence as an afterthought."[4]Furthermore, Mireille Miller-Young explores black sexuality in hardcore pornography that transgress the boundaries of "proper" black sexual practices, arguing that "black women in hard-core engage in the illicit erotics of sexual economy. Through illicit eroticism they mobilize deviant, outlaw racialized sexuality as vehicles of consumption and labor as well as of contestation and consent."[5] Considering the potential of black women comics to mobilize illicit erotic economies, and what I see as aesthetics of abjection, they complicate the binary debate about explicit sexual representations as *either* radical feminist practice, *or* complicit in the creation and perpetuation of controlling images.

John Limon (2000) offers a solid theory of stand-up comedy as abjection. For him, abjection is always a way of acting; when one feels abject, he argues, there is some skin that cannot be shed, "as if there is some role that has become your only character."[6] In this sense, the processes and conditions of marginalization manifest as abjection for comics, "a psychic worrying of those aspects of oneself that one cannot get rid of, that seem, but are not quite, alienable."[7] For stand-ups who struggle to escape the conditions of their lives, they can enact abjection on the stage.[8] "What is stood up in stand-up-comedy is abjection,"[9] and in this chapter we will see how in the 1990s, black women comics work to stand up their abjection by linking private (and illicit) sexual pleasure with the pleasure of public laughter. Performing marginality is doubly empowering for women comics, Joanne Gilbert argues, "first by foregrounding difference, and second by commodifying and ultimately profiting from that difference. In this way, social stigma may function as a rhetorical means to a political end."[10] Aesthetic and political choices are rendered through their performance to redress gender, racial, sexual, and cultural marginalization.

I begin the chapter with a sketch of the social and cultural landscape upon which contemporary black stand-up comedy arose in the mid-1980s in Los Angeles, from the perspective of Michael Williams. As an enterprising young concert promoter, Williams started the *Comedy Act Theater* in 1985, the first all-black comedy club in the world from which many

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3 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 147.
4 Stallings, *Mutha is Half a Word*, 3.
5 Mireille Miller-Young, "Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, and Transnationalism*. Vol. 8, No. 1, 2007, 280.
6 Limon, *Stand-Up Comedy In Theory*, 4.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid, 6.
9 Ibid, 4.
10 Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*, 165.

comics who would gain popularity in the 1990s got their start. I then lay out some of the theoretical language about disgust, abjection, and marginality which structures my analysis before shifting to a thematic discussion based on interviews and performance analysis of elements of BWCL during the 1990s. The interlocking themes covered in this discussion are the pleasure of sexual disclosure as pointed political and aesthetic conventions in the comics' routines. The performance of the "bad girl" persona and the cultivation of urban working-class respectability, along with humor as a performance technique that troubles (black) feminist politics allows multiple ways of reading performances of black womanhood.

The Social and Cultural Context of the Rise of the Black Comedy Audience

By 1985 more than a handful of black women comics like Thea Vidale, Jane Galvin-Lewis, Marsha Warfield, and Shirley Hemphill performed before mixed or exclusively white audiences across the nation. The exclusively black comedy audience had yet to emerge. Popular acts like Richard Pryor, Redd Foxx, Moms Mabley, and Slappy White recorded their performances on records, typically enjoyed at parties as novelty adult entertainment. That same year, a concert promoter turned non-profit fundraiser, Michael Williams, ignited a chain of events that would change the course of American popular culture. I met Williams at the FICA convention Los Angeles, CA in 2012. Along with about 70 other women, I performed a five-minute stand-up showcase at the *J Spot* comedy club in Inglewood, CA. This was my first experience performing in an actual comedy club, as opposed to an open-mic night at a bar. I noticed Williams seated in the first row as my turn on stage came up because he was sitting with two of the most famous contemporary black women comics, Miss Laura Hayes and Luenell.

From a table away I surreptitiously glanced to the corner where the three of them sat, nervously gauging their laughter during other women's routines and prayed that I could make them, or anyone, laugh. Shaking and profusely sweating, I mounted the stage and started my routine, struggling through the details of my jokes. I made a joke about my menstrual period and heard Luenell's distinctive, deep laughter from the front row. Although the five-minute set felt like five hours, I was ecstatic that I had pulled off my first stand-up performance and got a laugh from an actual comic. As I stepped off the stage Williams was the first person I saw, he grabbed my hand to shake it and looked me in the eye "That was great! I really enjoyed that. Let's talk later." You could have bought me for a nickel.

During the course of my research I had read about Williams but I had no idea that this was the man in the flesh until later that night when he introduced himself. We chatted late into the night and I told him I was only a researcher working on my dissertation on black women's stand-up and not a "real" comic. Williams generously offered stories about his life as a producer of black stand-up comedy shows and the history of the contemporary genre itself, a trajectory that in some ways began with him, at another comedy club in Los Angeles 27 years earlier.

Williams got his start working as an apprentice under Quincy Jones' manager in the 1970s, doing every job from fetching coffee to making copies, becoming a master networker by learning the ropes of the Hollywood entertainment industry from a behind-the-scenes perspective. Eventually, he began promoting concerts and parties, and ended up as a fundraiser for a group of non-profit organizations. But Williams had bigger dreams:

> "After being somewhat disenchanted with how my career was going...I had just never, it just never seemed like I could advance. You know, and so I was determined that the next time I helped raise some money, it was gonna be my money. So, I decided one day to go to the comedy club just so I could cheer my spirits, because I knew that that was one way of alleviating my temporary state of being you know, somewhat depressed and confused about how do I get started all over again?"[11]

After sitting through a comedy show with all white comics that for him was "dull and boring, I was like damn, I want my money back." As Williams got up to leave, a black comic came on stage. Much to his dismay, the black comic was similarly dull, but at the end of the act the comic donned a preacher's robe and performed the end of his routine as a Baptist preacher. "Finally, something I could relate to," Williams remembered. "Then," he thought, "it would be better if this was all black. And that's when the light went off. We need it. Right then and there. I said yeah, this could be great!"[12] This moment seems mundane, but it sparked a shift in contemporary black expressive culture.

> "The white clubs had a formula that they kind of adhered to. It was always somewhat kind of corny because they [black comics] couldn't be themselves. They couldn't be too black. They had to tone some things down. In a way, they were cookie cutter type of comics. All predictable...and uh, so I guess when I saw these individuals they were always at a place like the little clubs and/or they had the opportunity to be the warm up for the...let's say a concert, or, in between acts, they would just throw a comedian up there. But it was never, they were never the focal point. They were never the entity that was taken seriously."[13]

From his years working with Quincy Jones' manager[14] and as a concert promoter, Williams had laid a large social network from the local black media in Los Angeles to nationwide outlets for black news and politics. He would draw heavily upon this group as he embarked on realizing his dream of starting the first all-black comedy club and cultivating a black comedy audience. Williams rented out a venue for a black comedy night and put an ad in *Variety*, an entertainment industry trade magazine that read: "Black comedians wanted for a show," and 16 people responded, 7 of them women.[15] The first night, 300 people showed up for a venue that could only seat 155. "I packed in as many people as possible, which made the room kind of intense...That particular night I saw magic, and I saw something that was about to explode and change the whole landscape of not just black entertainment, but entertainment overall."[16]

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11 Michael Williams. Telephone interview. 16 October 2012 (Michael Williams).
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Williams never referred to Jones's manager by name, but talked about meeting him at a film festival at a cultural center in Los Angeles, CA in 1977.
15 Williams recalled the text of his Variety advertisement in 1985, but it could not be located in the online archive, http://www.varietyultimate.com.
16 Michael Williams.

Over the next few years, Williams produced the talent and managed the business of the *Comedy Act Theater* (CAT), which would become the premier venue for black comedy in Los Angeles. Because stand-up was a nascent genre for black expression, Williams brought in almost anyone who had the guts to go onstage, "somebody's uncle, somebody's cousin, somebody's brother, somebody's sister. Somebody who's friends would say, you're funnier than these people, you need to come on out to this club that's happening for black folks...You make us laugh at work, or, you make us laugh at school, or church. You need to come on and try it. Those were the ones who were doing it."[17] The urban comics of CAT packed in audiences week after week, and other venues arose around the country to accommodate the new trend, such Mary Lindsey's *All Jokes Aside* club in Chicago. Some of the most talented comedians of the late twentieth century were groomed at the CAT, namely Robin Harris, Sinbad, and the Wayans brothers. Eventually around 1987, Williams recorded a pilot all-black sketch comedy show and pitched it to Black Entertainment Television (BET), but they claimed that there was no market for black comedy. Yet, the CAT flourished with what Williams called "real black" comics, "we were so-called culturally rich, we weren't diluted. We were relating our stories, our pain as pure and real as they had been for generations. And so it was now an opportunity for our voice to be heard and expressed."[18]

Around that same time, hip-hop culture was being nurtured in America's urban centers with an appetite for "authentic" expressions of black culture. John L. Jackson Jr. argues that authenticity is a fundamental trope of hip-hop expression. "In hip-hop, realness is the most valuable form of cultural capital; its mandates frame most internal debates. For hip-hop artists, realness is always at stake, even in seemingly innocent contexts."[19] Tricia Rose points out the deification of personal experience in early hip-hop, noting that "from the outset, rap music has articulated the pleasures and problems of black urban life in contemporary America. Rappers speak with the voice of personal experience, taking on the identity of the observer or narrator."[20] Media representations of black life in hip-hop videos often relied on narrow imagery that came to be "considered a rendition of performative blackness with everyday urban struggles against marginalization."[21]

Some hailed rap music as a fad, and others as the next phase of urban black genius. Part of what came to constitute "realness" was the barrage of mass media images of urban black youth engaging in titillating, yet dangerous anti-establishment practices like violence associated with street culture, hypersexuality, and excessive materialism.[22] As Rose notes regarding 1990s hip-hop, "nothing is more central to rap music video narratives than situating the rapper in his or

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17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 John L. Jackson Jr., *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 176.

20 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover & London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 2.

21 Jackson, *Real Black*, 177.

22 For a fuller conversation about how the market influenced hip-hop to cater to broad audiences see Mark Anthony Neal, "Critical Noire: Like Water For Chocolate: Common's Recipe for Progressive Hip Hop," *Pop Matters*, 5 May 2000, 7; and *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998). Imani Perry discusses the link between black consumerist impulses and hip-hop culture in *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip-Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), especially chapter 7, "Bling Bling…and Going Pop: Consumerism and Co-optation in Hip-Hop," 191-203.

her milieu and among one's crew or posse."[23] At issue was not whether or not these images were "true" depictions of black life, but the fact they were distributed so widely without the mitigating effects of counter-representations depicting other ways of being black in America. "The return of the ghetto as a central black popular narrative has also fulfilled national fantasies about the violence and danger that purportedly consume the poorest and most economically fragile communities of color,"[24] Rose claimed. At the dawn of the 1990s, "gangsta" rap, a form of the genre that took these elements to the extreme, emerged out of Los Angeles, rocketing to international visibility via television and radio. "Gangsta" rap, and the culture linked to it, was both alarming and liberating. Stand-up comedy emerged during this same period as an urban expressive practice accessible to ordinary citizens whose "real" experiences were at a premium in the pop culture industry of the late 1980s and early 90s. Simultaneously, with the same initial audience of urban working-class African Americans, the form and content of black stand-up comedy transformed.

In terms of the mainstreaming of this new hybrid genre that incorporated black storytelling tropes, musical traditions, and urban performance sites, Williams was keenly aware that his dream of an all-black comedy scene could be co-opted, if not protected and shielded from "the white man," to use his words. "I did not intend to take anything to Hollywood. I wouldn't bring my show there, they had to come to *me*."[25] He would find out that it was not the white entertainment industry that would capitalize on the black comedy movement (at first), but members of the increasingly influential urban constituents of the black entertainment industry who would bring black comedy to the popular cultural landscape. Russell Simmons and Stan Lathan, two of the most important arbiters of black expressive culture, frequented CAT.[26] As Williams recalls, they came in, took in the performances, and decided "they could do it better," and proceeded to capitalize on the newly formed comedy audience by producing a cable TV showcase of black comedy, *Def Comedy Jam*, running on HBO on Friday nights from 1992-1997.[27]

> "Russell Simmons was Def Jam [the record company]. Now you got *Def Comedy Jam*. He's bringing along with him that generation that was doing all the hardcore rap, the hip-hop and all that, that wasn't really in my club at the time. Because one, some of them were too young, and two, there was a separation between me and them at the time. The comedy that I was promoting wasn't hardcore; it wasn't full of profanity and filth. It wasn't bitch, ho, nigga."[28]

By 1992, the black comedy boom was in full swing. Russell Simmons' *Def Comedy Jam* and BET's *Comic View* blasted to popularity as a televisual alternative to attending live comedy shows, creating the atmosphere of a lively and intimate club experience in the privacy of millions of homes. This transformation was precipitated by the rise and commodification of urban black

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23 Rose, *Black Noise*, 10.
24 Ibid, 11.
25 Michael Williams.
26 Stan Lathan was a prominent film director of "blaxploitation" films and Russell Simmons was an emerging music mogul who headed the most influential rap label at the time, *Def Jam Records*.
27 As far as negotiations about creating a television showcase of black comedy, it is unclear if any between Williams and Simmons took place.
28 Michael Williams.

culture, especially the cross-fertilization of the genres of hardcore rap music and the new urban working-class stand-up comedy. *Def Comedy Jam* featured resident DJ, Kid Capri, who spun hip-hop music, and the hosts, performers, and audience members sported the latest hip-hop fashions.

In fact, these two genres were not just aural forms of entertainment as music and comedy had been in previous decades, but as Michael pointed out, "television was able to open up a door that had never been opened before. And it was not just television, it was cable television."[29] As hardcore rap music rapidly entered the mainstream with its explicit sexuality, worship of drug culture, and commitments to "keeping it real," the same demographic of urban working-class people who were aspiring comics, because of social, and cultural imperatives, incorporated those elements into their routines.

> "All of a sudden you're hearing the women don't want no soft dude, they want a bad boy or a gangster or a thug. And now guys are thinking they gotta be like that to get women. Now they're starting to believe that all you have to do is cuss everybody out, call everybody niggas, call everybody bitch, tell everybody you're sucking dick and eating pussy and getting fucked all kind of ways, and you *in*."[30]

More black people than ever before discovered the genre of professional stand-up comedy as a way to tell their stories, participate in popular culture as artists, and express their political opinions. However, with the turn toward the hardcore, criticism abounded that comics were perpetuating stereotypes of blacks as vulgar, ignorant, and simply not funny. Most notably, Bill Cosby openly criticized *Def Comedy Jam* because many of the comedians appearing on the show used explicit language and expressions in their unapologetic celebration of black sexuality.[31] Cosby's appraisal highlights one of the key paradoxes in contemporary black expressive culture: how do black people, especially those who are most marginalized, utilize popular culture to challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, and class oppression when their aesthetic and ideological choices sometimes perpetuate stereotypes that, when manipulated by the mass media, help justify and further entrench forms of marginalization?

Theorizing Disgust and Abjection

The demonization of black sexualities have structural consequences argues Ange-Marie Hancock (2004), who points out the political implications of the "welfare queen" stereotype. Hancock shows that marginal groups, for whom damaging public identities have become their primary markers of identity, are politically disempowered to participate in "processes of democratic deliberation."[32] The "welfare queen" is not the only public identity that strips black women of their personhood, but it densely captures the imagery of degrading cultural

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Darryl Littleton, *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us To Laugh* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Publishing, 2008), 200.
32 Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust*, 4.

iconography of black women viewed on the ubiquitous daily talk shows such as *The Jerry Springer Show* and *Maury*. These two television shows parade the "babymama" and "black whore," an amalgamation that approximates the "welfare queen," as the primary lens through which working-class black women are read.

As Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg point out, "the *Jerry Springer Show* emphasizes "the scatological, the salacious and expulsive emotion,"[33] and further, tabloid talk shows like *Springer* belong to an emergent televisual genre called "cruelty realism," trafficking in narratives of "humiliation and gross spectacle of and by "ordinary" people."[34] Epstein and Steinberg emphasize the "realist dimensions" of how talk shows "propose (and reproduce) its representational economies of race, gender/sexuality and class "as" real world,"[35] and "what emerges starkly in the [*Jerry Springer*] show is…a constantly repeated trope of "stuckness": people stuck in themselves, stuck in time, stuck on the bottom."[36] More specifically, the script of black womanhood that emerges from this kind of televisual imagery is one with an identifiably African American name; she is ignorant; she is irresponsibly fertile; she draws an income from which she does not deserve; she is sexually available, yet sexually repulsive; and she is loud-mouthed, constantly rolling her eyes and neck; she is socially and culturally incorrigible.[37]

These particular behaviors incite what Hancock calls the "politics of disgust," a process whereby a profound dislike for recipients of welfare (coded as young black mothers) is cultivated in the popular media and through interpersonal interactions between citizens. I want extend the idea of the politics of disgust beyond welfare recipients. The politics of disgust is so pervasive as a technique of reading the superficiality of black women's public presentation that all black women in the American context are subject to an evaluation based upon the rhetoric of the "welfare queen" script.[38]

I want to press John Limon's theory of the abject as a liminal praxis-space, where it may account for the experiences of black women who generate important epistemological material and consciousness in their comedy routines. The stage is a site where black women contest ideas that they are deviant and disgusting, and we can see public identities of black women played on, played in, and played out. The idea of stand-up comedy as a liminal praxis-space takes seriously Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as a creative force where a profound and transformative confrontation can take place *between* the ideal human and the abject marginal body.

Thinking about the conditions of abjection in the productive terms of Kristeva, highlights "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-

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33 Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, "Life in the Bleep-Cycle: Inventing Id-TV on the Jerry Springer Show," *Discourse*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Fall 2003), 91.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid, 92.

36 Ibid, 109.

37 For a discussion of gender and daytime talk show culture, see Jane Shattuc, *The Talking Cure: Tv Talk Shows and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1997). Also, Joshua Gamson discusses the evolution of the talk show genre in *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Non-Conformity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

38 Gwendolyn D. Pough discusses how black women's sexualities are stigmatized in television shows, hip-hop movies, and popular magazines in *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004).

between, the ambiguous, the composite,"[39] anchors this chapter. As liminal subjects, black women comics fit Victor Turner's definition as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial."[40] As I discuss black women's stand-up in terms of abjection, I want to think of the physical stage as a liminal praxis-space, following bell hooks conception of the margins as a radical and creative politics of place:

> I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continuously formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to that domination. We come to this space through suffering, pain, through struggle. We know struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfills desire. We are transformed, individually, collectively as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world.[41]

I am not implying that all black women have the same experiences of marginalization or that there can be one theory that exemplifies a diverse and heterogeneous group of performers. However, it is important to acknowledge that black women are the quintessential embodiments of the "Other" in terms of American racial and cultural representations.[42]

Some scholars would argue that theories like abjection, because of their rootedness in white, Western epistemological paradigms are inadequate to analyze the experiences of African Americans. Corrie Claiborne, for example, argues that African American women's identities are already over-defined by stereotypical representations, so much so that theories like abjection threaten to add to their burden of negative significations from the outside. For Claiborne, "abjection pulls [black] women in so many different directions that it is nearly impossible to grasp a theoretical leg on which to stand."[43] Instead of "approaching abjection," as Kristeva suggests as a mode of radical feminist practice, Claiborne proposes that black women ought to leave it behind, distancing themselves from the significations of the radical "Other." In this way, Claiborne argues, black women can open spaces where presence and voice are privileged over invisibility and silence.

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39 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4.

40 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Reprint edition (Aldine Transaction, 1995), 95.

41 bell hooks, *Yearning*, 153.

42 Several scholars discuss the cultural and discursive production of the black woman as "Other." For example, Patricia Hill Collins discusses the implications of "controlling images" of black women in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990); also see Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984). Cheryl Townsend Gilkes explores constructions of black womanhood in *If It Wasn't For the Women...Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (2001), arguing that black women have been represented by images and discourses of "deviant womanhood," such as the jezebel, mammy, and Sapphire archetypes.

43 Corrie Claiborne, "Leaving Abjection: Where 'Black' Meets Theory," *Modern Language Studies* Vol. 26, No. 4, Colorizing Literary Theory (Autumn, 1996) 31.

While I understand Claiborne's concern for utilizing Western theories to capture the experiences of African American women, especially in terms of literary criticism, there are valuable tools that, if reinterpreted within radical paradigms such as black feminist theory and black performance studies, can be useful to think through the efficacy of black women's performance. Abjection is one such theory because of its in-between status, the space that acknowledges marginality, but which black women endow with a generative capacity to become something other than problematic representations.

Black women comics' aesthetics of abjection incorporates the practice of corporeal orature as a mode of redress outlined in chapter one, and takes up bell hooks explanation of aesthetics as an active process of critically seeing and creating beauty simultaneously; "it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming."[44] Joined with abjection, black women comics' performances, in form and content, reflect the means by which they inhabit and transgress margins. As they engage with their audience, connecting with them through laughter, they make themselves visual as subjects, and particularly germane to this chapter, sexual subjects, despite the marginalization and demonization in the mass media of their sexual practices and politics. And, when black women stand up their abjection as they occupy center stage, as Limon would have it, their audience is provoked to confront it, the whole encounter mediated by a laughter that lays bare the possibility that stereotypes flatten into objectivity, are hegemonically produced. Perhaps the audience's laughter is recognition, an awareness of their own potential to be the "Other."

The Pleasure and Politics of Sexual Disclosure

The black comedy boom produced dozens of women comics between 1985 and 1997, most of them appearing on the popular showcase programs *Def Comedy Jam* on HBO and *Comic View* on BET. Women comics were relatively few compared to the hundreds of male comics, yet a rich comic culture arose amongst the women. The themes of their humor were not unlike other women, focusing on relationships, family life, body image, and current events. However, urban black women's humor significantly departed from mainstream white women's humor in that black women who relished explicit sex talk were encouraged, according to Williams, to be as vulgar as they saw fit in their routines. "The thing is, nobody was in the position to tell them no. They got yeses. I was told that the industry said, 'Let them be as nasty as they wanna be, because we're making money.'"[45] I am not implying that white women comics do not address taboo topics in their comedy or talk explicitly about sex, but sexual taboos are manifested somewhat differently in their routines.[46]

After surveying more than twenty black women stand-ups' routines on *Def Comedy Jam* and *Comic View* from the 1990s, I found that sexual disclosure was a major aesthetic and

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44 bell hooks, "An Aesthetics of Blackness—Strange and Oppositional," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* Vol. 1, (1995), 65.

45 Michael Williams.

46 On November 15, 2011, an article appeared in *The New York Times*, "Female Comedians, Breaking the Taste-Taboo Ceiling," which was entirely focused on white women comics making jokes about rape as their biggest transgression of taboos.

political choice in most of their routines.[47] In fact, the pleasure and politics of sexual disclosure was the major trope of urban working-class black women's comedy. This aesthetic is what Freud theorizes as obscene joking, which strikes at the heart of authority, enabling the comic and her audience to take pleasure in sexuality that is taboo.[48] Comedian Simply Marvelous brought the crowd to their feet in July of 1992 as she broadcast her sexual desire in her routine on *Def Comedy Jam*: "See, I'm almost 40 years old. I'm at the point in my life, I do not wanna make love. Goddamnit, I wanna *fuck*! I wanna fuck 'til I destroy some shit! I wanna fuck 'til the four walls come down! I wanna fuck 'til a bird fly over and shit in my bed!"[49] The set up in this routine is a particular knowledge that already resides in the consciousness of the young audience. A woman who is close to their mother's age does not belong on a stage talking about what pleases her sexually, much less using explicit imagery that conjures the act in their minds. The punch line is the surprise of the sexual disclosure itself, which becomes a common trope of black women's humor in the 1990s.

Excluding homosexual sex, oral sex is arguably the quintessential marker of sexual deviance, and in the 1990s, it was a frequent topic of black women's humor. In a 1993 routine on *Def Comedy Jam*, Adele Givens told the audience, "I'm sick and tired of people saying what a *lady* can and can't do, can and can't say. I feel like this: if a woman can suck your dick, then damn it, she can talk about it."[50] The historical exploitation and brutalization of black women's sexualities and the pervasive representations of them as sexual deviants understandably precipitated practices and politics of protection like what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls the "politics of respectability,"[51] or, Darlene Clark Hines' notion that black women engaged in a "culture of dissemblance."[52] Hazel V. Carby traces the discourse of black women's sexual deviance to slavery. "The links between black women and illicit sexuality consolidated during the antebellum years," Carby contends, and "had powerful ideological consequences for the next hundred and fifty years."[53] These strategies of preserving the dignity of black women with class-privilege by de-emphasizing their sexualities was constructive to the extent that they acted as a means of protection from sexual violence. At the same time, those strategies produced black women, especially working-class black women who engaged in illicit sexual practices, as deviant and in need of protection from both white and black institutions and organizations.[54]

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47 The following comedians were surveyed: Hope Flood, Luenell, Chocolate, Adele Givens, Miss Laura Hayes, Mo'Nique, Sheryl Underwood, Coco Brown, Coco, Sommore, Edwonda White, Thea Vidale, Yvette Wilson, Ellen Cleghorn, Wanda Smith, Dominique Whitten, Small Fry, Sonia D, Barbara Carlisle, Leighann Lord, Melanie Camarcho.

48 Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, 100.

49 Simply Marvelous "Simply Marvelous on Def Jam." Online video clip. 26 July 2009. Visited December 15, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F2H1lHMljZA.

50 Adele Givens. "Adele Givens on Def Comedy Jam." 29 July 2012. Visited 15 December 2012. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gMUbECjSK4.

51 Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement and the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

52 Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and The Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* Vol. 14, No. 4, Common Grounds and Crossroads: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in Women's Lives (Summer, 1989).

53 Hazel V. Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 39.

54 The black women's Club Movement during the early 20th century was an institutional site of policing lower-class black women's sexualities and encouraging the performance of social propriety. Hazel V. Carby discusses the discourse of black women's sexuality in the midst of the

Oral sex, and she who performs it, is discursively produced not just as deviant but as disgusting and abject. The mouth-genital function of oral sex, for some, conjures an inherent "nastiness" associated with the practice. Sara Ahmed's conception of the performativity of disgust is instructive here, as she notes disgust's "stickiness," and the propensity of emotions to separate bodies in danger of coming in "sensuous proximity."[55] Disgust becomes associated with "the lower regions of the body as it becomes associated with other bodies and other spaces," argues Ahmed, and "as a result, disgust at 'that which is below' functions to maintain the power relations between above and below, through which 'aboveness' and 'belowness' become properties of particular bodies, objects, and spaces."[56] To be considered a "dick sucker" for black women is to be made abject, yet the black women comics of the 90s celebrated the pleasure of oral sex on stage, delighting in the laughter their sexual disclosures elicited. The audience erupted in guffaws when Simply Marvelous expressed the pleasure of oral sex: "Ain't nothing wrong with oral sex, have you reaching for shit that ain't there. If they do it right they'll have you walking around in the daytime looking for that motherfucker!"[57]

Mireille Miller-Young argued that black women performers in the 1990s, especially in hip-hop music, hip-hop pornography, and I believe urban stand-up comedy, participated in "illicit erotic economies" to "mobilize deviant, outlaw racialized sexuality as vehicles of consumption and labor as well as of contestation and consent."[58] When comics talked publicly and explicitly about their sexual practices, they pushed back on middle-class rhetoric demanding that a "good" black woman be a "lady in the streets and freak in the sheets," an ideology that makes those who fail, feel abject. Humorist Pearl Bailey alludes to this rhetoric in her suggestive song "Since I Became a Hussy for My Husband," from her 1960 album *Naughty, But Nice!*.[59] The discourse of performing the "good" black woman script has evolved and remains a trope of black women's self-making practices. In fact, Carla E. Stokes' study of adolescent black girl's self-representation on their personal websites is inflected with a familiar, yet updated trope, "lady in the streets but a freak *on the web*." Panelists in the study explained the lady/freak dialectic: "it is considered socially acceptable for a girl to be 'classy' [elegant] and a 'lady' in public, but selectively freaky in private, behind closed doors, or on the Web."[60]

As black women publicly claim sexual pleasure, they generate another level of pleasure in the disclosure as well as from the laughter of an audience sympathetic to their desire to "kiss and tell." Michael Williams noted the increasing market for these kinds of "nasty" performances,

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Great Migration in "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Identities (Summer, 1992). These performances of black femininity were shot through with the rhetorical strategies of the "cult of true womanhood," adhering to the four virtues: "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity," Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Sexual Politics* (71). Katrina Bell McDonald addresses black women's use of performances of femininity as a mode of resistance, specifically paying attention to the black women's Club Movement during the early 20th century and their programs aimed at inculcating lower-class black women with notions of black respectability. See Katrina Bell McDonald, *Embracing Sisterhood: Class, Identity, and Contemporary Black Women* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 52-53.

55 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 85.

56 Ibid, 89.

57 "Simply Marvelous on Def Comedy Jam," 1992.

58 Miller-Young, "Hip-Hop Honeys," 280.

59 Pearl Bailey, *Naughty, But Nice!*, Roulette Records, 1960.

60 Carla E. Stokes, "Representin' in Cyberspace: Sexual Scripts, Self-Definition, and Hip Hop Culture in Black American Adolescent Girls' Home Pages," *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, Vol. 9, No. 2, (Mar.-Apr. 2007), 175.

yet black women comics also capitalized on their performances of sexual difference. By "performing their marginality," Joanne Gilbert argues, "social outcasts call attention to their subordinate status; by commodifying this performance, they ensure that the dominant culture literally pays a price for this disparity."[61] The pleasure of sexual disclosure becomes an aesthetic characteristic of BWCL in the 1990s, a transgressive technique of redress that evokes laughter by outrageously and audaciously elevating the low to the high, the abject to the subject.

"Do I look like a fucking lady, or what?" asks Adele Givens on an episode of *Def Comedy Jam* in 1993. The crowd affirmatively cheers and claps, and Givens goes on to tell the crowd how much she likes being a "fucking lady," because according to her, "we get to say what the fuck we want...and still be a lady."[62] Givens' stand-up persona is the "fucking lady." Throughout each of her routines in the 1990s on *Def Jam*, Givens uses oxymoronic imagery of the "fucking lady," to enact her idea of black womanhood. The combination of the sexually explicit and socially loaded "fucking" with a word as seemingly conventional, conservative, and equally loaded "lady," Givens' attempted to articulate the potential of what womanhood could mean for black women. That is, A black woman can use the word fuck, talk explicitly about sex, and a host of subjects deemed taboo for a historically, politically, and socially specific conception of a "lady."[63]

Givens opens another performance with this joke: "Met a stupid motherfucker at the airport...talking 'bout, 'you came all the way to New York by yourself, you *came* by yourself?'" She puts her hand on her hip indignantly, "Like it's so unusual for a *real* lady to *come* by herself."[64] Givens swaggers across the stage, inviting the audience to share in this experience of being proud of masturbating, something out of bounds for the conventional conception of a "true lady." The joke is also a left-handed jab at men who do not sexually satisfy their partners. In this sense, a "real lady" who "come[s] by herself," is a lady who not only masturbates, but also does not need a man to be sexually fulfilled. The "fucking lady" is an urban working-class feminist identity that several black women comics inhabited, because as L.H. Stallings reminds us, "the performance of comedy, with its play between public and private spaces, becomes one such means by which black women's self-invention and desire can flourish."[65]

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61 Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*, xi.

62 "Adele Givens on Def Comedy Jam."

63 Lisa B. Thompson examines constructions of the "black lady" in *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009). For her, performing the black lady "relies heavily upon aggressive shielding of the body; concealing sexuality; and foregrounding morality, intelligence, and civility as a way to counter negative stereotypes. Conservative sexual behavior is the foundation of the performance of middle-class black womanhood" (2). E. Frances White reminds us that the "black lady" relies on middle-class ideology, and it is important to read it as a confining, yet resistant performative strategy that functioned for black women "as a means of responding to the historical subjugation of black female bodies through the discourses of slavery, colonialism, Western science, and religion" (36). *Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism and the Politics of Respectability* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001). "The "black lady" can be held as the standard only if that representation can be defined in opposition to the over-sexualized, lower-class black woman, "the jezebel," Shanara R. Reid-Brinkley reminds us in "The Essence of Res(ex)pectability: Black Women's Negotiations of Black Femininity in Rap Music and Music Video," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, and Transnationalism*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Representin': Women, Hip-Hop, and Popular Music (2008), 246.

64 "Adele Givens on Def Comedy Jam.".

65 Stallings, *Mutha is Half a Word*, 113.

Sheryl Underwood, who is now mostly known for her role on the daytime show on CBS, *The Talk*, got her start as a stand-up comedian on *Def Comedy Jam* in the early 1990s. Underwood has one of the most brazen sexual disclosures on *Def Comedy Jam*:

> "Cause I'm a bitch that love to fuck, you know what I'm sayin'? I love to fuck! Cause you know what, my legs be open so much my IUD pick up cable channels goddamnit. Cause that's the kinda bitch I am, you know, fuck that! Fuck that shit, you know what I'm sayin'?...I'll tell you what, I'm fuckin', I love to fuck! I love to fuck more than I love to eat. If you put a dick between two slices of bread, ya got me! You know what I'm sayin'? I love to fuck! Manwich ain't nothin' but a sandwich, but a dick, that's more like a meal, goddamnit. And you know, I'm an easy bitch too, you can have this pussy from the front, you can have this pussy from the back. Hell, this pussy's like Burger King, you can have it your way, goddamnit."[66]

Underwood references cultural touchstones linked to 1990s popular culture (the IUD signals birth control integrated into the contemporary lifestyle, and Manwich and Burger King indicate the ubiquitous commercialization of fast food) to situate herself as a "woman of the times." Underwood illustrates that being a woman of the 90s means sexual mores are a component of cultural competence, and private sex becomes public culture. She stalks the stage like a hip-hop emcee engaged in a rap battle. Her free hand grips her crotch in an expression that involves her body in an enactment of corporeal orature. Underwood co-opts the phallic masculine rhetorical gestures pervading hardcore rap music, displacing herself as a sexual object for black men's pleasure and claiming it as a tool for her own illicit sexual adventures. Even though she is a "bitch that love to fuck," Underwood is also a responsible citizen who uses birth control, a subtle aesthetic and political choice that repudiates the ubiquitous "welfare queen" stereotype. What is more, she elevates the idea of hardcore black sex from dirty and abject to something that can, and should be as fulfilling and nourishing as food. In the same move, Underwood underscores the pleasure and anxiety of black sex, which in her account can be so intense that the lovers threaten to consume one another.

Underwood's enactment of the pleasure of sex and sexual disclosure has the audience in stitches because she successfully stands up her abjection and invites her audience to share in that transformation. Her deployment of black male hip-hop swagger coupled with her punchy, unapologetic disclosure about her sexual desires is outrageous, recalling LaWanda Page's ribald comic sensibility. It lands on the audience in the form of an inversion humor that characterizes BWCL aesthetics of abjection during this period, the abandonment of sexual shame. This aesthetic is political in that it troubles middle-class (traditional) black feminist imperatives of sexual propriety and respectability. If urban working-class black women had been marginalized in elite black feminist politics, stand-up comedy was a site where working-class women could make the case for their own incarnation of feminist practices that accounted for their desires and pleasures.

Gotta Get a Roughneck

66 Sheryl Underwood. "Sheryl Underwood on Def Comedy Jam." Online video clip. 29 July 2012. Visited 15 December 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cox48wXq38.

Along with oral sex, many black women who performed on *Def Jam* and *Comic View* expressed the desire for rough, violent sex. Williams noted the generational shift of hip-hop culture as a factor that helped shape urban stand-up's hardcore aesthetics. The iconography and rhetorical enactment of hypersexual and excessive black masculinity were tropes of working-class black authenticity that suffused popular culture; as hip-hop became a global phenomenon black stand-up was an integral part of that explosion. Patricia Hill Collins argues that class-specific gender ideology was instrumental in the commodification of black culture, with a high value placed on brute strength, notions sexual prowess, and a propensity toward violence. Black urban working-class authenticity relied on the reconfiguration and repetition of historical tropes of black masculinity as hypersexual, anti-intellectual, and in need of being tamed to "help justify racial inequality to White Americans and suppress resistance among African Americans."[67] In other words, black authenticity relied on "controlling images" of black femininity and masculinity. However, it is my contention that when black women used humor to publicly express the desire for and pleasure in rough sex, there was something else going on other than the simple uncritical reinforcement of stereotypes just to get a laugh.

Because jokes about the desire for a "roughneck" and the pleasure of rough sex were so pervasive, I want to take a look at several examples that illustrate this point. "It's hard to find a good man," Hope Flood tells the audience of *Comic View*, "I like the type of man that make love to you in the headlock. The type of nigga that'll snatch your weave out and then sew it back in. I like rough sex."[68] Here, Flood inverts the ideal of the "good" black man to one who is sexually powerful, but still sensitive to her needs. In another routine, comedian Coco claims, "I love a thug. A roughneck. I like a man been shot, still got the bullet in him somewhere. A chipped tooth. I don't like conservative men. I want a man can't hardly read, I have to hold pictures up and point to 'em."[69]

Yvette Wilson, who gained distinction in the cult classic film *Friday*, as Smoky's blind date who was supposed to have looked like Janet Jackson, but "got out of the car looking like Freddie Jackson."[70] Wilson expressed her love of black men in her routines, but articulated a particular desire for the gangsta type: "I'm tired of ladies night at the club, I want rusty knee, ashy nut night. I want dick just thick in the club...Cause I think men should be treated for the sexual beings that y'all are...I want my man home naked in an apron...but it's a certain kind of man, cause I don't like soft men. I'm sorry fellas, if you all gentle, I ain't fuckin' wit you. I'm serious, cause that smooth approach just don't work for me."[71]

The desire for a roughneck troubles black feminist politics, but at the same time I must acknowledge that at in some moments, the pleasure of sexual disclosure becomes an antifeminist performance that threatens the potential of radical transgression that corporeal orature opens. Instead, some women's sexual disclosures become that which is abject. For example, when Adele

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67 Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 180.

68 Hope Flood. "Hope Flood." Online video clip. 13 September 2011. Visited 15 December 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hq4h9jJgpck.

69 Coco. "Coco on Def Comedy Jam." Online video clip. 29 July 2012. Visited 15 December 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYXy0TmkLIs .

70 *Friday*, Dir. F. Gary Gray, New Line Cinema, 1995.

71 Yvette Wilson. "Russell Simmons' Def Comedy Jam : Joe Torry." Online video clip. 3 May 2009. Visited 15 December 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLxKlvAg02k.

Givens hosts *Def Comedy Jam* in 1995, she begins with a salient critique of thug culture, only then to go back and cosign on domestic violence visited on black women:

> "Nowadays, niggas talk about 'I got a AK, I got my 9,' they think they tough. They don't understand. You wanna impress me, Beat me down with your motherfucking hands and feet, nigga. You know what I'm saying? Kick my ass like you love me. That's why I like...a good old-fashioned ass whipping. That's why I like Ike Turner. Nigga, Ike, where you at, nigga? Ike, nigga, if Tina don't want you come on home, motherfucker."[72]

Even with some regressive elements, the pleasure of these kinds of sexual disclosures were political and aesthetic choices that black women made to mock codes of black middle-class respectability by publicly embracing "bad boy" and "gangsta" sexualities, thereby, recovering the abject, urban black male body as powerful and desirable. They also functioned as a metaphor for the desire for a "strong black man" to mitigate black women's archetypical representations as always embodying the "strong black woman," and the heavy burden that came along with it. The rhetoric of roughness acted as a visual and corporeal locus of power that black men embodied, especially as economic and politically marginalized members of the American body politic.

When black women comics expressed their unabashed desire for hardcore sex, it was from the position of their own marginality and can be understood as an attempt to equalize the duties and responsibilities of citizenship and everyday life. Sexual disclosure functioned as a mode of expressing desire and pleasure that troubled the sexual politics of traditional black feminism, and in important ways, articulated an alternative urban working-class black feminism. Such articulations did more than simply reject the politics of respectability; they sketched the contours of a working-class respectability that was anchored with ideals of racial authenticity that hinged on turning the abjection of black sexuality upside down. The black comedienne's success required that she not only perform these ideals, but it must come off as *sincere*. The "bad bitch" persona embodies this alternative feminism and respectability, and became the most valuable resource to demonstrate black women's comic sincerity as a performative strategy facilitating connection to her audience. Before I move on to examining black women's performances of racial sincerity, I want to take a look at how hardcore, taken to the extreme, could have deleterious effects.

The Pleasure and Pain of Doing It Hardcore: "The Queens of Comedy and the Commandments of Sex"

In 2001 entertainment journalist Margeaux Rawson conducted an interview about sex with the Queens of Comedy—Miss Laura Hayes, Sommore, Adele Givens and Mo'Nique—to appear in *Glamour* magazine. Rawson's task was to elucidate the "10 Commandments of Sex," from the perspective of the four comics who were on the heels of a historic road tour. The Queens described in intimate detail what many would consider their innermost sexual desires. Almost nothing is left to the imagination in the interview as the four women lay out in titillating

72 Adele Givens. "Adele Givens- Def Jam Host. Online video clip. 24 February 2008. Visited 15 December 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Di6d7JD2iUE.

detail the practices that turn them on and get them off. Much of the conversation revolves around oral sex. "Must eat pussy! I know you can't print that," laments Mo'Nique, "but that's rule number 10 through 59. Must be a pussy-licker. Ain't no pussy-licker, you gotta get away from me." Sommore departs from the rest of the group on the issue, "I ain't wit' it...Let me tell you something, a nigga will bust a goddamn root canal trying to make me come!"[73]

Adele Givens, for whom oral sex is a vital part of her stand-up routines, offers an interesting connection between stand-up comedy, hip-hop, and sex. "Oral sex is an art. It's kinda like rap and comedy: Everybody think they can do it but they can't."[74] As urban black stand-up comedy came of age during the same time hip-hop culture and pornography aimed at exclusively black audiences was being mainstreamed, conversations about the politics of oral sex were played out in the landscape of the black cultural matrix in similar ways. Hardcore rappers like Akinyele demanded black women to "put it in your mouth,"[75] while female rappers such as Lil' Kim scoffed, "I don't want dick tonight, eat my pussy right!"[76] As the interview progresses, the Queens outline the commandments of "good" sex: it must involve oral sex, using food, sexy dancing, naughty toys, and above all, it must be *hardcore*.

Mo'Nique poses the questions to the three other Queens: "You ever been fucked so hard it bring your period on when you was supposed to come three days later? You fucked so hard and then you look and you like, 'Oh, damn! I'm bleeding. Shit!'" and they answer in unison, "Yes!" The comics delight in the pleasure of this sexual disclosure. In essence, black women comics would revel in the pleasure of bringing laughter to an audience, even as an interview, creating a space for them to talk publicly about their lives in ways that validated and affirmed their humanity.

Glamour magazine rejected Rawson's raunchy interview with the Queens of Comedy, classifying it as too blue to go to print. The four comics had reached the height of success as stand-ups, embarking on the first-ever tour of four headlining black women comics. It makes sense that *Glamour* magazine would seek to capitalize on their success and the salaciousness of their comedy, and it is also understandable that the comics would agree to participate in an interview that had the potential to gain them broad exposure in a market beyond their target audience, which was black women. With representations of deviant, yet desirable black sexuality at a premium in the 1990s, *Glamour*, wittingly or not, set out to stage an attention-grabbing and monochromatic scene of black women's sexuality, and on a number of levels the project failed. We can see the Queens as having been too intimate with their sexual disclosures, or, perhaps the editors of *Glamour* magazine realized that the aggressive humor of the comics would be offensive to and/or lost on its target audience, white women. This incident sheds light on one of the key facet of BWCL, which requires a performers and the audience to grasp a particular social and cultural knowledge for the humor to be effective. The article was however published in early 2012 in *The Lowbrow Reader*, an annually published, mainstream coffee-table comedy journal, some eleven years after it was originally written.

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73 Margeaux Rawson, "The Queens of Comedy on the Commandments of Sex," *The Lowbrow Reader*, Issue #3, 2003, http://lowbrowreader.com/queens/.

74 Ibid.

75 Akinyele, "Put It In Your Mouth," Put It In Your Mouth. Stress Entertainment, 1996.

76 Lil' Kim, "Not Tonight," Hard Core. Big Beat Records, 1996.



Illustration 1: This image, illustrated by Tom Sanford, appears with the online interview in The Lowbrow Reader.

"The Queens of Comedy on the Commandments of Sex" interview/article "attempt [s] to refigure the racial logic of sexual respectability and normativity."[77] However, when sexual disclosure is taken to the extreme without an audience "in the know," the interview was consigned to the pages of *The Lowbrow Reader* out of view of popular culture, and the Queens' experiences are made disgusting and rendered abject. Even though they are considered "Queens," we must recognize the contested terrain on which the idea of the "Black Queen" has gained purchase. The moniker "queen" has often accompanied "of comedy" to describe accomplished performers[78] who have paid their dues, so to speak, but as Mark Anthony Neal reminds us, "queen" has also alluded to black women's "educational, moral, and cultural impoverishment."[79]

The Performance of the "Bad Girl" and Truth-Telling as a Trope of BWCL

77 Miller-Young, "Hip Hop Honeys," 264.

78 Phyllis Diller, Moms Mabley, and LaWanda Page were known as "queens of comedy" during the course of their careers before Mo'Nique, Sommore, Adele Givens, and Miss Laura Hayes took up the title in the late 1990s.

79 Mark Anthony Neal notes that law professor Lani Guinier was labeled a "quota queen;" Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders called a "condom queen;" and Alexis Hermann, a labor secretary during the 2nd Clinton administration, was called the "campaign finance queen." See *Soul Babies*, 74.

I interviewed Miss Laura Hayes, a veteran stand-up and "Queen of Comedy," and I asked her if she believes that there is a particular black women's humor. "Yes," she answered unequivocally, "and I think it's just raw, unadulterated truth."[80] Truth telling is a fundamental trope of BWCL, but we must read black women humorists' engagement with truth as *individual* expressions of personal experience, and not as essentialist gestures implicitly or explicitly linking *all* black women. Deirdre Heddon reminds us "every 'experience'…rather than being individual, is a cultural phenomenon and already culturally approved," an further, "mediated in and by language, experience cannot then be taken as some 'pure' knowledge or 'truth' about any subject, including the self."[81] The debate about black authenticity is not new, having been played out most visibly in the Harlem Renaissance and more recently in the Black Arts Movement. Yet, during hip-hop and black comedy's golden age in the 90s, new conversations about its efficacy and/or destructive effects came to the forefront of scholarly and cultural discourse.

The commodification of black culture demanded the "real" as its product, yet what was *really* "real" was a dynamic site of contestation. The authenticity of blackness oscillated between a discourse of embedded historical stereotypes (and the struggle expand the category to move away from them), and blackness as a subjectivity bearing the potential for radical social and cultural change. Saidiya Hartman's appraisal of blackness sums it's slipperiness, "blackness marks a social relationship of dominance and abjection and potentially one of redress and emancipation."[82] Black women comics dealt with the abjection of their blackness using performance to set the record straight, so to speak, employing truth telling as an aesthetic trope that signaled their comic racial sincerity.

Besides her recurring role as Cole's mom on the sitcom *Martin,* Miss Laura was the co-host of BET's *Comic View* throughout the 1990s, portraying an old woman cook. She got her start doing character-comedy in the mid-1980s at Laney College in Oakland, CA, when she decided to leave her previous life. Her husband was a pimp and drug dealer and Miss Laura was a stay-at home mother. Bored with her domestic life, and lonely with her children gone during the day, Miss Laura learned how to boost (steal), thus inaugurating her street life. Her children believed their parents had regular jobs, and the day her daughter found out that her mother was a thief, Miss Laura decided to change her life. Her daughter saw a bathing suit she like on a shopping trip with her mother, but the $75 price tag was too much for Miss Laura.

> "She wanted it *bad*. And I had never done anything with my children around, right? But I stole this bathing suit. And when we got to the car, cause I would put it in my girdle. So I pulled it out. And I said, "I got the bathing suit for you." And I figured it was time for her to know. She was about 8 ("stupid," she says under her breath). So I uh, I pulled it out, and she looked at me, and she said "You *stole* it?" And I said "yeah." And she said "I don't want it if you stole it!" You talking about, cut me to my core...So after that, I wound up going to jail for something I didn't do, but I looked guilty. Uh, as I was there, and had time to think, I knew that I wanted to change my life. And in my mind, I knew I could go home and have a discussion with my husband and we could both figure out how to get out the game. Well,

80 Miss Laura Hayes. Personal interview. 26 April 2012 (Miss Laura Hayes).
81 Deirdre Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2008), 26-27.
82 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 57.

> once I got out of jail, it literally took another 5 or 6 years before I changed my life, but I never stopped thinking about it."[83]

Life on the margins of American society as a black woman and a criminal deeply influenced Miss Laura's comedy. She literally lived the life of a "bad girl" from the streets, but it was not only the facts of that reality that connected with her audience, but the deftness of her ability to evoke feelings of familiarity with the sincerity of recounting her experiences. "Because I was still very much raw, coming from the streets, you know, that's what I brought to the stage...And I guess because my audience could sense that that was really me, they were more accepting of how raw and ghetto I was...there would be a few that would be like, 'Oh God, her mouth is so bad! Why she gotta talk like that?' But the majority understood what I was sharing of my life."[84] The autobiographical impulse in contemporary black women's stand-up underlines the link between performance and identity formation, and a paradox of using public performance as a means of "dislodging dominant cultural representations by showing other representations drawn from experience, whilst understanding that these experiences are themselves culturally and socially contingent."[85] That is, when they publicly share stories about themselves in their routines, black women comics face the challenge of essentialism where "the relation between life and its performed representation,"[86] can congeal into the appearance of a coherent idea of what it means to be a black woman.

Miss Laura's preference to use her life as the basis of her stand-up highlights the need to think beyond the materiality of race, beyond its verifiability, toward something more ephemeral that "values trust over proof."[87] Perhaps, as Miss Laura's truth telling aesthetic demonstrates, what was distinctive about black women's performances of urban working-class aesthetics is sincerity as a preferable analytic of BWCL as opposed to authenticity. As John L. Jackson, Jr. argues, "sincerity demands the vulnerability of intersubjective trust. To be human, sincerity demands, is to accept mutual impermeability. It means to grope around for the very impermeability of the other; it is to read the other darkly."[88] The darkness of the comedy club creates a space for black women comics to perform their lives on stage, and from the moments of vulnerability and laughter generated in the recounting of their stories arises the recognition of their humanity. Sincerity is an appropriate analytic to think through instantiations of black women's humor in the 1990s because it captures one of the most essential facets of BWCL, personal experience, and for Miss Laura, that is the most important element of what makes a good comic. "We give of ourselves; you know our love, our families, our desires and dreams. And, uh, that's what comes out most. When you think about black women in comedy who are good, that's what you're gonna get from them. You're gonna get that feeling of truth, of sassiness, you know. But it's gonna be about how her life really is."[89]

I want to go back to the idea of personal experience to acknowledge its fraught nature, especially as a measure of authenticating black cultural expression. "We, as readers and literary critics," argues Kimberly N. Brown, "have come to expect African Americans, and people of

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83 Miss Laura Hayes.
84 Ibid.
85 Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, 31.
86 Ibid, 9.
87 Jackson, *Real Black*, 86.
88 Ibid.
89 Miss Laura Hayes.

color in general, to produce experiential writings; the attention given to testimonial narratives serves as just one example."[90] Black stand-up comedy is subject to some of the same evaluations, especially the pressure to prove that one has indeed experienced the elements of the art that convey the trappings of cultural richness. Stand-up comedy in the 1990s becomes the first genre where there is a demand for black working-class women to publicly narrate their life experiences. There is a need to relay personal experience to contend with the confining scripts of black womanhood already "out there." The public voice that black women comics gain in the 1990s empowered them to tell their naked truths.

Luenell is a black comedienne and actress, born in Arkansas and raised in a mostly white suburb of Castro Valley, 15 miles outside of Oakland, CA. Luenell was the last-born of eight children, a position that would force her to struggle for a voice and vie for attention. "For the longest, nobody gave a shit about what I said. Nobody wanted to hear what I thought about anything," she recalls as we sit on an oversized loveseat in the performer's lounge of *Pepper Belly's*, a small-town comedy club in Vallejo, CA. Luenell has just finished her hour-long set, for which she was about half an hour late because her driver was pulled over for speeding on the way to the show. She sips Ketel One vodka and pineapple juice, the same cocktail she ordered and nursed on stage after taking a shot of tequila as she performed. Luenell is visibly comfortable, sitting back and engaging her friend who has accompanied us in our interview.

Luenell exudes warmth and has a smile in her deep, gravelly voice. "I want to bring common sense back to folks. I want to let them know that I am educated and that I'm a mother. And you know, that I'm more than just funny." Like most of the comics I have interviewed, Luenell characterizes stand-up comedy as a place that enables her to speak and be heard. "It's where I have my freedom," she says, still contemplating the contours of my question, "What does it feel like to be onstage?" While we did not discuss it at length, Luenell struggled in her relationship with her siblings and as the last child, she might have fallen through the cracks were it not for her determination and tenacity to be a stage performer. In Castro Valley, CA, Luenell participated in community and school theater, honing her artistic craft and cultivating a performance repertoire that would eventually bring her back from the edges of the economic margins, the place where black women who are single mothers are usually confined.

Luenell tells me about how she used to *be* a bad girl, she remembers, "I used to drink a lot. I used to fight in the club. I've been incarcerated a couple of times." Luenell's experiences as a bad girl fuel her stand-up comedy, making jokes of her life. As a former bad girl, Luenell gives her audience a more intimate, complex view of what it means to inhabit that life and the emotion and context of some of those choices that made being a bad girl such a large part of who she is. That night during her set, Luenell warns the women in her audience, "You gotta know what you can and can't drink. Every time I drink gin I slip and fall on a dick." If we take a closer look we can see an intimate portrait of the bad girl who is quite emotionally vulnerable.

> The last time I drank gin, Oh, I was so fucked up. That's when I knew, this is it. I'm done with the gin and the gin is done with me. I was sittin' at the motherfuckin' bar with my girlfriend. I had my glasses on like this [puts her glasses on cockeyed, acts the sloppy drunk seated at the bar], and I said to my girlfriend [with a drunken slur, half sobbing]: you, you know what?...You're my best friend...Yes you are. And you, you know why? Because you rrrremember that time...you

90 Brown, *Writing the Revolutionary Black Diva*, 6.

> remember that time when Tyrone came over to the house and he was fucking...with me and the kids? [Breaks down in tears, bawling. Twenty seconds of sobbing and audience laughter passes.] What? What did you say about Tyrone?!...Bitch don't you know I'll whip your motherfucking ass?! You raggedy bitch! Fuck you ho, you raggedy ho! Fuck you bitch!...What? What did I say? I didn't mean iiiit!...Oh yeah, I put that shit down.[91]

In this comic scene we see how Luenell's life has become abject. Alcohol causes her to publicly humiliate herself. Her glasses are askew, her speech is slurred, and she assumes the role of the mawkish drunk. Her seemingly abusive relationship, one that required the intervention of her girlfriend, is exposed. Yet and still, she protects Tyrone, the archetypical black man stereotype that complements the "welfare queen," a man who had abused her and her children. The effects of alcohol exaggerate her low-down position as she curses furiously. In the end, she is left groveling before her friend, the portrait of abjection. The condition of complete drunkenness in the story provides a narrative shelter under which actual embarrassing, intimate details of her life as a bad girl are revealed on the stage. The humor in Luenell's performance of being "three sheets to the wind" drunk pulls the audience in and makes the story, which is rife with heartache. Luenell's abjection is her life as a bad girl, and it is exactly that life which she stands up, making "vertical what should be horizontal."[92]

As a comic, Luenell transforms her experiences of abjection into a comic persona, a title she has been dubbed by others and claimed for herself "The Original Bad Girl of Comedy." That comic branding based on her personal experiences has opened numerous professional opportunities for her career in Hollywood films and on network television. In addition to enabling her career to blossom and flourish, Luenell is unwavering about the role of stand-up in bringing her from the margin to the center of her family, "I want all my brothers and sisters who all use to think I was an incorrigible loser to all have to bow the fuck down and realize the baby done saved the whole family." Stand-up comedy was a forum that enabled her to turn her difficult situation on its head and literally stand up, "This is where I can tell *everybody* what I think about *everything*. And, 'The End.'"[93]

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined some of the key issues and themes of BWCL in the 1990s. New aesthetic conventions emerged in the cultural landscape pervaded by the aural and visual imagery of hardcore sexuality that came to define that era of black expressive culture. Black urban stand-up comedy became a significant contributor to that generation of cultural production and black women comics transformed the ways black womanhood and black sexuality were understood. With their expressions of sexual pleasure and desire, they engaged in self-making practices that audaciously re-imagined the terms in which "ladyhood" could be understood.

Like the poets of the BAM, the new black women comics turned abjection on its head and reveled in the empowerment of its inversion, even if fleetingly. In light of "controlling images" that precipitated new manifestations of racial inequality, the comics of this chapter

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91 Luenell. Live performance. *Pepper Belly's Comedy Club*, Fairfield, CA. 18 August 2011.

92 Limon, *Stand-Up in Theory*, 4.

93 Luenell (personal interview).

enacted new modes of racial and sexual freedom by writing their own script. The paradox of redressive truth telling narratives, of course, is that one truth, coupled with a lack of commercial desire to celebrate the black people's differences, becomes "THE TRUTH" about black women. Essentially, the discourse of urban black authenticity played out in stand-up generated a working-class politics of respectability, both a strategy of survival, yet a blockage that hindered some black comic voices deviating from its script from surfacing. In the next chapter, I will examine the latest generation of black women comics, who, despite the marginality and relative invisibility of black comedy in the 2000s, have managed to cultivate comic styles and techniques that are reaching broader, more heterogeneous audiences.

Chapter 5
"By sassy, you mean black:" Power and Payoff in Contemporary Black Women's Stand-up Comedy

The J Spot Comedy Club is set back in a suburban shopping plaza in Inglewood, CA about a minute-long drive from Los Angeles International Airport. There, Hope Flood is hosting the first annual Females in Comedy Association (FICA) Convention, and I arrive twenty minutes late to the first event, a roundtable discussion called "Meet me in the ladies room, cuz we gotta talk." Convention participants have been invited to ask the panel of headlining comedians—Luenell, Thea Vidale, and Miss Laura Hayes—any question, about anything. As I take my seat, a woman stands and asks Miss Laura, "How did you come up with your wig bit from *The Queens of Comedy*?"

> "I was on the stage and this guy kept interrupting. And then, I don't know what he said, I think he called me a something, something bitch. And next thing you know, I snatched my wig off and it was me and him! Tables and drinks…they were trying to pull us apart. And after it was over, my manager said, "Oh, that was funny!" And I was like, "What?" And he said, "That wig thing you did," and I said, "Nigga, that was real!"[1]

The diversity and richness of contemporary black women's stand-up emerges from the variety of their life experiences, and Miss Laura's autobiographical narrative highlights some of the key features of contemporary black women's comic culture, specifically, the interconnection between performance practices and lived experience. Autobiographical performance is a revelatory practice for contemporary black women comics that brings their subjectivity into view, and as Heddon maintains, "a way to bring into being a self."[2] Miss Laura's "real" life is a reference point for her joke,[3] but its selection, scripting, and mediation underline it *as* a performance, a rendition of the "real." Though they are relatively few in numbers, black women stand-ups are performing in venues across the United States from casinos, to comedy clubs, and even in restaurants, and in this chapter, I use ethnographic interviews and participant observation to discuss several functions and themes of contemporary black women's stand-up comedy, especially the social and cultural politics of using humor to illuminate their experiences of marginality.

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1 "Meet me in the ladies room, cuz we gotta talk," Miss Laura Hays, *The J Spot Comedy Club*, Los Angeles, CA, 25 April 2012.

2 Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, 3.

3 Miss Laura has a bit about growing up "in a big family of girls," whose father "raised us tough. And he taught us to stick together, you marry one of us, you marry *all of us*. And when there's a problem, we get together baby. And Moms is the dispatcher. My little sister got in trouble, she had to call Mama. "Mama, [crying] this nigga hit me." Woo! Mama was cool though. She was like, don't worry about it baby. Moms hung up the phone and dialed one number, *all* our phones rang. Bertha, Laura, Ula, Ruthie, get on over to Alice's house, that nigga done gone crazy! That's all we needed, we jumped in the car, we rollin'. We slappin' fives over the seat…Get to the house, screech up real fast, walk in the door, the nigga just about to hit my sister. We go AW, NAW [snatches wig off] not *tonight*, motherfucker!" *Queens of Comedy*. Dir. Stan Lathan, Paramount Pictures, Lathan Entertainment, 2000.

The fieldnote excerpts describe how comics are more than merely entertainers, but critical thinkers who use humor to engage their audiences with their worldviews. In the process, they use the stage as a liberated space upon which they can publicly make and remake themselves in performance—becoming the people they are enacting. Further, black women's diverse experiences and critical reflection anchor their comic routines, manifesting ephemeral communities of laughter. Consequently, this chapter examines black women's stand-up as a cultural performance.

The chapter follows with three interrelated themes that help illuminate the connections between personal experience, public performance, and self-making for contemporary black women comics. The first section deals with stand-up comedy as a unique space where black women can talk freely and engage in various practices of self-definition. Then, we move to a discussion of how black women use humor to talk about intimate, and sometimes painful experiences in their lives, displacing their histories of marginality from burdens to assets. Finally, I conclude by exploring how black women use laughter as a bridge to intersubjectivity between performer and audience.

Review of Literature

Lawrence E. Mintz (1985) argues that we must understand stand-up comedy as an important public ritual that is richer than the simple practice of entertainment. When a person stands before an audience and evokes laughter, Mintz notes four social and cultural functions of the performer: as shaman, negative exemplar, comic spokesperson, and social commentator. The shaman's role is to lead the audience "in a celebration of shared culture."[4] The negative exemplar plays the various incarnations of the fool, enacting socially unacceptable traits that are then "ridiculed, laughed at, repudiated, and finally, symbolically 'punished'."[5] The comic spokesperson acts as mediator between culture and society.[6] And finally, the social commentator "speak[s] the 'truth' which [is] universally recognized but politically taboo."[7] For Mintz, these roles enable comics to function as social and cultural deviants who by their status as comedians, have license for unique expression. Comedians are seen as both defective and marginal, yet with a fascinating ambiguity that generates the audience's pleasure in laughter. Approaching humor through the lens of marginality is a common way of approaching the study of stand-up comedy, which is how I analyze the ethnographic data in this chapter.

While Mintz's approach helps us understand stand-up broadly in terms of cultural rites and rituals, it fails to capture the individual experiences of marginality that precipitate black women comics' as social and cultural constructions as deviants. Cultural studies of humor tend to paint black women's comic practices with broad strokes that can obscure the heterogeneity of their lives and cultural production. For example, L.H. Stallings (2007) proposes a theory of "trickster troping," where black women comics use blue material and what she calls "verbal dragging," as techniques of self-invention.[8] Similarly, DoVeanna S. Fulton (2004) conducts a literary and cultural analysis of contemporary black women's stand-up routines, noting the

4 Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," 74.
5 Ibid, 75.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid, 76.
8 Stallings, *Mutha Is Half a Word*, 113.

cultural and historical significance of their performances as practices of self-making. In these approaches, the text of the jokes is foregrounded, with less attention on stand-up comedy as a social phenomenon in which personal experience, joke form and technique, and intentionality are entwined.

Ethnographic research helps document and illuminate the theoretical arguments and assumptions about the roles, functions, and motives of contemporary black women's stand-up comedy. I directly engage their narratives and live performances. For the purpose of this chapter, I want to approach black women's comic culture the way Dwight Conquergood argued Frederick Douglass recommended we read American slavery in his autobiography, with "a riskier hermeneutics of experience…copresence, humility, and vulnerability."[9] In reading black women comic's narratives and performances, we can better understand how they use their life experiences and the craft of stand-up to both make and remake themselves and establish between their audience the feeling of intersubjectivity, which Victor Turner calls "comunitas," a moment "when compatible people—friends, congeners—obtain a flash of mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the group which is felt as 'essentially us' could sustain its intersubjective illumination."[10]

Methodology

I conducted my fieldwork in a variety of comedy venues around the United States, mostly in California. The majority of live performances occurred in comedy clubs where the primary business was stand-up comedy, and generally had a cover price between five and thirty dollars, with a separate two drink minimum. The comedy clubs held between 100 and 300 patrons and usually followed the standard lineup of opener, usually a local amateur comic, feature, a more well-known and seasoned comic, and the headliner, the comedian for which the audience has paid to see. At comedy clubs there is a waitstaff who serve food and beverages, collecting tips at the end of the performances. The waitstaff also acts as surveillance, often policing audience members they catch illegally recording performances. Bartenders serve alcoholic beverages, and ushers direct audience members to tables.

I watched four performances at small local theaters that occasionally put on special comedy nights. These venues had small cover charges and generally did not serve alcohol and had no waitstaff. I attended ten shows at bars with designated open mic nights, where local comedians signed up to perform routines of between three and ten minutes. These venues were often free or had a small cover charge and the shows lasted from an hour to several hours to accommodate the long lists of performers. Of all the venues, bars are the loudest and least organized place to watch live stand-up. Some bars followed the list as people had signed up, while others used methods left to the discretion of the emcee to choose the order, often causing animosity between comedians. One broad feature of live comedy at comedy clubs, local theaters,

9 Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *TDR*, Vol. 46, No. (Summer 2002), 149.

10 Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 47-48.

and especially bars, was the fact that the audience was often populated by large numbers of comedians seeking coveted stage time.

I watched four live performances of celebrity stand-ups at larger commercial performance venues seating thousands of patrons: The Paramount Theatre in Oakland, CA; Mountainview Winery in Saratoga Springs, CA; Treasure Island Casino in Las Vegas, NV; and The Arie Crown Theater in Chicago, IL. The cheapest tickets for these performances, which have a concert-like atmosphere, ranged from $50-65, excluding parking, food, and beverages. These performances attracted audiences between the ages of 40-60, mostly couples who "dressed up," for a night on the town. Ushers escort audience members to their seats individually. The format is similar at each venue, beginning with a DJ playing familiar popular R&B songs before the opening act, with the feature act performing second, followed by the headliner, collective performances lasting between one and two hours.

I was introduced to the comics of this study using a variety of methods. After attending live shows, I solicited participation from comedians Aisha Tyler, Khristee Rich, and Karinda Dobbins. After seeing an online advertisement for the "5 Funny Females" tour, I emailed comedian Naomi Ekperigin, who agreed to participate in the study. I met several comedians via Facebook after a male comedian I met in Berkeley, CA told his friend Kamane Malvo Marshall about my study. Marshall had previously been the opening act for Luenell, who later contacted me and invited me to her performance at Pepper Belly's Comedy Club in Fairfield, CA. Luenell passed my information along to comedian Hope Flood, who contacted me and participated in a phone interview.

Flood invited me to join a Facebook group she started for her new organization Females in Comedy Association (FICA), which had over 300 online members. After joining the online group, I made plans to attend the first annual convention in Los Angeles, and I solicited several interviews before I arrived by sending a group-wide email explaining the nature and purpose of my study. The convention was held at The J Spot Comedy Club and included four days of seminars, roundtables, and workshops with well-known comics, talent scouts, and business investors. On the first day of the convention, Hope Flood laid out her goals to the group of 72 amateurs to semi-professionals, mostly black comics. "I hope that y'all figure out exactly what you're doing in this business. If we are not careful, these niggas[11] are gon' X us out of this business. This is a movement…this is all in love, to help you get where you are going."

Because of the Facebook memo and my general online presence in the group, all of the people I met and interviewed were familiar with me when I arrived, and I had no issues of access. I interviewed four comics at the convention, Miss Laura Hayes, Vanessa Chambers, Niroma Johnson, and Jennifer Weeks. I had met Chambers and Johnson on the first day of the convention and offered them a ride back to the hotel. We became friendly and formed a group, attending most of the events together. Though I had no issues of access, I was initially nervous and mostly stayed in the background of the seminars and workshops, feverishly writing fieldnotes and looking awkward. Each night of the convention, there was a comedy showcase of

11 Flood's use of the term "nigga," I believe was a colloquial reference to black male comics. During the FICA convention, Flood initiated numerous conversations about disparity between black female and male comics, in terms of pay, representation at comedy venues, and treatment by promoters, etc. For a historical analysis of the term "nigger," or "nigga," see Randall Kennedy, *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (New York: Random House, 2002). For a comic's autobiographical perspective on what the term "nigger," means, see Dick Gregory with Robert Lipsyte, *Nigger: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964).

about ten women, headlined by Thea Vidale. On the second night, I nervously dressed and prepared at the hotel for my comedy showcase with Chambers and Johnson. We sat together at The J Spot and they encouraged me and promised to laugh at my jokes. Until that point, though I had been writing jokes and routines for more than a year, I had only performed at open-mics and I had trouble thinking of myself as a comedian, and part of this community of comedians.

Besides Aisha Tyler, who returned a written interview of pre-determined questions via email, all interviews were conducted in-person and audio recorded. The convention was packed with events, so the interviews happened during down times in the foyer of the comedy club, after breakfast in the parking lot of the hotel where most of us stayed, and I recorded a double interview with Vanessa Chambers and Niroma Johnson as I drove us all from the hotel to The J Spot. All other interviews were conducted at various cafés in the Bay Area, lasting between half an hour to two hours. I offered to use pseudonyms in the study, but all informants declined, underscoring their desire to be publicly known.

The stage as a zone of freedom

Self-definition

The struggle for authenticity is a continuing trope in African American performance history, especially in the era of late capitalism, where there is a high premium in popular cultural production on "keeping it real." In previous chapters, we have discussed the role of truth telling and how notions of "real blackness" creep into black women's comedy as a means to both validate their life experiences and refute representational racial and gender stereotypes. Being true to one's life experience on stage is an important trope of black women's stand-up, but it is also a convention of stand-up comedy in general, as a measure of one's distinct and authentic voice. Caught in the snare of historical stereotypes that are wittingly and unwittingly reinforced within the popular cultural machine, black women performers and artists struggle to publicly convey the heterogeneity of their experiences.

This struggle over representation has played out in stand-up comedy, a genre that is indeed supple enough to accommodate black women's diverse subjectivities. In fact, stand-up is a structure of performance enabling black women to publicly declare their authentic selfhood, comics often explicitly proclaim their comic personae as authentic representations of their "true" selves. The stage is a zone of freedom wherein they are at liberty to define themselves through narratives and in performative gestures; take refuge from life's hardships; break down representational stereotypes; and grapple with and express feminist politics. I begin with a live performance by one of the most well-known black women stand-ups, Whoopi Goldberg, who in a rare live stand-up show at the *Treasure Island* casino in Las Vegas in March of 2011, used stand-up to define herself.

Clad in a knee-length white linen button down blouse, dark skinny jeans, a loose fitting blazer, and Adidas sneakers with protruding angel wings, Whoopi Goldberg limped out onstage at *Treasure Island* with confidence and intensity. The crowd of a few thousand—seemingly diverse in age, race, and class, stood on our feet as she entered, clapping to the beat of the Black Eyed Peas song "I Gotta Feeling," as Goldberg danced along for the entire four minutes, her signature round spectacles perched at the end of her nose. As an Academy Award winner who has come to be recognized most visibly as an actress, her first order of business is to orient the audience about how to read her as a stand-up comic. "This is me," she explained through

spasmodic cheering and clapping, "this is not like 'The View'…this is not *Sister Act*." Though she has worked in theater, film, and television, stand-up comedy allows Goldberg to enact a subjectivity that is closer to a truer vision she has of herself, and her desire to make that distinction for her audience signals that they should watch and listen to her differently from the roles and portrayals which have come to discursively define her in popular culture, most notably, her Oscar-winning role as medium Oda Mae Brown in the film *Ghost* (1990), and as co-host on ABC's daytime talk show *The View*.

Even on *The View* as a host who presents her often confrontational, yet jocular commentary on politics and popular culture, Goldberg wants her audience to understand that she is constrained, but in her stand-up she is free to unrestrainedly express her opinions—raw, uncensored, and without regard for those whom she might offend. For almost two hours, Goldberg embarks on a vulgarity-laced rant typical of observational humor about celebrities like Charlie Sheen, Chris Brown, Sarah Palin and Donald Trump. "I'm on a show called *The View*, and I'm constantly in trouble. You know what? Fuck Bill O'Reilly!" The crowd claps and cheers for several seconds before Goldberg continues, "I'm tired of everyone getting painted with the same brush. That's why if I have a different opinion, it's a different conversation." On television, Goldberg finds it difficult to be candid about her social and political opinions without the threat of censure, but the utterance, "Fuck Bill O'Reilly!" in her comic routine enacts freedom of expression that stand-up comedy can manifest.

Stand-up comics like Goldberg who have reached high levels of professional success are more visible and tend to shoulder what Kobena Mercer (1990) terms the burden of representation, a phenomenon where a few popular images of black people result in mainstream society believing "all black people are like that."[12] Celebrity comics, especially those who started out as comics and achieved mainstream success as actresses, must make clear breaks in their stand-up from the characters they embody in other media, and distinguish themselves by presenting their "authentic" selves. The desire for self-definition drives mainstream comics like Goldberg and Mo'Nique to explicitly differentiate themselves from roles they've played vis-à-vis confining, and sometimes-disrespectful popular discourse that surrounds those performances. After winning an Academy Award for her role in the film *Prescious* (2009), Mo'Nique embarked on a national stand-up comedy tour, "Spread the Love," in April of 2010. Mo'Nique performed live at the Paramount Theater in Oakland, CA, and like Whoopi Goldberg, she began her performance by declaring her comic persona as the "real" her.

Mo'Nique dances from behind the velvet curtains, vigorously gyrating in the style of Beyonce's "Uh-oh" dance, the crowd exploding to its feet. In her trademark manner, she begins her set by degrading "skinny bitches." People continue arriving to their seats in the front row and she welcomes them, "Come on big bitches, sit your fat asses down!" ordering the "skinny bitches" not to sit in the front row. Her black cocktail dress is strapless and the tight bodice with a flowing skirt defines her svelte figure. Her toned calves glisten as she sashays across the stage in her stiletto heels, moving continuously to the beat of the music. Her hair, a dark brown curly lace-front wig, bounces with her motions and her enormous diamond earrings sparkle under the spotlight. "Fuck y'all, I been workin' the fuck out, trying to get this shit in order! I don't have high blood pressure. *Or* sugar." Weight loss is a personal choice for her, not a health necessity. One day, she explains to the audience, her husband was "fucking her up against a wall," and as

12 Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation," *Third text: Third world perspectives on art and culture*, No. 10, (Spring 1990), 63.

he picked her up they fell. "In the sweetest voice," he asked, "how much do you weigh?" "And I said proudly," the audience, seemingly already knowing the answer, echoes "PROUDLY!" "262 pounds." "That's too much baby," her husband replied, "I want you for a lifetime." [Performing jump-n-jacks] "I got up that night!" The woman sitting next to me shouts words of encouragement at Mo'Nique, "Go in, bitch!" she implores. "If you wanna know about me, ask *me*," Mo'Nique concludes, "don't read the magazines."[13]

Even though Mo'Nique has branded herself an unashamed plus-sized comedienne, she is considerably slimmer than she has been since she began her career as a stand-up in the 90s. Mo'Nique's commentary on skinny women[14] helped solidify her comic persona as a proud plus-sized funny woman. As Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant notes, "the strength of Black women is often an ironic inversion of their deviance and a reflection of Black culture and white society's failure to take seriously Black women's oppression."[15] Contrasted with the visual imagery of a new, slimmer body, these competing ideas signify a public confrontation between the old persona of Mo'Nique who used humor to deal with the social stigma of being overweight, by inverting it into an aggressively powerful quality, almost always fully-covered by non-revealing attire—and the new, yet familiar person who is so comfortable in her skin that declaration is less necessary than its revelation in her dress and gesture. Her performance and declaration that she has been working out to get healthy signals to her audience and critics that her success (personal and professional) is the result of the hard work and dedication, and not the "easy" route of weight loss surgery, which some African American celebrities like lawyer and journalist Starr Jones and meteorologist Al Roker have been accused.

Throughout her routine, Mo'Nique jokes about her proclivity to be "blue." L.H. Stallings argues for black women comics, blue material develops as a response to racial and gender oppression that marks black women as either asexual or hypersexual,[16] allowing them a means of expressing desire. "I don't know how to be politically correct, especially in interviews," Mo'Nique begins a joke. A journalist once asked that since she was so vulgar on stage, does she curse at her children? Mo'Nique retorted "Are you out of your motherfucking mind, you son of a whore?" The crowd bursts into laughter as she curses, loudly cheering and guffawing. "Don't cussing feel good?" she asks the audience, "cussing will keep your pressure down." As a child, she knew she "was gonna be a cusser." Later in the routine, Mo'Nique asks rhetorically, "Who the fuck are we behaving for? This is who we are!" Blue material is a technique of expressing sexual desire, but it is also a mode of pleasure itself and means of conveying the quality of sassiness, or, that one is happily out of place.

Like Whoopi Goldberg, Mo'Nique's profligate use of profanity is an indicator of quotidian authenticity. Both Goldberg and Mo'Nique use cursing to distinguish between their

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13 On February 27, 2008, the popular tabloid website mediatakeout.com ran the story, "RUMOR: Comedian Mo'Nique May Be Getting Her Stomach Stapled." The report reads, "Word is that she's been laying low and recovering from the surgery. And that, if all goes according to plans, she'll have her new physique in time for summer. Say it ain't so Mo'. You were always saying how proud you were to be a big girl." http://www.mediatakeout.com/21939/rumor_comedian_monique_may_be_getting_her_stomach_stapled.html. Visited 1 April 2013.

14 For example, see Mo'Nique's memoir, *Skinny Women are Evil: Notes of a Big Girl in a Small-Minded World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

15 Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, "Strong and Large Black Women?: Exploring Relationships between Deviant Womanhood and Weight," *Gender and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (feb., 2003), 114.

16 Stallings, *Mutha is Half a Word*, 115.

television personas and their authentic selves. Talking like everyday people (which is a distinct invocation of class ideology that can be read as buying into stereotypes about how lower-class people talk), the comedians become people and not personas, and more relatable to their audiences. Mo'Nique has a drawn out series of jokes about Oprah Winfrey, Michelle Obama, and Harriet Tubman, African American women in the American popular culture imaginary who have been alternately praised as symbol of progress and the subjects to degrading stereotypes. As Mo'Nique points out, these women also "wanna cuss a motherfucker out."

Melissa Harris-Perry discusses the link between race, gender and shame in *Sister Citizen* (2011), pointing out the material consequences of accumulated feelings of shame for black women. Shame is response to social alienation she argues, with material consequences for black women. "Shame causes the body to release the steroid hormone cortisol," and further, "African American women are structurally positioned to experience shame more frequently than others. As a group they possess a number of stigmatized identities and life circumstances: more likely to be poor, to be unmarried, to parent children alone, to be overweight."[17] In fact, "cursing someone out," is a trope of contemporary black women's stand-up— a way of using performance to managing feelings of social rejection by demonstrating one's ability to speak freely and candidly about issues that cause one to feel ashamed and/or stressed out. Using humor in "cussing a motherfucker out" is a technique with potential health benefits for black women comics and their audiences (heralding the adage laughter is the best medicine), releasing built up stress for the performer in the performance, and for the audience in their intersubjective laughter.

Whatever potentiality the trope of cursing someone out may hold as an element of BWCL, we must remember that depending on the audience, black women's enactments of this kind of sass may not always have positive outcomes. In fact, stereotypes of the "angry black woman" rely on superficial and essentialist readings of black women's public performances, especially with audiences illiterate to sass's subversive potential, and not simply bald expressions of anger. "The "angry black woman" stereotype may have its origins in "the shame-rage spiral," Harris-Perry reminds us and "In an effort to protect their core sense of worth, black women must shunt some of the demeaning and painful stereotypes away from themselves." Humor is "an effective, if sometimes destructive, way to accomplish this self-protection,"[18] a fraught, yet productive means of diverting the corporeal realities of shame, stress, and anger.

Stand-up comedy as a refuge

Black women comics define themselves in their routines by narrating their lives and experiences. Stand-up is also a refuge where they can retreat from them. Kamané Malvo Marshall, who uses the stage name Queenie TT, uses stand-up to cope with a long-term illness and issues that arise from her morbid obesity. I interviewed Marshall in July of 2011 at a café in Berkeley, CA and we talked about how she has been able to use humor to alleviate stress and vent about her battle with illness, being disabled, and feeling alienated because of her weight and interracial marriage.

17 Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 106.
18 Ibid, 123.

"When I started doing comedy, I was sick. It became a way to stay here, to stay current."[19] Since 2008, Marshall has been battling Graves Disease, for which she was treated with radiation therapy. She began gaining weight after treatment, more than 200 pounds. After being diagnosed with the crippling illness lymphedema, which caused her legs to swell so full of fluid that she could barely walk, and still a young newlywed and in her late twenties, she went into congestive heart failure and remained in the hospital for months recovering. During this time, she explained, she entered a period of deep self-examination and revelation, making connections between her physical and mental health. From this experience came her first book, *Praise Be to the Plus-Sized Sister* (2009), which included "seven characters, seven stories of redemption." It took seven characters, she explained, "for me to figure out my own personal psychosis. But it was healing."[20] She began doing stand-up by reading from her book at open mics, "It was really just me talking about personal stuff, my struggle with weight. My struggle with the fact that I'm legally disabled, but I don't see myself like that."[21] A few weeks after our first interview, I attended "The Funniest Woman in Berkeley" comedy competition at the Marsh Theater and I watched Marshall use her comic persona, Queenie TT, who characterizes herself as "America's Favorite Sister-Girl."[22] Here, she had a conversation with her audience about what it means for her to walk through life in the body she inhabits.

The Marsh is a small theater, seating about one hundred and is jam-packed with a mostly white audience. Unlike traditional comedy clubs, The Marsh serves only soft drinks, no liquor. An intimacy is necessarily generated from the low reddish lights and the damp warmth of the small, crowded room. Queenie TT stood on the perimeter wall, waiting for her turn. When her name was called, she slowly mounted the stage, the crowd quiet and waiting. "My name is Queenie TT," she almost shrieks, turning to reveal the profile of her figure, shimmying her backside. "That means *tremendous tail*! Anglo-Saxons, I'm your sister too. You wanna know why?" The crowd is mostly silent. "Because I have seven and a half inches of Irishman in me on a regular and consistent basis!" On stage, Queenie TT is exuberant, delivering her jokes with energy and positivity. Silence. "Close your mouth white woman." A roar of laughter. Marshall's comic persona bridges her daily experiences of feeling marginal with the relief and liberation emerging from making jokes about those experiences as the character Queenie TT.

> "It [stand-up] is just a place to say stuff that I, Kamané Malvo Marshall, the wife, the Christian, the intellectual, can't say that will be excused socially. But Queenie can say whatever she wants, because she is a Queen. She is a place that I can go that is just a safe space for me to go and let it all hang out. She is the character I created that I can put all my pain into."[23]

Marshall's autobiographical book provided a framework for exploring different parts of her life, and she generated a comic character that helped her better understand her experiences, and most importantly, find a pleasurable way of talking about them. Furthermore, feelings of freedom and pleasure that unfold from black women's performance of stand-up comedy become elements in their lives and transform their personalities off the stage too. I interviewed via email

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19 Kamané Malvo Marshall. Personal Interview. 30 July 2011 (Marshall).
20 Kamané Malvo Marshall, *Praise Be to the Plus-Sized Sister* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2009).
21 Marshall (interview).
22 Comedienne Queenie TT, *Making Calories Sexy*. Self- produced DVD, 2012.
23 Marshall (Interview).

comedian, actress, and television personality Aisha Tyler, who grew up in San Francisco, CA and gained mainstream success on the 90s NBC sitcom *Friends*, and is now cohost *The Talk* on CBS. Tyler is also the voice of Lana Kane on the FX adult cartoon series *Archer*. Her response to my question "how has stand-up comedy shaped who you are as a person, off the stage," reveals the nuances of how persona and person become interconnected for stand-ups, and how feelings of freedom during performance become essential to black women's practices of self-making.

> "I would argue that who I am as a person has shaped my stand-up comedy more, in that the more comfortable I become in my own skin, the funnier I get. But performing has also made me a freer person, in that I value honesty more, feel less constrained by social mores, and more willing to speak the truth both on stage and off. Part of becoming a good standup comedian is destroying the brain-mouth barrier that prevents most people from speaking before considering how others will perceive it. Successful destruction of this filter is critical to being a funny standup, but it can occasionally result in one saying the wrong thing in social situations. It's the price you pay."[24]

Breaking down stereotypes in stand-up comedy

Self-definition is an important trope of black women's stand-up, and conversely, defining who *one is not* is an equally important project. In fact, deeply embedded historical stereotypes about black women can be broken down using humor. Enactments of narrative "unnaming," disrupt confining discourses of race, gender, and sexuality by claiming "I am not what you say I am."[25] Despite being an Emmy-award winning comedy writer, Wanda Sykes was overlooked in *Ebony* magazine's recent "Biggest, Baddest Comedy Issue Ever." One reason Sykes may have been neglected is her homosexuality, a long-held taboo in African American communities, though it is abating recently, especially in the wake of President Barack Obama's public and continued support for marriage equality. However, the glaring omission of Sykes in the African American comic canon in the oldest continuously black-owned publication speaks to some of the challenges black women face in being recognized and affirmed as artists and thinkers in mainstream, as well as black culture.

One way black women work to overcome the obstacle of historical erasure and overrepresentation as flattened stereotypical archetypes is to break them down in stand-up comedy. Glenda Carpio (2008) investigates the limits of using humor to redress slavery, namely the grotesque and absurdist humor of Richard Pryor and Dave Chappelle, respectively. Early in their careers, she argues, both comics effectively dislodged the painful legacy of slavery by "transform[ing] stereotypes into objects of laughter."[26] Yet as their incisive humor catapulted them to fame, it became more difficult to "get inside the racist imagination without adding to its power."[27] Wanda Sykes is a political humorist, who, since coming out as a lesbian in 2008, has used stand-up as a framework to advocate for women's freedom of choice and to break down stereotypes of both black lesbianism and the mammy figure.

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24 Aisha Tyler. Personal Interview (email). 16 April 2011 (Tyler).
25 Stallings, *Mutha is Half a Word*, 37.
26 Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill,* 80.
27 Ibid, 115.

What is interesting is that like Pryor and Chappelle, Sykes is interested in aggressively interrupting and redressing legacies of slavery, but instead of mobilizing the absurdity or grotesqueness of stereotypes, she transforms them via narratives of her personal life. In October of 2010, Sykes performed at the Mountainview Winery in Saratoga Springs, CA outside of San Jose, spending the majority of her hour an a half set discussing life with her wife who is a white Frenchwoman, and their twin toddlers who are biologically white. Sykes bit about the trials and tribulations of raising bilingual and bicultural children brings some interesting issues to light.

> So the babies call her *maman*. And uh, for me, it's Mommy. And that's how I know Olivia doesn't like me. She goes, *maman*, *maman* and it's just very pretty when she says that to my wife. But for me she goes [pause] mammy [burst of laughter]. See…see what I'm saying? She has no idea how close she's come to me smacking the shit out of her. I love my daughter, but when I hear mammy…I had to catch myself a couple of times. *Maman*, *maman*…mammy. I ain't your fucking mammy, hear? Keep it up, you keep it up! Little cracker ass baby!

First, Sykes highlights the gender parity between she and her wife, yet their children's parental tags mark their cultural difference. Further, her daughter accidentally calling her "mammy," instead of mommy, marks the two mothers' racial difference. The crowds' laughter sonically signals a moment of reflection on the meaning of the idea of a black mammy, especially its incongruity as an antiquated term used congruously in the context of a black mother, Sykes, who is in fact raising white children. Sykes begins a conversation under the guise of humor about the reality and challenges of raising white children as a woman of color in a society that sees them as caretakers of white children and not mothers. Moreover, Sykes verbalization of the term "mammy" acts as a throwback reference that lets the audience create distance between themselves and the racist and misogynistic ideology that underlie its utterance, that distance enacted in their laughter. Essentially, Sykes directs her frustration at her infant daughter, who is a metonym for general social and cultural ignorance. This comic displacement of her daughter softens the sharp socio-political commentary and Sykes can talk about her life in a way that is connected to broader conversations about race, class, and gender. In so doing, Sykes publicly destabilizes and rejects the idea of black lesbians as "unwomen," and black women caring for white children as mammies.

Aggression without confrontation

As we have learned in previous chapters, humor is a powerful means to mediate aggression. However, when black women comics are already perceived as aggressive, loud, and brash, their comic performances can be sapped of their potency, forcing them to work against ideas that they are merely "angry black women," who are just "cursing somebody out," vulgarity a surrogate for wit. Harris-Perry reminds us of the damaging effect of the over-determination of black women's perceived strength. "What is so dangerous about the 'Angry Black Woman' stereotype" she argues, is "it holds Black women responsible for power they do not possess, power that is, in fact, being utilized in very real ways by members of other social groups who can

claim emotional innocence as they hide behind, and persecute the 'Black bitches' of our cultural imaginations."[28]

During the process of interviewing more than 10 black women comics, an interesting trend emerged amongst several comedians. Separately, four comics—Naomi Ekperigin from New York City, Niroma Johnson from Albany, NY, Vanessa Chambers from Long Island, NY, and Khristee Rich from San Francisco, CA—all asserted in their interviews that they are not interested in the typical strategy and trope of stand-up comedy of "battling" with one's audiences, an especially popular practice of black stand-up comedy.[29] The four comics' explanation of anti-confrontational comic techniques indicates that some black women comics are attempting to reach beyond typical strategies of displaying comic dexterity and potency. Contrary to popular perceptions, black women comics do indeed mobilize aggressive wit, but not all are rigid and confrontational.

Naomi Ekperigin is a 27-year-old comic who grew up in Harlem and got her start doing improv theater at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. Ekperigin was one of the few African Americans in her improv group, yet she was able to develop her talent because of the liberal, "loosey goosey" atmosphere of her small liberal arts college. "Everyone was about owning their differences, their otherness," she explained. When she performs stand-up, she uses her own life as the foundation of her routine. "I don't wanna go up on that stage and alienate you, cause then it's gonna be awkward."[30] Ekperigin's own awkwardness is the subject of her humor and she highlights her experiences of alienation. She aggressively does so in her stand-up, but without being aggressive toward her audience. This strategy enables her to focus her humor sharply, while at the same time creating a distinction between her as a black woman and confining stereotypes of black women comics.

> "Would you say you are outside the mainstream?" I asked Ekperigin. "I think I am," she responded, "because I don't think I can be easily pegged. I can give you both. I am aware of what you expect to see. Sassy…my least favorite word ever. But I love it. Because you'll hear it, and they'll say my name. And by sassy, you mean black. But I'm smart. My jokes aren't gonna be as simple as "Did you ever notice this and this…[but] personal stories."[31]

In her stand-up comedy routines, which we will explore more closely later, Ekperigin, like Wanda Sykes, breaks down stereotypes of black women by embodying and articulating an alternative rendition. She is one of the few stand-ups who rejected the label "sassy," because for her, it connotes a simple and narrow definition of blackness that is confining and uncomfortable. In her stand-up, Ekperigin performs what Daphne Brooks terms "afro-alienation acts," a

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28 Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 93.

29 Mintz categorizes this practice as "working the room," a practice of engaging audience members that helps loosen them up and prepare them for an atmosphere of laughter. The ritual insults of the audience, he argues, often relax them, making the audience feel less vulnerable. See Mintz "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," pp. 78-79. William Keough, however, articulates the violence inherent in the adversarial stance taken by some stand-ups against their audiences: "A comic enters, takes the mic, and tries to 'destroy' his audience with some feints, a few well-placed jabs, a haymaker or two. His job is to deliver the payoff, the punch line." In *Punchlines: the Violence of American Humor* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 171.

30 Naomi Ekperigin. Personal Interview. 10 August 2011 (Ekperigin).

31 Ibid.

performative strategy in which she critically defamiliarizes her body (via speech and gesture) to "invent ways to maintain the integrity" of her body as a "site of intellectual knowledge, philosophical vision, and aesthetic worth."[32]

"We all recovering from something," Niroma Johnson explains. Johnson is a 56-year-old recovering crack addict who uses the stage name Sweet Chocolate and has been performing stand-up since the 1990s. Johnson began performing as a comic at Narcotics Anonymous (NA) conventions, where she performed for charity. "God gave me a gift, and I'm finally using it," Johnson intimated. "I was very shy. And drugs gave me false confidence. And now I'm in recovery, and I got confidence, ok? I'm not shy as much as I used to be. But my shyness hides in my humor."[33] Like Ekperigin, but in a glaringly different way, as a former drug addict and prostitute, Johnson became accustomed to life on the margins, and those personal experiences provide enough comic material for her routines and she needs not marginalize the audience just for a laugh. "I'm not the type to put you down, what you got on and all that,"[34] she explained.

Khristee Rich, an actress-turned comedian born in raised in Ridgefield, CT, now living and performing in the San Francisco Bay Area, and is also averse to using her audience as fodder for her humor. "I'm a very clean comedian, which is a little bit refreshing. A lot of comedians today, men and women, are dark and bitter and crude and vulgar. Even putting down the audience—which I never understood. I hope that I have a more optimistic outlook on life than they do, just not be[ing]so hard and broken as they are."[35] It is tough these days to find an African American woman comic whose act is exclusively clean, "comic cleanliness" being another instantiation of marginality in a performance industry in which, as Limon argues, "the audience demands to be outraged not to be outraged."[36] Rich's comic cleanliness is an anti-aggressive and non-confrontational performance ethos that distances her from who she sees as typical comics doing typical comedy. Her optimism and positivity on the stage is also interestingly linked to her overall attitude, highlighting again the connection between performance and self-making.

I interviewed Vanessa Chambers, a comic in her early 40s who goes by the stage name Big Ness, in the spring of 2012 in Los Angeles at the FICA convention. Her commentary on performer-audience relations points to some of the imperatives and paradoxes of heckling audience members. "One thing I hate is to snap on people. But if you bring it, you gonna get it! I don't wanna hurt nobody's feelings. People are coming out to feel good, you know. You got some people that's freaks like that, that'll sit right in the front just to get snapped on. You know, but I have enough funny stuff that happened to me in *my* life."[37] As we can see, snapping on the audience is an accepted technique of stand-up, even expected and appreciated by some audience members. It is also a necessary tactic of defense from hecklers. But for Chambers, it is more important to spend her time telling her truth rather than telling an audience what she thinks about them. Not attacking audience members, even if playfully, is a crucial decision that some black women comics can make to distinguish themselves and recover from images of the "angry black woman," or the "black bitch," which can blunt their messages and inhibit the audience from engaging the stories they are trying to tell about themselves.

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32 Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 6-8.
33 Niroma Johnson. Personal Interview. 27 April 2012 (N. Johnson).
34 Ibid.
35 Khristee Rich. Personal Interview. 6 August 2011 (Rich).
36 Limon, *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory*, 23.
37 Vanessa Chambers. Personal Interview. 27 April 2012 (Chambers).

Stand-up comedy and feminist politics

I included the previous passages to demonstrate that black women comics are not a monolithic group, but individuals who mobilize myriad tactics and make pointed decisions about how they want to publicly define themselves. Stand-up comics rely on their distinct voices on a foundation of personal choice, and as such, stand-up comedy is structurally a form of feminist performance, a discursive practice meant to reflect and/or manifest the struggle for women's universal and unfettered choice. Feminist performance is an outstanding means by which black women can enact feminist politics, which as bell hooks notes, is the struggle against the absence of choices.[38] Naomi Ekperigin, for example, performed at The Purple Onion comedy club in San Francisco, CA for the "5 Funny Females" national tour in August of 2011, and made a joke about bearing children that underlines this point.

> I don't want kids. However you wanna live your life, fine by me. Whatever you wanna do behind closed doors. But when I think about all the reasons to have kids, they're not good enough reasons. I would wanna see what it would look like. I would like to create a…master race of baby Baracks. And, I would like to say, 'I'm eating for two," without people judging me. And those are not reasons to bring a life into the world."

Without explicitly naming it such, Ekperigin's bit is an enactment of feminist performance. First, she makes a claim for reproductive choice, according that same freedom to others without judgment. Secondly, she subtly alludes to having an interracial relationship (President Barack Obama is biracial), a topic that comes up later in her set. Though not inherently feminist, the belief that one has the undeniable choice and right to engage in an interracial relationship as a human right is in line with a feminist ethos. And finally, Ekperigin's desire to "eat for two," signals a feminist politics of food, that one should have the choice to eat until one is satisfied, without fear of judgment based on the amount.

Feminist politics take as many forms as there are black women stand-ups.[39] In fact, some comics use humor to convey ambivalence about feminist practices. I met Karinda Dobbins at a comedy show at the Layover Bar in downtown Oakland, CA in the summer of 2010 and had the

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38 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 2nd edition, (New York: South End Press, 2000), 5.

39 Black feminisms are multiple and varying in methodology, and are especially attuned to class ideology. For example, Patricia Hill Collins elucidates a sociopolitical brand of academic black feminism in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990); Angela Y. Davis examines working-class black feminism in the music of early 20th century blues women in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1999); meanwhile, Toni Cade's 1970 edited volume, *The Black Woman: An Anthology* uses personal narratives to illuminate a quotidian black feminism. Toni Morrison's oeuvre demonstrates a literary enactment of black feminism. Hip-hop feminism is a contemporary transformation of feminist praxis, explored in *Home Girls Make Some Noise!: Hip-hop Feminism Anthology* (2007), ed. Gwendolyn D. Pough, and *Wish to Live: The Hip-hop Feminism Pedagogy Reader* (2012), eds. Ruth Nicole Brown and Chamara Jewel Kwakye. See also Joan Morgan's interpretation of hip-hop feminism, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (2000).

chance to watch her perform live in several venues from comedy clubs, to hole in the wall bars, and the LGBT community center in San Francisco, CA during Pride Week. Dobbins describes her comic style as "witty, thought-provoking social commentary."[40] Indeed, Dobbins does take on a variety of social and political issues in her comedy that specifically affect her.

"I think I have a different voice than a lot of comedians I've heard. I have a very unique perspective. I'm black. I'm a woman. I'm gay. And I work in corporate America. It's a very unique set of circumstances."[41] Dobbins is originally from Detroit, and came out as a lesbian in 2008. When she moved to the Bay Area, she explained, she struggled to fit in. At the "Tomboy Comedy Show" at the LGBT Center in San Francisco, Dobbins joked about Bay Area progressive and feminist practices. "You know what, it's been a little difficult for me to adjust to the lesbians in California. The lesbians out here, they want me to grow my hair out natural. And uh, plant some organic vegetables in my back yard. When you go out on a date with them, they like to start out with a little light conversation, you know, about communism, composting, and carbon footprints. I don't know you like that." Dobbins uses humor to shed light on the potentially regressive nature of any politics. For her, the seemingly progressive practices of wearing unprocessed hairstyles and "going green," are not inherently progressive if one is not given the opportunity to freely make that choice.

Dobbins' humor is effective because it lands on the progressive political community that is her target audience. "KPFA is my audience," she explains in an interview over lunch, "women who are very politically engaged, very in tune to what's going on in the world. They don't take all those things, sexism, womanism lying down. They have a voice. And they have an outlet for it. And they love to hear someone who acknowledges some of those same things."[42] Explicitly stated or not, a feminist ethos permeates contemporary black women's stand-up comedy.

> "Part of my own feminist philosophy," Aisha Tyler maintains, "is that women should be free to express themselves in whatever way they feel critical or necessary to their own professional or creative work. So the way that is reflected in my standup is by expressing my ideas and opinions as they truly are, without filter or reflection, even when those ideas and opinions might not be seen as either traditionally feminist or particularly feminine. The most important thing for a comedian, and my goal first and foremost, is to be completely and fully myself onstage, without hesitation or self-editing. Everything else falls from that approach."[43]

Tyler unequivocally considers herself a feminist and makes a powerful point about how her personal identity as a feminist interacts with her chosen profession as a comic, and further, makes the case that the ability to cultivate and use one's talents and intellect to reach one's highest potential, is the essence of feminist practice. Stand-up comedy can be zones of freedom for black women, spaces where they use a variety of techniques to define themselves in the process of making people laugh. Humor is a powerful mode of communication, and the public performance of it in stand-up is also a potent means by which some black women comics overcome roadblocks that prevent them from realizing their potential.

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40 Karinda Dobbins. Personal Interview. 9 July 2011 (Dobbins).
41 Dobbins.
42 Dobbins.
43 Tyler.

Public performance as a means to mitigate self-doubt

Stand-up and self-esteem

Throughout this dissertation, historical stereotypes that degrade and devalue black women have been a recurring theme. I want to come back to it here to explore how some black women comics use humor to cope with and mitigate issues of low self-esteem. Some of the interviews I conducted and live performances I viewed show stand-up comedy as more than merely an art form and profession, but for several black women comics, public performance allows them to confront and surmount feelings and experiences of shame, alienation and disgust. Humor facilitates the process of public self-examination that some comics undertake, which ultimately helps them mitigate feelings of self-doubt. Kamané Malvo Marshall (Queenie TT) is one such comic for whom stand-up comedy is both a career and a powerful means of self-affirmation.

> "Low self-esteem began to manifest itself physically. My thyroid disease is a self-attacking disease. [With] low self-esteem, you are attacking yourself. I believe that God had to exaggerate the point for me to just really…I used to do all this stuff, hair, nails, dressed to the nines…all this exterior stuff just to be like I'm plus-sized but I'm beautiful. But behind closed doors, I didn't believe it."[44]

One of the ways Marshall attacked herself was with food, and jokes, by their very nature of demanding a problem that needs resolution became a framework by which she could examine the psychological issues that caused her to turn to food to deal with her problems. Marshall's comic persona Queenie TT is a manifestation of her self-examination who she turns to, not to resolve her illness and alienation, but to affirm and accept herself for who she is. Queenie TT is a character, yet she is essentially part of Marshall's personality who enables her to mount the stage, even though her weight very conspicuously marginalizes her. At the "Funniest Woman in Berkeley" competition, she brings her husband on stage at the beginning of her set, "Together, we are the interracial number 10," she jokes, her husband smiles and returns to the back of the club to record her routine. "And he loves *all* of this," she gestures with one hand "from the rooter to the tooter. Stretch marks included. I just tell him follow the lines. Cause they *do* lead to a sweet spot." The audience is laughing, but it is low and uncomfortable.

As she talks unashamedly about her active sex life and brings her husband on stage to prove its veracity, Marshall engages in an act of self-creation where she makes a spectacle of her appetite, both for food and sex. Her husband authenticates her narrative and helps her to craft herself as a desiring and desired subject. In this moment, "eroticism, rather than monstrosity, defines her identity as a performer…"[45] The large black woman is a well-known figure who is often lauded for her strength and power in mainstream and African American communities. As Cheryl Townsend Gilkes (2001) maintains, "In spite of the high premium placed on culturally

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44 Marshall.

45 Abigail Dennis, "The Spectacle of Her Gluttony": The Performance of Female Appetite and the Bakhtinian Grotesque in Angela Carter's "Nights at the Circus," *Journal of Modern Literature,* Vol. 31, No. 4 (Summer, 2008), 117.

exalted images of white female beauty and the comedic exploitation that surrounds the large black woman, many African-American women know that the most respected physical image of black women, within and outside of the community, is that of the large woman."[46] Yet Marshall highlights the myth of the strong black woman literally, as a weight. Marshall uses humor to point out her problems and her character is a conduit through which she performs the idea that she is still worthy of being loved, and the name of her self-produced comedy DVD, "Making Calories Sexy," is apropos of that self-affirmation.

Humor as a shame-management strategy

Stereotypes are not benign, even when they are seemingly positive, like the strong black woman archetype. They are misrepresentations that have material consequences for black women, one of which is feelings of isolation and social shame, defined by Harris-Perry as "a response to a real or imagined audience," that happens "when we transgress a social boundary or break a community expectation," causing us to "fear exposure and evaluation by others."[47] Black women use a variety of strategies to cope with shame, and as Harris-Perry argues, the strong black woman persona is a one such device. Further, humor is a "shame management strategy," that enables black women to publicly disclose intimate details about their lives and diffuse shame's isolating effects. Naomi Ekperigin's experience as a black child in a mostly white private school precipitated feelings of alienation both at school and in her home life, and her sense of humor helped her cope with those feelings.

> "I went to school in Harlem until 6th grade," she explained, "then private school on the upper east side…that was a very dark time. At Catholic school they stopped letting me participate in spelling bees…cause I was winning. And they would just send me graded tests. And my mother was like, 'Oh no, no, no, no, no. You need to be *challenged*.' "And then you went to private school?" I asked. "Yes, and then I was both challenged and broken…I went to this school where I didn't look like anybody…like rich kids. It's like 'Gossip Girl,' like, straight up and down, 'Gossip Girl.' So I learned very quickly, you better get a personality. And the first couple of years I was really shy. I used to be painfully shy. I would cry every day. I didn't like attention. My mother, if we went to a restaurant and something was wrong, I couldn't say anything. I wasn't that person who would be outgoing. But I reached this point where was kinda just like, well, you ain't got nothing to lose."[48]

Ekperigin's racial and class difference from her schoolmates caused her to feel isolated from them, so she avoided calling attention to those differences. Her experience of marginalization at school negatively affected her life outside of it and robbed her of ability to speak. Ekperigin's sense of humor, however, helped her develop a personality and overcome her inability to speak. "Once I hit 8th grade [or] 9th grade, I realized I could be funny. I realized I was fast, like quick thinking. Dumb puns and plays on language. I was very silly, very goofy.

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46 Cheryl Townsend Gilkes*, If it wasn't for the women…,"* 183.

47 Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, 104.

48 Ekperigin.

But I realized that people liked me."[49] Ekperigin's experience at a school with mostly white peers manifested changes in her affect that created distance between her and her family, which remains today and affects her sense of racial belonging. "My mom though, and even my family now in Detroit, they don't know what to do with me. Like, we're starting to slowly get along. You know. I talk white. Like, all these various things that nobody really knew. They were like, who are you? You're weird."[50] Ekperigin's perceived "talking white," manifested feelings of racial shame, which affected her level of self-esteem.

In her routine on the "5 Funny Females" tour at The Purple Onion, Ekperigin performs a bit that gets at the painful reality of what low self-esteem feels like for her.

> "I used to drink to feel pretty." Someone in the audience audibly agrees, "Mm hmm." "So when you do that, you know, you make mistakes." There is a second of silence before Ekperigin continues for the awkward punch line that does elicit laughter. "No one, no one else drinks to feel pretty. Oh ok, fine you're better than me? Please. But now that I'm through with drinking to feel pretty, I'm spending a lot of time watching genetic anomalies on TLC. Serial killer documentaries. Something about, like, watching "Born Without a Face" that helps you put things in perspective, you know? You stop saying, 'why didn't he call me?' This girl in India has eight limbs!"

Marginality and isolation fuel Ekperigin's bit and she shares a painful and intimate detail of her life. The laughter she evokes helps her manage feelings of shame that stem from the double isolation she experienced in her school and home life. "I'm doing what they call the *alt scene*, which is basically bar shows, writers, guys from *The Onion*, *Funny of Die*. *That* alt scene. You have that, and then you have the club comic, kind of the everyman. The alt comic is more of a personality. Usually, they're like, weird, neurotic, awkward."[51] The alt comedy scene thrives on awkwardness and the quirky, and is well-matched with Ekperigin's experience as an outsider.

Alternative comedy's anti-traditionalist celebration of edginess seems a suitable scene for Ekperigin to come to terms with her history of alienation. "Stand-up is the only place where you can be subversive. Stand-up is where you go when you don't fit anywhere…That idea of observational humor, and just sort of picking out the weirdness in life that comes when you're standing on the outside. You just kinda watch how people work."[52] But the question remains, what happens to BWCL for an alt comedian like Ekperigin, for whom marginality is the centerpiece of her stand-up, but whose audience is not necessarily equipped or willing to read elements of BWCL that she may be deploying? Ultimately, her comedy is a site where we can see that not *all* black women humorists mobilize elements of BWCL as a strategy of connection. In the absence of *shared* cultural competence of its elements and techniques, BWCL either fails or is non-existent.

Humor and outsider status

49 Ibid.
50 Ekperigin.
51 Ibid.
52 Ekperigin.

Khristee Rich is 37 years old and grew up in the mostly white town of Ridgefield, CT. Her family was one of two African American families that lived in her neighborhood. Like Ekperigin, Rich began using humor at a young age to cope with racial isolation. Now living in the Bay Area, I met Rich after seeing her perform in the "Funniest Woman in Berkeley" contest at The Marsh Theater and interviewed her shortly after. "I was made aware of race very young," she explained, "it's kind of hard when you're a kid and you feel like you should be so free, outside playing. You're very conscious of yourself."[53]

Rich has a theatrical presence that gives her stand-up routine the feel of a one-woman show, or a comic monologue. "Even the homeless people are nice," she says smiling, surveying her audience from side to side as she speaks. "The other day a homeless man chased me up the street for a couple of blocks, screaming 'Hey! Hey! Are you from Louisiana? Are you Creole?' I was like, no. I'm a black woman from Connecticut." When Rich graced the stage that night, I did not know she was a black woman. It was something she had to *tell* us all. Rich's racial ambiguity flung her to the margins of phenotypical blackness, while her tightly curled brown afro pulled her, in my eyes, into the circle. She doesn't seems ashamed or angry about of her light-skinned, green-eyed blackness, but she is certainly aware of it's ambiguity and marginality, making it a point throughout most of her routine to talk about it and make it known that she is in fact a *black* woman. "The epistemological moment of race," argues E. Patrick Johnson on the performativity of race, "manifests itself in and through performance."[54] In her routine Rich demonstrates, in fact, that one can lay claim to blackness (or race in general), and its centrality to one's identity by publicly speaking and enacting it.

"When I was a kid I had really big hair," her set begins. Rich is wearing a black turtleneck shirt that contrasts with the lightness of her skin; against the red background of the stage curtain her hair is even more apparently large. "It took six hours to dry and braid my hair. Six hours. I could have travelled to France in the same amount of time. Or run the New York City marathon. Twice," she laments. The politics of black women's hair is something Rich says she needs to address in her stand-up comedy, most importantly for her, "relaxing it, how it affects our identity." The goal of these conversations is to "get us to examine [it] a little more closely. Can we love ourselves for who we are?" Rich makes a gag of the difficulty of taking care of natural black hair, which stands in for her struggle with racial isolation. The Afro remains before us, signaling to the audience that despite the struggle of its upkeep, it is an important and valued part of her identity.

Rich describes her hometown of Ridgefield, CT as "white and affluent", and compared to the other black family in the community, which was Jamaican, her family's blackness held no cultural capital. Her Afro was neither cool nor exotic, but ordinary to the white people in her neighborhood, and a source of harassment. "In middle school," she jokes, "kids called me microphone head [bopping the mic against her head]. Testing 123, testing 123." Rich goes on to remix the idea of "black as cool" when a token black person inhabits a white community:

> "My family was not Jamaican. We were "African Americans" [throws up air quotes]. So, we weren't cool. If you were from the islands, you were cool! If you didn't know what country in Africa you were from, not cool. If your ancestors were famous for smoking ganja, cool! If your ancestors were famous for being kidnapped and shackled to a

53 Rich.

54 Johnson, "Black Performance Studies," 446.

> ship, thrown into slavery, not cool! If your people are famous for not washing or drying their hair, but wearing it natural and long in dreads under a big colorful hat, cool! If your people were famous for not going out on the weekends because they had to wash, dry, or set their hair, not cool.

There is a bit of weariness in Rich's routine mitigated by her humor. But she is able to potently convey to her audience, which she says has been mostly white since she began doing stand-up in 2010, the many different contours, both amusing and illuminating, of her experiences of being a racial outsider. Here, we can see that BWCL is not a quality of black women's humor that is simply "out there," or merely the performance of humor from a black female body. BWCL is a fraught mode of connection between performer and audience that can represent *and* manifest social and cultural competence in the performance. Even though her audience is mostly white, Rich uses humor as a site where sociocultural assumptions about the black people are challenged and new possibilities can emerge.

Black women's humor as a mode of healing

Up to this point I have tried to demonstrate how feelings of isolation and marginality are common features of black women comics' life experiences and by extension, part of black women's comic culture. Humor facilitates conversations about outsider status, especially when it comes to race, class, gender and sexuality, and I have tried to show it as a shame management strategy. Furthermore, stand-up comedy is a platform upon which black women are able to expose intimate and painful details of their lives and laughter acts as a salve for their shame. Niroma Johnson is a former drug addict and prostitute who talks candidly in her stand-up about that lifestyle and finds comfort and healing from publicly sharing her story, especially in her ability to entertain people with it. I met Johnson at the FICA convention in Los Angeles in the spring of 2012, and though I did not see her perform live, my interview with her reveals some important ways that humor and performance can help black women heal from traumatic experiences.

> "I get to share and heal at the same time bits and pieces of me. For a long time I was the ugly duckling. I didn't understand why I was the darkest one in my family…so I don't fit in nowhere. That's how I feel. I don't find out my beauty 'til I done lived all out in the streets, went through all this stuff, prostituted my body, the whole nine. I did everything to try to destroy me cause I didn't like me. And God told me, the last time I relapsed, you don't have the right to take your life cause you didn't create your life. Now get your punk behind back in there and fight for life. And I been here ever since."[55]

Public performance is part of Johnson's healing process, going back to her initial recovery exercise of sharing her story in Narcotics Anonymous. We talked about the content of her routines at NA conventions, and Johnson reported,

55 N. Johnson.

> "because of my experience on drugs and crack and all that, I talk about how they do at the meetings…I talk about my experiences…[joke] I married a newcomer. And I paid for it, cause he ain't have shit to lose. And I had everything to lose. My time. My apartment. My money, everything…My mind. I take my experience just like every other comedian does, and I put it out there."[56]

Johnson finds comfort and pleasure not only in talking about her life, but most importantly, in having an engaged audience that can relate to her experiences and affirm and enjoy (in laughter) her process of public testimony. "They love it…Even sharing at a meeting, they laugh at me. I'm dead serious, but they laugh at me."[57]

"Crack did two things for me," Johnson begins her favorite joke. "It got me off the streets and taught me how to give a blow job. It's a true story. I didn't know how to give head. But when you want that crack, you gon' suck the shit out of it! Do what you gotta do, just like a hooker."[58] Johnson's joke is personal, painful, and in its public telling, she can dispense with the isolating feelings of shame and disgust that characterized her drug habit and the deeds she did to feed it.

Displacing marginality and attaining distinction

One might get the sense that contemporary black women's comic culture is quite negative from the picture that emerges here, but I am not trying to be reductive and argue that all black women comics engage in narratives and techniques of overcoming marginality. I do, however, want to show marginality as an important feature of black women's lives, and through humor in public performance, can be displaced from a burden to an asset. When black women comics invoke experiences of marginality, they are able to distinguish themselves in ways that are desirable and necessary to be successful as stand-ups. Aisha Tyler sees distinction as an advantage that allows versatility and broad appeal. "It is very important to me to step as far outside any archetypal molds as I can. I don't strive to be an outlier, but I am one, and I embrace it. I find it much more satisfying to hear that I am someone's "favorite comic," than that I am someone's "favorite female comic" or "favorite black comic."[59]

Laughter as a bridge to intersubjectivity

Mutual understanding signified by laughter

Creating a connection with her audience through laughter is the most important function of humor for the stand-up comedian. Essentially, when black women comics share their lives publicly via humor they cultivate intersubjectivity, which is a bond of mutual understanding with their audience, especially other marginalized social groups. Lawrence Mintz notes intersubjectivity as a critical component in an effective audience-performer relationship. The

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56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Tyler.

comedian must establish *for the audience* that the group is homogenous," he argues, "a community, if the laughter is to come easily."[60] Kamané Malvo Marshall claims, for example, that her biggest supporters come from the gay and lesbian community. "It [her humor] came from a real place," she explained, when I asked her why she believed that was the case. "I think when you come from a place where you are constantly judged and constantly marginalized, you can tell if someone is authentic or not. And I think that's what the connection was."[61] Empathy is an essential component of comic intersubjectivity; and in laughter both performer and audience can experience pleasure as feelings of social and cultural isolation diminish and comunitas is established.

Comic intersubjectivity is a part of the structure of BWCL, establishing a path for both performer and audience to better understand and accept their own subjectivities via the community of laughter generated in the performance event. Joking and laughter work to bridge the gap between black women comic's personal experiences and those of their audience. We discussed alternative comedy, but gospel comedy is another subgenre of stand-up in which black women are using humor as a means of self-definition. Jennifer Weeks is from Jacksonville, FL and goes by Mz. Jenn on stage. She is a software programmer at a retirement benefits company by day, and a gospel comedian on the side. Though Weeks is strictly a clean comedian, she approaches gospel comedy to connect with a variety of people about everyday issues, inside and outside the church.

> "My definition of gospel comedy is comedy that is clean, that is, I guess an arena for people who go to church, or who are Christians, to get the same benefits as anyone else. Because a lot of regular comedy, there's a lot of cussing, there's a lot of sexual innuendo and stuff like that. It's almost comedy that won't make you cringe…Um, and then it's a form of, you're still getting out a message. I'm not actually in a pulpit, but people can actually see, ok, she believes in God, she's a Christian and, wow, she's normal! Because people have this false representation of what it is to be a Christian."[62]

For Weeks, gospel comedy is about using the art form of stand-up in a format that honors and respects the values of Christianity, which brings back notions of middle-class respectability. Additionally, stand-up is a means of enacting her values and subjectivity to her audience in a way that they can connect with, accept, and recognize in themselves. "Why would people in church want to hear comedy?" I follow up. "Oh my gosh, they need to…sometimes they're just so serious…they try to be stuck in tradition and acting like, I don't have this human side…and we all jacked up. That's why we're here."[63] In stand-up, Weeks creates a comic intersubjectivity between her audience, the laughter creating a bridge of understanding and recognition of her particular embodiment of Christianity vis-à-vis their own ideals.

For any comic, but especially black women comics, cultivating a community of laughter is the most difficult part about the art of stand-up comedy. But as we have seen, deftly using personal experience, especially the inversion of marginality from a burden to an asset is entertaining, empowering, healing, and for lack of a better term, sticky. That is, black women's humor of marginality creates a unique cultural product with affective power that is both familiar

60 Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," 78.
61 Marshall.
62 Jennifer Weeks. Personal Interview. 27 April 2012 (Weeks).
63 Weeks.

and off-putting, "in which emotions align some bodies with others, as well as stick different figures together, by the way they move us."[64] Yet the fact remains that for a variety of reasons, black women comics have a difficult time succeeding as professional stand-ups, not least because of their relatively few numbers. DoVeanna Fulton points out one of the biggest obstacles black women comics face, which is the fact that in the wide circulation through TV and media of stereotypically degrading images of black women, various opportunities emerge for misinterpretation of cultural and historical knowledge.[65] As comedian Karinda Dobbins argues,

> "It's tougher [for black women comics to succeed] because from our perspective a lot of things aren't funny if you don't know the history of black women…there's a difference between laughing at it and getting it. And that's one of the hurdles we face. And secondly, it's just really hard to make our experiences funny without making them trivial. There's a fine line between me telling you this is my reality and having you laugh at it and not trivialize it."[66]

Conclusion

As a zone of freedom, stand-up offers black women unique opportunities for public expression unavailable in other performance genres. Public performance gives black women the opportunity for public self-examination and laughter facilitates pleasurable and healing revelations and resolutions. Laughter is a technique of social and cultural understanding that opens up spaces for black women to create communities that otherwise might not have been possible.

In this chapter I have attempted to illuminate the nuance and richness of contemporary black women's comic culture. Incomplete and fraught as it may seem, black women use stand-up as a mode of self-making, political expression, and ultimately, as a ritual space in which they can cultivate fleeting, yet pleasurable communities of laughter. First-hand accounts of their motives, desires, and the payoffs of performing stand-up comedy sheds light on some of the personal and social functions of humor. The women of this study have provided vital information about conditions of marginality, and in particular, how black women, manage and cultivate new ways of articulating the materiality of marginality. These narratives demonstrate the multiplicity of black women's comic voices and the myriad styles and techniques they use to make people laugh, think, and understand the world around them. Black women comics and their various techniques of expressing their humor illustrate the heterogeneity of black women's experiences where sass is not always the paramount indicator of BWCL.

64 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 195.
65 Fulton, "Comic Views," 92.
66 Dobbins.

Chapter 6
From Becoming to Being: Stand-Up Comedy as Autoethnography

"Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose. It is a seeking that he who wishes may know the cosmic secrets of the world and they that dwell therein." –Zora Neale Hurston[1]

I learned how to write jokes and perform stand-up comedy as part of my research methodology for analyzing the history, culture, and efficacy of black women's humor. I am invested in engaging multiple strategies of analysis, and autoethnography is a performative approach to scholarship that "puts culture into motion."[2] In this chapter, I focus on my fieldwork performing as an amateur stand-up comic to elucidate the performative and political dimensions of the genre. My fieldwork included a five-week night course that met on Wednesdays for three hours at the San Francisco Comedy College. It was there that I learned the technical aspects of joke writing. I wrote over one hundred jokes, thematically organized on index cards.

Additionally, I performed in front of my two summer undergraduate classes at UC Berkeley on the history of African American stand-up.[3] I gave them a taste of what it would be like when they performed their two to three minute set as the final examination for the course. Besides rustling up the courage to go on stage, the biggest challenge of stand-up is writing and rehearsing material, shaving words and syllables, and as one of my students put it crafting "punch lines that actually punch." I also performed at several open mic nights at bars, and had the opportunity to perform a set in a stand-up comedy showcase at a mainstream black comedy club in Los Angeles, CA in front of veteran professional comics.[4]

In the beginning, I felt like an interloper, a phony. From my interviews, I had come to understand the personal and financial struggles that define the lives of professional stand-ups, and I did not want to be seen as a disconnected researcher who was unproblematically trying out an art form and profession that meant so much to the women I interviewed. Being a researcher who was trying to become a part of the community of which I was studying challenged me to write the best and tightest jokes, to practice and revise them, and not take the craft lightly. The uncomfortable experience of simultaneously inhabiting two seemingly contradictory worlds

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1 Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography* (Longon: Virago Press, 1986 [1942]), 174.

2 Denzin, "The Call To Performance," 193.

3 During the summer of 2010, 32 students enrolled in the course "African American Stand-Up Comedy and the Performance of Resisitance," while 22 students enrolled in the same summer course in 2011.

4 I performed my first 5-minute stand-up comedy set at an open mic at *The Oasis Restaurant & Bar* in Oakland, CA on December 16, 2010. I performed a 5-minute routine at another open mic night at *Groucho's Bar & Karaoke* in Louisville, KY on May 5, 2011. I prepared to perform a 5 minute set at an open mic at *The Raven Lounge* in Philadelphia, PA on April 19, 2012, but there were 28 comics signed up to perform and after 4 hours of not being called to perform, I left. Only one woman performed that night, I am unsure of the politics of selection were. I looked at the list on my way back from the restroom and saw that someone had drawn the symbol for woman next to my name. On April 20, 2012, I prepared a routine to perform at an open mic at a *Noche* in Philadelphia, PA and again, even though I was one of the first people to sign up, my name was not called after hours of performances and I left without performing. I performed twice (5 minute sets) at an open mic night called "Laughs on Fairmount" at *Urban Saloon* on April 23 and June 18, 2012. I performed my last stand-up comedy routine on April 26, 2012 at *The J Spot Comedy Club*.

(scholar and comic) is par for the autoethnographic course. One might perceive the seriousness of academic study and the entertaining function of stand-up as contradictory modes of theorizing experiences and phenomena in the world. But *as* autoethnography, stand-up comedy becomes a method and product of academic analysis. D. Soyini Madison reminds us, "the performer must be committed—doing what must be done or going where one must go—to experience the felt-sensing dynamic of that world: its tone-color—the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, rhythms—the visceral ethos of that world."[5] For me that meant spending many nights in dark, dank clubs with individuals both working to get their "big break," and understanding the difficulties of achieving such a goal.

Autoethnographers "anchor their narratives in an ongoing moral dialogue with the members of a local community…[t]roubling the usual distinctions between self and other, they fold their own life histories and testimonies into the self-stories of others. These are performance events."[6] In hindsight, I folded many moments of my life (my youth, grappling with my sexuality, my weight, personal relationships, etc.) into my jokes. My testimony, similar to the black women comics I interviewed and observed, was rooted in my own experiences of race, class, sexuality, and gender.

Autoethnography is a postmodern approach to scholarship. It is a method of analysis and textual representation that destabilizes the desire for and validity of notions of scientific objectivity. Kimberly Lau notes, "autoethnography seeks to make sense of the often contradictory relationships between self and culture that so acutely mark the postmodern predicament while also exerting a very real influence on the politics of representation and scholarship."[7] As a research method, I am using autoethnography not to suggest a monolithic black women's comic culture, but to explore the possibilities and potentialities that performance manifests for individuals within the cultural community. As Zora Neal Hurston eloquently put it, "There is no single face in nature, because every eye that looks upon it, sees it from its own angle. So every man's spice-box seasons his own food."[8] This is my account of performing stand-up comedy that hopefully sheds light on some of the social and cultural functions of the practice.

My attempt to become a stand-up was in earnest, fully aware of the privileges I had in terms of being financially secure with no children to provide for, and without the burden of failure. Unlike many women who work on the road as comics and must perform where they *can* get work, I had the luxury of choosing where I would perform; most of the time, it was at venues in progressive urban areas where audiences had the cultural and social knowledge that made my humor legible to them. I did not have to make the sacrifices that many black women must make in order to personally and financially create a viable career. Comedian Hope Flood, who has been a professional stand-up and advocate for black women comedians, organized the first ever convention that attempted to realize a vision of a supportive community of black women comics. At the Females in Comedy Association (FICA) convention in April of 2010, seventy-two mostly black women comics came together at The J Spot Comedy Club in Inglewood, CA to attend

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5 D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*. 2nd Edition (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington D.C: Sage Press, 2012), 195-196.

6 Denzin, "The Call to Performance," 195.

7 Kimberly J. Lau, "This Text Which is Not One: Dialectics of Self and Culture in Experimental Autoethnography," *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 39, No. 2/3, Special Double Issue: Dialogues (May-Dec., 2002), 244.

8 Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 61.

seminars, round table discussions, and share technical skills aimed at bringing into harmony the artistic and business aspects of stand-up comedy. Flood's goal was to provide us with the tools to build successful careers.

Flood is no stranger to organizing around issues that affect African American comics. In the mid-90s, Flood organized a widespread boycott of BET's *Comic View*, where she and dozens of comics refused to perform until they were paid a reasonable wage. I want to reveal her story at length because it captures the immensity of the sacrifices stand-ups make and the politics that frame their art and labor.

> "Basically for the first 8 years of *Comic View*, they only paid us $150. The people who didn't live here in LA had to fly themselves in with their money, put themselves up in hotels, and then perform. And, at the time, we didn't know that there was anything wrong with that. We were just happy to have been selected to be on television. We were just excited on that level. We didn't know any better… They would shove a contract in your face and if you didn't sign it, you wouldn't even get your little $150… We called our union rep, and got our union rep to come in. Her name is Lauren Bailey, and we finally got somebody to *hear* us. Cause everybody else was like "You niggas…just go on with your nigga show, whatever." After we had stared a petition, Me, Sheryl Underwood, Buddy Lewis, and a few of us got together and we started a petition, and we started getting the comics to sign it. And then we started to get some BIG name comics to sign it. Eddie Griffin, George Lopez, Paul Rodriguez, Carlos Mencia… And they all got on board, and that's what brought it to the forefront, once they got involved with it. After fighting and fighting, and negotiating and negotiating…trying this and trying that…after a few years, they decided they were gonna pay us $1000. But we still had to get there on our own."[9]

Flood understood the business, artistic, and political aspects of stand-up comedy, and became an advocate and activist for the rights of stand-up comics. In fact, Flood's political activism recalls a similar and more visible moment of comic agitating in 1979, when comedians at the famed *Comedy Store* in Los Angeles, CA formed a union and went on strike for six weeks, demanding to be paid for their labor. Comedians like David Letterman, Jay Leno, Robin Williams, and Marsha Warfield participated in the *Comedy Store* strike, and one comedian, Steve Lubetkin jumped to his death from the high-rise hotel next door to the establishment in protest of owner Mitzi Shore's labor practices.[10] These strikes illuminate the political and economic struggles that go along with professional stand-up comedy, and it was at the FICA convention that I began to fully explore and grasp the multidimensional experience of being a stand-up comic.

I have chosen to share a few personal experiences that help demonstrate the generative capacities of performance as I have laid them out in the dissertation—the way I am able to express my feminist politics using humor—a difficult undertaking in my every day life outside of the academic milieu. As I wrote jokes and performed them publicly, humor helped me come to terms with embarrassing and painful parts of my personal history and to ultimately embody and enact an ideal version of myself. Finally, I experienced a sense of belonging and community

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9 Hope Flood. Personal interview. 28 April 2012 (Flood).

10 For a full account of the *Comedy Store* strike and 1970s stand-up culture in general, see William Knoedelseder, *I'm Dying Up Here: Heartbreak and High Times in Stand-up Comedy's Golden Era* (New York: Perseus, 2009).

amongst my peers, using laughter to connect with other black women comics in the process of becoming one myself.

Becoming a black intellectual "is an act of self-imposed marginality; it assures a peripheral status in and to the black community," argues Cornel West, leaving me "dangling between two worlds with little or no infrastructural bases."[11] As a black woman, deciding to perform as a stand-up is another choice of marginality, and what is more, it puts me in the awkward position of trying to connect back up with a community from which I feel alienated. "There is a deep distrust and suspicion of black intellectuals within the black community," West maintains, which "stems not only from the usual arrogant and haughty disposition of intellectuals toward ordinary folk, but more importantly, from the widespread refusal of black intellectuals to remain, in some visible way, organically linked with African-American cultural life."[12] What happens when one's cultural, social, and intellectual spheres expand as a result of elite education, along with inhabiting a marginalized and maligned sexuality? More specifically, as a black woman intellectual from a working-class background, how can I use humor to negotiate the experience of trying to fit into communities from which I feel ambivalent about—academia and stand-up culture? How can I be a black intellectual stand-up?

See J Run…

Before this project, I had never performed in public in front of strangers. I spent hours preparing for my stand-up debut. I had already interviewed several comics, making it a point to ask if they had any advice for an aspiring comic such as myself. The answers were variations on the same theme: be yourself. I had been trying to lose weight since I was a teenager, and I decided that since I struggled so mightily in that endeavor, I would use my sense of humor to talk about my body as a site of struggle. I was invited to perform (in an artistic way) for the first time in my life, in front of an audience of undergraduates taking a "Race, Gender and Performance" course at UC Berkeley in the department of Theater, Dance, and Performance Studies. I had composed a mixed-media piece about the process of working out to lose weight at the RSF, UC Berkeley's public gym, during an ethnographic field methods graduate course. The students are supposed to view my performance, "See J Run…" as an embodied way of manifesting the theory and analysis of their coursework, which included viewing Whoopi Goldberg's character-based performance "Fontaine," from her 1985 *Whoopi Goldberg: Live on Broadway*.

The room is enormous, seating 200 people at least. My moisture situation is slightly off: my armpits are dripping and I've got that viscous white spit that threatens to choke me. This room is enormous. I can barely breath. I'm freaking out. This is going to be awful. My goal is to use the poem, video, and comic monologue to lay my shame about being fat and trying to become unfat bare. I am disgusted at the sound of my projected voice, HUGE, tinny, metallic me. I take a breath trying to steady my legs and voice. The crowd becomes an indiscriminate blob of faces. Now, I can begin. Shaking, I read a poem about overcoming anxiety.

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11 Cornel West, "The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 2 (Winter, 1993-1994), 59-61.

12 Ibid, 60-61.

The room is silent, and like my workouts at the gym I become hyper aware of my body and the eyes fixed upon me. In this public confession, "Fat is delicious," I try and let go of my embarrassment. Darkness envelops the giant room; the projection screen reads "See J Run…" and Nina Simone's "Feeling Good" blasts from the speakers, as I appear onscreen running on a treadmill. Four uncomfortable minutes of me running on the treadmill go by and the song changes as I skip tracks on my iPod while I am running on the screen. The lights come up and I am at the podium again to deliver my first ever comic monologue.

"The gym is not FOR fat people. You gotta lose weight first just to go in the motherfucker," I joke. Humor has been a part of my life as long as I can remember, from the humor I found in my mother and grandmother's folk sayings, to doing the dozens with my friends and cousins. "People see your fat ass on the treadmill, elliptical, bike, whatever, and look at you like you can't read. Like you've just walked into the wrong room. *Excuse me, this is not the buffet*." The public gym is a socially and culturally specific space and there are particular conventions and activities that make me feel like I do not belong there.

The inherent exhibitionism of public workouts bother me with the uncomfortable feeling of exposure, the sense that people are always watching every move I make. "I didn't use the shower for the first month because it was this big open room where everybody can see everybody doing what they do when they shower." People in the audience shake their heads, recalling the experience of going into the gym shower. "And I don't know about y'all, but I got rituals in the shower, *private* rituals. Some women just don't care. They're just in there talking, laughing, shaving their pubes...just like they're out shopping with the girlfriends." As Norman Denzin suggests, performance is a site of struggle and intervention, becoming "transgressive achievements, political accomplishments that break through sedimented meanings and normative traditions."[13] The room bursts with laughter, and I feel like they get that I am using humor to temper a more serious social critique and my struggle with deep personal revelation.

After my performance, I feel like a performer. But am I a comic? The anonymous written feedback tells me that yes, I am. I want to share some of it because it motivated me and gave me the courage to get up on the stand-up stage and talk about my body and my life. Furthermore, besides laughter's material indication of connection with one's audience, the efficacy of one's performance is difficult to discern. It is rare to receive such an abundance of reviews of one's performance, and sharing them illustrates, to some extent, the critical reception of my performance work.[14] One person commented, "I appreciated the humor present in your piece of work. Although your accomplishment should not be taken lightly, the humor added a light-heartedness that makes the audience want you to succeed." I take pleasure knowing that my story resonated with people who might not have necessarily thought we shared a connection. Someone wrote, "As a white man, I have trouble identifying with many of your struggles, but as a fat person who has always struggled with my weight and the public perception of my body, I truly understood where you were coming from." Unintentionally at first, I conveyed a phenomenological view of my body, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, the body is "'the very "stuff" of subjectivity."[15]Another audience member commented, "Your personality and humor carries the

13 Denzin, 188, citing Dwight Conquergood, "Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics," in *The Future of Performance Studies: Visions and Revisions, edited by S.J. Dailey* (Washington DC: National Communication Association, 1998), 32.

14 I received 69 reviews, but I am unsure of the number of students enrolled in the course.

15 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), ix.

piece beautifully," and another remarked, "I love all the details; they make your experience so real for the audience."

My performance was ineffective to varying degrees for some of my audience; for example, several members reported being disoriented by the narrative structure of my piece. One person wrote, "I liked the comedy but I'm confused about the message. Was it the idea you are trying to present? I feel that there isn't emphasis on important parts. (Which parts are important?)." The fact that I used a mixed-media approach with poetry, video, and dramatic monologue was disagreeable to some people, one commented, "I felt you might change the video segment. It's a little long and bland and I think shortening it could make it more effective." My aesthetic and expressive choices were off-putting to some people, as one person lamented, "What I didn't quite enjoy was the beginning of the performance. I found it a little bit overdone, a bit too dramatic." Though she "really enjoyed the humor in the piece," a "white, 120lb woman," reported an almost complete lack of understanding of what I was attempting to accomplish in the piece, "I feel as though the piece lacks a particular climax…at the end of your monologue, I wasn't left with any lingering questions…I wasn't left with a sense that I should do something to discontinue these stereotypes. It seems as though it's simply your struggle against your weight. What does society contribute to this stereotype, and how can we right that wrong?"

In reading audience reactions to "See J Run…" it became clear that I would encounter difficulties because of the autobiographical nature of my work to translate my experiences to audiences who may see me differently than I see myself, and those moments of misconnection are troubling and uncomfortable for myself and my audience. One member was moved by the piece in a completely different way than they saw their fellow audience members react, manifesting an awkward, yet generative moment of reflection. "I felt sad and uncomfortable when the audience laughed at your story," they recalled. "It seems like comedy (your face expression and body movement were comedic sometimes) but actually it is not a comedy at all." Deirdre Heddon alludes to the complicated relations autobiographical performance brings about between performer and audience, and even between audience members themselves. Heddon puts the point nicely, "Although autobiographical performances look, in form, monologic, the public context of their work and the performers' aspirations to communicate with their spectators transform those works into dialogues. Live autobiographical performance takes place not only in shared time, but also in shared space."[16]

One review in particular illustrates a difficulty I encountered throughout my performative research. "As an audience member, a major reaction seeing you perform this was, "This woman's talking all about her weight but she's not actually fat…and it just seemed strange to me that it was all about you being perceived as fat when I didn't see you the same way." During the year and a half of writing jokes and performing stand-up, I was constantly read differently than I saw myself, which made it, at times, tough to forge comic connections with my audiences.

The Oakland Comedy Slam: My first time on stage

The stage light blinds me, causing the crowd to disappear. I could die up here. That is, I could totally bomb, my humor entirely illegible to these people. Before I utter my first joke, the

16 Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, 5.

stage is a tightrope of liminality between laughter and social death. Liminality is often linked with the semiotics of death, explains Victor Turner, "being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness."[17] I begin. "A woman with a shaved head is like a closed KFC," I continue, "you can see all the breasts and thighs inside, but the door is locked tight." Earlier in the day I'd gotten my head shaved at the barber college on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland, CA. The clippers vibrated over my skull and the barber asked "Does this *feel* right to you?" I caught his eye in the mirror, "Yeah, usually I do it myself." The crowd is laughing. I become more comfortable.

My first time on stage at an open mic, I wanted to talk about homophobia and patriarchy, because I have experienced it for so long without a way to adequately respond. "I mean, I'm shaving my head," I tell the audience, "not my whole pussy off!" People keep laughing, which is surprising. I get into the rhythm of setup, pause, punch line, pause again for laughter, and I feel electric. Every laugh validates me and I feel it in my body. Laughter makes me feel high. "Bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively," argues Grosz. "They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable."[18] "Any straight guys in the house?" I ask. A wave of hoops and hollers rolls through the audience, "I know what you're thinking," I tell them, pacing the stage. "Y'all can suck my dick, too!" I have wanted to do that ever since I saw Demi Moore take her misogynist drill sergeant down a peg using the same jibe in the film *G.I Jane* (1997). It was an enactment of my butch sass. I flipped the script and used a misogynist insult, even in that fleeting moment, to put myself on an equal level as men, who have often tried to wield power over me by insulting my bald head or my butch appearance in general. My first time doing *real* stand-up was a success: the crowd laughed appropriately and I did not bomb.

Soul Titties

Now that I have been doing comedy, I get into joke writing modes and everything becomes material. In the fall of 2011, I am sitting in on a graduate course at the University of Pennsylvania, "Feminist Ethnographies," and we must present our research as part of the final project. I will write a feminist joke. I decided to take my body image humor deeper and write a joke that will humorously disrobe me, using my body to speak my politics. "Susan G. Komen is racist," the joke starts. The professor and students smile and nod knowingly, right there with me. I want to unmask the seemingly innocuous, yet discursive prejudice of the breast cancer awareness industry. "How does the color pink represent *everybody's* titties?" A few people start snapping as if we are at a poetry reading, "Right?!" someone cosigns. "I mean, just once, I wanna see one of those wristbands, or, a Yoplait yogurt top that's brownish purple." Titters squeak out from the audience, and I am slightly flushed with embarrassment, but I continue, "maybe some of those little bumps on it." The class cracks up, "Cause me," silence. "I got soooooooooooooul titties! You raise up my shirt and look at my areolas, and you'll be like, "Is that an Al Green record?" [singing] "I'm so tired of being alone…"

This is my favorite joke. It embodies *me*, from my personal insecurities about my body, to my commitment to a feminist ethos in my life and my work. I intended this joke as a political performance; I wanted to start a conversation about the hegemonic representation of white women's bodies as *all* women's bodies in mainstream feminist politics and beyond. The joke

17 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.
18 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, xi.

also functioned as a performative gesture manifesting what Grosz calls "corporeal feminism," which insists, "bodies have all the explanatory power of minds."[19] In short, my feminist politics expressed via the joke materialized the "concrete specificity, "[20] or, the corporeality of my feminism. "Soul Titties" is a way of coming to terms with the difference of my body and affirming its value, and in a world that constantly feeds us images and ideas that black women's bodies are dangerous and excessive, "loving ourselves is the final resistance."[21]

From Becoming to Being a Comic

The most exciting and edifying experience I have had performing stand-up was at the FICA convention, where I performed in a comedy showcase. Participant observation is a tricky business. For the majority of the convention, I was assiduously taking notes or conducting interviews. I struggled with my place in this community of women artists that I was no doubt becoming a part of. Up until that point, I had only performed stand-up at open mics or in college classrooms. A showcase, unlike an open mic, requires more preparation and is more stressful because the whole point in showcasing talent is that some important person might "discover" you. You are supposed to bring your funniest material and perform it as perfectly as possible—a showcase is not the time or place to "work out" your new material.

There were two showcases each night with each comedian getting five minutes of stage time, divided by the headlining show, which on my night was performed by Thea Vidale. I was slated for the late 10:30pm show, in the middle of the lineup. I was nervous. But I had made friends at the convention and one of my oldest friends from college came to cheer me on. I slid up to the microphone and played coy asking the crowd "How y'all doing, are you awake?" I started my first joke, one I had told a couple of times before about the awkwardness of liking to use food during sex, but being on a diet. "Whoa, whoa, how many points are in that chocolate syrup?!" I tried to warm the crowd up with my first joke, silence. That was one of the first jokes I ever wrote, and the audience's silence voted it lame.

I paced nervously in my brown slacks and blue polo shirt with a slick, matching tie. My head was freshly shaved, and I felt comfortable in my butchness. "Have you ever accidentally bought scented tampons," I asked. "No one ever goes into a store to intentionally buy scented tampons, it's always an accident. You get home, [sniffing and rummaging through a bag] did I get dryer sheets too?" I hear a few laughs. "I look in the bag and see that pink band, and I'm like, AW, DAMN! But I'm not going back, so I'm just gonna use 'em, hell it's just a week. I hate scented tampons. They say they're Spring Rain scented. Try Spring Rain *shrimp salad*! Or Jasmine Rain. No. How about Jasmine Rain *Trout*." It took a few seconds, but they got it, releasing a roll of chuckles and a few claps. The red light indicating I had only one minute to finish my routine flickered and I gave everything I had to "Soul Titties," hoping, after the lukewarm reception of my first two jokes, to leave an impression. I nailed it and got a great, loud laugh from the crowd that felt surreal and dizzying. Stepping off the stage, I felt less of a researcher and more like a comedian.

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19 Ibid, vii.

20 Ibid.

21 Cheryl Clarke, "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. Edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall (New York: the New Press, 1995), 247.

There is something about getting a laugh from your comedian peers that made the idea of "J Finley, the stand-up comedian" a reality. The next morning, a few comics came up to me and congratulated me on having a good set, and as I was walking out the door for lunch, a comic I had met the day before strode over to me and sang out "I got soooooooool titties!" She and another comic repeated my tag line in unison, "That's a great line," the older woman said, "you should say that at the end of every show, they'll remember that." Hearing my joke from other comics and having them appreciate my humor gave me a sense of belonging to the community of mostly black women comics. Before, when I was just a researcher, the comics seemed to appreciate what I was trying to do with my dissertation but when I showed my ability to craft jokes and had the guts to go on stage, there was a new level of respect.

Even so, organizer Hope Flood had a shocking opinion of my act. "It was more mainstream to me," she told me at the end of our interview after I solicited her opinion. "So I'm white mainstream, that's how you would describe me?" I asked, half joking, half knowing how I am viewed by black folks outside the academy (inside too, perhaps). "I think so. You ain't ghetto black. It's not relatable, some of that stuff you were talking about. You were talking about periods. I know you have one, but I didn't expect you to get up there and talk about it. If you would have gone on Sunday night, the kids [gay] night, I think it's a gay act. I think you would kill kids night."[22] As usual, my multiple identities leave me coming off as awkward, hanging in the balance, neither here nor there.

Awkward Black Girl

"Dangling status," as West puts it, can be uncomfortable, awkward, and lonely for a black woman intellectual, and more and more, dangling black women like me are using humor to displace some of the rage of constantly feeling like we just do not fit. I am not the only black woman negotiating "betwixt and between"[23] status, and using it as fodder for my humor. This struggle is reflected in the web series *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl* (ABG), which tells the story of a young black woman in Los Angeles whose struggles to fit in are uncomfortable and hilarious. Issa Rae is the creator and lead character of ABG, who earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Stanford University and studied film at the New York Film Academy, describing herself as "a pioneer in the fight against the narrow, mainstream portrayal of people of color in the media." Her company, *Issa Rae Productions* "lends a voice to a demographic that largely goes unheard."[24] Comedian and co-creator of the *Seinfeld* sitcom, Larry David, and Ellen DeGeneres influence Issa Rae's brand of racial satire in ABG, she said in an interview with *Vulture*. "She's so good at pointing out subtle awkward moments,"[25] Issa Rae says of DeGeneres. One can assume that ABG is also influenced by Issa Rae's personal experience, that she is in fact a member of the silent demographic of black people who do not fit traditional tropes of blackness who are rarely represented in mainstream media.

The protagonist, J, works as a salesperson for a diet pill company with a motley crew of coworkers, and her sense of herself as a misfit and inability to make personal connections plague

22 Flood.
23 Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.
24 http://www.issarae.com/about-me. Visited 6 April 2013.
25 http://www.vulture.com/2013/02/issa-rae-awkward-black-girl-interview.html. Visited 6 April 2013.

her with one uncomfortable situation after another. I want to spend some time discussing ABG because it represents new directions in contemporary black women's comedy, highlighting the negotiation of multiple subjectivities as a salient feature.

"My name is J, and I'm awkward. And black. Someone once told me those were the worst two things anyone could be."[26] J introduces herself as she drives along in her car, struggling to avoid a painfully annoying coworker who has a crush on her. She comes to a stop sign and declares it "the epitome of social misdirection,"[27] the material signifier of anxiety because it asks the driver, can and should one go this way, or that? J's life is a series of four-way stops, and one of the central themes played out in ABG is that you can negate awkwardness by making it public. Ultimately, to be awkward is to be a misfit. In the third episode, J walks through a long hallway at her job, a structure that epitomizes discomfort. The hallway materializes J's liminal status, neither here nor there. When she is able to make a connection with someone in the hallway, the antidote to awkwardness is revealed when her new friend, CeCe, exclaims, "I *get* you!"[28] Even though it is only a community of two, J and CeCe establish an intersubjective connection based on a shared inability to connect, thus alleviating their feelings of isolation.

J's awkwardness is exemplified in her strange, inappropriate performance of black womanhood. Her shaved head marks her as unusual and her boss, who is a white woman, unleashes a string of cringe-worthy questions about the nature and culture of black hair, "Oh my God, your hair…did it shrink? Do you wash it? *Can* you wash it? Girlfriend, how are we gonna go get corn rows now? Why did you change it? Oh, it's Black History Month. Is that how your ancestors wore it?" This experience makes J "uncomfortable and angry,"[29] but she struggles to directly express those feelings. Yet, the platform of the web series opens a space for her to publicly express this discomfort, mediated by her biting humor as social critique.

Satire is a continuing comic technique in the tradition of African American humor, and black women humorists are beginning to employ it to talk about issues of race and gender, illustrated in the popular YouTube meme, "Shit White Girls Say to Black Girls."[30] J's shaved head is a continuing trope of awkwardness and source of her insecurity; both white and black people use it to render her strange. The week she cut her hair short, several black women at the company Christmas party subject J to the dozens, "So are you gay now?" one woman derides. J's

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26 Issa Rae, "The Stop Sign," *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, web series, 3:40, visited 28 February 2013.

27 Ibid.

28 Issa Rae, "The Hallway," *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, web series, 5:28, visited 28 February 2013.

29 Issa Rae, "The Job," *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, web series, 4:50, February 28, 2013.

30 There is a long history of African American satire, especially in literature. Darryl Dickson-Carr explores the history of the use of satire in American and African American literature in *African-American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001). More contemporary black satires include the film *Hollywood Shuffle*, directed by Robert Townsend. The Samuel Goldwyn Company, (1987), and *Bamboozled*, directed by Spike Lee. New Line Cinema (2000). Aaron McGruder's comic strip-turned-cartoon series *The Boondocks* (2006-present) on The Cartoon Network's Adult Swim is uses satirical methods, as did Chappelle's Show, a sketch comedy show that appeared on the Comedy Central network from 2003-2006.

office nemesis Nina approaches, "Oh hey girl, when did you catch cancer?" And J responds, "I *don't* have cancer," and Nina jabs back, "So wait, you're *bald* on purpose?"[31]

Allegedly inappropriate black womanhood makes for good comedy and enables Issa Rae to expand the boundaries of both identities in the context of ABG. Along with having a shaved head, J speaks with a Standard English dialect, yet her competence and affinity for black cultural forms that code her as authentically black are clear. For instance, she has a penchant for "writing violent rap songs," as a "secret way of coping with stress."[32] J's violent raps conjure the trope in BWCL of "cussing a motherfucker out," and it is during the times when she feels a sense of isolation and rejection that she resorts to this technique of alleviating stress. J uses her clothing to reflect her literacy in 1980s black popular cultural, donning a Salt N' Pepa Halloween costume alongside her Indian sidekick CeCe in one episode, and a "Soul Glo" t-shirt referencing the film *Coming To America* (1988), in another. J's references to black cultural forms like hip-hop music and slam poetry illustrate her cultural competence, but when she parodies them, she enacts a sense of distance from them, a way of illustrating her simultaneous connection and disconnection from black culture.

In an episode where she reminisces about high school, J's awkwardness is manifested in her inability to successfully join a rap cipher to impress her crush, Alex Porter. She listens as he spits his rhyme, "They call me Master P, there's no limit to my hoes. I'm the king of these halls, no cough drop. Bitch, drop drop, on my cock cock, lemme plug all up in your laptop." J walks up smiling, "Can I get next?" she asks before launching into her own embarrassing verse. "Call me Lil' Kim, cause I got a crush on you, wanna make you my boo, carpool wit you to school. Be staring at you in geometry, fantasize about you on top of me. I'm a virgin but I promise thee, I got that ill nana, no Fox-y."[33] J has conventionally black desires (like rapping), but her performance of them fail because she does not *seem* like a person who *should* be rapping, thus illustrating her status as black on the margin on blackness.

ABG is interesting because it is "a text that enacts its own theory."[34] It mobilizes the techniques and tropes of BWCL—use of black cultural material, personal experience, and the element of sass—along with techniques of humor like satire, parody, and sketch that are associated with mainstream white comedy television series, such as *30 Rock* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. The series is uncompromising and does not pander to mainstream modes of representing black life by relying on tired tropes. In fact, it breaks open something new, showing awkwardness not just as a sensibility in a black body; it is not that J's blackness makes her awkward, but that she is both at the same time.

Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore the way black women have used humor personally, culturally, socially, and politically. I began by offering the conceptual framework of BWCL, which includes the marshaling of personal experience, a competence of black cultural idioms, and the propensity to use sass as a technique of inversion. In this chapter, I have

31 Issa Rae, "The Exes," *The Mis-Adventures of Awkward Black Girl*, web series, 13:17, visited 28 February 2013.
32 "The Stop Sign."
33 "The Exes."
34 Lau, "This Text Which is Not One," 248.

foregrounded my own experiences of performing stand-up comedy, demonstrating through my joke writing and public routines the way that one can make themselves in performance. Though I am certain that not all black women comics fall within the framework of BWCL, it was a salient feature of my own act. I chose to infuse humor into my experiences of marginality as an overweight, gay black woman, opening broader conversations about public health, homophobia, and dealing with multiple forms of oppression at once.

Even though it was unsuccessful at times, some of my jokes included explicit references to black culture, which was a way I attempted to connect with black audiences. Sass was an integral part of my comic repertoire like it was for Zora Neale Hurston, "I just had to talk back at established authority."[35] Essentially, I have enacted my argument by way of my research as an amateur comic—my humor helped me come to terms with some of my body image issues; by successfully performing, I became part of a community of black women performers; and, I established myself as a feminist in the act of publicly struggling against the invisibility of black women's bodies and the affirmation of my own.

I have attempted, while mindful of my proximity to making essentialist claims, to reveal insights about the particularity of black women's comic culture. There are as many differences in black women's expressions of humor as there are similarities in their functions. For black women, humor is means of entertaining people, but more importantly, it serves purposes beyond merely providing a vacation from real life for both performers and their audiences. Additionally, black women use humor to engage serious issues relating to racism, sexism, and class oppression. In particular, humorists like Nikki Giovanni and Jane Galvin-Lewis destabilize traditional narratives by revealing the invisible contributions of black women. Carolyn Rodgers and Jackie "Moms" Mabley use humor to generate intragroup dialogue about fraught issues concerning black politics, identity and belonging. Humor is also a means of navigating hostile environments and conditions of marginality; Shirley Chisholm literally shut a racist Congressman up by flexing her caustic wit.

Stand-up comedy is a site of self-making and zone of free expression for black women, where they can both redress sociohistorical stereotypes about black womanhood and talk freely about their lives to become the people they want to be. When they offer alternative renditions of black womanhood, they not only challenge deeply entrenched stereotypes, as Alice Arthur and Naomi Ekperigin do, they also reveal the power and politics associated with having a public voice. "What are the politics of performing marginality?"[36] The (black) woman comic is socially and economically empowered, Gilbert argues, challenging the power structure. "By the very act of standing onstage, speaking about any topic and getting paid, a female comic is empowered rhetorically and economically—by most standards, a "feminist" triumph."[37] Ultimately and at best, joking and laughter are liminal social practices for black women, invested with the potential for transformation and failure.

Coda: Show-and-Tell (and be)

35 Hurston, *Dust Tracks*, 95.
36 Gilbert, *Performing Marginality*, 167.
37 Ibid.

I have been making people laugh before I even knew I was funny. When I was four years old, I shocked, frightened, and made my mother almost pee herself laughing. I went to a preschool daycare center owned and operated by one of my mother's good friends. Show-and-tell was the activity of the day, and standing before the class, I said, "I can show you how to roll a joint." Thinking I was just blabbering on and didn't know what I was talking about, the teacher and my classmates looked on intently as I held the imaginary rolling paper midair and sprinkled in the herb, then used both thumbs to twist the long doobie, finally licking it from end to end before dramatically rolling it all the way up. "You need to come up here right now," a voice at the other end of the phone told to my mother, "We need to talk about Jessyka, right now."

"This is just an FYI, it's not being reported, but you need to talk to the kids about what goes on in the house staying in the house." Luckily, this scene played out in friendly circumstances, and though my mother told me years after I'd graduated college that she and my teacher had laughed and laughed, she was also embarrassed. "If a black woman could turn red," she said, "I would've been beet red, I was no more good!" I don't remember that story, but it sounds like me, a sassy little girl who wanted people to listen to what she had to say. Show-and-tell, that's the bedrock of my humor.

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