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Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comediennes¹

Using the paradigm of Gary Alan Fine's "folklore diamond," this essay analyzes comedic material of contemporary African American women comics. This comedic material conveys the uniqueness of African American women's position at the intersections of race, gender, and class dynamics, thereby marking the performers as not only Black, not only female, but as Black women entertainers who are changing the face of Black women's comedy.

"Being able to laugh about one's tragedies presupposes the formation of a pretty solid identity."

—Michele Najlis, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*²

HISTORICALLY, AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN have used humor to assuage painful experience. "If there is any one thing," folklorist Daryl Cumber Dance insists, "that has brought African American women whole through the horrors of the middle passage, slavery, Jim Crow, Aunt Jemima, the welfare system, integration, the O.J. Simpson trial, and Newt Gingrich, it is our humor. If there is any one thing that has helped us to survive the broken promises, lies, betrayals, contempt, humiliations and dehumanization that have been our lot in this nation and often in our families, it is our humor" (1998:xxi). This legacy of humor in the face of pain lives in the texts of contemporary Black comediennes, many of whom first gained a national audience on "Russell Simmons' Def Comedy Jam," telecast by Home Box Office (HBO) and are featured on the recently released *Queens of Comedy* video production (Latham and Purcell 2000). This comedic material conveys the uniqueness of African American women's position at the intersections of race, gender, and class dynamics, thereby marking the performers as not only Black, not only female, but as Black women entertainers who follow in the tradition of predecessors like Jackie "Moms" Mabley, who Trudier Harris has said, "urged people to laugh with rather than at her" (1988:766).

Gary Alan Fine's "folklore diamond" is a useful paradigm to determine the strategies these women employ to both distinguish themselves from Black male and White

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female comics, and his approach offers possibilities for representations of African American women that contradict dominant ideologies of the inferiority of Blacks, women, and Black women in particular. Fine's model, as described in his book, *Manufacturing Tales: Sex and Money in Contemporary Legends*, consists of four main points—social structure, personal imperatives, performance dynamics, and narrative content—that demonstrate how “the external world” is linked “to the content of the text, through the mediation of the person and the situation,” illuminating the narrator and audience's involvement and connection in the performance and perpetuation of folklore (1992:5). Although Fine uses this model to examine urban legends, I posit that these elements are present in African American women's comic performances as well.

I choose to analyze the women on the “Def Comedy Jam” circuit as opposed to Black comediennes on either another program or in a different media because “Def Comedy Jam” allows them to present their material in a manner that parallels that of a live performance, which is important for understanding the overall function and context in which the humor is actuated. These women performers have changed the face of stand-up comedy and because the “Def Comedy Jam” audiences reflect the hip-hop scene, the comediennes articulate the experiences of many young African American women. Furthermore, through the mass media of home video and cable television, the audience for the “Def Comedy Jam” circuit is enlarged from that of a relatively insular, mostly young, Black audience to a wider mainstream American audience. Because of the voicelessness many Black women have experienced and because of the historical and cultural complexity of degrading images of Black women, resistance inherent in this humor demands explication for audiences who either are not cognizant of the history and pervasiveness of these images and their effects on Black women's lives or for those who may be aware but will use these performances as confirmation of racist and sexist ideologies.

Social structure, the first element in Fine's model, explores the impact and influence of the larger social and cultural structures that surround the narrator, audience, and thus the text. These structures include class structure, demographic divisions (race, gender, ethnicity, age, and other factors), institutional structures (state, economic, religious, educational, and familial), and the organization of social networks. All of these components form the larger setting in which the narrative is performed. The American social structure of race and gender divisions is fundamental to cultural impositions that make up the landscape in which African American women's humor resides. The documentary *Ethnic Notions* (1987), produced and directed by filmmaker Marlon Riggs, reveals the history of destructive racist images and representations of African Americans that permeate American popular culture. These images became stereotypes that African American performers were forced to adopt, modify, or challenge on the American stage. As a result of the continued representations of African American women as large, domineering, emasculating women who fail to conform to essentialized notions of womanhood, Black women comic performers consistently focus on the thematic issues of body image, male-female relationships, and racial and gender authenticity.

The innovative female comics of the “Def Comedy Jam” are a result of and react

against the history of constraints forced on Black comediennes to tailor and modify performances according to societal expectations, while simultaneously presenting narratives in a manner understood and appreciated by African American communities. The social constructs of race that influence these performances echo W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness ([1903] 1994:2–3). Yet, whereas Du Bois's trope of the veil signifies the duality of race consciousness, Black feminist theorists articulate the “brave” standpoint that African American women must contend with the complexity of self-representations.³ We are faced with the “multiple jeopardy, multiple consciousness” of society's images as Blacks and as women (King 1988). In addition, I would add that we must contend with a third facet—our own consciousness as selves that are sometimes all, or none of, but always wading through, such representations.⁴ Thus, we develop—what I see as—triple consciousness that calls for struggle and laughter.

From Josephine Baker (who refused to accept abuse and discrimination from American audiences), to actresses such as Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers, and Butterfly McQueen (who were forced to continually portray servants on stage and screen), the history of Black comediennes is filled with resistance. These women understood the social structure that surrounded them and worked within and against it. In an interview regarding these performers, veteran actress Della Reese maintains, “The people of the era understood what was going on at that time. There was no need for Louise Beavers or Hattie McDaniel to think that they were ever going to be the ingénue. They understood that so they took what they had and worked it, and turned it into something magnanimous. They took that that was supposed to be a slur or a put down and turned it into a wonderfulness” (Smith 1993). Like their foremothers, contemporary Black women performers are cognizant of the dominant society's standards of beauty that, for the most part, exclude Black women. In fact, they appreciate the Black female body in relation to and in spite of these standards. In her analysis of Black female rappers, folklorist Cheryl Keyes (2000) identifies four personae (“Queen Mother,” “Fly Girl,” “Sista with Attitude,” and “Lesbian”) that many female hip-hop performers adopt.⁵ These performers “portray via performance the fly girl as a partygoer, an independent woman, but, additionally, an erotic subject rather than an objectified one” (Keyes 2000:260). “Def Comedy Jam” comedienne Mo’Nique adopts the “fly girl” persona as a consciously erotic woman who is appreciated without being objectified. A full-figured woman, Mo’Nique dresses in the latest fashions and celebrates her position as the primary wage-earner in her marriage. According to Mo’Nique, rather than perceiving her as threatening to men or an undesirable wife, her husband finds her attractive and sexually appealing. Mo’Nique’s “fly girl” image encourages women viewers to reject destructive objectifications in favor of a self-defined sexuality that is uncommon in mainstream American culture. For instance, throughout her routine, Mo’Nique praises the virtues of large women: She exhorts the large women in the audience to stand up and take a bow, insisting they are attractive and sexy to men and threatening to slimmer women because “Once you go fat you never go back” (Latham and Purcell 2000). This position flies in the face of the stereotype perpetuated in American popular culture of the Black mammy who is maternal, asexual, and nonthreatening. The mammy is a controlling image, maintains

Patricia Hill Collins, that sustains “interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression,” through the figure of “an asexual woman, a surrogate mother in Blackface devoted to the development of a white family” (1990:71–2). Instead of adopting and reinscribing the stereotype, Mo’Nique inverts it to disempower the destructive force of the racial construct.

Other gender constructs influence these women’s performances. Critic June Sochen recognizes the constraints women have traditionally encountered when attempting to enter the profession of comic performance. “Men could be satirists and physical comics,” she writes, and “Preferably, women were neither, but if they ventured into this culturally forbidden land, they should only display restrained wit—sly humor, perhaps, but not raucous, screaming, demonstrative stuff” (1991:13). Black comediennes also faced these constraints. For Black comediennes in the early twentieth century, audience acceptance and performance opportunities were, respectively, difficult and rare. Mel Watkins explains, “Some of the earliest Black comediennes were blues singers who expanded their roles and became regulars in the comedy bits” (1994:390). In the first half of the twentieth century, like their male counterparts, Black comediennes performed in tent shows, on minstrel and vaudeville stages, and on the “chitlin’ circuit”—the stage circuit comprised of cabarets, nightclubs, and theatres that featured Black artists performing, almost exclusively, for Black audiences—with the rare performance opportunity in Broadway musical comedies such as Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle’s *Shuffle Along*.

Although the history of early African American women comics has been largely ignored, comedienne Jackie “Moms” Mabley’s work has received critical attention.⁶ Born in 1897 in North Carolina, Mabley became a dancer and singer by the time she was sixteen but quickly turned to comedy in traveling tent shows. Early in her career Mabley “assumed the character of an elderly earth mother. The guise provided the buffer or intermediary necessary to quell resistance to a woman doing a single comic routine” (Watkins 1994:391). Adopting the styles of monologues and stand-up routines that her contemporaries eschewed, Mabley constructed her material and persona in a manner that fostered a familiar relationship with the audience, and thus, detracted from any perceived threat her texts might have engendered. According to Lawrence W. Levine, “The appeal of Mabley’s humor was precisely its degree of folkishness. . . . Her antique clothing, her easy manner, her sense of kinship with her audiences—marked by her references to them as her ‘children’—her lack of pretentiousness, the easy familiarity of her language, her movements, her dialogue, were at the core of her vast popularity” (1977:362–3). Clearly “Moms” Mabley situated herself in the position as mother, a safe and accepted role for women; however, her material dealt with sexual and political issues—issues unacceptable for women to discuss publicly. By creating a character that appeared nonthreatening, Mabley was able to subvert the gender constructs of the day.

Following in this tradition, Black comediennes on the “Def Comedy Jam” confront traditional gender constructs. Adele Givens, one of the most popular women to appear on the show, uses what has become her signature line, “I’m such a fucking lady,” in direct opposition to societal norms of what a lady does and does not say. She dismisses negative responses to her use of expletives and contends that her attitude is

inherited, “Grandma told me that it’s not what comes out of your mouth that makes it filthy, it’s what you put in it” (Latham and Purcell 2000). Indeed, Givens’s signature line reminds the audience to resist societal markers and, as Dance asserts, “[love] (or at least not [hate]) themselves as Blackbrownbeigecreamdamnear-whitewomen with straightcurlybushykinkylongdamnneardowntothewaistmediumshorthair and breasts and hips of varied and sundry descriptions” (1998:xxvi). In her *Queens* routine, Givens declares:

Know that you are beautiful. Understand that. You know what happened, we started getting tricked by these magazines and these televisions. These bitches is tricking you. You think you can live up to the celebrity bitches, don’t you? Well, it can’t happen ’cause the hoes ain’t real. You know they build them bitches, you know that? . . . Ladies these hoes are not made out of the same stuff you made out of. You a real woman, them bitches are not. They there to entertain yo’ ass. You know they ain’t made out of the same thing ’cause you read about them going to the hospital for shit like exhaustion and dehydration. Now, what bitch you know so tired she got to go to the hospital? I know some exhausted bitches. I know some women who got two jobs, six kids, no man. The bitch got things to do. (Latham and Purcell 2000)

With this declaration, Givens undermines media representations of women with “perfect” figures. She privileges the lives of working-class, “ordinary” women—who survive alone in spite of enormous economic and familial pressures—as true reflections of beauty and human substance.

Givens’s declaration exemplifies Fine’s second point on the folklore diamond; it directly reflects the narrator and consists of factors such as the personal self, unconscious motives, mood states, and rational choice. The importance of the performer’s mood state is highlighted in the context of these recorded live performances. Featuring comedians who, for the most part, honed their performance skills and developed routines in venues that traditionally cater to Black audiences, “Russell Simmons’ Def Comedy Jam” recreates the atmosphere of insulation and intraracial interaction that African Americans often exhibit outside the presence of Whites. The comedians exhibit forms of Black oral traditions of call and response, signifying, the dozens, and Black vernacular speech.⁷ In addition, the “Def Comedy Jam” contains all the elements of the hip-hop scene of young African Americans, chiefly reflected by the music featuring the latest in hip-hop and rap and clothes fashion. The show is performed before a live audience at New York City’s Academy Theater.⁸ The mood is always upbeat and boisterous. Comediennes usually come onto the stage while dancing or in a similar lively state. They may first inquire about the audience’s mood with a question such as “How y’all doin’ out there?” Certainly, the comic’s mood influences the performance; however, the audience’s initial mood state determines the receptivity of the material as well. The audience’s response, which is an aspect of performance dynamics, clearly affects the mood states of both the audience and performer. Recognizing the matrix produced by the interaction of each of these elements illuminates the significance of “Def Comedy Jam” comediennes’ humor to contemporary Black women’s self-definition and struggle.

The performer’s personality and the rational choices the comedienne exhibits in her material are further aspects of personal imperatives. Fine discusses the personal-

ity as part of the “personal self” that is a “nexus between social forces and individual principles. . . . Instead of conceiving of personality as something that is mystifyingly internal, we can understand personality traits as situated modes of responding to external stimuli” (1992:15). Comediennes usually present themselves as gregarious and sociable. Although they do not adopt the maternal figure as their comedic foremother “Moms” Mabley did, these comediennes demonstrate a direct relation to Mabley by presenting themselves as nonthreatening and familiar beings with whom the audience feels comfortable even as they are far more risqué and explicit than Mabley. One of the more notorious “Def Comedy Jam” comediennes, Cheryl Underwood, represents herself as—in her vernacular—an “easy bitch.” Her text centers on her sexual promiscuity, friendships with other women, and their subsequent betrayal. Discussing why she slept with her friend’s boyfriend, she says, “Bitch goin’ have nerve enough to get mad at me. Talkin’ ’bout, ‘Cheryl, what you doin’?’ I say, ‘Bitch, I’m tryin’ to help you. Nigger say if he don’t get no pussy soon, he goin’ leave yo’ ass.’ Cause I’m a friend to the end” (Underwood 1994). Her personality, as she represents it, is one of “sluttish” girl next door. If the personality is a combination of “social forces and individual principles” (Fine 1992), Underwood’s character’s personality is informed by the cultural definition of friendship and the character’s individual principles of sexual promiscuity that respond to the external stimulus of the boyfriend’s sexual objectification of women. The incongruity of these values combines to present a humorous situation. Moreover, Underwood’s material displays her rational choice in presenting such a character. The use of expletives is a deliberate choice that illustrates Joan Radner and Susan Lanser’s concept of appropriation of “coding strategies that involve adapting to feminist purposes forms or materials normally associated with male culture or androcentric images of the feminine” (1993:10). Not only does Underwood—indeed, all of the “Def Comedy Jam” comediennes—appropriate the language commonly judged unacceptable for women, the absurdity of her braggadocio attitude about promiscuity and betrayal highlights the detrimental effects of objectification of women on romance and friendship. With this appropriation, Underwood claims her sexuality while simultaneously critiquing sexist gender reductions and definitions.

This appropriation parallels Keyes’s discussion of women rappers. Keyes suggests, “Women artists appropriate male performance behavior and use performance as a vehicle to express their responses to stereotypes and male standards, while simultaneously achieving recognition and success in the male-dominated tradition” (1993:204). Underwood’s rational choice in appropriating these characteristics shows her response to male-defined objectifications of women as sexual entities. In the same way, the use of the word “bitch” is appropriated by many of these comediennes. The word seems to function similarly to the word “nigger” in the African American community.⁹ Like “nigger,” “bitch” is used with pride, derision, or simply as a common name. Keyes demonstrates the term varies in definition and acceptance among female rap artists (2000:262–3). Although for many this word is offensive and degrading, the flagrancy with which these comediennes toss the term about suggests an attempt to dispel the offensive connotations. Comedienne Mo’Nique scoffs at the affront of the term and claims, “We give that word so much . . . power . . . and if it’s used at the right

time, at the proper time, oh, it's a wonderful word" (Latham and Purcell 2000). Describing the "Sista with Attitude" persona affected by some female hip-hop performers, Keyes notes, "Female MCs revise the standard definition of bitch, from an 'aggressive woman who challenges male authority' to an aggressive or assertive female who subverts patriarchal rule" (2000:263). The term is an appropriation of misogynist discourse traditionally used to deride and insult women, but it now has a multi-valent quality dependent upon use.

According to Fine, another factor of personal imperatives is unconscious motive. Although this factor involves psychoanalytic theorizing, which can be unduly steeped in Freudian patriarchal concepts, it is helpful to study the performer's text for displays of unconscious motives. Zita Dresner suggests that women's humor tends to be more humane and compassionate than male humor (1991:180). She discusses Whoopi Goldberg and Lily Tomlin's respective one-woman shows and asserts "the 'humanity' of the humor ascribed to these two performers derives from the form and content of their work. For one thing, both women insist on defining themselves as actresses rather than comediennes, because neither is interested in simply standing up and telling jokes or performing a comic routine as herself or in the persona of herself as jokester" (1991:181). The expression of human characters that are derived from Goldberg's and Tomlin's personal ideals concerning their profession demonstrates an unconscious motive of attempting to change the concept of what constitutes a comedian and how a comedian performs. The women of "Def Comedy Jam" exhibit the unconscious motive of distinguishing themselves—and by implication, African American women in general—from Black males and White females alike. The material, language, and overall performance of Black comediennes illustrate this motive. Although these women performers often appropriate male characteristics, their texts, for the most part, center on a kind of parody of females and feminine concerns. Furthermore, although feminine issues are privileged, the female performers are also able to explicitly discuss issues that are of significance to African American women. They distance and distinguish themselves from other comedians, resulting in a celebration of Black womanhood, another unconscious motive.

The performance dynamics involved in the production of "Def Comedy Jam" illustrate the communication paths between the performer and audience. More than any other point, performance dynamics highlight the connection and collaboration of the narrator and audience. This element includes the setting (spatial and temporal) in which the folklore takes place, style and texture of how it is performed, interactional purpose, and audience response. As previously mentioned, "Def Comedy Jam" is an extraction of the hip-hop scene: its setting, music, performers, and audience are all part of the contemporary rap arena. The stage is set very close to the audience so that comics are neither at a distance from nor at an exaggerated level above them. This setting engenders a sense of community and familiarity. Indeed, instead of the usual monologue that comedians normally present in stand-up comic situations, this setting allows for the comics to carry on a dialogue with the audience. Comedians often ask questions of the audience, and the answers are heard by nearly everyone. This dialogue is a form of the African American oral tradition of call and response, which is quite different from the hecklers mainstream comedians may en-

counter. Although hecklers are generally an undesirable, but often expected, aspect of stand-up comic routines, the call and response of “Def Comedy Jam” is an essential element of African American dialogic performances. Similarly, the audience’s response to the performance illustrates the connection between them and the performer. The “Def Comedy Jam” audience is made up largely of young African Americans; the laughter is animated and boisterous. Many male audience members jump out of their seats, stand up, shout, and “high five” one another—or even the comic—when they find an anecdote, joke, or situation particularly amusing. Laughter is an unapologetic expression. Although Blacks, and particularly Black women, have had to be conscious of offensive representations by Whites, the familiarity between audience members and performers is positive in this context. Past association and familiarity greatly influence audience response. As Fine argues, “Audience response is more complicated than the making of a simple judgment on the factual adequacy or credibility of the narrative. The performance itself is being evaluated. How well was the material presented? How entertaining was the narrative? How well liked is the speaker? Some speakers are given more leeway in the evaluation of their performance because of past satisfactions, friendship, or sympathy. They have a margin of idiosyncrasy credits” (1992:25–6). When comediennees are introduced by the host of the “Def Comedy Jam,” if the audience is unfamiliar with the comic, there will be light, polite applause. If the audience immediately recognizes the comic, though, the applause will be thunderous and filled with what has become known as “dog woofs.”¹⁰ As long as the comedienne lives up to the expected level, this reaction will continue throughout the performance. The comediennees who return to “Def Comedy Jam” for repeat performances can expect a more receptive audience than newcomers, who must earn the audience’s appreciation.

The style and texture of the performance influences its reception. Fine suggests, “The first thing that most audiences—academic and folk—listen for in a text is its content; yet the aesthetic qualities of how the narrative is performed are crucial to analysis” (1992:23). The style these comediennees exhibit necessarily conforms to hip-hop, or “old school,” style, as in the case of Miss Laura Hayes, who is clearly older and not of the hip-hop generation. Because much of rap and hip-hop music has been criticized for its misogynist themes and lyrics, many comediennees present themselves with dignity and integrity—in direct opposition to the images characterized by much of the music. Jeff Niesel reasons, “It is important, however, to ensure that rap music on the whole is not equated with misogyny, an assumption that supports the stereotype that Black males are unrestrained sexual animals” (1997:242). “Def Comedy Jam” comediennees destabilize the equation of hip-hop and misogyny with material that examines sexism, racism, and parody of the self, rarely making humorous remarks at someone’s expense except, obviously, the pointed critique of men and sex. Their style adds to their strength and integrity as comic performers and Black women.

All of the aforementioned points on Fine’s folklore diamond impact the final point, narrative content. Narrative content comprises the details of the narrative, the themes it advances, its moral structure, and the function of the narrative in contemporary society. Fine asserts, “Content is the product; the other issues represent the conditions and process of narration. No matter how much folklorists wish to examine the con-

ditions or process of production, we cannot escape the necessity of confronting the text” (1992:27). Although I have given examples of the material the comedienne uses to illustrate the significance of social structure, personal imperatives, and performance dynamics in a substantive challenge to cultural race and gender ideologies, detailed attention to the material reveals resistance to dominant ideas *and* self-definition without essentializing Black women and our experiences. Although the texts might seem antithetical to feminist values, when read in the context of parody, they often critique patriarchal objectification of women and, in doing so, claim a space for Black womanhood that defines it against patriarchy and outside of mainstream feminism.

The details and themes of the material often center on sex and gender constructs. These comedienne often celebrate sexuality while simultaneously denouncing sexism and male sexual domination. Far from reinscribing the stereotype of Black women as hypersexual and emasculating, they personify Toni Morrison’s alternative interpretation of the stereotyped aggressive Black woman as “sexually at home in [their] bod[ies]” and “self-sufficient and tough” (Williams 1991:72). They do not mind discussing women’s healthcare and sexual satisfaction, or lack thereof. Exploring the conditions of single life, Givens says,

I watch Oprah ’cause I ain’t got a man. But that’s alright ’cause between Oprah and my gynecologist, I’m satisfied. That’s right, I learned to appreciate that fucking pap smear. Talkin’ about once a year, bullshit, I’ll see you tomorrow motherfucker. Shit, ten inches of iron, hard, safe shit. When he’s finished, I smoke a fucking cigarette and ask him, “Was it good for you too?” And some women like foreplay. If you creative enough, you can get foreplay with that fucking pap smear. Oh yeah, all I got to do is say something like, “Doc, could I get a breast exam before the pap smear?” (1992)

This narrative parodies the pseudointimacy offered by the Oprah Winfrey talk show through the discursive acts of self-disclosure and the impersonal—and for many women, highly uncomfortable—nature of gynecological exams.¹¹ Claiming fulfillment through these activities, which are generally recognized as nonintimate, unsatisfying encounters, speaks to the lack of satisfaction sexual relationships can offer.

Other female performers describe situations in which men attempt to dominate, coerce, or otherwise exploit women; in doing so, they condemn the trivialization of women as sexual commodities. Melanie Comacho expresses this attitude:

All they think about is sex, sex, sex, sex. We can’t even go to the movies with the brothers no more. I’m mean, there’s so much sex in the movies that by the time the movie is over, the brother talkin’ that same old drag, “Well baby, how come we don’t never do that what they was doin’ in the movies?” I was like, “Well baby, they paid her \$450,000 to jump on that table like that. Now exactly how much money you talkin’ about? I mean what you think you goin’ get for a Pepsi and some goddamn popcorn? Not a goddamn thing here.” (1994)

This scenario critiques the complex system of sexual commodification, for not only does Hollywood’s portrayal of women as sexual objects color the male gaze, but by pointing to the irony of selling herself, Comacho demonstrates that the commodification of the female body decreases the value and substance of heterosexual relationships.

Infidelity and domestic abuse are other topics these comedienne are not ashamed to expose. Using her age to claim the position as older, wiser advisor to her audience

(the “Queen Mother” image, as identified by Keyes [2000]), Miss Laura Hayes describes the unity and support she and her many sisters provide one another that also provides the privilege to criticize self-destructive behaviors, such as ignoring their male partners’ infidelity and lies. Hayes narrates, “You know how your sisters and your girlfriends won’t tell you when your man is fooling around? Oh, we tell, baby. Go right to the phone, “Eh sis, yeah motherfucker down at the mall. Oh, you right, that’s disrespectful. *Mr. Motherfucker* down at the mall” (Latham and Purcell 2000). The absurdity of including the appellation “Mr.” with the expletive “motherfucker” enhances the parody without dismissing the man’s culpability. The sister fails to identify the respect Hayes shows her by calling, but she demands respect for someone disrespecting her man. This situation displays the skewed sense of self some women hold. Domestic violence situations also occasion sisterly support, as Hayes narrates:

You marry one of us, you marry all of us. Okay. And when there’s some problems we’ll get together, baby, ’cause moms is the dispatcher. Aw, my little sister got in trouble. She had to call mamma. “Mamma, this, this nigger hit me.” Woo, mamma was cool, though. She was like, “Don’t worry about it, baby.” Moms hung up the phone, dialed one number, all our phones rang: “Bertha, Laura, Eulah, Ruthie, get on over to Alice’s house. That nigger done gone crazy.” That’s all we needed. We jumped in the car. We rollin’. We slappin’ five over the seat. . . . Get to the house, screech up real fast, walk in the door, the nigger just ’bout to hit my sister. We go, “Aw naw, not tonight.” (Latham and Purcell 2000)

Hayes removes her wig and makes a motion to fight, and the audience erupts into gales of laughter. She demonstrates the tradition of support structures in her family that has been passed from mother to daughters. Yet, rather than the stereotype of the Black matriarchal family, á la Moynihan,¹² part of Hayes’s narrative (not included above) begins with a description of her father’s insistence that she and her sisters deprecate Barbie doll play for pursuits that require strength and physical skills. Therefore, that Hayes and her sisters physically defend their sister is not attributable to some faulty notion of “strong Black women,” but is a result of parental guidance by mother *and* father to support and defend one another.

In a similar way, Givens critiques the lack of consciousness many woman possess in the face of exploitation by men. According to Givens, “real” women are conscious and independent as opposed to her sister, whom she describes as a “fake bitch”:

My sister, fake bitch. I’m not lying, thirty-five years old and fake than a motherfucker. She think she know all there is about a man just ’cause she’s been married for fifteen years. Give the bitch a few drinks and she gives you advice. . . . “Baby sister, come on let me tell you something. You know big sister ain’t gone tell you nothing wrong. Let me tell you something. If my husband come home, on payday, it’s late, and he’s broke, he ain’t getting no pussy.” Fake bitch, bless her heart. She don’t know. I say, “Let me tell you something, sister. If your husband come home, on payday, it’s late, and he’s broke, he done *had* some pussy.” (1992)

Instead of the passive aggressive resistance her sister suggests, Givens urges further critique of the situation and recognition of the signs of infidelity, which is a far more substantive action. She refutes the implication that marriage bestows wisdom and consciousness and that her sister’s sexual withholding is an effective tool to combat unfaithfulness.

The concept of a “real woman” is in direct opposition to “normalized” gender constructs in American culture. The term “real woman” echoes notions of “true womanhood”—which included ideals of piety, domesticity, purity, and submission—that were propagated in the nineteenth century and still reside in contemporary culture; however, the tenets of the “cult of true womanhood” were essentialist and excluded African American women. Nineteenth-century race ideology viewed people of African descent as excessively sexual and deviant. Hazel Carby shows how this racial ideology marked Black women as overly sexual and precluded recognition of their chastity (1987:27). Therefore, Black women were not considered virtuous enough to exhibit purity. Following this rationale, Black women’s immorality made their ability to maintain the concomitant values (piety, domesticity, and submissiveness) of the “cult of true womanhood” suspect. Yet, African American women adopted the values of “true womanhood” in what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls “the politics of respectability,” which included a discourse that “emphasized manners and morals while simultaneously asserting traditional forms of protest, such as petitions, boycotts, and verbal appeals to justice” (1993:187). This ideology was problematic because of an inherent contradiction—it paralleled White middle-class values and held African Americans responsible for adopting and representing these ideals; however, although Givens’s term “real women” echoes the past by evoking a concept of “authenticity,” her text typifies the three central aspects of Black feminist thought that Patricia Hill Collins identifies: African American women’s self-definition and self-evaluation, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the importance of African American women’s culture (Bell et al. 2000:42). Givens’s narrative of communication within the sisterly relationship signifies African American women’s culture of communication, particularly that of advising and tutoring one another based on personal experience. Although the sister’s self-definition and evaluation are problematic, the situation and Givens’s response illustrate the intersection of sex and class domination. Givens suggests—instead of the illusion of power her sister thinks she has—women who are economically dependent on males are disempowered sexually and economically. Givens’s critique of the sister centralizes African American women’s experiences without reducing us to an undifferentiated whole. These comediennes do not present themselves as feminist, although some of the material could be termed feminist. Their work can be more accurately described as womanist. The outrageous, audacious, willful character of the texts and performers exemplify the womanist concept first articulated by Alice Walker in her pioneering work on Black women writers (Walker 1983).

Representations of African American women offered by African American female comics have been received by a growing audience of Americans through mass media, which becomes an additional factor in analysis of these performances. Charles S. Dutton asserts, “The crossover success of ‘Russell Simmons’ Def Comedy Jam’ signals the dominance of urban Black youth on American culture” (Smith 1993). This dominance suggests that mainstream America is absorbing these images of Black women. Although some of us are able to analyze these images and understand them for their value, I worry about how these representations affect the overall perception of African American women by American society. On the one hand, although these

comediennes celebrate Black culture and womanhood and confront gender constructs, the methods they employ may not be understood by viewers who lack historical and cultural knowledge. This concern is compounded by the fact that these performances are viewed by large audiences through television and video recordings. The sheer magnitude of viewers exponentially increases the chances of misinterpreting contemporary Black women's humor. On the other hand, these performances function as a vehicle for changing the ideals and conceptualizations of Black women. Michael Omi and Howard Winant's discussion of Black nationalism and its use as a vehicle for change parallels the potential significance of "Def Comedy Jam" comedienne. They write, "Painting, theater, dance, music, language, even cars and clothes, all became media through which a new style could be developed, and through which 'genuine' oppositional culture could be distinguished from assimilationist practices" (1994:109). In short, these comedienne are "soul babies."¹³ In order to foster this transition, however, mainstream culture must be willing to both accept change and understand African American culture, looking beyond the appropriation of expletives and "hard-core" styles to discern the messages that are being advanced—for the trajectory the material and performances have taken since the early days of Black comic performance has continually moved away from the center of mainstream society. Comedian-turned-activist Dick Gregory expresses his view that "these Black comics [are] out there. They can never come back to our level. They're out there for good and all we can do is document the metamorphosis" (Smith 1993).

Even though contemporary Black comedienne diverge from Black comics of the past, their work is grounded in African American oral traditions using common themes and motifs that are passed on generationally. For example, comedienne Sommore uses material derived from "tales and stories that are almost exclusively the property of Afro-Americans, including ones that focus on heaven and hell, as well as those that treat the relationships between blacks and whites" (Harris 1988:772). Compare the following two narratives that employ the heaven and hell motif. The first text was related by "Moms" Mabley in the 1960s.

Colored fellow down home died. Pulled up to the gate. St. Peter look at him, say, "What do you want?" "Hey, man, you know me. Hey, Jack, you know me. I'm old Sam Jones. Old Sam Jones, man, you know me. Used to be with the NAACP, you know, CORE and all that stuff, man, marches, remember me? Oh, man, you know me." He just broke down there, "You know me." He looked in his book. "Sam Jones," he say, "no, no, you ain't here, no Sam Jones." He said, "Oh, man, yes, I am; look there. You know me. I'm the cat that married that white girl on the capital steps of Jackson, Mississippi." He said, "How long ago has that been?" He said, "About five minutes ago." (Harris 1988:772)

In her *Queens* routine, Sommore relates the following:

I had a dream that I was standin' at the gates of heaven and got into a fight. It wasn't my fault, they was fuckin' with me in line. Let me tell you. Now, I'm standin' in line at the gates of heaven. Foxy Brown, the rapper, is standin' in front of me. Monica Lewinsky is standin' in back of me. So Foxy Brown gets up to the gate, she say, "How you doin', St. Peter? My name is Foxy Brown, I'm a rapper. I've done some sins in my life but I'm still a good person." He say, "Foxy Brown, my child, what part of your body have you sinned with?" She said, "my hands." He said, "Go over there and rinse your hands out in the faucet and you may enter the gates of heaven." Next, it was my turn. I went up to the gate. I said, "How

you doin', St. Peter? My name is Sommore. I'm a stand-up comedian. I've done some sins in my life but I'm still a good person." He said, "Sommore, my child, what part of your body have you sinned with?" Before I can say any fucking thing, Monica Lewinsky pushed me out the way and said, "Excuse me, but can I rinse my mouth out in the faucet before this bitch put her ass in the water?" "You don't know me. You, do not know me." (Latham and Purcell 2000)

As Harris points out, "Part of the [jokes center] upon the fact that death, the usual entry to heaven, frequently does not suffice for Black people. They must pass another test with St. Peter, the traditional keeper of the gate comparable to Legba in African folklore" (1988:772). Mabley's text humorizes the notions that racism kills Blacks faster than good deeds can be recorded and that the civil disobedience used by major civil rights organizations is less risky than violating southern dictates against interracial marriage. The amusing element of Sommore's narrative combines media awareness and parody of the self. The humor derives from the public's knowledge of the sexual activities of Foxy Brown—whose sexually explicit lyrics are infamous—and Monica Lewinsky—whose sexual relationship with the president gained worldwide attention—and Sommore's sex life. That Brown and Lewinsky can enter heaven before Sommore can speaks to the notoriety of her life. While Mabley's protagonist's assertion that St. Peter knows him is meant to vouch for his character, Sommore's insistence that Lewinsky is not acquainted with her points to Sommore's blatant sexuality. By claiming a sexuality that is equal to these very public figures, she locates herself in the entertainment and political arenas where women have been publicly castigated for explicit or revealed sexuality. Sommore suggests that spiritual cleansing for private acts is a private matter and anyone who gainsays that is presumptuous. Mabley's narrative is a political joke that turns on the sexual, while Sommore's is a sexual joke that turns on a political situation. Harris's assessment of Mabley is equally true of Sommore. Harris contends, "Moms's awareness of those traditional encounters in the lore, along with her incorporation of the topical focus, makes the humor a unique blend of the old and the new, doubly recognizable, and double funny" (1988:772).

While I agree with Gregory that these comics cannot return to the level of comedy performed by Mabley, Gregory, and their contemporaries, we can do more than document the change in performance, language, and acceptable comedic subjects as he suggests. Ultimately, the characteristics of performance style and subject matter contemporary Black women comics display reflect the social changes brought about by the activism of civil rights advocates such as Gregory. Using the term "postsoul" to delineate the period of social, political, and aesthetic experiences in African American communities since the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, Mark Anthony Neal recognizes that individuals and cultural products of this era have "been fueled by three distinct critical desires, namely, the reconstitution of community, particularly one that is critically engaged with the cultural and political output of Black communities; a rigorous form of self and communal critique; and the willingness to undermine or deconstruct the most negative symbols and stereotypes of Black life via the use and distribution of those very same symbols and stereotypes" (2002:120).

But the repertoires of Black comediennes reflect an even deeper acknowledgment of the difficult lives of Black women. The comedic performances of African Ameri-

can female comics illustrate this postsoul aesthetic. As scholars and critics, it is imperative that we analyze these texts and facilitate understanding by different audience communities. Analysis and understanding may not be simple or readily apparent, in view of Alan Dundes's (1973) claim that the study of folk humor has been long neglected because the various nuances and subtleties can be lost even on the researcher, regardless of whether she is a member of the community. Nevertheless, we must endeavor in our study of African American humor to understand the historical and cultural factors underlying the humor in hopes of rendering credible and satisfactory analyses. This article is presented in that spirit.

Notes

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1. My title comes in part from a line in Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*: "but bein alive and bein a woman and bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma / I havent conquered yet" (1977:45). This line reflects the difficulties Black women have regarding both self-definition and self-representation, which point to inner conflicts about the self. The epigraph from Najlis, however, suggests this metaphysical dilemma is conquerable and that the expression of humor demonstrates a medium through which to triumph over the dilemma.

2. From an interview with Najlis titled "Women's Solidarity Has Given Our Lives a New Dimension: Laughter," see Margaret Randall (1994).

3. I am echoing the title of the pioneering anthology of Black women's studies criticism, *All the Women Are White, All the Men Are Black, But Some of Us Are Brave* (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982).

4. In an effort to disrupt the academic writing/African American discourse distinction, I often use "our" and "we" pronouns throughout this essay when referring to African American women to reflect my subject position in connection with the texts and my analysis.

5. Keyes defines the characteristics of each of these categories as follows: "Queen Mother," an African-centered, wise, regal, self-assured woman; "Fly Girl," a highly fashionable, independent, flamboyant woman with an explicit sexuality; "Sista with Attitude," an aggressive, assertive, self-empowered woman; and "Lesbian," an openly lesbian woman who explores the dynamics of race and role play that concern the Black lesbian community (2000). Keyes points out that, because the categories are fluid, performers can shift and occupy multiple categories simultaneously.

6. Although Watkins produces an invaluable history of Black comedic performance, his work barely highlights the experiences and work of Black women comics (1994). According to Dance, in her introduction to *Hush Honey*, "African American women have been pretty much ignored in every kind of study of humor—American humor, women's humor, African American humor" (1998:xxix).

7. The practice of "signifying" in African American culture is thoroughly explored in Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). Signifying is an African American oral tradition that is a discursive strategy in which the meaning of words or actions is determined by the situation or identities of both speaker and listener and is generally used to subvert or triumph over an adversary. With this practice, one can signify to, about, or upon someone or something. Signifying takes multiple forms but consistently "entails formal revision and an intertextual relation" (1988:51). See Gates for a discussion of signifying as a literary technique. The "dozens" is a verbal contest of mockery in which contestants ridicule their opponents or their relatives with verbal wit. These oral traditions can be found in similar forms and are rooted in West African cultures from which many of the Africanist aspects of African American culture derive. See Watkins (1994) and Abrahams (1985) for more detailed discussion of these verbal traditions.

8. This information comes from a press release that HBO distributed to print media, dated June 22, 1994.

9. The term “nigger” “ranges in connotations from a term of endearment to a vilification, and it is used freely in conversation among many African Americans. Among upper-class Blacks, it tends more toward the pejorative. Blacks almost always consider ‘nigger’ an offensive term when it is used by whites” (Dance 1998:xxv). Randall Kennedy extensively probes the history of the use of “nigger” in his book *Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (2002).

10. This particular form of applause and recognition has long been a part of African American youth culture. The “woof call” is a signature of the Black fraternity Omega Psi Phi, whose members are commonly known as “Q dogs.” In addition, the “father of funk,” George Clinton made the “woof call” popular in the Parliament’s recording, “Atomic Dog.” The call was ushered into American popular culture, however, by talk-show host Arsenio Hall and his “dog pound” in the early 1990s.

11. See Laurie L. Haag (1993) for a discussion of the constructed intimacy of the Oprah Winfrey show.

12. The “pathology” of African American family structures has been the foundation of many sociological studies of Black culture and is exemplified in Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 study *The Negro Family*. Moynihan concludes that the reason Blacks do not succeed in America is because Black families are often headed by women “matriarchs” and that this structure is so different from mainstream White families that Blacks are ill equipped to integrate into American society. Moynihan’s report was based on the work of E. Franklin Frazier and suffered not only from a lack of understanding of race, gender, and class issues, but also a disregard of African survivals in African American culture, thereby producing a study that held African Americans—particularly African American women—responsible for our own oppression. Unfortunately, Moynihan’s report determined public policy with respect to African Americans for more than two decades.

13. Neal (2002) uses this term to describe African Americans who came of age in the period following the cultural and social changes resulting from the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, what he defines as the “postsoul” era.

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