Enacting Racial and Gendered Authenticity in Black Hair Humor

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Researching Black Hair & Humor

♦ Talk unites two research interests
  – 6-year multi-sited ethnographic study of Black hair care
  – 5-year ethnographic study of Black standup comedy

♦ Ethnographic and Discourse Analysis
  – Race, “Realness”, and Representation emerge as central themes across data
Common Topics in Black Hair

Humor

♦ Artifice (e.g., weaves, extensions)
♦ Communal debates about “good” versus “bad” hair
♦ Black women’s hair rituals in beauty salons and kitchens
♦ Common Black hairstyling dilemmas
♦ Hair and head coverings (e.g., wigs, bandanas)
  – Function as signifiers of “authentic” racial and gendered consciousness
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Physicality of Black Humor Provides Lessons in Authenticity

- Comics use bandannas, wigs, and shirts as props
  - Prescribe aesthetic standards for racial and gendered authenticity
  - Embody race-, class-, and gender-marked “authenticity”
  - Idealize, as well as interrogate “realness” as a cultural value and aesthetic ideal

- Physicality is a central resource in this work
Contexts of Hair Humor

♦ Observed in-group and out-group discourse
  – In-group jokes often framed in terms of “we”, “us”

♦ Frequent use of term “Niggah”
  – “Niggah’ used in in-group settings to connote Black people more broadly
  – “Niggah” also used with negative affect to describe people of questionable character (e.g., abusive men, racial “inauthenticities”) or of working class backgrounds

♦ Hair humor
  – Inflect cultural knowledge and realities around hair as a means of representing gender and beauty
  – Exploits physicality in service of larger claims around authenticity, race, gender, and class
Hair as a Marker of Racial Authenticity

L.A. Comic, “Sruncho” (9/13/04)

♦ You got “real” niggahs and “fake” niggahs. If you ask a Black person what they mixed with, they’re gonna say, “I’m Black. I’m not mixed with nothing.” But if you ask a niggah – a straight-up niggah – what they mixed with, what they gon’ say? ((extends microphone to audience)) [Audience responds in unison: “I’m Indian!”] - Yeah right, “I’m INDI::AN! Cherokee::!:!” Can I share my philosophy on that? ((Audience: “Yeah!”)) In-de-end, you still a niggah!
Hair as a Marker of Racial Authenticity

♦ Scruncho’s joke reifies the “one-drop rule”
  – Criticizes “straight-up niggahs” who, unlike “real” Black folks, emphasize their multiracial heritage
  – Situates claims of Indian ancestry in opposition to racial consciousness and Black pride

♦ Black audiences corroborate the joke’s subtext
  – Punch-line relies on the audience’s provision of the word Indian

♦ Coda is rich in phonetic parallelism and dialectal play
  – Asserts that while African Americans may claim to be part-Indian, in-de-end (i.e., in the end), they are still “niggahs” (i.e., Black)
Bandanas as a Marker of Gendered Authenticity

- All my real men say “Man up!” ((Male audience members reply in unison; “Man up!”)) Something’s going on with men. They’re getting watered down and losing their edge. Let me tell you something. The bandana was designed to give men an instant edge. It was NOT meant … for rhinestones! Let me show you how to wear this thing. Now brothers (i.e., Black men) and Mexicans wear theirs like no one else in the world. We [Black men] wear ours just above the eyebrow. ((Ties scarf on head to demonstrate)) Instant edge! Now Mexicans have the same mentality. They wear theirs right below the eyebrow. ((Adjusts scarf so it rests just below his eyebrows)) … Now if you gon’ make a conscious decision to rob me, you better have it on right! I SWEAR FO’ GOD I’d rather DIE than - ((Unties knot and reties it under chin; wields imaginary gun with one hand on his hip)) - [If] you come at me this way, you better kill me! I’d rather die!! ((Audience laughs uproariously))
Bandanas as a Marker of Gendered Authenticity

♦ Play related clip (bolder more colorful claims)
Bandannas as a Marker of Gendered Authenticity

- Scruncho actively polices men’s aesthetic practices
  - outlaws rhinestones on bandanas
  - prescribes other standards by which “real” men should don headscarves
- Impersonates “authentic” hyper-masculine Black and Latino men and sets them against the physical posturing of an awkward thief
- Inscribes models of culturally-authentic masculine aesthetics and succeeds on the basis of these incongruous juxtapositions
Wigs and Authenticity

- Laura Hayes’s comedy turns common quips about fake hair on their head through a comical “unveiling”
- While hosting “The Queens of Comedy” (2001), she reflects, not uncynically, on her and her sisters’ upbringing as the basis for their camaraderie today:
Hair “Unveiling” as a Punch Line

I come from a big family of girls. My daddy raised us tough. He was like, “I ain’t raising no punk bitches.” And you couldn’t go to my daddy with … what he called “sissy shit.” You couldn’t go up to him and say, ((little girl voice)) “Daddy, can I go outside and play with Barbie?” ((mimics Dad’s retort)) “Fuck Barbie! [You] better get out there and build me a sofa!” And he taught us to stick together too. You marry one of us, you marry all of us… And when there [are] some problems, we’ll get together, baby, ’cause Moms is the dispatcher. My little sister got in trouble and had to call Mama. ((impersonates tearful sister)) “Mama … this … niggah … HIT me.” … Mama was cool, though. She said, ((deep voice)) “Don’t worry about it, baby.” Moms hung up the phone, dialed one number, and ALL our phones rang. ((mimics mother)) “Bertha, Laura, Eula, Ruthie, get on over to Alice’s house. That niggah done gone crazy.” That was all we needed. We jumped in the car, we rollin’. We slapping 5’s [i.e., slapping hands] over the seat … … Get to the house. Screech up real fast. Walk in the door. The niggah just about to hit my sister. We go:
Hair “Unveiling” as a Punch Line

((Takes off wig)) “Aww na::w, not tonight, niggah! ((rhetorically)) What?!” ((Audience laughs wildly; Hayes saunters around onstage wigless))
Hair “Unveiling as a Punch Line

… “Niggah what? Niggah who?” ((to audience))
Unh-unh. We didn’t play that!!
Hair “Unveiling” as a Punch Line
“De-wigging” as the Punch Line

De-wigging is a radical gesture that effectively announces Hayes’ intention to fight

- Exemplifies tenacious “ghetto” (i.e., street savvy) Black women and men who remove extraneous accessories prior to fights and (of women who) are defiant even in the face of threats of domestic violence
- Gesture enacts core communal and, to some extent, distinctly class-marked values concerning the importance of standing up for family and self

De-wigging acts as a climactic coda that comically breaches societal and communal standards governing the presentation of hair/self
Black Girls, Hair, and Self Esteem

♦ Whoopi Goldberg – Live on Broadway (1991)
  – Impersonates Black girl who subscribes to Eurocentric standards of beauty
  – Goldberg also stages a strategic “unveiling” that acts as both a dramatic turn and comedic segue
Black Girls, Hair, and Self Esteem

♦ ((Swinging white shirt on her head)) This is my long and luxurious blonde hair. Ain’t it pretty? ((Audience: Yeah!)) I can put it in a ponytail. Wanna see? ((Goldberg turns around, grabs the shirt and swings shirt sleeves)) … My momma made me go to my room ’cause she said this wasn’t nothing but a shirt on my head and I said, “Nuh unh, this is my long luxurious blonde hair.” She said, “Nuh unh, fool, that’s a shirt!” And I said, “You a fool. It’s my hair.” She made me go to my room. But I don’t care because when I get big, I’m going to be White. … Fifty million trillion million elephants and I’m going to let ’em go in the house so they can trample on everybody. And then she gonna want me to make ’em stop but she ain’t even gonna know I’m there because I’ll have blonde hair, blue eyes, and I’ll be White. … I AM! Uh huh! And then I’ll have a dream house, and a dream car, and dream candy and a dream house and me and Barbie are gonna live with Ken and Skipper and Malibu Barbie. … We ARE!
Black Girls, Hair, and Self Esteem

♦ And [my mother] say I just gotta be happy with what I got, but look: ((Removes shirt from head)) … It don’t do nothin’. It don’t blow in the wind. And it don’t casca-casca-dade down my back. It don’t and I put that bouncin’ and behavin’ stuff in it and it didn’t even listen! And I want some other kind of hair that do something else. I do. [play clip]
Black Girls, Hair, and Self Esteem

♦ Goldberg conveys childlike innocence via
  – frank assessment of her kinky hair
  – trouble she has pronouncing *cascade*
  – literal interpretation of hair product advertisements
  – Her comments reveal a near-comical naïveté

♦ Her dramatic “unveiling” acts as a dramatic turn and comedic segue towards a broader political critique
“Unveiling” as Comedic Turn & Segue

♦ By speaking as a child, Goldberg can assume an unapologetically naïve positionality and frankness (e.g., *And don’t nobody on TV look like none of y’all.*)

♦ Her innocence summons greater empathy from the audience concerning her plight and its relation to the lack of racial diversity on TV and in children’s toys.

♦ By making audience members the brunt of her humor and slyly referencing America’s insidious history of race mixing (i.e., * Somebody in your family look like me?*), Goldberg moderates the more serious aspects of her monologue with humor.
Summary

♦ Authenticity is constructed and constituted through physical humor about hair

♦ Men and women participate in physical humor
  – Employ wigs, bandannas, and shirts as props
  – Use these props to physically stage jokes about hair, gender, authenticity, and beauty standards

♦ Jokes illuminate how hair functions as markers of authenticity for Black men and women

♦ Jokes also allude to why hair matters as an index of authenticity
Theoretical Implications

- **Hair humor likewise presents a stage for exploring authenticity in new ways**
  - Study that is necessarily sensitive to, but not entirely delimited by the analytical parameters of identity politics
    - *which mandates deconstructing racial authenticity*
  - **Asks not only:** What is racial authenticity in these episodes? How is it constructed?
  - **But also:** Why might racial authenticity matter in these episodes? and What might this tell us about the pervasiveness of racial authenticity in Black comedic performance and everyday life?
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 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)
Theoretical Implications

♦ 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
Theoretical Implications

- 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, \textit{as well as} notions of realness that are so taken-for-granted and implicit as to draw legitimacy by remaining unstated?
Theoretical Possibilities

♦ 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”
Thank You!
(and panel coordinator, Dr. Roxanne Schwab)