American Anthropology Association 104th Annual Meeting

(In Pursuit of) ‘Race’ and ‘Authenticity’ in African American Standup Comedy

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An Ambitious Abstract

- I wanted to do so much today, chiefly
  - Explore how and why constructions of race and racial authenticity matter to African Americans, both in the context of comedic performance and in their everyday lives

- Explaining the “why” is constrained by the very things that conspire to keep me honest and accountable as an anthropologist
Contingencies of Knowledge
Production/Sharing

♦ What do you think you know?
♦ What can your data support?
♦ Can you be eloquent in its telling?
♦ How much time do you have?
(Narrower) Presentation Goals

♦ African American standup comedy as a window into communal notions of racial authenticity

♦ Comic-audience engagements around race afford endless opportunities to explore the what and how of racial authenticity claims, but beckon a less-exploited inquiry around the why

  – What is at stake for African Americans in individual and collective claims around racial authenticity? Why does it matter?
The Catalyst of September 11th

♦ 9/11 compelled me to ask:
  – To what extent did African American and other “urban” comics find humor in the wake of such wide-scale tragedy and loss?
  – What might their shared laughter say about matters of race, identity, and nationalism post 9/11?
Multi-Sited Ethnography of Black Standup Comedy


- Ongoing ethnographic observations of Black/“urban” comedy shows, competitions, and movie premieres in and beyond Los Angeles (January 2003-Present)

- Ethnographic interviews with comics, club owners, promoters, club-goers (October 2001-Present)

- Data collected thus far include 200+ typed pages ethnographic field notes, 175+ hours audio-recorded interviews, 100+ hours of videotaped observations of Black standup comedy
Comedic Themes Concerning 9/11

♦ Race and 9/11
♦ The Arab as the New Nigger
♦ **Racial Difference, Authenticity, and 9/11**
♦ Mixed Responses to 9/11 Humor
♦ An Ambivalent Patriotism
Racial Difference, Authenticity, and 9/11

♦ "Sama Bin Laden is a hell of a motivator. He [lives] in caves while others blow shit up. Ain’t no niggahs gon’ go along with that. If I worked for him it would be a whole ‘nother story. He’d be like, `Go do that [stage a suicide bombing]!' I’d be like, `Where you gon’ be?!' Hell, I know a pimp when I see one!" Earthquake
Racial Difference, Authenticity, and 9/11

♦ “There must not have been a lot of brothers in first class the day that the planes were hijacked. I’m sorry but you can’t hijack no niggahs with a knife!” Michael Colyar

♦ “God bless all those who died on September 11th, but I gotta be real. If it had been at least three real niggahs on the plane, It-Wouldn’t-Be-No-War-Right-Now!”

“Scruncho”
Racial Difference, Authenticity, and 9/11

♦ “God rest the souls of those who died. But them must've been some passive whites on the plane. What happened to those nigger-killing, Indian-land-stealing white folks? Where's the Aryan when you need him? ... We needed some big niggahs to guard the plane. They would've made the terrorists change their minds.” Geoff Brown
Critical Rejoinders

♦ Some 9/11 jokes problematized notions of Blackness predicated upon being “hard”
  – “Black folks been living off the fumes of the Black Panther movement for far too long. Thinking you [are] the shit just `cause you black.” (Brandon Bowlin, 3/6/03)
Critical Rejoinders

...And stop looking for rappers to be hard. You ain’t hard just because you can snarl and say some dope ass lyrics… ‘((snarls)) I’m hard niggah!’ No. You’re not. The ... lunatics who blew up the World Trade Center took ‘hard’ to a whole new level. You try that hard shit [with them], ... they’ll [terrorists] look at you [and say], ((stylized Middle Eastern accent)) ‘No you’re not hard. No I’m sorry ... No sir ... okay yeah okay rap rap okay. ((mockingly waves hand as if frightened)) I’m scared motherfucker. Oh you come in here to rap for me? Oh noooo! My heart is beating so ever fast sir.’”

(BRANDON BOWLIN - VIDEO 1)
Critical Rejoinders

♦ Chris Spencer (Video 8)

- Premise: For everyone who claims to be “hard”, there’s always someone out there who’s “harder”

- Implication: “Being hard,” “Being real,” “Being (real) Black” – it’s all relative
Critical Rejoinders

♦ Jokes unsettle certain assumptions underlying what it means to be Black

– Comics use irony, caricature, and incongruity to question “hardness” as a behavioral barometer of “authentic” Blackness

– Comics enlist Black audiences’ participation in validating and interrogating racial authenticity scripts

– Jokes likewise constitute communal deliberations around the boundaries of race
Research Implications

♦ Comic-Audience engagements beckon us to ask new questions of racial authenticity
  – Scholars should not merely deconstruct racial authenticity, but carefully consider:
    • How, when, and why racial authenticity matters?
    • What is at stake in comedic/communal stances around racial authenticity?
Further Lessons from John Jackson’s (2005) *Real Black*

- Important conceptual intervention
- **Racial Sincerity** vs. “Racial Authenticity”
- I’ll hold onto the “smoking gun,” *for now at least*, in order to think more about the “why” of racial authenticity
Probing the “Why” of Racial Authenticity

♦ Why do comics feel their notions of “real” are the realest and commit themselves to enlisting others (e.g., audiences) in their validation?

♦ How does context (i.e., Black humor) shape the way African Americans perceive and discuss racial authenticity?

♦ Why do notions of racial authenticity – in the strictest and most flexible sense of the term – pervade African American folklore, humor, music, literature, scholarship (e.g., Hurston, Gwaltney)?

♦ Why do Blacks make constant illusions to “the real” as a cultural stance, a racial positionality, an index of culture, a barometer of trust and, as Jackson develops richly, sincerity?

♦ What precisely is at stake for comics and audiences in claims around notions of race and racial authenticity?
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A Ventured Hypothesis Regarding the WHY of Racial Authenticity

- The flexibility and permanence of racial authenticity has much to do with the equally flexible but enduring significance of race

  - Jokes about racial authenticity imply and, in some cases, instantiate stances around race
  - Those for whom race matters as a qualifier of identity and lived experience take steps to sure up its boundaries by policing the performative, ideological, discursive, and behavioral boundaries of racial authenticity
  - Jokes about racial authenticity socialize strict notions, often caricatures of race (Black, White, etc.), towards multiple ends (e.g., to amuse, provoke, reprove, mark belonging, communal affiliation, individual identity)
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Conclusion

♦ Is authenticity something we (academics) really know?

– Showing race and racial authenticity to be social constructs is an important theoretical, if not moral task and scholarly responsibility

– But we also need to attend to the contexts and stakes by which these pronouncements are made and lobbied for/against

– There might be other ways of understanding racial authenticity - starting with, but in no ways limited to, John’s important theoretical and conceptual intervention: racial sincerity
Conclusion

- What if, instead of merely deconstructing racial authenticity, we explored the kind of realness that is at pains to expose itself and shore itself up in folks’ imaginations, *as well as* notions of realness that are so taken-for-granted and implicit as to draw legitimacy by remaining unstated?
Conclusion

♦ Answers could potentially transcend the very limits posed by the term, racial authenticity, and its prior deconstructionist framings

♦ Answers could shed light on why Black subjects privilege multiple definitions of race and authenticity, but never completely abandon the idea that race and racial authenticity are “real”
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Thank you!

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The Evolution of the “Arab as New Nigger” Premise

♦ “Black people, we have been delivered. Finally, we got a new nigger. The Middle Easterner is the new nigger.”

   Comic Ian Edwards (October 27, 2001)

♦ “Hell if we had placed bets on whether or not the [Washington, DC] sniper was black or white, we would’ve all lost money! I couldn’t believe it was a brother [African American]! The sniper done set us back again! After September 11th, we wasn’t niggers no more. We had new niggers! Now, we niggers again. …How you gon’ be niggers again?!”

   Comic Ray Chatman (October 26, 2002)
Comedic Riffs in Hurricane Katrina

Jokes

♦ Comic Joey Wells (Video 5)
  • “Why we got to be refugees … and looters?”
    September 13, 2005

♦ Whereas the evolving “Arab as New Nigger” coda speaks to the permanence of racialized marginalization for Blacks in the face of a “new enemy”, jokes about Hurricane Katrina bitterly question why Blacks could not be Americans or even victims in the wake of tragedy at “home”