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

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Speaking My Truth

♦ Taking inspiration lately from writers
  – One advises writers to say what they mean up front
♦ So, why “truth” and “authenticity” in Black standup comedy?
♦ How did it this passion arise?
Truth and Authenticity in African American Humor: On Getting There

♦ The catalyst of 9/11

– 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?
– Finally, did some jokes succeed while others failed? Why or why not?
Multi-Sited Ethnography of Black Standup Comedy

- Initial 15-month intensive ethnographic study
  - 4-5 club visits per week in first month, 2-3 visits per week in subsequent months (October 2001-December 2003)
  - 1-2 observations/tri-weekly (January 2004-Present)

- Observe urban comedy shows and competitions in and beyond Los Angeles

- Conduct ethnographic interviews with 35+ comics, club owners, promoters, club-goers (150+ hours)

- Frequent bystander in comics’ “backstage” conversations
The Joke that Resonated

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

Comic/Writer Ian Edwards

“Finally”

African American Audience Member
Theoretical Inspiration

- Standup comics as “everyday ethnographers”
- Urban comedy club as cultural locale
- Black comedy as a site for in-group and cross-cultural engagements
  - Participants use humor and shared cultural frames to interrogate the state of the nation
  - Black comics routinely explore transgressive “truths” and notions of authenticity
  - Dialogical forum where controversial narratives are routinely taken up
Racial Nuances of Black Standup Comedy

♦ **Audience as co-author**

- “Black audiences are different from white audiences. They’re like, ‘Make me laugh motherfuckah. I done paid my money and I got stress. You *better* be funny. – And don’t put me in the front neither!’ White audiences come to black clubs and are appalled. They’re like, ‘Geez gosh, could you quiet down. There’s a comic on the stage. Can’t you see he’s talking? This is a comedy show for Christ’ sake!’” *Mad TV* comic/actor Arie Spears
Comedic Themes Concerning 9/11

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

“Why were there no flags being displayed before 9/11? Where was the patriotism? … Look at the flag - it was made in China!... [Critics] always say, (stereotyped southern accent) ‘Don’t make fun of the flag you fucking … nigger boy. It’s America!’ Well [then] stop slapping [black] teenage heads against the hood of motherfucking police cars!”

comic/poet “Shang”
“Many people wonder why I’m not tripping after the terrorist attacks in New York and D.C. I’m a niggah – I’ve been dealing with [white] terrorists all my life! … *Still*, I’m glad the white man came over to Africa and got *me!*”

“*Earthquake*”
Race and 9/11 Jokes

If you’re not white, you’re not American –

Dominique

(Video 1)
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The Arab as the “New Nigger”

♦ “It’s a good time to be black. If you ain’t got no towel wrapped around your head, your ass is in the game!” Don “DC” Curry

♦ “National tragedy was ‘messed up’ but it had it’s benefits. I haven’t been a nigger for a month! Everyone’s like, ‘Hey Brother!’” “A.C.”

♦ “It’s a good time to be black. Afghanis are the new niggers. Cab drivers pick me up and let me drive!” Tony Rock
The Arab as the “New Nigger”

“There’s one good thing that came from the terrorist attacks. For a good while, the police left black people alone. [Recently] the police stopped me. I had some weed in my hand and some cocaine in the trunk. They asked me if I’d seen anything out of the ordinary. I told them, *(puffs an imaginary blunt)* `I just saw two Arabs walking down the street and they looked suspicious. You may want to go check `em out.”” *Frantz Cassius*
The Arab as the “New Nigger”

Cassius’ joke is based on true story:

“Now, the focus is on something bigger than the Black man – someone who’s really after white people and not some imaginary enemy.”
The Arab as the “New Nigger”

♦ “Excuse me stewardess? That gentleman who walked by with the gold chains and baggy jeans - do you think he could have a seat next to me? You can just take it off my tab.” Ralph Harris

♦ “[Now] white men … get to be suspects too. They get to see what it feels like.” Gee then performed his interpretation of an angry white male passenger at an airport security check point: “What?! Take off my shoes? What the fuck for?! I don’t own a 7-11 or have a fucking dot on my head!” Courtney Gee
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Racial Difference 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 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 and 9/11

♦ “If Blacks had been on the plane …”

Eddie Griffin

(VIDEO 2)
Racial Difference 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
Brandon Bowlin’s critical rejoinder (VIDEO 3):

“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. …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.’”
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♦ **Mixed Responses to 9/11 Humor**
♦ An Ambivalent Patriotism
Mixed Responses to 9/11 Humor

- Not all jokes about September 11th managed to provoke laughter.
  - An amateur Black comedienne’s joke about Blacks’ tendency to run first and ask questions later as a contributing factor to their death from upper floors of the World Trade Center met silence.
  - A joke from amateur White male comic was met with silence and heckles from a predominantly Black audience.
Mixed Responses to 9/11 Humor

♦ The joke that failed:
  - “You are NOT from Africa. That’s for sure. You are American. Can you just see some [white] guy saying, … ‘I’m American. - No wait. I’m Swedish American.’ That’s not important right now in a time of national crisis… Political correctness will die with the souls in New York. We need to be together, especially now. I want to help to make that happen through comedy. Good night!”

(Amateur White Male Comic)
Mixed Responses to 9/11 Humor

♦ A joke that met with mixed responses:

– “…White people, I love you dearly. I do. But Osama bin Laden – he ain’t mad at us, he mad at ya’ll. Ya’ll got a problem... I don’t know what you did to him, made him mad but ya’ll got a problem.... America was shocked ‘cause it’s not so much that we got bombed it’s where they bombed us. They bombed us at the World Trade Center. That’s the World Bank in this country! You know ‘cause if it had ...been bombed in Compton ... or Harlem, they would’ve been saying, ((upbeat reporter voice)) ‘... Osama Bin Laden has bombed Compton, California and Harlem, New York. NEXT, Jim with sports.’”

Thea Vidale (NPR Tavis Smiley Show 8/2/02)
Mixed Responses to 9/11 Humor

♦ “A lot of people don’t know it but the safest place to be right now is the ghetto. Osama and them not worried about niggahs. Can you imagine Al’Qaeda trying to convince bin Laden to bomb black people. They’d be like, ‘Osama we have found a target!’ Osama would be like ((highly agitated)) ‘What is this Compton?! Look, I don’t have time for this….’” Arie Spears
Mixed Responses to 9/11 Humor

♦ “It’s a damn war going on and black folks are the only one’s going out [and] having a good time!” Chris Spencer

♦ “White people?! Why ya’ll let this happen?!” Loni Love

♦ “White folks done got us into some problems again.” Dave Chappelle
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An Ambivalent Patriotism

- We all love this country but a lot of folks think that blacks don’t support the war on terrorism. That’s bullshit. It’s just hard for me to get behind the war on terrorism over there when we haven’t done it here. Can we stop off in Alabama and hunt the terrorists there before Afghanistan?! ...People say, ‘Well if you don’t like it then go back to Africa.’ What African tribe I’m a go back to?! Plus, black people helped build this country! ... I love America.

Evan Lionel, Actor/Comic
An Ambivalent Patriotism

“The attacks were on our rights and way of life as Americans. You can “come up” [do well] in this country! Plus, Black folks were saying, ‘We’re not trying to lose the rights we just got!’”

Dwayne Perkins
DuBoisian Codas

♦ “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)
African American 9/11 Jokes

- 9/11 jokes offer cautionary perspectives about American’s war on terrorism and its socio-political ramifications
  - Denounce blanket racial profiling via sardonic critiques
  - Condemn simplistic and ahistorical accounts of U.S.-Middle East conflict that conveniently absolve America from culpability in past and present tragedies
  - Critically consider what America’s new war on terrorism will mean for them as African Americans who, in the words of comic/actor Faizon Love, “only get to be Americans when [the nation] needs something from them.”
  - Offer important racially nuanced perspectives on what it means to be an American in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks – perspectives too often lost when our nation rallies in the face of “new” vulnerabilities.
On Writing “The Arab is the New Nigger”

♦ Simultaneously a means of sharing what I’ve learned and a gesture towards reciprocity
♦ Comics’ access to this manuscript had important consequences
The Politics of Representation and Reciprocity

♦ Comics’ access to this manuscript

- Contributed to an evolving coda: `The Arab is *not* the “new nigger”`
- Afforded a “richer” understanding of complexities of the sardonic “Arab as new nigger” stance
- Repositioned me as “the writer”
The Politics of Representation and Reciprocity

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  • Repositioned me as “the writer” in the eyes of many comics
Truth Be Told…

♦ “Arab As New Nigger” paper gets me closer to notions of “truth” and “authenticity”
  – 9/11 jokes act as counternarratives to mainstream truths about 9/11
  – Engages notions of “authenticity” insofar as jokes about racial difference and 9/11 (e.g., “If Blacks had been on the plane…”) play upon notions of racial authenticity that link Blackness with cunning sensibilities and urban combat skills
  – But I’d like to say this and much more
Where I Want (Need) To Be

♦ I want to move from merely framing comedy as a form of socio-political critique
  – to also show comedy to be a performative site where notions of truth and authenticity are routinely interrogated and constructed

♦ I want to move from generic/sterile “scientific” writing about comedy
  – And get closer to the ‘truths’ embedded in the multi-genred space of my ethnographic notes
Mainly, I want to explore notions of “Truth” and “Authenticity” in African American Humor

- Ethnographic Interviews take me part of the way
- (But) I must also begin conducting videotaped observations of comics’ standup routines and audience dynamics
  - The visual is an important window into the nuances of the audience as co-participants in comedic performance and interpretation
Where I Am in this Journey

♦ Initial & Tentative Publications
♦ Curricular Inspirations (African American Humor & Culture, The Practice of Ethnography)
♦ Honed a strong “footing” in LA comedy scene
♦ Emerging theories within ethnographic notes (100+ pages)
What Gets In The Way?

- Tenure Demands
- Teaching Demands
- A Second More Noble and Prestigious Research Project
- Fears, Insecurities
Fears/Insecurities

- What at all do I have to say that’s worth listening to?
- How can I possibly do justice to the complexity of comics’ routines and personal lives?
- Some people won’t like what I write
- They [comics] are going to tell me “no”
- I won’t be able to meet my own/comics’ expectations
- This work won’t help me gain the respect of my peers
What Writers Teach Me

- We write to find out what we know and what we want to say. William Zinsser, Writing to Learn
- “I write to tell myself the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. I write, not to make art, but to make sense. I am looking for honesty, not artistry. Julia Cameron, The Right to Write
- So in a sense, each time we sit down to write, we have to be willing to die, to let go, and enter something bigger than ourselves. Wild mind includes writing with our whole body, our arms, our hearts, legs, shoulders, and belly. This kind of writing is athletic and alive. We must get out there in the playing fields of our notebook. Natalie Goldberg, Long Quiet Highway: Waking Up In America
What Writers Teach Me

♦ Like the stand-up comic who polishes every joke to its highest possible luster (gives each joke its proper accents and timing, proper eye rolls and double takes), polish each element of the total fiction so that the story is not only good as a whole but arresting from moment to moment. John Gardner, On Becoming a Novelist

♦ Yet our finest writing will certainly come from what is unregenerate in ourselves. It will come from the part that is obdurate, unbanishable, immune to education, springing up like grass. It will come from who we already are and how we already write. Bonnie Friedman, Writing Past Dark: Envy, Fear, Distraction – and Other Dilemmas in the Writer’s Life
What Writers Teach Me

♦ But if you dream of having your work stay alive beyond your tenure on earth, if you hope to see it beside the unforgettable voices that are part of our literary diaspora, then you must be fearless in every aspect of your writing, from the syntax to the symbolism. Betsy Lerner, The Forest From the Trees: An Editor’s Advice to Writers

♦ If there’s one truth that comes out of your writing education, one single nugget of plain truth you can walk away with, it will be this: you’re on your own. Brett Lott, Before We Get Started: A Practical Memoir on the Writer’s Life
Writing as a Metaphor for the Craft of Language Research

- Must silence critical voices within
- Must be willing to “die” unto ourselves to do our best work; to “give up” the book – the article – the publication – in order to gain them
- Must write constantly and critically to find our truths and nurture our distinct “voice”
- Must realize that finding and refining the truths of our findings, as well as our distinctive voices, are, ultimately, up to us
May 7, 2005 – Email to Club Manager

Hope all is well. …some time ago, I spoke with you about the possibility of taking my comedy project to another level; instead of merely writing about it, I would start videotaping comics sets'. (Some things can't be conveyed in print). You mentioned this would be okay, so long as comics' consented. With my hair book submitted and classes ending, I want to make a move in this direction this summer. I haven't asked comics' yet, because I wanted to get your consent first. But I know that the Comedy Union is a place I'd like to spend some time, either the Monday, Friday, or Saturday show. My hope is that I could videotape comics' sets and provide them with copies of their specific sets as a gesture of reciprocity. I also hope that you (and comics') trust my interests are long-term and scholarly. I wanted to put that out there and see what you thought. Thanks for considering. Lanita
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