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Modalities of Freedom: Toward a Politic of Joy in Black Feminist Comedic Performance in 20th and 21st Century U.S.A.

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Modalities of Freedom: Toward a Politic of Joy in Black Feminist Comedic Performance in 20th and 21st Century U.S.A.

by

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Dedication

In memory of Sidney Hale Wood: proof that our voices have the power to linger with love.

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Modalities of Freedom: Toward a Politic of Joy in Black Feminist Comedic Performance in 20th and 21st Century U.S.A.

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Modalities of Freedom argues that comedy and the laughter it ignites is a vital component of feminist and anti-racist community building. The chapters of my dissertation analyze the work of three Black standup comedians from the United States: Wanda Sykes, Jackie Mabley and Mo'Nique. These three women have an outsized presence in standup comedy, but have been chronically underrepresented in academic literature despite their nuanced, complex and emboldening performance styles. I claim that their particular brands of humor are modalities of freedom. That is, under varying social, temporal and cultural contexts, Sykes, Mabley and Mo'Nique resist and expose marginalization and oppression. In turn, their comedic material and the act of laughter bond their audiences and generate anti-racist/feminist coalitions.

The first chapter of my dissertation shows how Wanda Sykes employs comedic performance to "crack up" white supremacist historical narratives. That is, Sykes' comedy functions as historiographical intervention that not only critiques history, but also moves Black lesbian women from silenced subjects to active (re)creators of United

States' collective memory. My chapter on Jackie "Moms" Mabley claims that Mabley's legacy has been misremembered in both mainstream and scholarly texts. Employing Black queer theoretical frameworks, I trace how Mabley's standup solidified important precedents for Black female comics in contemporary U.S. performance and generated specific modalities of freedom unique to Black feminist humor. The final chapter of my dissertation analyzes Mo'Nique's 2007 documentary *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate.* This film is a live taping of Mo'Nique performing for convicts at the Ohio Reformatory for Women. Mo'Nique's performance articulates the multiplicities of identity, and builds feminist community across difference. Mo'Nique and the women in the audience demonstrate how laughter is an intimate survival strategy and a freeing act even while under the restriction of state power. In short, my dissertation is an effort to validate how laughter can harness and express the complexities of Black feminist lives, and be a productive site for social change and stability.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction and Chapter Overview

Joy |joi|: the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.
–Merriam Webster Dictionary

Is the subject of jokes worth so much trouble? There can, I think, be no doubt of it.
–Sigmund Freud[1]

I love myself most when I am laughing…and then again when I am looking mean and impressive.
–Zora Neal Hurston[2]

Do what you want. But by all means, know what you're doing.
–Jackie "Moms" Mabley[3]

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is first and foremost about privileging joy and all of its seriousness. I seek to understand how comedic performance and laughter operate as a binding agent and expression of joy among Black American women and their allies.[4] The above definition of joy as the prospect of possessing what one desires correlates with Black feminist aims and efforts for social and political justice, erotic autonomy and the ability to move about the world with *some* sense of security. In this sense, joy is about

[1] *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960)
[2] Quoted in, *I Love Myself When I am Laughing…and Then Again When I am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (1979)
[3] n.d.
[4] Throughout the dissertation, I interchangeably employ the terms Black American women and Black women from the United States to describe the performers about whom I am writing. I employ this term to mean Black women who are from or reside in the United States. Even as I use this term I do acknowledge the ethnocentricity of the word "American." At present, however, it is still a legible way to identify people from the United States.

striving and about unapologetic wanting. Simply put, joy is an embodied, affective motion towards freedom. One of those motions, I believe, is comedic performance and therefore laughter.

Modalities of Freedom argues that comedy and the laughter it ignites is a vital component of feminist and anti-racist community building. Just as Hurston loves herself when she is mean, she announces that laughter, too, is an integral part of both self-actualization, and communal motions towards emancipation and social justice. The chapters of my dissertation analyze the work of three Black standup comedians from the United States: Wanda Sykes, Jackie Mabley and Mo'Nique. These three women have an outsized presence in standup comedy, but have been chronically underrepresented in academic literature despite their nuanced, complex and emboldening performance styles. I claim that their particular brands of humor are modalities of freedom. That is, under varying social, temporal and cultural contexts, Sykes, Mabley and Mo'Nique resist and expose marginalization and oppression. In turn, their comedic material and the act of laughter bond their audiences and generate anti-racist/feminist coalitions.

Contemporary discourse on racism and gender inequity in the United States so often oscillates between anger and silence. Whether it is necessary and productive outrage at injustice or claims that we live in a post-racial society, we are in a gridlock. Conversations about how race, gender, citizenship, history and sexualities operate in our day-to-day lives are never easy, and do require space for anger and unearthing the nature of privilege and oppression. My work reveals that laughter and humor are unique entryways to articulating the complexities of these issues. While humor has historically

been used as a tool to create and perpetuate racist/sexist archetypes, the artists I examine in my dissertation employ Black feminist aesthetics and comedic performance as a way to garner community and freedom through a politic that reclaims and requires joy.

Throughout the dissertation, I show how the bold work of Black feminist comedic performance and the communal, performative and resistant act of laughter function as unique and imperative methods to queer history and time, assert Black feminist subjectivity and supersede seemingly stagnant rules of state sponsored marginalization. Laughter has infinite iterations: from a quiet chuckle to a deep laugh that comes from the belly and could perhaps produce tears. No matter the kind of laughter, however, this act requires the body, comes from the body and reminds us of the body—of our own body and those bodies around us. Laughter feels good with others. Laughter takes us to multiple temporalities: the present moment of laughter as well as the past moment the joke cites. Laughter is communal, adorns the body and (re)members our relationships with others, our environments, and ourselves. Laughter is thus inherently performative.

Can the seemingly simple act of laughter ignite us towards change and sustainable joy? I say "seemingly" because laughter is often not so simple. For many of us, pain, trauma, violence and silence are at the forefront of our motivation for pursuing social change. For many of us, it is at the forefront of everyday life.[5] Laughter can seem to negate the seriousness of struggle. At other times, we employ laughter to respond to struggle—its irony, ridiculousness and outwardly futile nature. However, as I argue, a

[5] See Ann Cheng's *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (2001); Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012); Frank Wilderson's "The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents" (2011).

claiming or reclamation of joy through laughter is also an integral method of uncovering, discovering and recovering feminist subjectivity. I assert that comedic performance instilled with Black feminist aesthetics and rhetorical practices articulates and teases out the co-constitutionality of race, gender, sexuality and class as to give voice to audience and performer.

While my dissertation addresses broad assertions and inquiries around the politics of joy and laughter, I seek to specifically answer four key research questions. (1) What constitutes Black feminist humor? (2) How do these kinds of performative acts instill a sense of agency for audience and performer? (3) How can laughter become an integral component of feminist resistance and critical engagement with race relations in the United States? (4) What are the unique qualities of comedic performance that set up conditions for empowerment among women who occupy various identity markers such as race, class and sexuality? I contend that the diverse, yet distinct features of Black feminist comedic performance create conditions to empower performers and audiences, and stage critical interventions. These interventions summon stories of Black women into the cultural fabric of United States' collective memory. Thus, Black feminist comedy holds potential to employ live performance as a form of social and political dissent whereby white supremacy and sexism are challenged and deconstructed. This practice, according to Diana Taylor, "also functions as an epistemology. [Performance as] embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing" (15). Black feminist comedic performance evokes performance as epistemology and offers distinct ways to produce, create and enact a politic of joy and resistance. Accordingly,

performances I examine in my dissertation also work *as* a model for operating in the larger world under oppressive regimes and cultural constraints.

HUMOR THEORY AND (WHITE) FEMINISMS' RESPONSE

This dissertation works in conjunction with some, but against many ideas of how standup comedy, joke telling and laughter function and what these performative acts induce. As I explain below, humor studies has been dominated by and preoccupied with the ways in which non-racialized subjects tell and experience jokes. The artists I examine in my dissertation place race, gender and identity at the forefront of their humor, affirming and/or challenging their audiences to confront the lived histories and experiences of minority subjects. Humor studies, however, has historically operated within white masculinist frameworks—concentrating on a generalized joke structure rather than content and context of comedic performance. Scholars draw most frequently upon the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson to situate their ideas around humor and its inherent nature as an aggressive act.

Sigmund Freud's theory of humor takes up joke telling as a method of asserting dominance. His 1960 book, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,* marked a precedent in humor theory as it solidified notions that successful comedy requires aggression against another for the pleasure of the voyeur. According to Freud's psychoanalytic approach to humor, the subject (joke-teller) expresses aggression towards an object under the guise of laughter. The "successful" joke form follows a simple formulation: the teller attacks an object for his and the listener's pleasure. The traditional joke form is centered on the punch line. The "set up" becomes subsidiary to the

momentary release of laughter. Freud expands upon this idea by explaining that a comic's success is dependent upon an "economy of release." Mental pleasure of the listener (voyeur) is wrapped up in the *amount* of laughter directed *at* the marginalized other, or more colloquially, the "butt of the joke." For Freud, we move towards comedy solely to obtain pleasurable release. The comic is no longer useful to the audience when the economy of release has run its course. Laughter is thus reduced to a physical act; it is one in which achieving pleasure is emphasized on an individual level, rather than a method of community building.

Henri Bergson's theories on comedy precedes Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, but nonetheless takes on a similar approach to humor and joke-telling. His essay "Comedy" (1901) reflects on humans' need for laughter as well as the comic's method for producing laughter. Bergson contends that in moments of laughter, the audience is void of other emotions (i.e. pity, shame, etc.). The comic, therefore, must be detached from his/her subject matter and object of the joke. He calls the successful comedian a "detached spectator" who approaches narrative through intellect (737-738). According to Bergson, the characteristics of a successful comedic character include inflexibility, mechanical movement, absentmindedness and unsociability. These standards, upheld by many contemporary comedic performers, do not account for the communal nature of laughter. It assumes that comedy that yields positive results requires the performer to work from a position of power over the audience. As I show in more detail in chapter four, comics like Mo'Nique often aim to dissolve detachment from or power over an audience.

Bergson and Freud articulate not only the importance of comedy, but also that comedy is an innate part of human life. Bergson assumes, however, that the comic is a kind of anti-social performer who sees the world and, especially the audience, as inferior. I agree that the artfulness of an inventive and skilled comedian does require a certain kind of detachment from their environment. However, while Bergson believes that this detachment is because of cynicism, the artists I study in this dissertation use detachment as a momentary tool—a way to look at certain cultural phenomena and then crystallize their experiences or the experiences of a certain public through comedy. Freud's idea of humor as an unconscious release of aggression is often undeniable, and I agree that an object of a joke is almost unavoidable. However, when the comic's standpoint is that of marginalized and/or oppressed bodies, aggression may not be caused by a sense of superiority over an object, but rather from the systemic operations of everyday life against which minority subjects have to battle.

Further, as Freud and Bergson set precedents in humor studies, scholars who examine "female" comedy or feminist humor place their analysis in direct opposition to "male" humor. The 1980s and 1990s saw a resurgence of interest in scholarship on comedy by and for women, and much of it reified the very marginalizing, heteronormative tropes of humor theory popularized before second and third wave feminisms. Unfortunately, much literature outlining women in humor focuses primarily on differences between men and women's comedy, or speaks of women's humor as a direct response to male comics. For example, Regina Barreca, one of the most published feminist humor studies scholars, often discusses women's humor in terms of

socialization: "For most women, humor occupies a different space emotionally and socially that it does for men. For most women, humor is something we aren't sure how to use, because we've been told it's something we haven't got" (11). I believe conversations around women and humor such as Barreca's are dangerous ones. Not only are these views grounded in the conflation of biological sex and gender presentation, but they also imply that humor is an individual skill in which one simply "shows off," rather than a rhetorical/performative tool that has historically been used to reflect, refract and shift cultural ideologies.

While scholarly works that have documented the careers of comediennes in the U.S. are few and far between, Nancy Walker's *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (1988) does attempt to do so, but falls short. Walker's book traces both the historical contexts and characteristics of women's written and performed humor in the United States. She argues that women's humor possesses elements of subversion and identification. Female comedians "reveal the shams, hypocrisies, and incongruities of the dominant culture. To be a woman and a humorist is to confront and subvert the very power that keeps women powerless…" (9). Walker's chapter, "Humor and 'The Minority,'" addresses the ways in which ethnic minorities have employed humor to expose both the ridiculousness of racism and sexism in the United States. Like white women's humor, what Walker calls "minority humor" also seeks to expose and resist hegemony. This type of comedy "displays a consciousness of a group identity, often posing a "we-they" dialectic." While Walker's book does address women's humor as a performative and rhetorical tool of resistance, her analysis of African American women's

humor is lacking as she only addresses Black women's humor in comparison to that of white women. In her research on "minority humor," Walker begins to account for how race can shape non-white comediennes' work, but women of color are treated like tokens in her research. She thus reifies the invisibility of whiteness while simultaneously ignoring the ways in which race and gender always inform one another. For example, she explains, "the humor of black American women […] demonstrates a consciousness of separation from the dominant culture, and yet as women they have bonds with all women because of their shared experience of gender." (107). Walker refuses to investigate the particularities of Black women's humor as she places white women humorists as the standard throughout her book. Women of color thus become further marginalized within performance and humor scholarship. While I am interested in how feminist humor as a whole may detract from or resist masculinist elements of comedy, conflating, erasing or strictly comparing racial identities, as *Women's Comic Vision* does, perpetuates the marginalization and erasure of Black female bodies and performance of dissent.

Black feminist comedy is rarely considered to be a viable site of analysis within humor studies, and standup comedy is lacking within Black feminist and critical race scholarship despite it being a form of performance rife with connections among theoretical and vernacular/political discourse. However, Lisa Merrill posits the importance of examining feminist humor as a method of engaging in critical cultural scholarship.

> Comedy is both an aggressive and intellectual response to human nature and experience. A cognizance of women's right to be both aggressive and intellectual is a relatively new historical phenomenon. What is even more recent and radical

> though, about feminist humor is that it addresses itself to women and to the multiplicity of experiences and values women embody (278).

The following section, then, seeks to outline historical contexts of Black humor and offer distinct features of Black feminist humor.

BLACK FEMINIST COMEDIES

Histories that address African American performance consistently site comedy as both a subversive and interventionist method of dissent. In other words, Black performers in the United States have employed comedic performance to disidentify with hegemonic structures. David Krasner's 1997 book, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre 1895-1910,* does not pay particular attention to comedic performance of Black American women. However his text is useful for my work in that it historically grounds my research and explores the ways in which Black performers, working at the turn of the twentieth century, evoked the comedic strategy of parody in order to express resistance and confront oppression all while under the gaze of white audiences. The emergence of parody at this time reflected W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, or the idea that Black bodies occupy a sense of "two-ness" in which they see themselves through their own eyes as well as those of their oppressors. Krasner elaborates that Black performers worked "amidst deteriorating race relations between two competing forces: the demands to conform to white notions of black inferiority, and the desire to resist these demands by undermining and destabilizing entrenched stereotypes of blacks on stage" (1). In other words, Black American performers simultaneously worked within and against the racial stereotypes they played

onstage. This "double inversion," meant that even as Black performers performed in minstrel shows, they employed subversive farce on stage as a method of transgression and transformation (Bean 187).

Krasner historicizes how Black American performers have employed comedy as both a tool for coalition and community building, but also to resist various marginalizing forces within particular cultural contexts. However, this text lacks serious attention to gender in his analyses. While the text does not completely ignore African American female performers, as he devotes much of the book to the work of Aida Overtaon Walker, gender recedes to the background in this work. This dissertation adds to the research/archive of Black American women who have employed the stage as a tool to assert themselves in the public sphere and empower their audiences to do so as well.

Historians often trace the birth of standup comedy as a performance form to the minstrel stage. Rooted in white male fascination with and desire for the Black body, minstrel shows enacted Blackness as it existed in the white American imaginary (Lott 1993). Particularly, the "stump speech," in which a single male performer in blackface and formalwear gives an unintelligible extemporaneous address to an audience that laughs at the characters' stupidity, shows how fictional ideas of Blackness were displayed onstage for white audiences' enjoyment. The 1905 collection of minstrel show material, *A Bundle of Burnt Cork Comedy*, for example, contains a chapter dedicated to sample stump speeches. For example, "A Stuttering Coon and His Speech on Politics" is a common stump speech in which the speaker rambles ideas such as, "De way is stan-standing, ladies and gem'men, de way it is standing, it should go way back and sit down.

Dis country is in de center of de beginning of de commencing of the start of de finish. Is that clear?" (101). Although standup comedy resembles the stump speech in terms of a bare stage and single speaker, since the emergence of standup comedy in the early twentieth century, the comic takes on a role of cultural critic rather than uninformed fake.

The roots of standup comedy in minstrelsy do not detract from the fact that Black performers have been engaging in comedic performances that reflect the actuality of the Black diaspora, rather than fictional stereotypes produced and consumed by white performers and audiences. Studying Black comedy in post-soul era United States (1960s and 1970s), Bambi Haggins writes in *Laughing Mad* that comedy has been key in expression and formation of Black identities and cultures in the United States. She argues:

> Black comedy is tied inextricably to the African American condition. As the annunciation of laughing mad, black comedy also supplied laughter for (white) mainstream audiences when constructed through the narrowing and diminishing lens of minstrel tropes. Nonetheless, the function of humor and the therapeutic value of the accompanying laughter inside communal black spaces […] spoke to specific black experiences (1-2).

Like Mikhail Bakhtin's claim that the clown exposes "vulgar convention and falsehood that has come to saturate all human relationships," (162) Black comics have employed the stage as not only a place for enjoyment, but also a space to speak bold truths about politics, culture and history.

Standup as we understand it in its form and content today was developed by artists who worked on the Chitlin Circuit. As I describe in more detail in the third chapter, the Theatre Owners Booking Association (TOBA), or the Chitlin' Circuit,

provided opportunities for Black performers and theatre makers to create and tour variety show performances that reflected and shaped experiences of working-class Black Americans (Acham 2005; Littleton 2006; Lauterbach 2011). L.H. Stallings contends that it was in the Chitlin' Circuit that Black comedians honed comedic aesthetics rooted in African American cultural traditions of folklore and dance, but also in queer theatrical tropes such as camp and drag. In the working class, "no holds barred," and often sexually explicit comedy Black performers on the Chitlin Circuit used humor for backlash and bonding. [6] The work of Jackie Mabley, specifically, set standards for Black women to tell jokes in "response to systematic oppression based on their racialized gendered identity and minority sexual orientation as asexual and hypersexual representational others" (Stallings 115-116). Black standup comedy, then, has "stood up" in the face of and against legacies of minstrel stereotypes. And while standup comedy became popularized in the American imaginary through (mostly) Jewish male comedians who gained exposure on late night television in the mid-twentieth century (Limon 2000; Stebbins 1990), Black American comedians have been subverting white supremacy through standup comedy for much longer than most narratives of humor studies assume.

Poststructuralists such as Gilles Deleuze claim that comedy is a front to rationality and a genre free from definition. I argue throughout the dissertation that comedy is a distilled form of rationality—a crystallized observation of how the world operates from the specific standpoint of the comedian. Black feminist comedy in past and present U.S.

[6] See Angela Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1998) and *Whoopi Goldberg Presents: Moms Mabley* (2013)

employs joke telling and laughter to express the ways in which systemic racism, sexism and homophobia situate themselves in everyday life. Haggins states that this practice has always been a party of Black comedy: "Historically, the black comic has retained the ability to get the audience laughing while slipping in sociocultural truths" (6). Comedic performance, as a distinct play between public and private can, instead of being based on aggression or free flowing ridiculousness, operate as an approachable, yet complicated response to social norms, systemic oppression and daily life. Black joke telling and laughter in the United States, while not monolithic in form, style or subject matter has been a unique and important epistemological and visceral response to forced transatlantic migration, slavery, state-sponsored violence and cultural marginalization. At the same time, Black joke-telling and laughter holds space for the particular joys, communities and spiritual experiences in the face of and also in spite of legacies of racialized grief. Rather than forging and performing these kinds of grief and grievances through direct expressions of anger or sadness, comedic performance weaves together the complexities of trauma, celebration, hyper-reality, confusion, loneliness and community through jokes that move beyond the set-up/punch line paradigm.

Glenda Carpio, for example, writes that Black humor has a distinct "diasporic sensibility." Carpio's study, *Laughing Fit to Kill*, theorizes the Black comedic artist as a conjurer who symbolically redresses slavery through joke-telling, performances of the grotesque, satire and re-formation of Black stereotypes. She argues that Black humor "constantly puts in tension the experience and interpretation of slavery" (16). That is, the Black comedic artist reveals tropes of minstrelsy and racial archetypes as constructions of

white supremacist history, "recoiling" and "purging" oppression through the creation of laughter. While Carpio's study is limited to humor and ideas around slavery and does not solely address standup comedy, her theorization of Black humor is useful to me insofar as it analyzes humor beyond the structure of a joke triangle. *Laughing Fit to Kill* masterfully addresses what Carpio calls the "arsenal" of Black American humor: the insult, the tall tale, the trickster tale and the "blues-infused" joke have created a foundation in which Black humor bonds audience and performer through a shared sense of time and legacy (230-231). Similarly, L.H. Stallings work on Black female folklore, myth and vernacular theorizes Black female comedy as evidence of the resourcefulness of Black women to voice their too often silenced lived experiences. Humor, specifically sexually explicit humor, works to counter misrepresentations of Black female bodies. Joke telling and laughter are "oral and aural subversions" to white supremacy, sexism and homophobia.

I am not denying that Black feminist humor lacks a set-up/punch line format, nor does Black feminist humor lack the kind of sexual or aggressive underpinnings of Freud's theories of humor. I am troubled, however, by the binaries this kind of humor criticism creates (subject/object, audience/joke-teller). If Black feminism and Black queer theories see identity as fluid, informed by varying histories and assert that bodies (individual and collective) matter, then I believe that deeper attention to how humor reflects these concepts are imperative to theorizing a Black feminist comedy that moves beyond popular theories of joke-telling. The chapters of my dissertation, then, pay less attention to whether or not the artist's joke is "successful" and more attention to how the particular bodies within and beyond the space and time of the performance might

experience and reflect the performances by both comic and audience. Like Carpio and Stallings, I believe that the laughter ignited from Black humor is a sign of dispossession from containment and commodification, as well as an effort to "to work from the knowledge of their bodies and a territory of cultural and political maneuvering rather than accept false gender [and racial] ideologies of whatever time period they exist in (23). The comic articulates the very cultural practices that have and continue to contain Black bodies, and places them center stage. The laughter does not "fix" history, but shakes it off and reforms it. For example, as I examine in Chapter Two, when Wanda Sykes advises First Lady Michelle Obama to "nail down" the bust of Sojourner Truth before "the next white guy that comes in [The White House]" places it in the kitchen," she uses the role of joke-teller to function as historical critic. She is an artist who is less concerned about the moment on stage (i.e. heckling the audience) and more concerned with using humor to hold the space of a painful collective past in conjunction with the joys of political and racial progress.

Black feminist humor, like studies have shown on Black humor more generally, combines and navigates the seemingly opposite terrains of trauma and comedy. However, Black feminist humor takes up the specific aesthetic political and theoretical tools of Black, feminist and queer studies and articulates their complexities through comedic performance. Commentary on Black womanhood and gender is undeniably at the forefront the material Sykes, Mabley and Mo'Nique create. While each woman's approach to gender performativity, Black female sexuality and feminism is distinct, a few key tenets of Black feminist and Black queer theory and thought are echoed in and

inform the development of the artistic work I analyze in this dissertation. These tenants are deeply imbedded in all of the performers I examine in this dissertation. Although I believe feminism, Blackness, queerness and comedy are all dynamic and fluid, it is important to begin to define some of the overarching themes of Black feminist comedic performance.

Black feminist comedy privileges the stage as a place for self-definition. Since Black performance, or performing Blackness, has historically been linked to white supremacy and the "spectacle of black contentment and abjection," (Hartman 56) the Black female body on stage, and on her own terms is inherently subversive. Artist Pearl Cleage calls this the creation of a "hollering place," or artistic work committed to giving Black women voice. Cleage contends, and I agree, that it is in "accurately expressing our very specific and highly individual realities that we discover our common humanity" (12). *Modalities of Freedom* shows how a "hollering place" is not only imperative for the performers in this dissertation, but also for immediate and future audiences (if the text is recorded). It is within multiplicity and individual declaration that the comic and audience bond. bell hooks reflects the importance of this action when she explains, that it is harmful to "assume that strength in unity can only exist if difference is suppressed and shared experience is highlighted" (*Black Looks* 51). Sykes, Mabley and Mo'Nique weave autobiographical and fictional comedies to demonstrate the joyful, freeing and radical work of self-definition. They do not conflate their stories with all Black American women, but rather use them to unearth and reveal cultural oppressions and systems that keep Black American women silenced and marginalized. Thus, the hollering place is a

space in which Black women can narrate and hear the various stories that constitute life in the public and private spheres without judgment or punishment.

Black feminist comedy privileges the body as a site of knowledge. This concept is not new to the feminist and avant-garde theatrical traditions, nor is it surprising to those of us interested in comedy. Laughter is an act of recognition, a visceral response that attends to understanding the comic's worldview and her relation to the audience. This work understands that while the stage can be a place of transformation, progression and freedom—social justice, recovery, and community building is an ongoing process. This Black feminist labor is more concerned with continued illumination than contained, ephemeral happenings. Sykes, Mabley and Mo'Nique do not allow the audience to be complicit in isolation, but rather engage their audiences to show Black feminist perspectives on everyday life, politics, sexuality, futurity and community. They challenge their audiences to find connection, and even love, amidst trauma and cultural difference.

The comediennes I analyze in this dissertation create spaces by and for Black women and their allies, and recognize Black women as agents of history, their communities and their own subjecthood. In "Performance as a Site of Opposition," hooks notes that Black performance "has yet to be fully theorized in a manner that would enable discussion of the way in which desire to reach a specific audience shapes the nature of standpoint and perspective." (*Let's Get It On* 219). hooks argues for performance that disrupts white supremacist sensibilities and attends to the realities and specificities of Black politics. I am interested in both documenting and theorizing how certain Black feminist artists do this kind of work. For example, Jackie Mabley's career, choreographed

through humor, showed what is required of people to do anti-racist work: honesty, direct confrontation with racist laws and cultural practices and a dedication to celebration of Black culture and community. Space by and for Black women and their allies exemplifies what Jacqui Alexander calls "knowing who walks with you" (300). Black feminist comedic performances, in this project, use theatrical space as community building and to exchange important ideas about identity, history and culture. This practice is a "spiritual injunctive to activate a conscious relationship with the spiritual energies with whom one is accompanied, and who make it possible, in the words of Audre Lorde, 'to do the work we came here to do'" (Alexander 303). The artists I examine in this dissertation direct audiences to intervene in their own worlds—proving what is thinkable onstage and in U.S. history need not be dictated by white/patriarchal hegemony. These works recollect, but also offer up models for social change and justice in and out of the theatre. In the following section, I show how employing their particular performative methods of dissent, through standup comedy works with, against and despite Black abjection.

ABJECTION AND LAUGHTER IN ITS FACE

The genesis of this dissertation maintains that laughter is resistant and animates freedom. How then, is joyful affect (joke-telling and laughing) a modality of freedom insofar as it (re)claims the subjecthood of both audience and performer? I address laughter and joyful affect as a communal experience that reflects and forms Black feminist resistance and movement towards freedom. I am interested in exploring the following question: within the context of Black feminist comedic performance, how does

the action of performance and of laughter burst through that which contains, polices and ignores marginalized bodies? If the Black female (and in the cases of Wanda Sykes and Jackie Mabley, queer) bodies are marginalized into the state of non-being,[7] I argue that the acts of laughter in the context of these performances are dissident and, literally, burst through abjection.

In analyzing the moment of the punch line, the physical burst in which performer and audience come together in common understanding, I am less interested in the ways in which a comic's joke is effective, but rather I am asserting that the affective moments between comic and audience act as a primary modality of freedom. What exactly does laughter within the context of Black feminist comedic performance excavate to work with, against and reform white supremacist violations of Black people as well as non-normative genders and sexualities? The physical, the vocal and the emotional come together in the moment after a joke is told. Together, the audience expresses their relation with the performer by laughing. In the reaction and cooperation between audience and performer, the moment of laughter resists rejection, resists silence and resists isolation. Carpio confirms when she argues that "to confront the maddening illusions of race and the insidiousness of racism we may just need to laugh long and hard, perhaps in the tragicomic notes of the blues or the life affirming spirit of righteous insurgency (4). I

[7] See Hortense Spillers' "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words" in which Spillers contends that public discourse (The dominative symbolic mode) surrounding sexuality relegates Black American women to a status of invisibility, misconstruction and/or non-being. Here, I use non-being and abject interchangeably. Although Spillers' definition of non-being is particular to Black female sexuality, I use this term in a broader sense in order to trace how in many aspects of identity, Black women employ performance to not only become agents of sexual expression, but to work and identify outside dominative modes of discourse and culture.

agree with Carpio, but would like to extend the role of laughter as not just a confrontation, but also a way of coming into or reclaiming subjectivity.

THE ABJECT BODY

An abject state literally means to exist in a state of spiritlessness, resignation and a fall from hope. Julia Kristeva theorizes abjection in her work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) as that which/whom operates outside of the symbolic order—a non-being. Using the metaphor of a corpse, Kristeva asserts that abjection is an incoherent, unstable mode. The body (the corpse) cannot claim lived experience within the realm of subject or object—the abject is not of this world; the abject is extraterritorial. Stacy Keltner's *Kristeva* (2011) provides a detailed analysis of *Powers of Horror*. She defines abjection as a borderless identity.

> The term 'abjection' signals both a state of crisis (in which the borders between the self and the other break down in the confrontation with the abject), as well as a constitutive process of rejection (in which the borders between self and other are rudimentarily constituted through the exclusion of the abject). Abjection thus as both a negative and positive meaning: it signals both the disruption and the constitution of the subject and meaning (45).

In psychoanalytic terms, abjection is the initial break from the maternal figure. It is the state of neither/nor in which an individual body exists independently and unattached to any kind of subjecthood. The result is a shuttling between a state of non-being and detachment from community. Moreover, the abject body shuttles between the isolation experienced by being marginalized, but also cannot fully escape from the culture surrounding it, thus operating within and without community.

The abject body is one, according to Kristeva, that is "ejected beyond the scope of

the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1) and therefore resides in a space of powerlessness. The corpse is silent, dirty and sedate. The abject is "the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses" (2). Materially, this is a perpetual state of crisis—for the abject is one that is created and maintained inside hegemonic systems. The abject is put down by but always required in order to maintain whiteness/maleness/heterosexuality. Abjection is a state of existence and also a process that work, as Kristeva describes, "the primers of my culture" (2).

In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Judith Butler addresses the material effects of abjection. Butler argues that bodies forego certain processes and performances of normalization that are, in many senses unattainable—i.e. gender. Subjecthood and privilege are social constructs that rely on behavioral and material attributes. One's ability to move about the world with safety and security depends on how well they obey or fit into normative performances of sex. The "regulatory norms" of sex and gender performance materialize to either comply with or dissent from "consolidation of the heterosexual imperative" (xii). This reiterative sex work is never complete, always shifting and never-ending labor to serve hegemonic and heteronormative culture. Those bodies that cannot, or refuse to, adhere to such unwritten, but nevertheless stringent, laws are abject. She defines the abject as that which is expelled from the self, and yet not discarded, but buried deep within the self. It is something rejected from which one does not part.

For Butler, abjection is a zone of liminality, in which those who live in a state of abjection, involuntarily, cannot enjoy the status of subject despite the fact that they

populate and are integral to social life. "The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject" (3). In other words, despite the fact that an abject body is neither subject nor object, they exist and resist their status in opposition to the powers that name them as unlivable or unthinkable within cultural contexts. Butler is worth quoting at length here as she explains that abjection is not inherently linked to a mental state of psychosis.

> …the notion of abjection designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality. Indeed, what is foreclosed or repudiated within psychoanalytic terms is precisely what may not reenter the field of the social without threatening psychosis, that is, the dissolution of the subject itself. I want to oppose that certain abject zones within sociality also deliver this threat, constituting zones of uninhabitability in which a subject fantasizes as threatening its own integrity with the prospect of psychotic dissolution ("I would rather die that do or be that!") (186).

What is particularly compelling about Butler's analysis is that while abjection is a result of hegemonic processes whereby some bodies are deemed worthwhile and others are cast out (non-white or queer, for example) of certain privileges of citizenship and sociality, to be abject is *not* to be corpse-like. In fact, queer sexuality and gender performativity can work *as* a strategy in and of itself to deploy movements towards freedom. Butler's reading of abjection accounts for how abject bodies, through the very identity markers that deem them abject, resist such subjection.

BLACK ABJECTION AND COMIC BURSTS

For theorists concerned with Black subjectivities and abjection, Blackness does not

work against abjection, but rather is an identity marker that forces one to work *with* abjection—maneuvering around it through various performative and affective strategies. Darieck Scott's *Extravagant Abjection* (2010) examines the relations between Blackness and abjection and claims that Black abjection, particularly the abjection of Black queer people, facilitates "pathways" towards freedom and survival. He re-reads Frantz Fanon's writings on Blackness and subjectivity and claims that if abjection is inherent in the experiences of Black people in the United States, it has to, on some level, facilitate a counterintuitive power. That is, despite or even because of abjection, Black people in the U.S. can evoke particular kinds of affective templates for dissent and empowerment. Scott elaborates,

> black people have had to be inside, as it were, abjection, have had to embody it and to *be* it in the lack of command of their embodiment that becoming black decrees; they have had to do this, be this, and survived, after a fashion, giving rise to the questions: What then is the fashion of survival? What are the elements of that survival *in* abjection, or *as* abjection? (17).

Keltner confirms Scott's point. The experience of abjection, while a conflicting and critical state in which "the borders between the self and the other break down," abjection is also and always "a constitutive process" whereby the forced inability to access subjecthood in and of itself define and shape experiences and modes of resistance. Abjection then, allows for a way to approach and critique how power and oppression become operable and unquestioned in culture. Scott continues,

> Abjection in/of blackness endows its inheritors with a form of counterintuitive *power*—indeed, what we can begin to think of as *black* power. This power (which is also a way of speaking of freedom) is found at the point of the apparent erasure of ego-protections, at the point at which the constellation of tropes that we call *identity, body, race, nation* seem to reveal themselves as utterly penetrated and

compromised, without defensible boundary (9).

Each of the comedians I examine in this dissertation use humor and performance to serve not just as counter-discourse to dominant narratives, but a kind of counter-existence whereby the particular tropes of body, race, nationality, sexuality and identity do not butt up against abjection, but rather laugh through it, in spite of it and most importantly, beyond it.

How specifically then, might we theorize laughter as a unique reaction that works against, with and despite abjection? I argue throughout the dissertation that "unruly," that is, loud or joyful, displays of affect in Black, female, and queer people function as repositories for white supremacist fears about aggression, sexuality and resistance. To laugh at such fear renders those fears laughable. The Black feminist laughing body is the opposite of the corpse Kristeva describes in *Powers of Horror.* The laughing bodies in my dissertation animate each other and politics by joyfully and radically bonding through common experience. Laughter is a "uniquely invigorating kind of epistemological response" to forced abjection because laughter requires vocality, embodiment and community—the very factors that disintegrate abjection (Carpio 8).

I realize my assertions are complicated by the history of slavery, as displays and performances of enjoyment and amusement were and are often deeply linked to white consumption of and power over Black bodies. The contradictory nature of pleasure in antebellum South was yielded in the fact that even if "pleasure was poised in contrast to labor" as Saidiya Hartman explains in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), enjoyment was "ensnared in a web of combination, accumulation, abjection, resignation and possibility"

(45). That is, it might be impossible to talk about the dissent powers of Black performance and enjoyment if the specters of white slave master and various archetypes of minstrelsy and blackface haunt even contemporary performance. "In other words, the figure reconciles infantilized willfulness with the abject status of the well-less object [and serves as a] pervasive and repressive tool that makes claims about the performative as a practice of resistance and redress quite tentative" (Hartman 52). For Hartman, performance remains inadequate in creating agency, and cautions against "romanticizing" the politics of performance as "the significance of the performative lies not in the ability to overcome this condition or provide remedy but in creating a context for the collective enunciation of pain" (52).

Hartman contends that ordinary practices of expression or enjoyment can indeed be political and resistant—she refers to this as redress. However, forms of redress (performance, everyday affective expression, etc.) are incomplete insofar as it is only experienced on an individual level. "The inadequacy of the redressive action undertaken in everyday practices does not signal the failure of these practices but highlights the way in which pleasure of the counterinvestment in the body at stake here serves as a limited figure of social transformation" (76). Thus, according to Hartman, individual and communal instances of enjoyment are inherently tethered to past terror even as enjoyment is expressed. Hartman's work in *Scenes* is incredibly important as it ties affect to culture and cultural memory. In other words, what we express or experience affectively is not static. However, if as Hartman asserts, the performing body is an incomplete site for resolution and resistance, where else can this "working through" exist? While I do not

think performance is a panacea to social transformation, I do not believe it is a limited figure in resistance either, because resistance cannot exist without the body. I am continuing to think of the comediennes in this dissertation as agents who employ laughter not as blind optimism, but as a way to maneuver around the very systems that have disciplined or exploited Black affect and enjoyment.

As Carpio explains in *Laughing Fit to Kill*, the racist assumptions that link gaiety and blackness laughter and humor are nonetheless an integral way to maneuver around silence, injustice and even death. Black humor, in other words, is both an instigating and an intimate affective form that shows how "the very contours of the body are sites that vacillate between the psychic and material" (36). Like Scott and Carpio, I believe that abjection is a state that, while unjust, allows for "counterintuitive" powers. The relevance of pleasure and joy, therefore in twentieth and twenty-first century Black feminist performance is a continuation of a legacy of quotidian expression that works to supersede both historical and contemporary violations of and domination over Black people in the United States. The Black feminist comic uses her body to mold together the cerebral and corporeal. Her body, her voice and the audiences' sounds of laughter become vessels of discursive intervention. Affect and joy, then are important constituents concerning Black cultural expression and the disintegration of abjection.

In John Limon's *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or Abjection in America* (2000) concerns itself with postwar humor in the United States and focuses on American comedians David Letterman, Richard Pryor, Ellen Degeneres, Paula Poundstone and Lenny Bruce. Limon's study, a rich and excavating take on standup in the U.S.

nonetheless relegates women and queer people to "token" chapters. Black comediennes are absent from Limon's book and his work on Pryor seems to speak for all Black comedy. However, in the introduction to *Stand-up Comedy in Theory*, Limon offers an important articulation of the relationships among joke telling, laughter and abjection. Limon calls standup a "beautiful abstract geometry" in which the comedian carves out and "stands up" against abjection. Limon argues, "To 'stand up' abjection is simultaneously to erect it and miss one's date with it: comedy is a way of avowing and disavowing abjection…" (4) Limon's position on abjection is similar to mine insofar as the nature of comedic performance and the act of laughter make abjection, on some levels, unsuccessful if not impossible.

Diane Davis' related take on feminist comedy in particular asserts that a feminist politic and feminist laughter breaks up "phallocratic order" by "breaking up *at* it" (208). In other words, comedy's out loudness, brassiness and riskiness, moves bodies from a state of non-being to undeniable liveness. Carver (2003) describes a female performance as an inherently "risky business" because a woman's body on stage is an authoritative stance—one in which the objectified body moves to subject, taking charge of her own public terrain. The female body, as a site of oppression and colonization can thus rebel through public performance. The "risky business" of live performance is the collision of abjection and out loud, embodied agency. While the act of being on stage is one of social protest—moving from private to public—the Black female body on stage may be subject to unfair and oppressive scrutiny. As Patricia Hill Collins explains, "The racial and gender meanings assigned to Black bodies as well as the social meanings of Black

sexuality in American society overall constitute sites of contestation in an uncivil civil war against Black people" (Collins, 2005 51). I show throughout the dissertation, however, that comedy is a unique form to work within and against cultural practices that silence Black women's voices or compartmentalize them within white supremacist and sexist aims to exploit and consume the Black body for white male pleasure.

Jose Muñoz's work on disidentification in performance certainly accounts for how performances of humor, camp, excess, and irony challenge abjection for bodies of color. For Muñoz, to perform disidentification is to simultaneously work within and against cultural and hegemonic constraints. He states that disidentification "is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual and national subjugation. These routinized protocols of subjugation are brutal and painful. Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence" (161). Thus, Muñoz asserts that performative disidentifications allow marginalized groups to work within their own "social matrix" to resist state power and create potential for counterpublicity. Muñoz explains that disidentification promotes anti-assimilationist rhetoric and produces discourse that shifts with and around power. *Disidentifications* will serve as the framework for my third chapter, when I examine the ways in which Mo'Nique's performance to the prisoners at the Ohio Women's Reformatory suggests tools for survival under a restricted, supervised gaze of the state as well as moments of freedom through humor, collectivity, and resistance.

To summarize, the abject body emerges and speaks through laughter. The act is both a symbolic and a literal expulsion of abjection as a silencing tool. If abjection leaves

us stationary, silent and invisible, then laughter is the exact opposite of abjection. Shaking shoulders, guttural noise and wide-open mouths bolster and reinforce not just the presence of marginalized bodies, but the inherent power that comes from communal joy. This performative work allows for love and light to shine through and beyond death, injustice, suppression and repression. This is not a romantic notion of what performance can and should do, but rather a faith in the power of how the voice and the body on stage constitute and create social justice. This dissertation is a delineation of the process of that creation.

METHODOLOGY

I attempt to make explicit how the rich, skilled and intricate kinds of humor employed by Sykes, Mabley and Mo'Nique not only reflect, but also produce their own kinds of Black feminist theoretical work and generate agency. In fact, I show throughout the dissertation how comedy is the very genre that weaves together, through vernacular rhetoric, the complexities of lived experience, history and theory. I close read recorded performances, engage with archival materials, visually analyze images of the performers and situate their work within their own cultural and historical contexts. While I study the artists alongside theorists in the fields of Black feminism, performance studies, humor studies and queer theory, I also privilege Sykes, Mabley and Mo'Nique as theorists in their own rights.

Each of the chapters focuses on specific themes around ideas of freedom, Black feminisms, queer sexualities and community. However, I approach my analysis of comedic performance with broad questions that are not seeking to find if a joke was

"successful," but rather, I delve deeply into the contexts, styles, tone and politics of joke-telling as Black feminist theory. The following questions guide my close readings of the artists' performances: What is the context of the performance and for whom is the joke? Are the artists in this dissertation alone onstage laughing *at* the audience, using the stage to create community against a common enemy, or using comedic performance for the purpose of sharing laughter in spite of marginalization (or all of the above)? What is the structure of this joke? Does it fall in line with traditional set-up/punch line rhythm? Does the joke align with ideas of feminist comedic performance in which the object of the joke is not only inverted to dominating subjects, but also meanders so there is no a distinct comedic burst, but rooted in storytelling and improvisation? In what ways do their jokes address the co-constitutionality of race, gender, class, and sexuality in poignant yet accessible ways? What are the ways in which these comics comment on history and point towards a more powerful present and future for Black American women? Finally, I close read these performances in such a way to get a sense of the incredible skill sets of each of the artists I read in this dissertation. I do not claim that any of the performances I close read are ideal examples of Black feminist performance and rhetoric, but I do ask what effects and affects these performances have on furthering humor as a productive feminist and antiracist tool. Elam (2002) insists that performative spaces are important venues for both the examination and construction of cultural identification. They "not only reflect the changing dynamics of cultural identity within the existent social order, but can make their own claim, structure their own circumstances, and raise significant questions about how race operates and how it interacts with issues of gender, sexuality, class, and

culture" (98). Additionally, while closely examining the comic's words are imperative to my work, performance analysis is particularly important to me as it pays attention to and marks gesture, embodiment, and affective tone as not only equal to the text, but examines how these elements work *as* text.

Because the nature of standup comedy is rooted in first-person narrative and seemingly autobiographical, it becomes easy to conflate a comic with her persona.[8] I take into account biography, but also understand that the work comedians create onstage, even with the use of first person narrative is highly crafted, imbued with fiction, exaggeration and imagery for the purpose of creating a specific kind of experience for the audience. At the same time, however, their bodies on stage matter. That is, even in constructing their stage-selves, Sykes, Mabley and Mo'Nique present themselves onstage as agential individuals in conjunction with the facade of their personas.[9]

Unfortunately, none of my analysis focuses on live performance. I rely solely on recorded events. In the cases of Wanda Sykes and Mo'Nique, these include performances that have been edited as comedy specials and the documentary *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate.* Mabley's collection of comedic performances, however, required more piecemeal archival research and close readings of her LP recordings and one of the three feature films Mabley starred in over the course of her career. Since 2012, I have been working with the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Roger and

[8] I draw this conclusion not only from scholarship on standup comedy, but also Thomas Postlewait's "Autobiography and Theatre History" from *Interpreting the Theatrical Past: Essays in the Historiography of Performance* (2000).

[9] For more on constructions of comedic personas, see Bambi Haggins' *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (2007); Andrew Stott's *Comedy* (2005); and Mel Watkins' *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (1999).

Hammerstein Archive of Recorded Sound. The Schomburg Center provided photographs of Mabley that, when closely read in conjunction with her recorded performances enliven my assertions that Mabley's comedic persona was feminist, queer and radical. Thus, because certain elements of live performance analysis are missing from my readings of Mabley (gesture, facial expressions and movement), I work to create an analysis that is grounded in textual and vocal readings, and yet still attunes to Mabley's physical presence onstage.

While all forms of performance rely on and need audiences to become performance, standup comedy is especially dependent on audiences. A joke does not become a joke until those hearing it respond.[10] This dissertation privileges the artistry of the comedians themselves, and also recognizes that audience response plays an imperative role regarding not just how a joke is received, but also how it is performed. Live performance, already ephemeral, is exacerbated when adding comedy as a main element of what is happening on stage, and here is where standup is "uniquely audience dependent" (Limon 12). The audience not only participates in the joke telling, but also makes the jokes themselves. They are constant conversation with the performer as their own collective entity. I thus borrow from Michael Warner's idea of a public (in this case, the audience) who creates, within its own time and space, a kind of group identity based on the collective experience and voluntary engagement. Publics "commence with the moment of attention" and are self-activated. Therefore, audiences within the sphere of the

[10] See Regina Barreca's *They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor* (1991), 53; Sigmund Freud *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960), 176; John Limon's *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (2000), 12.

comedic performance I examine may not share common identity markers, but do take on a group dynamic under the auspices of the performance. Warner (2002) continues, "Women speaking in public bring about a distinct challenge in the public vs. private split. "Public and private are bound up with the elementary relations to language as well as to the body" (24). Because disenfranchised groups have historically been silenced (or many times, unheard) feminist comedy is unauthorized discourse and a rebellious act both in finding community and fighting oppression.

While I label the artists Black feminist comics, I understand that not all audiences can/are willing to share that label. However, because performer and audience engage in shared experiences and exchange of emotion, I assume that the audiences of Sykes, Mabley and Mo'Nique are in some ways affected by and become consumers of Black feminist and queer performance. In some instances, Sykes' performance at the White House Correspondents' Dinner for example, this exposure to Black feminist humor creates noted tension between performance and audience. In other instances, Mo'Nique's performance at the Ohio Reformatory for Women, Black feminist comedy literally bonds women who span across differing identity markers, but find commonality within their role as audience members. Mo'Nique's performance in the Ohio Women's Reformatory is particularly tailored to her audience. Mo'Nique creates space for women to find freedom through laughter even while under the watchful eyes of the guards. Thus, while viewers of the DVD of the performance may have an affective, freeing experience from viewing the film, I am much more interested in how that performance operates under the specific contexts of the prison.

Laughter plays a crucial role in my close readings of the performances I analyze. I am less concerned with examining the *amount* of laughter from the audience, and more concerned with what these women can and do say under conditions of joke-telling that promote social change and community among women. However, much of the video footage of Mo'Nique's performance focuses on audience reaction and involvement. Because, for example, the chapter dedicated to that performance focuses on community and coalition building, I examine how Mo'Nique interacts with her audience and how the women in the audience interact with each other. Laughter and cheering are important to this analysis; however, it is not the primary element of audience interaction I will study.

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

In Chapter Two, "Cracking Up Time: Wanda Sykes' Comedic Historiography," I examine various moments in standup artist Wanda Sykes' career as examples of the ways in which Black feminist comedic performance reconfigures, reforms and queers time. I investigate how Sykes' work functions as historiographical intervention that not only critiques history, but also moves Black lesbian women from silenced subjects to active (re)creators of United States' collective memory. Sykes' standup career began in the 1980s, but her material, as I demonstrate throughout the chapter, took a distinct shift after she came out as a lesbian in 2008.[11] Sykes uses standup comedy to explore the

[11] To be clear, I do not approach Sykes' coming out publicly as an event in which her life becomes markedly better, or more honest. I resist assimilationist notions that coming out is a singular event in which one automatically becomes free of the burden of secrecy and can move towards a legible life (also framed by capitalist, heteronormative ideas of ascension). Simply, I mark Sykes' coming out as a shift in her professional career. Sykes, after coming out, publicly employed her own identity to articulate and create onstage the fractured, frazzled and multidimensional temporalities that marginalized bodies experience daily.

multiplicities of her own Black and queer identities and also use Black queer performance to shape the content and structure of her jokes. Her approach to comedy after 2008, then became not only more personal, but also politically confrontational.

In this chapter, I take up definitions of queer time as nonlinear, and also as that which can bind and bond marginalized populations (Alexander 2005; Cvetkovich 2003; Dolan 1993; Freeman 2010; Halberstam; 2005). I examine Wanda Sykes' queering of time in three different performances: her 2009 comedy special, *I'ma Be Me;* her 2008 performance at the White House Correspondents' Dinner; and Sykes' first full length standup DVD, *Tongue Untied* (2003). Each of these examples of Sykes' comedic repertoire demonstrates her engagement with laughter and queer time. The chapter's title, "Cracking Up Time" is a pun intended to show how Sykes' humor laughs at white, heteronormative stories of U.S. history while simultaneously opening up narratives about how queer bodies of color experience time and histories not in a singular, progressive fashion, but in a constant tension with dominant ideas of national heritage, white nostalgia and heteronormative ideas of productivity. Sykes makes visible and audible the unspoken and unseen dominance of time as a tool of state power, and in turn, critiques that power to be laughable.

I argue that Sykes uses comedic performance (a queer way of expressing time, itself) to queer time/memory by (1) revealing the disorienting nature of Black queer subjectivities in present day United States, (2) using jokes to reinstate Black subjectivity into U.S. collective memory, and (3) employing comedy to challenge broader publics to think beyond nonlinear identities, spaces and times. I also take the time in this chapter to

tease out the ways in which laughter is an embodied practice that plays with and against linear time. Like theatre and performance in general, I argue how the act of laughing reshapes time—molding past and present and creating different kinds of shared futures for audiences. In other words, laughter has a specific kind of ability to re-negotiate audiences from individual to connected beings.

In the third chapter, I trace how Jackie "Moms" Mabley's standup solidified important precedents for Black female comics in contemporary U.S. performance and generated specific modalities of freedom unique to Black feminist humor. Employing Black queer/quare theoretical frameworks, I argue that Mabley's legacy has been misremembered in mainstream and scholarly texts. Scholars and cultural critics often cite Mabley as the first African American standup comedienne. Mabley's career spanned a sixty-year period, from minstrel shows in the early 1900s to sold-out performances at the Apollo in the 1960s. At the peak of her fame, Mabley was one of the country's most popular comedians and a major figure in the Civil Rights Movement. Unfortunately, texts that critically examine the work of Mabley are lacking. For example, her performance recordings are mostly on out of print LPs, there is only one biography written about her, and one documentary that chronicles her career. Additionally, Mabley's papers do not exist in a single archive, but are fragmented across the United States. Jackie Mabley's place in theatre and Black history has been marginal at best despite her radical influence on Black American and female comics such as Whoopi Goldberg, Wanda Sykes, Joan Rivers and Red Foxx. This project is foremost about (re)membering the archive of Jackie "Moms" Mabley's comedic performance through

Black queer theory and critical historiographical frameworks.

I begin by providing a brief genealogy of Mabley's personal and professional life, although throughout the chapter I address and also question certain "facts" of Mabley's herstory. I then propose an intervention in Mabley's archive by closely reading the recordings of Mabley's comedy in which I analyze three specific themes: (1) quare/queer performance, (2) Black feminist performance of temporality and nostalgia, and (3) (re)membering Black feminist subjectivity and agency. Finally, I conclude with a call for strategies to continue the expansion of queer archives and critical analysis of Mabley's work. I engage with the resources available that have documented Mabley's work and life. This includes her twenty-eight LP's (almost all out of print), four films Mabley starred in (two of which, she plays herself), the one biography written about Mabley, a play by Alice Childress titled, *Moms*, the recently released HBO documentary *Whoopi Goldberg Presents: Moms Mabley* and various periodicals. Primary documents from the New York Public Library and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture also shed new light on Mabley's work. I examine Mabley's work to address historiographical deficiencies in scholarship on Mabley as a Black feminist comic, and to celebrate her incredibly brave and innovative performances. Mabley's comedy intertwined entertainment and feminist/anti-racist politics to cut through the pain and silence of pre-Civil Rights U.S.

Chapter Four, "I Love You Back" shows how laughter reaches through and across difference and operates as a strategy to unite women in political solidarity. The chapter analyzes Mo'Nique's 2007 documentary *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!*. This film is a

live taping of Mo'Nique performing for convicts at the Ohio Reformatory for Women. This chapter addresses the promises as well as the limits of Black feminist humor as a method of community and coalition building. I show how Mo'Nique uses Black/feminist/queer methods of dissent—disidentification, erotic autonomy and intimate connection—through comedic performance.

Engaging in these theoretical concepts through humor expresses, encourages and makes space for dissent, sexual agency and hook's notion of productive sisterhood. This kind of sisterhood, and resulting community, is not necessarily based on sameness or even friendship. Rather, it is the ability for the performer and audience to create space for mutual respect and engage in difficult, on-going conversations about identity, sexuality and empowerment. Mo'Nique does not pretend to fully understand the experiences of the inmates at ORW; neither does she conflate the women's experiences as monolithic. What this performance does do is show how laughter reaches through and across difference and operates as a strategy to unite women in political solidarity. Comedy, as I demonstrate throughout the chapter, sets the groundwork for Mo'Nique to facilitate a time and place in which the rules of her performance (intimacy, liveness, joy and improvisation) supersede the rules of the state (invisibility, mundaneness routine and violence). I conclude the dissertation with call for future research and queries regarding the future of Black feminist humor as a tool to resist ideas of "post-racial" America.

To summarize, my dissertation works to understand how Black feminist comedy gives scholars, performers, and audiences a lens with which to view the transformative clout of humor. I engage in performances from Wanda Sykes, Jackie Mabley and

Mo'Nique because I believe they reshape and reform comedy to create Black feminist ethos of resistance, critical historiography, community and self-declaration. The stage, for these performers, produces instances in which time, history and state-sponsored oppression stand little chance to remain stagnant in the face of laughter.

CHAPTER TWO: Cracking Up Time: Wanda Sykes' Comedic Historiography

On a blindingly sunny afternoon on November 15, 2008 hundreds of people gathered at The Center, the Southern Nevada LGBTQ Community Center, to protest the passing of Proposition 8 and several other state amendments, which just four days earlier banned gay marriage and gay adoption. The protesters, like so many across the United States that week, assembled in the Center's small parking lot, performing the scripts that solidify and bolster queer community and social movements in the U.S.: waving rainbow flags, chanting and holding signs and banners. On grainy, shaky cell phone cameras, participants of the rally record what became another public, defiant and communal performance: coming out. Wanda Sykes had been in the audience that day, and without planning to, jogged up to the podium with confidence and enthusiasm. While previous to this day, Sykes had been a popular comedian for queer audiences; she had never publicly discussed her romantic relationships with women. Dressed in jeans, a t-shirt, sunglasses and sneakers, Sykes' role at the rally was simply a protester. The crowd cheers wildly as she strides onto the makeshift stage and hugs the Center's staff. At the podium, draped in rainbow flags and flanked by large speakers in front of the Center's entrance, Sykes stands tall with her chest puffed out in pride. She hugs the woman who introduces her, takes a deep breath and says, "Thank you. This is beautiful. To see this many people out here" (2008).

The speech immediately went viral on YouTube; the quickness with which Sykes'

once speculative sexuality and its now widespread accessibility serves as just one facet of the ways in which queer temporality and locality were overpowering forces that day and continue to weave themselves as key components into how Sykes narrates her identity and constructs her comedic material. Indeed, this particular cultural moment was a "queer time and place." Gay marriages across California were suddenly in jeopardy, while President Obama's victory marked an unprecedented progress in this nation's race relations. For many of us, the days following the election were exhilarating and saddening, enraging and victorious, and most certainly divisive and bonding. Even viewing the event recorded on a cell phone or low quality camera five years later, the charge of energy from the crowd is apparent. Miles and days and different mediums away from the actual event, Sykes and the members of the protest travel forward to a particular political and cultural moment held in a stalemate.[12] As Sykes continues her speech, she cites *time* as the crucial thing that propelled her to speak up that afternoon:

> On Tuesday on November 4th, 8:15 [p.m.] was the happiest moment of my life. I was so proud of the country. We elected Barack Obama. And I was like, "Man we are moving in the right direction." And then at about eleven o'clock, I was crushed. We took a huge leap forward, and then got dragged twelve steps back. When California passed Prop 8, Arkansas, you know, gay couples, same sex couples can't adopt, and Florida banned gay marriage, you know, I was just, that was just heart breaking. I felt like I was being attacked, like I was being personally attacked. Our community was being attacked. I got married October 25th. My wife is here. And you know, I don't really talk about my sexual orientation […] I was just living my life. But I got pissed off.

Sykes' insistence that she came out because of the nation's seemingly

[12] The Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act as unconstitutional in June of 2013. As I worked through this chapter, I kept thinking of queer time as not just non-linear, but also as liminal. What can be produced in these "stuck" places? The times of waiting? For Sykes, it was in this particular liminal space that coming out became her way to transforming her position of silence and passivity.

simultaneous progression and retraction of time is reflective of the consistent negotiation and reformation Black/queer people must make in regards to time and space in the U.S. In other words, time was the entity that so strongly compelled Sykes to move her sexuality from the private to public sphere, and was also the very entity that attacked her personhood (re: "twelve steps back"). This performative act of publicly coming out of the closet was due, in large part, to culture's movement backwards in time (anti-gay legislation), but also in Sykes' expression that time was "running out," that she was affectively pushed forward. Time "got" her "pissed off." After this apparently impromptu public declaration of her sexuality and marriage to her wife, Wanda Sykes began to freely discuss her sexuality in her comedic material. The genre of standup carved out specific temporalities that demonstrated the simultaneous joy and frustration of being Black, female and queer. Nonetheless, this moment in Sykes' career pursues how the "pleasures of queerness can be found in the interstices of national-political life, and that they are definitely worth living for" (*Time Binds* x). I am interested, then, in the connections and through lines among temporality, the performance of coming out and Black feminist humor. This chapter explores the fractured, frazzled, complex and affective work of time as a key modality of freedom.

The moment of laughter as a performative explosion, or a burst, can stop, speed up and even transport us to other times and places. The comedic performances I examine in this dissertation ignite audiences with markedly queer sense of time as to declare and move towards non-white, non-heteronormative conceptions and inceptions of time and place, and therefore, belonging and community. Here, I take up others' definitions of

queer time and space as non-linear, and also a binding agent. Elizabeth Freeman defines queer time in her book *Time Binds* (2010) as the kind of time that "overtakes both secular and millennial time. And within the lost moments of official history, queer time generates a discontinuous history of its own..." (x-xi). The queering of time as something that overtakes and overpowers us, much like Sykes' extemporaneous coming out, shows how queer temporalities in performance both access and generate alternative histories through embodiment, affect, and in Sykes' case, joy.

I argue that standup comedy is a unique platform to reshape, dislocate, reclaim and celebrate how marginalized groups experience time. Black feminist comedic performance operates "as a provocation to move past the boundaries of alienation," in U.S. history and present day culture, towards oppositional knowledge and action (Alexander 5). In this chapter, I show how Black feminist comedy "cracks up" chronomormativity. Chrononormativiy, as defined by Freeman, is the use of time to organize individual bodies to abide by the institutional rhythms of capitalism, heterosexual family and normative gendered behavior. I argue that Sykes uses comedic performance (a queer way of expressing time, itself) to queer time/memory by (1) revealing the disorienting nature of Black queer subjectivities in present day United States, (2) joke telling to reinstate Black subjectivity into U.S. collective memory, and (3) employing comedy to challenge broader publics to think beyond nonlinear identities, spaces and times. This chapter begins by providing a brief literature review of queer temporalities as they relate to comedic performance. I examine Wanda Sykes' queering of time in three different performances: her 2009 comedy special, *I'ma Be Me;* her 2008

performance at the White House Correspondents' Dinner; and Sykes' first full length standup DVD, *Tongue Untied* (2003). Each of these examples of Sykes' comedic repertoire demonstrates her engagement with laughter and queer time.

QUARE TIMING

E. Patrick Johnson, Jose Muñoz, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones and other performance studies scholars, have noted how queer studies has, even in its attempt to work around oppressive regimes, still been "unable to accommodate the issued faced by gays and lesbians of color" (Johnson, *Black Queer Studies* 3). Thus, Johnson calls for a "queering" of queer studies through what he calls "quare" readings. Quare, on one hand, "keeps with traditional understandings and uses of 'queer,'" be that odd, irregular, or non-heteronormative. On the other hand, quare denotes "something excessive—something that might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience" (2). Quare studies theorizes how subjectivity and agency are discursively mediated to propel material bodies into action (9). Quareness thus requires rigorous attention to how bodies perform their racialized, gendered, affective and classed experience. Quareness attends to how performance is both a survival strategy and generative "dialogical/dialectical relationship between theory and practice, the lettered and unlettered, ivory tower and front porch is crucial to a joint and sustained critique of hegemonic systems of oppression" (19).

A quaring of time in performance then shows how both Blackness and queerness intricately disrupt and intercept linear time, history that only attends to those in power,

and what is worth the time and space for public discourse. Quare time would align with Jacqui Alexander's defense of embodiment of the Sacred as key to Black/queer liberation which, as she contends, "dislocates clock time, meaning linearity, which is different than living in the past or being bound by tradition" (309). Shifting temporality from linear to non-linear can create or attend to the generation of "counter-memories," which Joseph Roach defines as "the disparities between history as it is discursively transmitted and memory as it is publicly enacted by bodies that bear its consequences" (26). Counter-memories conjure and articulate the multi-dimensionality of time and the ways marginalized bodies experience culture, history, sexuality, violence and joy. Omi Osun Joni L. Jones insists that queerness and Blackness are linked insofar as they operate "transtemporally" and refuse crystallization, but instead generate cites of possibility whereby performance "enacts roads to movement" ("Jazz as Theatre" 2012).

Throughout this chapter and dissertation I use both of these terms, queer and quare. For Sykes, I believe that quareness is imbedded in queerness and vice versa. Queer thought and performance in this chapter is also quare as Sykes uses comedic performance as both a survival strategy and a generative "dialogical/dialectical relationship between theory and practice, the lettered and unlettered, ivory tower and front porch [and] is crucial to a joint and sustained critique of hegemonic systems of oppression" (Johnson 148). All of the artists I examine in this dissertation create work that is deeply imbued with a feminist sensibility and imbricated with quare political and aesthetic practices.

Frantz Fanon states in *Black Skin, White Masks* that "The past can in no way be my guide in the actual state of things" (200). The performers in this dissertation know

this and resist the ways in which Black/queer bodies are often "surrounded in an atmosphere of uncertainty" through taking and making time to articulate the complexity of race, gender, sexuality and class through comedic performance (111). Laughter is a kind of quare affect in this dissertation because both laughter and joke telling burst forth to bring its audiences into the present moment. Laughter is quare in this dissertation because it asserts that joy is an integral part of Black embodied resistance and empowerment. The somatic release of laughter at once takes us in the now, harkens to a past not bound by hegemonic narratives, and points towards a more just future. This pleasurable release in the context of Black feminist humor are, as Freeman states, "matters of the body, matters of timing, and tropes for encountering, witnessing, and transforming history, with a capital H and otherwise" (58).

Performances of and actions towards freedom confront challenges to understand and enunciate alternative histories, as well as alternative ways of living in the present and working towards a more just future. For Sykes, quareness and performance of quare/queer time began to weave itself into the ethos of her comedic persona almost immediately after coming out at the anti-Prop 8 rally in Nevada, notably in her 2010 full-length comedy special. Two years into the Obama administration and the continued struggle for gay marriage to become legal in the United States, issues of coming out and being Black in America were the central point of the special, released to DVD under the title, *I'ma Be Me.* The title of this performance is already steeped in Black feminist sensibility through employing vernacular grammar and self-declaration that reflected both Sykes' style of comedy and also her personhood. *I'ma Be Me* suggests that

authenticity is not acquired, but worked for and worked on—something to be declared and lived according to Sykes. Sykes articulates time and identity as quare because selfhood and community are both a doing and a saying.

Sykes' standup work prior to this had addressed issues of race, class and sexuality, but Sykes took on a passive role in her joke telling. She was often the observer, the commentator who critiqued and made fun of racial and sexual oppression, but rarely made herself a main character in narratives about queerness or even Black female sexuality. Sykes began her comedy career in the late 1980s as a standup comic, and in the 1990s she moved to television writing, winning an Emmy for her work on *The Chris Rock Show.* Her steady and successful acting career kept her personal life out of the spotlight as well; even *Wanda at Large*, her sitcom which ran for two seasons in 2003 and 2004, was highly fictionalized (Wanda played a straight woman, for example), drawing few parallels from Sykes' personal life.

I'ma Be Me takes a sharp but important turn in Sykes' motion towards self-expression and resistance. Previous structuring of Sykes' jokes often included hypothetical, third person narratives. A joke about racial profiling and fears of Black masculinity in her first comedy special, *Sick and Tired,* proclaimed: "When we see a white man running down the street, we think, 'He must be late!'" (2006). While still highly political and vocal about racism, sexism and gay rights, her standup prior to publicly announcing her sexuality was, in some way, closeted. Making herself the major character in Sykes' narration functions as its own kind of coming out. She disrupted time by announcing herself as queer, thereby relinquishing heteronormative temporal arc of

marriage, reproduction, waning interest in sex, and death, and also by placing her personal experiences at the forefront of her work. *I'ma Be Me,* as I explore below, is a salient example of the ways in which standup comedy announces quare/queer temporalities in both coming out as well as joke-telling.

The stage on which Sykes performs for *I'ma Be Me's* taping is similar to her other comedy specials. It is a large proscenium space, lit brightly with a microphone stand. The backdrop is an evening cityscape Sykes is dressed in her usual performance attire: dark trouser jeans, high heels, a dark blouse and leather jacket. She begins her set by speaking about the election of Barack Obama, which segues into a more personal reveal. Her audience, clearly in the know, cheers loudly when she states, "Had a lot of changes in my personal life." She nods, as to say, "I know you know what I'm talking about," but she continues to elaborate:

> A lot of changes. I got married. Happily married, got married in California. Then I had to publicly come out. Had to do that. I had to do it. After Prop 8, after that, you know that Prop 8 fiasco in California, I had to come out. I had to say something. 'Cause I was so hurt and so fucking pissed.

Sykes claims that she had not planned to come out that afternoon at the rally, but was emotionally compelled to do so. She acknowledges this when repeating, "I *had* to come out [emphasis mine]." Sykes' Black lesbian female body on stage, particularly in and on her own terms becomes defiant act of self-naming. While marriage as a life-changing event is often associated with heteronormative progression, Sykes' marriage to her wife and the subsequent repealing of Proposition 8 propelled her to publicly state her sexuality. This was and still is a quare act. Sykes' decision to keep her sexuality private

did not detract her from loving and being in love with other women, but these two personal and cultural significant life events: coming out of the closet and getting married were reversed. Even still, the "backwardness" of Sykes' actions relied on intuitive affect. *Having* to come out because of hurt and anger, privileges the emotional and spiritual nature of naming oneself despite oppositional forces. Quareness, Black feminist humor and queer temporalities are all affective realms, and Sykes places these elements directly into her comedic persona and standup material.

COMING OUT AS BLACK

After explaining her reasoning for coming out, Sykes once again cites the election of Barack Obama and the passing of Proposition 8 as simultaneous victories and regressions. "I was up here," she raises her hand above her head, "Now I'm back down here," as she gestures towards the floor. The swiftness with which Sykes and so many others felt degradation that election evening reflect quare/queer experiences of constant (re)orientation of time and space regarding one's positionality in the world. This kind of "objective vertigo" as described by Frank Wilderson is inherent to Black, and I would add queer, subjectivities. Because, as Wilderson explains, "one's environment is perpetually unhinged," Blackness means a "life *constituted* by disorientation rather than a life interrupted by disorientation" [emphasis mine]("Vengeance of Vertigo" 3). At the intersection between structural (imposed by the State) and personal (a feeling of uneasiness or being unsafe) is the space where marginalized bodies experience daily and unavoidable dis-ease. Sykes feelings of simultaneous elation, joy, anger and disappointment, then demonstrates how Black queer subjectivities operate under

continuous discontinuity. That is, time is experienced as a forward/backward, multiple and confusing entity rather than linear progression. Sykes' work clearly falls in line with this kind of oppositional work in the 21st century, and articulates the very double bind that kept marginalized people masking opposition through laughter. In this special Sykes explicitly names and articulates white privilege and often uses her own body as a vehicle through which she articulates ideas of the double bind, or racial vertigo.

Sarah Ahmed explains that this is a fundamental tenant of queer life. "Emotions involve such affective forms of (re)orientation. It is not just that bodies are moved by the orientations they have; rather, the orientations we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies." (*Queer Phenomenology* 2-3). Sykes' feeling "up here" and then "back down" were not just emotional, but could also be translated to the corporeal—her body was literally moved from recognizable, to invisible and deemed unworthy of equal rights by the State. Humor, however, can function as a method to crystalize the feeling of Black/queer abjection and vertigo. Black feminist humor can bring the public and private together in such a way that abjection becomes impossible because laughter is a form of affect and spectatorship whereby the voice and body converge to proclaim itself as worthy of expression. The women I write about in this dissertation both name and disavow racist, sexist and homophobic structures to audiences. Produced by the comedian's performance, the powerful experience of laughter shores up and makes possible realms of liberation. Cynthia Willett, Julie Willett, and Yael D. Sherman also state, "feminist comedy can make visible the history of identity and the struggles for recognition and identification,

but as a moment of dislocation and transformation. In other words, the moment of laughter may jolt one out of habitual habits and cognition and open up fresh possibilities" (229). The jolting nature of standup comedy makes the performer visible, and also makes accessible the ways in which time is directly linked to subject position.

Sykes' jolting, disorienting feelings of being "up here" were directly tied to race, while the "back down here" gesture was linked to her sexuality. Despite that much of her material which has reflected Black feminist assertions and performance of the co-constitutionality of identity markers, Sykes strategically essentializes these categories as she declares with conviction, and what has since sparked much controversy, "It's harder being gay than it is Black" (2010). The set up for this joke demonstrates the confusing, conflicting feelings of racial progression paired with homophobic regression. Without pause, she continues:

> It is harder. It's harder being gay than it is being Black. 'Cause there's some things I had to do as gay that I didn't have to do as Black. I didn't have to come out Black. I didn't have to sit my parents down and tell them about my Blackness. I didn't have to sit them down [and say], "Mom, Dad I gotta tell y'all something. Hope y'all still love me. I'm just gonna say it. Mom, Dad: I'm Black."

Sykes puts herself in bind when she makes such definitive arguments about what it means to be Black and gay in the United States. Her pacing is quick, she makes sure that she explains herself before the she loses her audience, but they applaud and laugh when they realize she has replaced the word "gay" with "Black." This joke takes advantage of the marked tensions between gay rights advocates employing the language of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Sykes does not make a direct comparison between the two, but evokes the difficulties of grappling with multiple, intersecting identities and their frequent

incompatibilities. She does not deny marginalizing experiences of being a Black woman, but rather emphasizes the ways in which her queer identity requires certain kinds of labor different from racial discrimination. Both racialized and queer experiences, as she explains, are unnaturally bound up by chrononormative expectations.

What follows is a narrative in which Sykes plays both herself and her mother in a hypothetical conversation that involves Wanda "coming out as Black." Freeman articulates that queer temporalities, specifically in performance "cannily engage with the uncanny, with both the alterity and the familiarity of prior times, and tap into a mode of longing that is as fundamental to queer performance as laughter" (72). That is, Sykes draws parallels between the antiquated (albeit still present) ignorance of racism and the rejection queer people often face when coming out. In a miniature one-woman show, Sykes quickly switches between her voice and her mother's voice. She sets the scene, sitting her parents down and gently, slowly looking out towards the audience (her parents), "Mom, Dad [...]" She pauses for dramatic effect and then says, "I'm Black." Sykes immediately pops to her mother who is clearly upset. "Mom" holds her hand out as if she cannot/will not hear what Wanda has said. As her mother she exclaims, "OH NO LORD JESUS NOT BLACK!" Wailing melodramatically, gutturally. Sykes turns her back to the audience and outstretches her arms yelling to God, "Anything but Black, Jesus! Give her cancer, Lord, giver her cancer! Anything but Black, Lord!" (2010). As Sykes turns her back to the audience, they become the people "Mom" is rejecting. Playing multiple characters in this narrative, Sykes replaces herself with the audience as she switches to the persona of her mother. The audience thus embodies a kind of

empathetic simultaneity—at once watching the experience of Wanda, but also becoming the character of Wanda as well. Sykes, meanwhile, works a kind of third person acting style—consciously using exaggerated gestures and vocal affect to satirize her mother's reactions.

Sykes, as Wanda, is quiet and calm—the rational one as she plainly explains, "No, Mom I'm Black that's just what it is." "Mom's" voice immediately becomes serious and suspicious. Sykes hunches over and points her finger out at the audience in an accusatory manner. "Mom's" voice lowers. Her eyes narrow. "No. No. You know what it is? You been hanging around Black people […] they twisted your mind!" (2010)
The pace then quickens as Wanda switches between herself and mother:

WANDA: No, Mom. I'm Black. That's just how it is.

MOM: What did I do? I know I shouldn't have let you watch *Soul Train*!

WANDA: No, Mom. It wasn't *Soul Train*. I was born Black.

MOM: You weren't born Black, I don't want to hear that. The Bible says, "Adam and Eve," not "Adam and Mary J. Blige!"

In this fictional exchange, Sykes speeds up, slows down, and (re)forms typical coming out narratives. Comedy here functions as a compelling genre for queer time because it crystallizes and illuminates the complicated, often ineffable experiences of queer life and Blackness in the United States. This narrative enacts that being queer requires (potentially) repeated political choices due to the often invisibility of sexual identities. With race, most often, our bodies already declare who we are to others. Queer identities disrupt time through cycling back through the act of coming out. Sykes

confounds time as she sits down to tell her parents she's "Black" because this has always been present and true. However, through performance she erases the often years of agonizing over what one can and cannot say about sexuality. The jokes speed up that agony, but the laughter, in response, is a pause, a way to show what resonates. Additionally, the repetition, "No, Mom I'm really Black" show cases the cyclical nature of coming out, that it is a repeated process as heteronormitive comments/actions/expectations are ever present and embedded in daily life.

Eve Sedgewick's study *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) theorizes "the closet" as a particular way of understanding culture, history, and sexuality claims that coming out narratives reveal and solidify certain truths about how "the language of sexuality not only intersects with but transforms other languages and relations..." (3) Sykes, however, inverts the language of race and sexuality. She uses the language of race to intersect with but also transform the cultural script of coming out. By replacing the word "gay" with "Black," Sykes creates a world in which the language of sexuality and race collide and transform narratives of coming out from secretive and compulsive to laughable. She conflates coming out as Black to coming out as queer, even as it is ridiculous for someone who is obviously racially marked as non-white to declare their racial identity. Sykes' demonstrates the hyper *in*visibility of heteronormativity by amplifying the hypervisibility of race.

I agree with Sedgewick when she states that epistemologies of the closet and language surrounding the closet "have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally" (3). Sykes employs a theatrical quare time in such a

way to reanimate and reconfigure culture scripts of coming out—we see the ridiculousness of sexuality having to be declared, and the confusion queer people experience when bombarded with aggressive responses from loved ones. When Sykes' mother accuses her of "catching" Blackness by telling her she has been "hanging around with Black people," and exclaiming, "they twisted your mind," we see the disorienting, warping occurrence of coming out. Time moves quickly between antiquated and unfair prejudice from her mother and Sykes' present day acceptance of herself and identity. The twisted mind, in Sykes' exaggerated performance, is not her own, but rather her mother's. Sykes' coming out script thus "pays attention to gaps and losses that are both structural and visceral: the all too real limits presented by the stigmatization of [queerness]" (*Time Binds* 11), while at the same time empowering herself as rational and self-accepting in the face of comical bigotry.

Sykes not only manipulates and plays with identity markers of sexuality and racial identity, but also that of parent/child. Sykes reverses the affective roles of mother and daughter. Her mother reacts harshly while daughter remains calm. Sykes shows the stoic role children who come out to their parents have to play, even as the put themselves at risk for rejection, abandonment or violence. More often than not, queer children become the receptacle to familial anxieties about sexuality, queerness and compliance to state, religious and social authorities. Without using Black as a stand-in for gay, however, Sykes could easily fall into the trope of tragic queer. Reversing the language of race and sexuality reveals the confusing, disorienting experience of coming out. This narrative re-tells (goes back in time) the story to re-form (build a different future) the queer subject as

powerful and in control of her own narratives.

A repeated punch line in *I'ma Be Me* serves as the ending to several of Sykes' jokes; she mimics a hushed, scolding voice in the persona of Sykes' mother: "White people are lookin' at you!" The implication of the comment is to stop doing whatever you are doing. The first time Sykes tells this joke she recalls a time that she is dancing in the car as a child and her mother yells at her. Operating within the framework of Black respectability, Sykes' mother scolds her daughter's unruly behavior as "too Black" or "improperly" female. Within the construction of this through line, Sykes explores the quotidian as well as the political ways in which privilege functions and even more importantly, how she locates modes of resistance.

Throughout *I'ma Be Me,* Sykes takes her time transitioning between jokes and often stops to laugh at her own material. The last third of this performance becomes more confrontational, more personal. This is especially evident after Sykes speaks to the audience about coming out as a lesbian. She explains, "It's great being out. I love being publicly out. Everything is on the table. I am what I am. That's it. I'm happy about it." In the spirit of putting "everything on the table," regardless of the gaze of "white people," each joke becomes more explicit in self-expression and dissecting white privilege. When critiquing the intertwined racism and sexism Sonia Sotamayor experienced during her Supreme Court nomination hearings, Sykes curiously asks,

> Isn't it funny that the only time your race or gender is not questioned is when you're a white man? I think, I think white men get upset. They get nervous if like a minority or another race gets a little power, it makes them nervous. Cause they scared that that race is gonna do to them what they did to that race. So they start screaming, 'Reverse racism reverse racism!' I'm like wait a minute. Isn't reverse

> racism, isn't that when a racist is nice to somebody else? That's reverse racism. What you're afraid of is called *karma*.

This kind of inquisitive joke-telling Sykes does here demands radical transformation of structures that simplify and/or claim white supremacy is over—directly confronting hegemonic fears that Black people are willing/able to engage in racial discrimination if they gain certain kinds of class, political and social status. Sykes points out not only the impossibility of reverse discrimination, but also offers up non-Western ideas of cyclical time as a kind of "revenge" on White supremacy. Sykes shows not only how queer time is experienced by queer people, but also offers up the inadequacy of chorononormativity in non-queer communities as well. That is, regardless of economic status, gender performativity or ethnicity, "straight" time is a constricting entity that (re)produces fear of progress and change beyond white, capitalist ideas of productivity.

Sykes dismantles the invisibility of white, patriarchal gaze that keeps our nation in a firm deadlock—unwilling and/or unable to tackle and articulate the complexities of how power and privilege maintain themselves in the backdrop of public policy and daily life. In line with bell hooks' emphasis on how performance is a vital tool for articulating and making change, the stakes of which, as hooks elaborates are vital to movements toward freedom. "Whenever we choose performance as a site to build communities of resistance we must be able to shift paradigms and styles of performance in a manner that centralises the colonisation of black minds and imaginations..." (1995 218) Injustice then, through laughter, is no longer muted. Rather, Black feminist humor functions as a modality of freedom insofar as it refuses to be trapped in temporalities dictated by a logic

of linearity and marginalization. In quaring time, Sykes opens up bountiful sources of advocacy for social change and joyful expression of the self.

HISTORY BUSTS OUT

This section examines how Black feminist comedic performance dislocates/"cracks up" white, heteronormative notions of history and citizenship. I contend that Black feminist comedic performance aims to produce laughter that dislocates its audience. Here I use dislocates not as an escapist term. Rather, comedic performance is at its best when it jolts us out of normative, oppressive and marginalizing discourse. Paul Gilroy claims, "subversive or disruptive communicative opportunities can co-exist with the painful demands made upon black subjects by the everyday politics of white supremacy" ("…to be real" 17). Gilroy's assertion illuminates how performance operates as protest despite systemic and cultural racism. I agree with such assumptions, but am also interested in the ways in which certain kinds of performance move beyond the "within and against" strategies of Gilroy and of which others speak.[13] What are the moments in which performance not only disrupts, but also moves us towards a time and place in which the everyday politics of white supremacy, and more importantly, its historical roots are not just agitated, but also cracked up?

Tongue Untied

Sykes' humor dislocates her audience towards a recollection and recognition of Black women into the cultural fabric of United States' collective memory. In her second

[13] See Paul Gilroy's "…to be real" and Jose Munoz's *Disidentifications.* Both authors assert performance's power to maneuver and corrupt from within particular hegemonic systems. My desire is to look for comedic performance that explodes the very systems it critiques.

televised comedy special, *Tongue Untied*, Sykes performs a carefully crafted comedic performance that weaves together everyday experiences of Black womanhood with critiques of systemic racism bound in historical scripts of white supremacy. *Tongue Untied* was released in July of 2003, and Sykes was billed as one of the executive producers. Just four months after the United States' invasion of Iraq and many U.S. citizens still reeling with post-9/11 racist paranoia, Sykes filled her set with jokes about President Bush's intelligence, the U.S. economy, and how Orange Alerts can ruin a weekend of fun. Sykes was not yet out as a lesbian, and her short-lived sitcom was about to be released on Fox Television Network. Certainly, Sykes practiced self-censorship either out of contractual obligation and/or to keep herself safe in the public eye. However, Sykes chose to open her set with a joke that tackled the complexities of navigating her career as a Black female actress in the United States.

At the start of the special, the camera follows Sykes' movement from the greenroom to center stage. She walks swiftly with long strides, her arms pumping back and forth at her sides. Dressed in a tan, velvet pantsuit, Sykes enters the stage to thunderous applause. The stage is draped with red curtains and large, round paper lanterns. Sykes' hair is straightened in a chin-length bob.

She announces that her new sitcom (which only lasted one season) is about to air on Fox. "I'm really excited about it," she explains, "because it's an idea that *I* came up with." Sykes, a writer and executive producer on the show, held clout within the program's creation. However, as she explains, despite her integral leadership role in the program, she was still subject to network executives and staff writers relying on racist

and sexist archetypes for the show's main themes while the show was in development. Sykes does not name these coworkers, but labels them "their" ideas. She places herself outside "their" logic but is simultaneously the object of it:

> Before you get to do a show that you want to do, you gotta listen to all their bad ideas. And they had a lot of bad ideas. You know my agent would call me and she'd be like "Wanda you don't even wanna hear this." I'd be like, "No tell me." [As her agent,] "Alright. They want you to play a maid, and you win the lottery. But you love working for this family *so* much, you continue to be their maid."

Strolling back and forth on the stage with her chest high, Sykes exclaims, "I said, 'Set it up! I wanna meet these people! So I can slap that dumb ass idea right out of their head.'" Sykes asserts herself as a woman in her field who understands and experiences blatant racism and sexism. What the joke further elicits however, is for her to not be a passive bystander in everyday workplace oppressions. Rather, through violent imagery Sykes figuratively removes not just the "idea," but also confronts and dismantles (e.g. slapping out) notions that she would oblige to play certain stereotypical roles for her very own show. With a disgusted look on her face, she asks, "What makes you think people would *want* to work for you like that?" [emphasis mine]. While never stating who "they" or "you" are, this joke conjures white upper and upper middle class scenarios that harken back to the construction of the Black servant who is content in their place within the white heterosexual family structure.

Even in her position of power as a producer and co-creator of her own sitcom, Sykes still fell subject to the institutional and cultural ways in which racism and sexism intertwine. Sykes confirms the ludicrous offer by ending the bit with, "What kind of idea is that? If someone told me I won the lottery, I would walk out in the middle of this *joke*."

Strongly and firmly, Sykes asserts her power and her lack of interest in working simply to please other people. Willett, Willett, and Sherman contend that laughter is perhaps the most "explosive in the social sphere [and] discomforting to our social modes of thought." The well-placed joke invades "our quasi-private store of associations" (218). In other words, jokes can crystalize and enunciate that which is unspeakable.

Seamlessly, Sykes moves into her next joke, which is the last time throughout the special in which she talks about her identity as a Black woman in U.S. culture. Sykes states that she flew to New York from her hometown of Los Angeles. and, as always, was subjected to extra security screening.

> There is nothing random about the random screening at all. I know every time I fly, I get checked twice. They stop me at security and then they got me again at the gate. The last time was so bad they actually made me go through the machine with the luggage. This cannot be healthy! There is nothing random about it. You get to the gate and they standing there with a Sherman William paint chart. If your ass is darker than khaki, you getting searched. Shoot, I been searched so much, I said the hell with luggage, I'm bringing my stuff on a hanger.

Again, "they" implicitly stands in for, not just the security guards, but white suspicion in general. These suspicions, certainly exacerbated post 9/11, but were firmly in place prior to 2001. Sykes shows that embedded in the construction of abiding citizen is whiteness. National belonging as well as racial meanings and structures are not stagnant and separated from ideological production, but rather, "a salient feature in a general process whereby culture mediates the world of agents and the structures which are created by their social praxis. These meanings are sources of the individual and collective actions which give culture its materiality" (Gilroy *Ain't No Black* 17). Sykes produces work that "cracks up" the "randomness" of security checks by engaging her audience in the deeply

imbedded, systemic forms of racism and national paranoia of post 9/11 United States.

On April 28, 2009, congressional leaders, dignitaries, and First Lady Michelle Obama gathered in Emancipation Hall at the U.S. capitol to, after ten years of legislation, reveal the bust of Sojourner Truth. Truth became the first African American woman to be memorialized in the Hall, which was built to "recognize the contributions of the enslaved laborers who helped build the U.S. Capitol"("Emancipation Hall"). The bronze statue, crafted by Los Angeles sculptor Artis Lane,[14] stands 37 inches tall and depicts Truth staring forward with a soft smile and bonnet on her head. In Hillary Clinton's address to the audience that afternoon, she proclaimed this permanent fixture solidified Truth's "rightful place alongside the heroes who have helped shape our nation's history" (2009).

Nancy Pelosi gave the opening remarks, heralding the importance of Truth's presence in the Hall "so that every person who visits the Capitol of the United States will know her important role in America's history, and will see her as an inspiration [to fight] injustice..." (2009). Michelle Obama was the final speaker of the afternoon before revealing the statue of Truth. Standing proudly at a podium in front of the audience, she spoke warmly:

> I hope Sojourner Truth would be proud to see me, a descendent of slaves, serving as the First Lady of the United States of America. So I am proud to be here. I am proud to be able to stand here on this day for this dedication. [...] All the visitors in the U.S. Capitol will hear the story of the brave woman who endured the greatest of humanity's indignities. They'll hear the story of Sojourner Truth, who didn't allow those indignities to destroy her spirit, who fought for her own

[14] Artis Lane is a Black Canadian visual artist who works primarily in the mediums of painting and sculpture. According to Lane, all of her art is concerned primarily with the following elements: portraits, social injustice and metaphysics.

freedom, and then used her powers to help others.

As Pelosi, Clinton and Mrs. Obama slowly pull back a red swath of fabric that covers the statue of Truth, the Hall erupts in applause. The celebration continued with a children's choir and a performance of Truth's famous address, "Ain't I a Woman."[15] The tone of the event, celebratory and victorious, did indeed mark the important and vital legacy of Truth's efforts as she is often a symbolic figure representing the struggles of countless other African American women and their allies who dedicated their lives to the emancipation of enslaved and oppressed peoples in U.S. history. Amidst a Hall dedicated to honoring, and according to its name, freeing those who have been absent from the U.S. collective historical conscious, I am particularly interested in what went *un*said at this ceremony. The "indignities" First Lady Obama alluded to in her address most certainly include racism, sexism, poverty, sexual and physical abuse and myriad violations and violence done to Black female bodies before and after Truth's time. But what does it mean that they remained inexplicit during the ceremony? What would it require to, as Jacqui Alexander proposes, "destabilize existing practices of knowing" and dissolve "the fictive boundaries of exclusion and marginalization" that keep Black U.S. American women on the margins of cultural memory?

Just two weeks after the unveiling of Sojourner Truth, Wanda Sykes became the first Black American woman and out gay person to be the keynote performer at the White House Correspondents' Dinner. Sykes used her time on stage to not simply entertain, but

[15] Despite dispute about whether or not Truth actually gave the "Ain't I A Woman" speech in the dialect in which it has been recorded, actress Cicely Tyson performed the three-minute long text at the podium characterized as Truth.

to specifically *name* the various indignities suffered by marginalized bodies in this country's past and present. "I have to say, to the First Lady, kudos to you for unveiling the bust of Sojourner Truth in the White House." Mrs. Obama closes her eyes and nods. The audience applauds and Sykes does as well with an affirming, "Yes." Her tone rises however, and Sykes looks directly at the First Lady and pointedly asks, "But can you do me a favor and please make sure it's nailed down real well? Cause, uh, cause you know when the next white guy comes in they gonna move it to the kitchen."

In a single punch line, Sykes confronts the history of Black U.S. women's servitude to white power structures, from enslavement to present employment in white households. More importantly, her comedic performance conveyed what could not have been said by any of the women who spoke that day—most notably Michelle Obama. Under the guise of "joking" Sykes communicates the complicated, violent and silencing ways in which Black bodies, particularly Black female bodies, are not only pushed out of U.S. cultural memory, but are in constant danger of being placed back in the confines of white supremacy. Humor here functions here as a genre apt to reveal certain truths, to dismiss decorum in order to manipulate and revise hegemonic historical narratives.

Sykes' joke, delivered directly to Mrs. Obama, communicates the private and shared understanding between Black women's experience of being strategically removed from U.S. cultural memory. Juxtaposing Sykes' reaction to the bust with the unveiling ceremony, comedy operates as a liberatory act. Laughter becomes that which frees "the physical reality of teeth clenched, unable to or unwilling to speak, biding your time, holding your tongue, not saying the things that you yearn to say" (Haggins 1). The

spontaneous act of laughter explodes forth past decorum, in spite of social requirements to "behave." Two specific instances in Sykes' performance at the White House Correspondents' Dinner demonstrate the ways in which comedy is a unique medium to historiographically "crack up" narratives around race, nation and power. First, her comments on Sourjouner Truth and later, comedic attacks on Rush Limbaugh allowed her to disrupt the narrative that is so common in national media. I aim to examine how Wanda Sykes employs humor as a modality that not only critiques history, but moves us from passive or silenced subjects in U.S. history, to active (re)creators of National Heritage.

Stuart Hall's conception of the National Heritage asserts heritage is a rhetorical and discursive practice that is bound into notions of power. The nation creates a collective social memory that perpetuates various colonial and patriarchal myths. Hall writes, "The Heritage inevitably reflects the governing assumptions of its time and context. It is always inflected by the power and authority, of those who have colonized the past, and whose versions of history matter. These assumptions and co-ordinates of power are inhabited as natural—given, timeless, true and inevitable"(26). Implicit in the construction of United States Heritage—or what it means to be a citizen, is the cultural scenario of white control, commodification and exclusion of bodies of color. "It follows that those who cannot see themselves reflected in its mirror, cannot properly 'belong" (Hall 23). How might performance, specifically comedic performance, allow for a dislocation of the various cultural practices and discourse that bind National Heritage to white supremacy? Cultural memory and heritage are powerful tools employed to create

and sustain a seamless narrative that celebrates some and silences others. In other words, National Heritage can determine who belongs within a nation.

James E. Young articulates how cultural memory purposefully serves to uphold the state's interest. He explains, "If part of the state's aim, therefore is to create the sense of shared values and ideals, then it will also be the state's aim to create the sense of common memory, as foundation for a unified polis" (182). In this sense, collective memory operates "to create common loci around which national identity is forged" (182). For much of the United States' history, the idea of a Black liberation, let alone a Black President has been linked with impossibility. Tavia Nyong'o elaborates, "As national surrogate and leader of the free world, the U.S. president traditionally stood for everything that blackness was not: commanding, legitimate, virtuous, and white" (3). Thus, the systemic operations of the National Heritage seek to erase black bodies as part of the United States' past and present, denying any progressive future towards dismantling racial hierarchies.

Sykes shows imbedded in the construction of nationhood, is that whiteness has become synonymous with proper citizen. Gilroy furthers, "The politics of 'race' in this country is fired by conceptions of national belonging and homogeneity which not only blur the distinction between 'race' and nation, but rely on that very ambiguity for their effect." (*Ain't No Black* 51). While Gilroy's analysis is specific to the racial politics of England, his words ring true in the United States' political and cultural attitudes that sync whiteness and patriot. The presence of bodies of color, according to Gilroy is an inherent threat. Black settlement is really an invasion and a threat to the close relationship with

whiteness and nationalism. However, Diana Taylor contends that performance generates opportunities for a deconstruction of scenario that uphold bodies of color as threats to the nation. By re-enacting the scenario in an artistic medium, performance challenges "the way history and culture are packaged, sold, and consumed within hegemonic structures" (67). Sykes' keynote follows this repackaging of history as it directs its attention not just at the administration or even the press corps, but rather reveals and ridicules larger cultural scripts that insist nationhood is inherently white and male. In doing so, she interrogates and dismantles historical narratives that disallow individual and cultural agency of marginalized people—particularly Black American female bodies. Both Sykes' physical presence as a Black, openly lesbian woman at the dinner and her evocation of Truth dislocate this inherent credibility of white males as holders of historical and present day authority.

Correspondents' Dinner

The yearly White House Correspondents' Association Dinner began in 1920 to honor and celebrate efforts of the press who cover the White House news. Calvin Coolidge was the first president to attend the dinner in 1924. The early years of the dinner included a variety of entertainment, such as song and dance between courses, short skits, and an after dinner show with a number of celebrity performers.[16] During World War II, the dinner instigated controversy as a site of decadence and merriment in a solemn national time. An article in the *Charlotte Observer* reported that guests "ate

[16] See Condon, George. "Unfounded Leaks to Modern WHCA." *WHCA: White House Correspondents' Association.* White House Correspondents' Association, n.d. Web. 8 May 2011.

unrationed duck and traded off-the-record political wisecracks" and "President Roosevelt, attending the only party outside the White House that he allows himself in wartime, sang loud when the entertainers called for audience participation, and laughed louder at some of the fourth term jokes which flew thick all evening."[17] According to the White House Correspondents' Association website, although women were always a part of the WHCA, the annual dinner only allowed men until 1962. That changed when, at the prodding of Helen Thomas of UPI, President John F. Kennedy said he would not attend the dinner unless the ban on women was dropped. It is no doubt that during segregation and before the Civil Rights Movement people of color were excluded from dinner. Thus, we see a history of the event built on exclusivity.

By the time of the Nixon administration, the dinner replaced the variety show format of the evening, and began to invite a keynote speaker, usually a comedian. The President gives the opening remarks, which take the form of a comedic public address in which the president makes fun of himself and his administration. For example, in 2006, George Bush gave a speech alongside a President Bush look alike, who articulated Bush's inner thoughts such as "Here I am at another one of these dang press dinners. Coulda been home asleep…"[18] Each year, the Dinner is broadcasted on a cable news channel, most frequently C-Span. The evening after, political blogs, culture sections of newspapers, and entertainment news are often abuzz with attendees of the dinner, who wore what, and what, if any, jokes during the evening, stirred controversy. *The New York*

[17] Ibid
[18] "See, 62nd Annual White House Correspondents' Dinner." C-Span. 29 Apr. 2006. Television.

Times called the 2009 Dinner "nerd-prom," which often attracts "something of an unlikely crew" of both journalists as well as actors, socialites and artists.

Dressed in a conservative, tailored black pantsuit, chandelier earrings, and high heels, Sykes confidently walks from the end of the head table onstage to the podium that faces the ballroom of White House reporters, celebrities and politicians to begin her address. She briefly smiles at President Obama, steps up to the stand where two microphones sit. In a low and slow tone, Sykes sighs, "Ugh." It is a sound of relief, of relaxation, and of confidence. Apart from her usual higher pitched voice and furrowed brow standard in much of Sykes' comedy routines, she continues with a "Thank you, thank you. This is truly an honor. To be here." The audience applauds loudly. She eases in, "I keep getting asked the same question. Are you nervous? Are you nervous? I said, 'With this administration, what is there to be nervous about?' You know, if I do a good job, I get great press. If I screw it up royally, Tim Geithner gives me a bonus!" She and the audience chuckle together. Sykes refers to the 2009 American International Group bonus payments controversy and bank bailout in a direct, albeit nonthreatening way. Sykes places herself inside the joke, making the insult to former Treasury Secretary in a pointed but not shocking or aggressive manner, and not directly attacking Geithner's character. This joke exemplifies the tone of much of the comedy performed at a typical dinner. However, as Sykes' fifteen-minute performance continues, and as she slips into her comedic persona, the material gradually becomes more confrontational.

She begins her speech by thanking necessary folks and making jokes about President Obama and Joe Biden—addressing Obama's likeability and his basketball

hobby, and Joe Biden's tendency to be an unpredictable speaker. As Sykes moves on to speak about the First Lady, she is flattering. Sykes points out how beautiful Michelle Obama looks in a sleeveless bright pink dress and large necklace. Mrs. Obama does not break eye contact with Sykes, laughing at each of her jokes and even verbally responding to her. Sykes directs her attention back and forth between the First Lady and the larger audience, but in a moment of seriousness, Sykes lowers her tone and gestures palm up towards the First Lady: "I have to say, to the First Lady, kudos to you for unveiling the bust of Sojourner Truth in the White House." Mrs. Obama closes her eyes and nods. The audience applauds and Sykes does as well with an affirming, "yes." Then, as if to suggest the following request is just between she and the First Lady. Sykes looks directly at Mrs. Obama and asks the "question:" "But can you do me a favor and please make sure it's nailed down real well?" She drops her tone again, pursing her lips, "Cause, uh, cause you know when the next white guy comes in they gonna move it to the kitchen."

This is the moment in Sykes' performance in which she demonstrates her incisive style of comedy. She is not agitated, but certainly becomes more aggressive in her performance. This joke motions towards freedom not because it simply points out how racial politics in the U.S. operate in both the past and present, but it calls for action. To "nail down" the legacy of both Truth and the Obamas dislocates our National Heritage from synonymous with whiteness to an acknowledgement of Black people's contributions and power in our culture. And while, as Jacqui Alexander contends, "If hegemony works as spectacle, but more importantly as a set of practices that come to assume meaning in people's everyday lives, that is the ways in which ordinary people do

the work of the state and the work of war; then all spaces carry the potential for corruptibility" (6). The joke-teller manipulates the everyday operations of hegemony to not just show its potential for corruptibility, but to actually corrupt. She employs the stage, a space rife with histories of hegemonic practices, to bring forth racist practices within U.S. public policy (the White House) and domesticity (the kitchen).

In C-Span's broadcast of the Dinner, the camera stays on Mrs. Obama for the duration of this particular joke. As Sykes' thanks her for revealing the bust we hear the audience's applause and Mrs. Obama nods with pride. When Sykes' asks her to "nail down" the bust "real well" the audience lightly laughs. Mrs. Obama looks down, her shoulders rhythmically shaking and mouths, "Oh my god." She gazes up with her head still low, one eye towards Sykes and smiles widely. Sykes responds with a chuckle as well. The audience is relatively quiet at this point. The aftershock of the joke becomes an intimate moment between performer and audience member. The larger audience bares witness to the women's understanding of Black female marginalization in the U.S. By bearing witness, in either laughing or seeing Mrs. Obama and Sykes' knowing laughter we move away from state-sponsored repression of Black bodies and voices.

Sykes manipulates an important interplay between past/present and public/private. While the "success" of a joke is wrapped up a bond between a larger audience and performer through the vocal response of laughter, Sykes aims the punchline of the joke specifically at Mrs. Obama. Though a public critique of a moment of knowing laughter and intimacy between two women among a crowd of folks who, for the most part, have little understanding of the women's standpoints.

Crossing the Line

Comedy as both a genre and performative act consistently teeters on and crosses over boundaries of acceptability. Comedians build their careers by pushing what is appropriate, laughable, or even speakable within a specific context. The morning following the White House Correspondents' Dinner, mainstream media was abuzz with the question of whether or not Wanda Sykes had "gone too far" in that evening's performance.[19] While Sykes is known for her blunt and unapologetic material, she is not a "shock" comedian, like Sarah Silverman's racist comedic persona or Mo'Nique's sexually explicit jokes. The White House Correspondents' Association indeed set a precedent for choosing Sykes as the first out lesbian Black female keynote of the dinner. At the same time, however, she was not a particularly risky choice. Sykes' material indeed has a liberal stance, but she is not an unpredictable performer. For example, two years earlier Stephen Colbert stood in Sykes' place and used his time onstage to mercilessly roast President Bush.[20]

The question of whether or not Sykes had crossed lines of appropriate performance material stemmed from a particular joke made towards the end of the Correspondents' dinner address. At this point, twelve minutes into Sykes' eighteen-minute performance, the crowd has "warmed up" considerably. She has finished the simultaneous mockery and applause of the Obama administration, and, as is customary, moves on to make fun of individual political figures who, at the time of the dinner, have

[19] See http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,519872,00.html, http://www.examiner.com/article/did-wanda-sykes-just-go-too-far, http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2009/05/wanda-sykes-jok/
[20] http://politicalhumor.about.com/od/stephencolbert/a/colbertbush_2.htm

been making headlines. She names each figure one by one and then begins to "roast" them. The second person she addressed in this portion of the address was Rush Limbaugh, who had early that year stated on his radio show that he hopes the Obama administration fails.

"Rush Limbaugh, one of your big critics, boy — Rush Limbaugh said he hopes this administration fails. So you're saying, 'I hope America fails.' You're like, 'I don't care about people losing their homes, their jobs or our soldiers in Iraq.' He just wants our country to fail." The camera pans wide to show Sykes at the podium. She is steady, but speaking quickly, raising her left hand in exasperation. The tone of her voice becomes low and pointed. She seems serious as she continues: "To me, that's treason. He's not saying anything differently than what Osama bin Laden is saying." The audience is silent. The head table is stone-faced. Tension is clearly mounting as Sykes reaches the climax of the joke. She looks directly at Mr. Obama and suggests, "You know you might want to look into this, sir, because I think Rush Limbaugh was the 20th hijacker but he was just so strung out on Oxycontin, he missed his flight." The President laughs and shakes his head, taking a sip of water, seemingly to cover up his enjoyment. The camera quickly cuts to the audience who has exploded in a mix of laughter and boos. Some are shaking their heads seriously, scolding the joke. Others are howling with laughter. Most, however, look around as if to gauge each other's reactions. Sykes remains confident and convicted, but eases the tension with an aside: "Too much? You're laughing inside, I know you're laughing." The joke is not over, however. She finishes in a low town, as if speaking to herself: "Rush Limbaugh — I hope the country fails. I hope his kidneys fail,

how about that? He needs a water boarding, that's what he needs."

This series of jokes affirm Sykes' vocally progressive liberal politics, as well as her frank and sometimes jagged sense of humor. Sykes' body in this particular venue and at this particular political moment mark her as a rebel—violent imagery such as waterboarding and Limbaugh's failing kidneys might be "too far" not because of the content of the joke, but because Sykes fearlessly deploys these images to "crack up" the assumed power and credibility of conservative white male political figures. Black feminist rhetoric rests on anti-patriarchal strategies. The joke emerges as a performative device that not only imagines a future of shifting hierarchies, but also confronts Black feminist frustrations against figures such as Limbaugh. Sykes positions Limbaugh as a representative of patriarchy and herself as Black feminist dissenter. Albeit satirically, Sykes stages herself within a scenario that points out historically prevalent white anxieties about Black female vocality, and also demands that her audience see those who hold political power (specifically, wealthy white males such as Limbaugh) as the possible enemy.

The mixed reaction of the audience also signals dislocation. While laughter is often a tool that unifies an audience, this instance showed the divisive nature of humor. Those who applauded, chuckled or even burst into laughter confirm their appreciation of Sykes, while those that booed signaled a disdain for the joke's material. The "boos" scold her excess, but the laughter affirms the power Sykes holds. Diane Davis shows how comedy refutes the status quo and reveals it to be not just dysfunctional, but also laughable. "Comedy alone challenges what Nitzche calls the 'force of gravity,' the

tyranny of meaning, because it doesn't take faith in the Truth (the negative) seriously anymore" (63). Sykes suggests not that Limbaugh was actually involved in the 9/11 attacks, but that his rhetoric does a kind of violence on marginalized bodies in our country. Saying that Limbaugh was "strung out" on Oxycontin not only attempts to crush his credibility and influence, but also insinuates that a person must be on drugs to believe what he believes. Those in the audience who agree with Sykes willingly dislocate Limbaugh's power by physically and emotionally embracing a "free flowing (excessive) dis/order." This is indeed a motion towards freedom from the status quo. Their laughter says, as Davis contends, "…'yes! To the eternal comedy of existence by simulating it, exploding with it" (63).

The positive response of laughter is an engagement with Sykes, but also an awakening. The physical and vocal act of laughter shows a knowing, a communal agreement. Further, the moment of explosive laughter, of going, perhaps, "too far" is in and of itself a meaning making process. Going "too far" would indicate that Sykes knowingly engaged in "both a momentary line of flight from the debilitating dis-ease of humanism and reason and also a joyful and explosive momentary metamorphosis" (Davis 63). Her comedic performance works to both name boundaries that keep certain people in the U.S. silent, but purposefully breaks those boundaries to make new times and places room for revolutionary and quare performance and action.

LETTING IT ALL HANG OUT: FUTURITY AND EMBODIED PRACTICE

At the crux of this dissertation, I seek to understand the ways in which humor can operate as embodied theorizing. What might comedy procure to articulate the

complexities of being Black, female, queer and/or working class? And how do these intricate and intertwined identities show up for each of the comics I am examining? While identity politics has been critiqued as passé in academic literature, I contend that it still remains complex and important work among Black feminist performers. Specifically because, as bell hooks illuminates, "Theorizing black experience in the United States is a difficult task. Socialized within white supremacist educational systems and by a racist mass media, many black people are convinced that our lives are not complex, and therefore unworthy of sophisticated critical analysis and reflection" (1992 2). What performance allows for, however, is a proclamation of the self in relation to and/or against dominant culture. Moreover, comedic performance, as I articulated in the introduction of this dissertation operates as an important vernacular rhetoric whereby the multiplicities of Black experience and identities in the U.S. are placed center stage.

Black feminists in the United States have historically and continue to articulate the ways in which gender and race are inextricably linked and tied to other social structures such as class, ethnicity and sexuality. Intersecting oppressions shape the perspectives of Black women in the United States in ways that complicate and contest many Western White feminist standpoints. Kimberlé Crenshaw (2000) emphasizes the importance of recognizing intersectionality as a distinctive experience of those coming from multiple oppressed groups.[21] Black feminists such as The Combahee River

[21]For more on intersectionality, see Crenshaw's "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." I also use the term co-constitutionality (which Crenshaw does not in her article) to reflect and expand upon Crenshaw's work. Co-constitutional, here is meant to state that identity markers always and already intertwine, while some have critiqued intersectional to mean that oppressions only meet at certain points in

Collective proclaimed that they are in a unique position to construct a social movement that integrates elimination of classist, sexist, racist, and heterosexist institutions. "We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual or class privilege to rely upon nor do we have the minimal access to resources of power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have" (67). These intersections, as Collins would explain, "stimulate a distinctive black feminist consciousness concerning that material reality" (184). This distinctive vantage point creates oppositional knowledge, which according to Collins would ideally foster "the group's self-definition and self-determination" (*Fighting Words* 279).

These key figures in Black feminist scholarship all pronounce how Black women hold multiple and often times marginal identities, but that these very standpoints are imperative to both self-expression and self-determination. As Audre Lorde contends, imbued in movement towards equality and freedom is the ability to declare oneself as subject. "For Black women […] it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others […] The development of the self-defined Black woman, ready to explore and pursue our power and interests within our communities is a vital component for Black liberation" (46). Sykes' humor, as I demonstrate throughout this section, has developed throughout her career to vocalize an ever-expanding Black feminist lens.

Sykes' instance on integration of identity markers peaks during this performance

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time. I use both terms as they both apply to Black feminist theorizations of how identities shape our everyday lives, histories, and culture.

when she addresses her experiences of getting older. At the time of this special, she was forty-five years old. Without shame or self-deprecating tones, she marks her body as changing, or as she calls it "relaxing" once she passed the "40 mark." With one hand on her belly, Sykes rubs her mid-section in back and forth strokes and says to the audience, "Like this area right here? I named this is Esther, right here. *Esther Roll*. Esther is a beast! Loves bread and alcohol." While seemingly compartmentalizing herself into discrete body parts, Sykes uses this particular area, her stomach as a somatic symbol of rebellion. Esther takes over Sykes' whole self—unapologetically taking up space as a middle aged, Black, out lesbian. Despite attempts at containment, "Esther" is unruly especially in public. When Sykes appeared on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno in 2008, as she told the audience, she put on control top underwear. "I was like, Esther I gotta put you in the Spanx." To which Esther" replies, "I hate Spanx! Don't put me in the Spanx! I wanna be on TV!" Sykes makes her voice gruff and grumbly. As Esther, she is loud and mean—with no understanding of "proper" behavior linked white to feminine propriety. Esther shakes her head and hunches her shoulders. Esther, like laugher, bursts through and forth despite attempts at stifling or minimizing her. As Sykes builds her story about the tonight show, she recalls how difficult it was to place her body in a thinner state and still feel comfortable.

> I put Esther in the Spanx and she's just fightin' me. She's like, "Ooooo, eeeee, ooohh you're killin me! Oh this hurts! Oh I want some cheese cake!" So I got Esther in the Spanx right. And I'm sittin, you know, on *The Tonight Show*. Now things are going great. But all of a sudden in the middle of the interview, I feel something rolling down. And I could just hear, "Ooohhh. Ahhhh." Esther is climbing out of the Spanx! I looked down, and there's Esther! [Esther says,]"Hey Jay!"

Sykes covers her forehead with her hand and looks down at her belly as she is shaking her head. She quietly mumbles, “Fuck you Esther.” She then dramatically stretches out her arms a whispers loudly, “White People are looking at you!” Her jacket is unbuttoned and she slowly paces from left to right. Moving back the present moment, she is unembarrassed. As the joke dies down, Sykes also laughs with the audience. Suddenly there is no separation between her psyche and her stomach. She is easy, content. As Sykes’ body ages and moves forward in time, she does not resist it, but rather rests in it.

Black feminist comedic performances, at their core, acknowledge, affirm and privilege Black women as historical, political and social agents. Wanda Sykes’ and the other performers I examine in this dissertation employ performance as a vital tool to subvert and rewrite dominant marginalization of Black women in the United States. Their staging practices are tied to traditions of Black feminist theory, asserting that the voice and body on stage are integral to ending all forms of oppression. These aesthetic choices work towards a more accurate understanding of privilege and oppressions. More importantly, Black feminist humor demands audiences reflect on and/or to intervene in their own worlds—proving what is thinkable on stage and in U.S. culture need not be dictated by white/patriarchal hegemony. These works recollect, but also offer up models for social change and justice long after laughter has faded.

CHAPTER THREE: Laughter and/in the Archives

A 1951 picture taken by famed photographer Gordon Anderson shows a candid moment of comedienne Jackie "Moms" Mabley outside the back door of the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. Apollo manager William Spayne stands at the top of three steps leading into the theatre. He gazes just beyond the camera. Mabley and an anonymous stagehand stand at the bottom of the steps. The stagehand holds what looks to be programs for the show in one hand and is reaching into his pocket with the other. He is dressed in a black suit and stares thoughtfully at the camera. Although the three figures are close together, Mabley is the focal point of this photograph. Dressed in monochromatic light (perhaps white) clothing, she is striking in her stylish mix of feminine and masculine attire. On her short, stocky frame, she sports checkered capris slacks, a short-sleeved button-up shirt, and a pocket square. She looks casual, but well tailored and handsome. For accessories, she wears a slightly brimmed sun hat, a thin watch and a small woven basket as her purse. She stands with her hands together, wrapped around something—possibly a pack of cigarettes. Even through her cat-eyed sunglasses she seems to glare at the camera. Her eyebrows are raised above the dark frames around her eyes; her lips are slightly parted and pursed as if speaking directly to Gordon. This rare image of Mabley—offstage, backstage and outside the theatre where she performed more than any other single female artist, depicts the comedienne fully independent of her performance persona, "Moms." While Moms was a grandmother to "all her children," Mabley stands out in this photo as fiercely independent, non-maternal

and not at all compliant to performances of heterosexual femininity.

The feature story of the January 3, 1974 issue *Jet* magazine tells a much different story and, especially in conjunction with the Apollo photograph, highlights broad historiographical dilemmas regarding the life and career of Jackie "Moms" Mabley. The article, "Moms Mabley Raps About Old Women, Young Love," stages Mabley as sweet, feminine and passive. In the cover photo, she sits in a shimmering light pink silk robe. She dons a party hat and holds up a glass of champagne ringing in the New Year—a wide, warm smile on her face. Behind her is her "blind date" for New Year's Day, a young handsome man named Norris Sutton. He is tall, lean and wears a brown-checkered leisure suit. The article depicts the couple on their first date at Mabley's house. The interviewer, M. Cordell Thompson, refers to Mabley only as Moms and explains that she "initially acted like any woman (young or old) on a blind date, coy and withdrawn, but after several hours, *Jet* had a good interview and Moms was offering the young Sutton a job as her chauffeur…" (61). When Thompson asked Moms to share any relationship advice for *Jet's* younger readers she stated, "The best time is now when you can go out with who you want, love who you want and as many as you want" (62). The "date" ends with Mabley receiving "a hearty kiss" on the cheek from Sutton. Despite her words advocating for non-heteronormative and/or non-monogamous sexual and romantic expression, this article both conflates Mabley with her comedic persona and assumes a heterosexual desire that Mabley subtly rejects throughout the interview.

The disconnections between these two items are not just spatial and temporal tensions. Even while the *Jet* article was written after the candid photograph at the Apollo

Theatre, the article is a tangible example of the inaccurate ways Mabley has been remembered. Mainly, that there are pervasive fractures between how defiant and radical Mabley's work and personal life was, and how both popular culture outlets (like *Jet* and *Ebony*) and scholars have chosen to record her.[22] I realize that histories and restorations are always incomplete and always subjective, but I am troubled by reductions of Mabley's artistic labor as that of "Mother," "revisionist Mammy" or simply a "frisky granny."[23] I thus wish to reconsider the work and legacy of Jackie "Moms" Mabley through three main arguments: (1) The current critical and scholarly texts on Mabley examine her work within heteronormative/heterosexist frameworks that deny not only Mabley's queer identity, but also the queer structuring of her work; (2) The lack of documentation of Mabley's career reflects historiographical deficiencies that relegate Black people, women and those of us who identify as queer to the silencing margins of our cultural past and present; and (3) Mabley's work as a standup comedienne solidifies important precedents for Black female comics in contemporary U.S. performance. Her work sets standards for the specific modalities of freedom and critical/cultural work unique to Black feminist humor.

At best, Mabley's archive is limited. At worst, it is an incomplete and distorted history that disserves us as performance scholars, queer people, people of color and

[22] I choose to include popular periodicals in this analysis because other than very few performance and Black studies scholars, the bulk of Mabley's story resides in magazines such as *Jet* and *Ebony*. Both of these sources have provided a large amount of information for this chapter and also offer broad examples of how Mabley has been written about over the course of her career.

[23] See Bambi Haggins' *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* pgs. 132-177, and Elsie Williams' *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley.*

theatre consumers. Moreover, it fails Jackie Mabley and glosses over the radical, risky and joyful work of Black feminist resistance during her sixty-year long career. Through comedy and the persona of a grandmotherly figure, Mabley was able to speak truths about white supremacy, gender inequity, class dynamics and sexuality in blunt, confrontational ways that would otherwise be dangerous for a Black American woman to do in the public sphere. For the purpose of this research, I engage with the resources available that have documented Mabley's work and life. This includes her twenty-eight LP's (almost all out of print), four films Mabley starred in (two of which, she plays herself), the one biography written about Mabley, a play by Alice Childress titled, *Moms*, and various periodicals. Primary documents from the New York Public Library and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture also shed new light on Mabley's work. Like Jayna Brown's study of early 20th century Black popular dance, I agree that the kinds of performances Moms created "resist containment but hold history" (15). While these ephemeral performances and personas Brown writes about, and Moms certainly also possessed, cannot be restored to wholeness, we must be held accountable to examine them with a critical eye towards how these performers operated within and around the constraints of silence, violence and oppression. Although Mabley will never be fully understood even with the most detailed archival resources, the *mis*remembering of her life and work is harmful insofar as it denies and disconnects us from significant stories of racial performance, feminism and Black American innovation in the United States.

I begin by providing a brief genealogy of Mabley's personal and professional life, although throughout the chapter I address and also question certain "facts" of Mabley's

herstory. I then propose an intervention in Mabley's archive by closely reading the recordings of Mabley's comedy in which I analyze three specific themes: (1) quare/queer performance, (2) Black feminist performance of temporality and nostalgia, and (3) re-membering Black feminist subjectivity and agency. Finally, I conclude with a call for strategies to continue the expansion of queer archives and critical analysis of Mabley's work.

MOMS IS BORN

Mabley's performance work is relegated to the margins of theatre history despite her mainstream success. Other than Elsie Williams's book *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition*, and the recently released HBO documentary *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley*, texts addressing Mabley do so in a single chapter, paragraph or even sentence. There are no "Mabley Papers" housed in an archive for safekeeping. The archive in traditional Western modes of documentation and evidence is, in Mabley's case, sparse. When authors do devote time to her, there is little attention given to performance analysis. However, many performance and humor scholars agree that Mabley's comedic style was one that contributed to oral traditions responding to and rebelling against racist ideologies ingrained in U.S. culture, politics and everyday life.

The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley chronicles Mabley's early life and family history through piecemeal archival work because, as Williams explains, "The personal biography of Mabley is not easy to come by, and though she on occasion revealed personal details during her performances, she characteristically avoided revealing

specific, intimate details of her life to interviewers" (43). Mabley was born between 1894 and 1897 in Brevard, North Carolina. This three-year gap in certainty exists because Mabley was never forthcoming about her age. Straddling the delicate balance between her stage persona and her personal life, Mabley played the part of Moms when reporters would ask her how old she was—avoiding answering the question directly.

Mabley began her performance career at the age of fourteen in order to help support her family. She left home and joined a minstrel troupe, performing all over the country. During the Great Depression, Mabley found work on the segregated Theatre Owners Booking Association (T.O.B.A.). "Despite the fact that black clubs and theatres experienced difficulty in staying open, [Mabley] performed wherever and whenever the opportunity presented itself at church socials, tent parties, in movie houses, and show theatres" (Williams 45). T.O.B.A. formed in 1907 and included a string of theatres that showcased Black performers across the South and Midwest. Audiences were largely Black, and the circuit provided steady work for Black performers. Women comediennes who worked for T.O.B.A. often performed as the foil or sidekick to male performers. However, Mabley developed "Moms" as a solo act and became one of the first and only women on the T.O.B.A. circuit to perform comedy without a male counterpart. While Mabley's success came after decades of performance, she developed her Moms character in her early twenties.

Dressed in an over-sized housecoat, floppy slippers and a short wig and hat, Mabley "schooled" her audiences through jokes and storytelling. Mabley stood out in the T.O.B.A. circuit as a solo performer, but was most certainly influenced and encouraged

by the kinds of performances that were most popular among Black audiences at the time. Christine Acham points out in *Revolution Televised* that T.O.B.A. "formed the basis of political comedy" for Black Americans in early twentieth century U.S.A. Communities of Black working-class performers and audiences found T.O.B.A. to be an outlet for cultural production and expression through working-class, non-assimilationist performances. These plays and performers established an "empire of comedy and pathos [...] for, by, and about black folks," and Mabley's work certainly falls in line with this kind of unapologetic and celebratory staging of Black experience and pride (Elam 139).

Mabley was an authority figure onstage—funniest and most affective as a solo performer because Moms knew best. Mabley credited the persona of Moms to her maternal grandmother, one of the only subjects about her personal life that she consistently infused into her comedic material. She often told her audiences that she was so "hip" because of her Grandmother.

> I never will forget my Granny. You know who hipped me? My great grandmother. Her name was Harriet Smith. She lived in Brevard, North Carolina. This is the *truth.* She lived to be 118 years old. And you wonder why Moms is hip today? Granny hip me. She say, I lie to the rest of 'em, but I'm not gonna let you be dumb, I'm gonna tell you the truth. And Granny tell me the truth about it. One day she sittin' out on the porch I said, 'Granny, how old does, uh, a woman have to be before she don't want no more boyfriend?' She was about 106 then. She said, 'I don't know, honey you gonna have to ask somebody older than me!' (*Best of Moms and Pigmeat, Volume 1* "Grandma")

This "truth" Mabley imparts to her audience is not one of historical fact. Rather she explains her affective ties to her past, and how these ties to her family shaped her blunt style of performance. The persona of Moms allowed Mabley to perform alone and outside the confines of sexually exploitative expectations placed upon many other Black

female performers of her time.

QUARE AS FOLK

The 1948 film, *Boarding House Blues* stars Mabley as Moms, the head of a Harlem boarding house that tended to vaudeville performers. Saving Moms from going bankrupt, the tenants raise money by putting on a special variety show. One of the opening scenes of the movie plays out the interesting and often blurred lines between Mabley's comedic persona as caretaker and flirt. A young woman rings the doorbell; above it is a small circular sign "Moms Boarding House." Cut to inside. Moms shouts, "Watch that pot on the stove for me, Freddy." She is wearing a light, fitted short-sleeved housedress. Her hair is short with a body wave. She answers the door. "Oh, come in," Moms says sweetly. The young woman walks into the foyer; she is slim and lovely with delicate features and light brown skin. Her voice is melodic in a soprano tone. Moms rests her hands on her hips, and then leans in clasping her hands together in front of her waist. "Are you in show business?" The woman lightly replies, "Yes," and Moms asks her to run a scale explaining that she just loves to hear people sing. The woman complies. As the woman gets higher in her scale Moms looks up to the sky and sways her body with the movement of the notes. Her eyes light up and her mouth opens widely. As the woman finishes, Moms stretches her arms out to full extension in delight and says, "Why honey, that was *beautiful.* What is your name?" When she brings the young woman to her room, Moms looks her up and down and says, "You know, you're a pretty girl. I think you look better with your hat *off*!" [Italics my emphasis].

Lesbian sexuality, as Teresa de Lauretis implies in "The Technology of Gender,"

occupies "the elsewhere of discourse, the here and now, the blind spots or the spaces of its representations" (25). The blind spots, in Mabley's case, show in the most precarious and uncertain pieces of evidence regarding her sexuality. Few academic texts make mention of Mabley's sexuality—only Moms as a frisky granny who would hit on younger men in her audience. But, as Jill Dolan explains, "The lesbian subject is in a position to denaturalize dominant codes by signifying an existence that belies the entire structure of heterosexual culture and its representations. [She rejects] culturally imposed gender ideology [based on] representation based on sexual difference and on compulsory heterosexuality" (116).

Reading Mabley's aesthetic as decidedly feminist and quare/queer addresses previous historiographical deficiencies in scholarship and collective cultural memory of her work, carving out important space for Black feminist and queer documentation. In *Silencing The Past,* anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot takes on projects of unearthing silenced histories. He asks, "If some events cannot be accepted even as they occur, how can they be assessed later? In other words, can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world within which these narratives take place? How does one write a history of the impossible?" (73). Mabley serves as an example of our "incapacity to express the unthinkable" as Trouillot would explain (97). For example, how might we read this scene in *Boarding House Blues* as not necessarily direct evidence of Mabley's sexual practices, but as a record of queer possibility? Queerness as a theoretical and performative practice defies boundaries and containment. Judith Butler describes queer theory as a mode of thought that opposes all claims to identity and rejects

"those who would regulate identities or establish epistemological claims of priority for those who make claims to certain identities" (7). Queer is an ever-expansive doing. It is a continuous and paradoxical fight for autonomy and connection—a struggle for individual recognition and communal assembly outside confines of social and legal constructs of "normal." How then, did Mabley's comedic persona allow for freer expression of sexual desire outside of white heteronormative structures and restrictions? And how do we document this?

To start, I am interested in documenting not only subjects who have been relegated to the margins of history, but reading their work in such a way that accounts for ephemeral, non-traditional modes of resistance. I agree with Ann Cvetkovich's assertion that queering the archive does not privilege conventional documents, but rather considers affective instances (i.e. performance, ephemeral events) as essential in documenting the lives of Others. This is rooted in the premise of Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings*—a queer archive must consist of affective, unconventional forms and spaces in order to articulate the experiences of a counterpublic. Queer archives commit to the articulation and maintenance of counterpublic spaces, places, participants and affective records (24). For Mabley, this includes paying close attention to performance of voice, sexuality and the ways in which she carefully manipulates time, place and space in her performance. While these elements of performance often defy documentation, they are imperative to analyze embodied politics of resistance. I read Mabley's crafting of her comedic persona, comedic material and the ways she navigated her celebrity with an eye towards queer possibility and to understand how, regardless of sexual practices, Mabley is an

important figure in Black American *and* queer/quare feminist performance history.

Quare studies theorizes how subjectivity and agency are discursively mediated to propel material bodies into action (Johnson 129). Reading quarely requires attention to how bodies perform their racialized and classed experience. Throughout this chapter, I still use both of these terms, queer and quare. As is the case with my analysis on Wanda Sykes, in Mabley's work, I believe that quareness is imbedded in queerness and vice versa. Queer thought and performance in this chapter are also quare as Mabley uses comedic performance as both a survival strategy and a generative "dialogical/dialectical relationship between theory and practice, the lettered and unlettered, ivory tower and front porch [and] is crucial to a joint and sustained critique of hegemonic systems of oppression" (Johnson 148). Mabley's persona, nuanced and grounded in Black American identity, and deeply imbued with a feminist sensibility is imbricated with quare political and aesthetic practices that privilege the body, history, sexual expression and vernacular articulation of racist/sexist/homophobic U.S. culture.

An authoritative, yet campy version of a grandmother, Mabley's comedic persona—especially given the historical context of her work—shows how excess can resist the invisibility placed upon queer bodies. Moms, in fact, defied invisibility. She entered a stage with her arms stretched out widely, her eyes would bug out comically at each of her punch lines, smacked her lips in an exaggerated way to show she was not wearing her false teeth, and she flaunted sexual desire and ease onstage. Mabley did not hide older age, but paraded it. She did not shrink herself, but took up as much space as possible, even occasionally laughing at her own jokes, slapping her leg loudly. Her quare

iteration of a grandmother character made space for a singular, mature, funny Black woman to express a brashness and bossiness not culturally "allowed" for Black women of her time. Quare performance allowed Mabley to simultaneously draw upon and resist performances of femininity and sexuality. While a grandmother might be selfless and sexless (fix this and look at race nation and media), Moms was self-possessed and, as I illustrate below, insistent on physical and sexual pleasure.

A large stage would have been equipped with a single microphone in the center. Perhaps Mabley's piano player, Luther, sits at his bench to stage left. Mabley strides out confidently as Moms, slightly hunched over in her large house slippers and floral housedress. Mabley told her audience during a performance recorded on her album *Moms Mabley at Geneva Conference* in 1962, that she buys her dresses in Hawaii. "I like em! For the summer, you know? I think this is what a woman ought to wear in the summertime." She continues, gently building her voice to a guttural exclamation: "So the air can circulate, you know? See them great big fat women in the summertime, with all them corsets and brassieres on. And get that air all hemmed up in there. And when it does come out, it's terrible!" While traditionally a Mumu or housedress is worn privately, to cover up the female body and to deemphasize the female form, Moms loves her Mumu for the very fact that her vagina feels a breeze. The female body is at once exposed, but hidden under the garment. Mock would argue, and I agree, that address of the mature female vagina in comedic performance by mature female comics is both unruly and productive. The audience sees the aging female body not as a site of decline, but as a site of possibility. The aging/aged body of Moms is in direct opposition to the desexualized

older Black female. The Mumu, a garment linked to leisure, but also working class fashion aesthetics, creates a kind of discrete freedom that Moms proudly declares. She is free from constraint. Mabley's anti-feminine yet sexually ignited grandmother is "breezy" and unabashedly comfortable, performing quare grandmother who refuses the dictation of age, modesty and physical restraint.

The quareness of Moms is also found in her movement among various contradictions. Mabley's work as Moms found possibility within seemingly disparate characteristics of subjecthood. She was quite mobile among aspects of the self such as hypersexual and nonsexual, aging and 'hip" or nonthreatening and dissenting. Mabley did not just straddle these lines, but invalidated the very boundaries that keep these traits separate and more importantly, gendered and racialized. Mabley's performance of a grandmother was funny to audiences because she not only spoke the kinds of truths characteristic of older family and community members, but also because she strayed from the many other roles that older women are expected to occupy in white, ageist, and heterosexist frameworks. Her corporeal-centered performances displayed the Black female body as a site and source of pleasure, anger, sexual desire and political resistance. Like the physical act of Black feminist laughter, Mabley's explosive persona destabilized and disobeyed a heterosexual imperative.

"Old Men Don't Do Nothing:" Sexuality and Subjecthood

Moms Mabley Live at Sing Sing is a 1970 recording of Mabley's performance at the Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York. Sing Sing is an all-male maximum and medium security prison known for the first execution by electrocution in

1891 and a 1983 uprising by prisoners. Mabley performed at Sing Sing annually around the Christmas holiday. However, this album is the only recording of her standup at the facility. What is particularly intriguing about this performance is that Mabley employs her Moms persona to invert objectification of the female body onstage to that of the elderly male body. Even with an all-male audience of convicted and potentially violent inmates, Mabley's humor resists compliance with patriarchal systems and certainly with heteronormative notions of female passivity. Mabley does not just use simple comedic inversion—reversing the butt of the joke onto the male body—for laughs, however. These jokes go a step further by exposing and quaring the very systems that put the female body on display for the purposes of heterosexual male consumption, objectification and violence.

The following excerpts from Mabley's performance at Sing Sing occur about halfway into her thirty minute set. The crowd yells loudly when the announcer introduces her as the "the funniest lady in the world." When she yells, "Hello Dollies!" the audience cheers more intensely. She does not need to "warm up" the crowd. Rather, every joke receives a warm laugh and even applause. This performance took place well into Mabley's career; she had built a reputation for shunning older men particularly by making sexual advances at young males in her audience. By the time she begins joking about her dislike for older men, the prisoners seem willing to accept anything she says as worthy of a laugh. She begins by saying, "That old man like to run me crazy, children. I don't want nothin' old but some old money. And I'm gonna use it to put an ad in the paper for some young man!" The crowd cheers, and even Mabley chuckles at her own

joke. She continues her set by describing the "one old man" she'd ever been with: "Old men don't know how to do nothin'. There ain't nothing for him to do but be old. My old man was sitting under a tree this summer and a leaf fell on him and knocked him out. He got up on the scale to weigh [himself] and the scale didn't move." Here, Mabley begins her attack on this man by rendering his body useless. She employs hyperbole to paint a comedic picture of the weakness of this male body.

Mabley affirms both the skillfulness of her own joke and the fact that she has control over her audience. When she says, "a leaf fell on him and knocked him out," we hear her low and slow laugh into the microphone as the rest of the audience howls. She continues:

> He looked at me and she said, 'Tell me, just tell me, where you gonna find another man like me?' I said, 'In the graveyard.' He said, 'What man can you find that will treat you like I do?' I said, 'Hitler.' He said, 'If I should die what would you do?' I said, 'Laugh.' He said, 'I ain't gonna argue with you. I'm going upstairs. I'm going to bed.' I said, 'You gonna have to wait a while cause I don't feel like carrying you up the steps.'

Mabley slowly builds this story up in speed and rhythm until the audience is howling with laughter. She skillfully moves back and forth between her own voice and the voice of the old man. Mabley's voice, still gruff and low in tone, is nonetheless strong and loud. It booms into the microphone and echoes at the end of her sentences. The old man's voice, however, is whispery, shaky. Mabley adds a mocking undertone to the old man character—a wink to the audience of this man's stupidity. In this quick back and forth exchange, she reverses normative gender coding through vocal affect. The old man is feminized through a weak vocality. He is quiet, while Mabley is louder and assertive.

Mabley's physically stronger voice fuels her contentions that her old man does not meet any of her sexual or emotional needs.

If Mabley was, in fact, a lesbian, her motivations behind her bits about dating younger men and despising older men could have certainly been employed to detract audiences from suspicion around her sexuality. These jokes also worked, however, because of the dissonance between Mabley's overt performance of heterosexual desire and the age of "Moms." While I believe both of these points are plausible, I am less interested in Mabley's motivation to perform heterosexuality as I am interested in what it might mean for a Black female and possibly queer body onstage to strategically objectify and emasculate a heterosexual male for an audience of all men. She quares heterosexuality as an act *and* as an identity marker. Jill Dolan explains in her analysis of Karen Finley's work, the lesbian performer onstage holds particular clout when she, as Dolan describes,

> […] refuses to participate in the rules of representation by objectifying herself. In performance, objectification implies an active male spectator who is invited to identify with the narrative's hero in search for the fulfillment of his desire. [The lesbian performer] does not offer herself as a passive object. She forces men to be passive in the face of her rage, and she desecrates herself and the object of their desire, thereby mocking their sexuality. Her refusal to play the game leaves the male spectator nowhere to place himself in relation to her performance. He can no longer maintain the position of the sexual subject who views the performer as sexual object (*Feminist Spectator* 67).

While Mabley's work is much different from Finley's, her performance at Sing Sing does indeed mock male heterosexual desire, physical strength and ability to take care of a female partner. The male spectators in this performance, even as they laugh, cannot identify with Mabley. If they fall into the category of older male, they are forced into the

role of useless partner. If they are younger, they become the object of Moms's desire. Mabley exposes, destabilizes and denaturalizes compulsory heterosexuality and "proper" performance of femininity for older Black female bodies.

Mabley continues with her disgust of older men in a campy musical number that parodies the song "You're Just Too Good to Be True." Mabley calls this song her "Old Man Opera." Employing the structure and melody of a famous love song, this queer performance practice of camp works "not only as a strategy of representation but also as a mode of enacting self against the pressures of the dominant culture's identity denying protocols" (Muñoz 120). The tune begins: *"You're just too old to be true/There's nothing weaker than you/I have to grab you and shake/ Just to keep you awake! There's nothing more I can do/you're just too far-gone to be true."* Mabley not only changes the words to the original song, but also shifts the role of narrator from passive to active. Andy Williams's original recording of the song, "*You're just too good to be true/Can't take my eyes off of you/You'd be like heaven to touch/I wanna hold you so much*," situates the narrator as distant from the object of desire, idealizing and wishing for them from afar. Mabley, however, places herself in the present moment with the old man, who according to the lyrics is physically passive and mentally incapable ("far gone"). The song continues:

> *You're just too weak to be true/I'm sorry I ever met you/Why don't you give me a break/ and just go jump in the lake? / I just can't put up with you/You're just too sad to be true/ My old man, there's nothing that he's weaker than/ If you want a sexy friend, you better not depend on my old man/ That old wreck/But what more can you expect. He can't hear and he can't see, he's just here to upset me/Talk about my old man*.

In this quare reiteration of the song, Mabley strategically essentializes the male body as disposable, mute and blind. Vocally, each time Mabley repeats "my old man," she draws out the vowels, so the listener hears "myyyyy ooooooooold maaaaaaan." Such an elongation of the phrase reiterates Mabley's frustration, her notes guttural and hoarse. The long held notes, as Meta DuEwa Jones purports in her analysis of Langston Hughes's public performance of poetry, "signifies a fierce, fearsome, can't-touch-me attitude that might also indicate a begrudging form of respect" ("Muse is Music" 54). Mabley both cannot and will not depend on the patriarchal figure, thus queering her subjecthood marking herself as a creator of her own gendered, racialized and sexual ideologies.

In contrast to Mabley's overt mocking of heteronormative coupling, some of her comedy sets contained slyly embedded one-liners that not only acknowledged the presence of gay people in everyday life, but also painted pictures of them as autonomous, sexual and empowered bodies. From my research, Mabley never speaks of a lesbian subject onstage, but does speak of gay men. Lesbians remain invisible, unheard and unseen, but given the suspicion of Mabley's sexuality, the implications of her addressing male homosexuality pre-Stonewall are abundant still. Mabley's album, *Out on a Limb* was recorded in 1964. In an almost awkward, but abrupt transition, Mabley tells a quick joke about a group of gay men (presumably urban) going on vacation. "Speaking of riding. Some of the gay boys hired a bus to go out for an outing last summer. Went down to get it and say, 'You can take the bus and leave the drivers to us!'"

While the joke initially plays out a sex pun, ("drivers" is a slang term that describes a homosexual male aggressor, or the "top"), the content and tone of this bit

celebrates queer community and worldmaking amidst the risk of homophobic violence and/or isolation.[24] There is a distinct poetic rhythm in the way Mabley delivers this joke—a kind of quick, melodic two-stepping. Her voice itself is the bus driving out of town. She speaks quickly, building speed and volume towards the punch line. Her voice almost squeals when she exclaims, "Leave the drivers to us!" She punctuates "*drivers"* and builds to a loud, elongated "us!" She ends with a hearty laugh, not at the men, but as them. Mabley paints a picture of the men rushing out of town with a sense of glee—leaving the city to cut loose. The quotidian event of a vacation becomes an important act of defiance and queer worldmaking when describing the men's celebratory mood and being "out" in the public. The subjects of the joke demonstrate how queer people have historically created oppositional spaces, "slicing into the facade of the real that is the majoritarian public sphere" (Muñoz 196). Mabley thus sets a scene in which Moms does not simply make fun of the queer male subjects, but shows them as people insistent on the liberatory possibilities of queer communities and pleasure.

In Mabley's jokes, queers were not only creating their own communities, but also active participants and disrupters of broader communities as well. Her most detailed and involved set up for a joke about gay subjecthood and sexuality takes place in a church. In the 1961 album, *Live at the Playboy Club*, Mabley begins the following joke in a matter-of-fact tone. Her voice is low, but commanding:

[24] See Jose Muñoz's *Disidentifications* for more on queer worldmaking. He conceptualizes it as a performative process whereby a queer subject "forms and de-forms" new processes of being outside of majoritarian culture. This is about transformation and liberation.

> One day a little fairy walks into the back of a church and sits down in the back, and when the pastor passed the plate around, he put a hundred dollar bill in it. So when it got around the room he said, 'Who put this in here? Oh, we thank you so much for that hundred dollar bill that you put in the plate, and to show you our appreciation, the choir wants to give you any hymn that you want.'

Mabley's voice gets higher—evoking a stereotypical lisp of a gay male as she hits the punch line: "The little fairy said, 'I want him, and him and *you*!'" [Italics my emphasis].

Moms tells another "fairy joke" on the *Live at Playboy* album. This short, punchy line conjures a similar kind of wordplay and innuendo. "A man was walking down 42nd Street in New York. Met another man and said, 'Excuse me can you tell me where the 42nd street ferry is?' He said, 'Speaking darling.'" While quite risqué for the time (1961), these jokes are no more sexually explicit than Mabley's advances towards younger men in her audiences. There are similarities here between Mabley's "fairy" jokes and how Moms performed heterosexual desire: she is unapologetic and joyful. The subjects of the "fairy jokes" and Moms perform sexuality from the status of minority without fear of discipline from the state or their communities. While Black women and openly gay people in the United States have historically been legally and culturally relegated to the margins, criminalized and often quite violently silenced and stripped of sexual expression, Mabley plays Moms as a kind of queer ally, who embraces and produces non-heteronormative performances of pleasure and joyful dissent. The men in her jokes are not objects of others' laughter, but express queer humor to unassuming heterosexual audiences. The gay men become visible through their own volition—teasing the straight people around them. Going to church, vacationing and taking public transportation are all routine instances of everyday life in which queer subjects are often isolated or invisible.

However, Mabley places these subjects firmly in the realm of self-determination and fearless self-declaration. Mabley's narrative of gay men reclaims queer sexuality, visibility and strength through ordinary affects and erotic expression.

MABLEY'S POLITICS OF SILENCE

In a tense scene in Alice Childress's 1987 play *Moms,* Mabley's piano player, Luther; her assistant, Adele; and Moms engage in a game of poker. This scene comes after Luther and Mabley have reconciled after a fight, and Mabley has re-hired Luther. He is on shaky ground with Mabley, who, as characterized by Childress, is difficult and arrogant—easily disposing anyone who displeases her. Mabley, Adele and Luther sit around a table somewhat tensely. In this scene and the rest of the play, Adele and Luther are careful not to upset their boss. During the game, Luther, who is trying to record Mabley's life story on a tape recorder, carefully asks her personal questions, which Moms continues to evades— both literally and figuratively keeping her cards close to her chest.

> LUTHER. I have a question about sex...but let's skip it. (He covers his notes as Moms tries to peep.)
>
> ADELE. (Sorting poker chips) That's right. Enough is enough.
>
> MOMS. Ask it. Well?

Adele, the interlocutor between Luther and Moms, but also Mabley's caretaker and protector in the play, tries to remain casual as she sorts poker chips and commands Mabley to "drop it."

> MOMS. Don't hide nothin' from me...in my house. Speak.

LUTHER. They say you...you are gay...I mean Lesbian.

MOMS. Boy you got heart.

Luther becomes so flustered that he breaks the fourth wall and turns to the audience. They become his confidants, the receptacle to his embarrassment as he bumbles, "I knew I shouldn't-a said it…" He "tangles himself further" as he comes back to the poker table and stutters, "It is a contradiction...I mean her having four children AND being a Lesbian...Oh, damn. I mean...IF you are, or ever WERE Gay, ...(lamely) ...you couldn't have been very... dedicated. It... it's alright to be anything ...you want, really...I guess." Adele tries to calm Luther down, but Mabley stops them both. She turns on the tape recorder and proclaims plainly: "As far as the sex subject is concerned...I'll say it once, and put it this way...Like the good Lord, Moms Mabley tried to love EVERYBODY." She turns off the tape recorder and commands, 'Now, shuffle the cards'" (30).

This fictionalized account of Mabley publicly explaining and recording her sexuality to Luther sways from how Mabley actually discussed her love life to reporters. While never hinting as strongly as "Moms loves EVERYBODY," Mabley still kept her cards close in regards to her romantic life. A 1974 article in *Ebony* reported, "Jackie Mabley's romantic past is something she isn't very talkative about. There is, however, a ring of bittersweet truth, the kind that comes from experience, in her jokes and observations on love and men" ("She" 87). The article, like many other profiles about Mabley during her lifetime, conflates Mabley as artist and Moms as comedic persona, assuming Moms speaks as and for Mabley's personal experience. Mabley's performance

of heterosexuality and femininity onstage, as discussed in the introduction of this chapter, did not always coincide with her performance of self in everyday life. Small pieces of evidence such as a 1962 *Ebony* magazine profile of Mabley titled "Behind the Laughter of Jackie Moms Mabley" reported that when not in costume as Moms, "Mabley is a striking figure in tailored slacks, matching sports shirt, Italian shoes, horn-rimmed glasses—and teeth. She looks utterly sophisticated" (89). Records of Mabley posthumously that address her sexuality are contradictory and vague. Wikipedia casually mentions Moms Mabley was a lesbian. Keith Stern's short entry on Mabley in his book *Queers in History: The Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Historical Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, and Transgenders* purports that Mabley came out as a lesbian at the age of seventy-nine, but gives no reference to evidence (295). A blog dedicated to gay celebrities lauded Moms as one of their own, but said she was never "out."

Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explains that for Black women in the United States, silence has historically been employed to retain selfhood amidst hegemonic discourse of Black female sexuality which, at once hypersexualized and dismissed, rendered Black bodies invisible. Evelynn Hammonds also explains this phenomenon in her essay "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality" that this politic of silence "emerged as a political strategy by black women reformers who hoped by their silence and by the promotion of proper Victorian morality to demonstrate the life of the image of the sexually immoral Black woman" (132). Expression of sexual desire may confirm mythologies of hypersexuality.

> The historical narrative begins with the production of the image of a pathologized black female "other" in the eighteenth century by European colonial elites and the new biological scientist. By the nineteenth century with the increasing exploitation and abuse of black women during and after slavery, U.S. black women reformers began to develop strategies to counter negative stereotypes of their sexuality and their use as a justification for rape, lynching, and other abuses of black women by whites. [...] By the early twentieth century black women reformers promoted silence about sexuality which, it could be argued, continues to the present (Hammonds 132).

Silence, then, can be a political strategy to resist negative stereotypes and allow Black women control over discourse about their bodies and sexualities.

Rather than be exposed as a so-called sexual deviant, Mabley's resistance to speaking about her love life could have been a critical strategy. This may not have been a conscious decision to hide or shame herself, but rather a kind of self-preservation that operated on two important levels: (1) Using the persona of Moms to maintain privacy as she grew more interesting to the public eye and (2) using the persona of Moms as a strategy that kept her within the framework of non threatening and respectable. I end this section with an open conclusion because I believe it is less important that Mabley was or was not a lesbian, but rather important that historians open discourses of queer possibilities—both in Mabley's biography and structuring of her performances. Reading Mabley's work as quare and expanding discourse on her personal life as one that was certainly anti-heteronormative expands and elicits attentiveness to the always and already present quare resistance in Black feminist performance and U.S. history.

"THE GOOD OLD DAYS"

Mabley was a creator of her own archive. That is, Mabley's performances critiqued and ridiculed the past in order to scrutinize cultural tendencies towards nostalgia

and history as a fixed set of facts. Mabley is decidedly in charge of telling her story. This proves that not only are there multiple ways to interpret and experience the past, but also that performance has the power to animate new temporalities. By temporality, I am using Elin Diamond's definition: "a shifting time-sense, a receptivity both to the contingency of the present and to mimetic figurations of what we might call historical experience" (142). I argue that Mabley claims temporality as something to be manipulated in her performance. In doing so, she complicates dominant narratives of the "good old days" and also re-animates herself as self-possessed agent rather than victim.

Mabley "cracks up" history in a famous performance at the Apollo in 1956 (recorded on *The Best of Moms Mabley and Pigmeat Vol. 1)* includes a well-known Mabley bit titled, "The Good Old Days." Like much of her other comedic material, Mabley weaves her jokes in and out of larger stories. This strategy allows her to stay true to the mother/grandmother persona. Her standup routines evoke a sense of domesticity—sitting down at the kitchen table listening to a family member talk about the past or give advice. More importantly, though, this structure enables Mabley to revise dominant narratives of nostalgia and but also, as exemplified below, critique and push back against victimization.

> Let me tell you about the good old days. You couldn't do nothing. And if you did, your daddy would knock your brain out. He hit my brother so much with a backhand, until his lips were out here. Looked like he put on a turtleneck sweater. Everything your parents pick for you to do. Who are you to love, who are you to go out with, who are you to marry. If Daddy said so that was it.

This excerpt demonstrates how Mabley's work was often grounded in what Bambi Haggins calls socially defiant "commonsense feminism" (149). Mabley decidedly

resists simple nostalgia and is instead frank about a childhood entrenched in patriarchy and violence. When she states, "Let me tell you about the good old days," we assume she may reminisce about simpler times. However, the narrative quickly becomes a critique of the domestic sphere and gender inequality. "Let *me* tell you about the good old days," allows Mabley proclaim her subjecthood. The past moves from universal to specific—this will be Mabley's story, rather than cultural romanticizations of the past. She becomes the weaver of details, rather than a passive bystander.

Mabley is strategic in switching between first and second person in this routine. When Mabley changes the subject of her monologue by saying, "you couldn't do nothing" instead of "I couldn't do nothing" when explaining the controlling nature of her household, Mabley not only distances herself from the experience, but demands her audience to put themselves in such a situation. While her matronly persona could potentially reify nostalgia and her female body as caretaker of the audience, she instead uses this character to "school" them in a non-threatening way. Additionally, after she remarks, "If Daddy said so, that was it," she seamlessly changes her narrative to first person when talking about her looks.

> I was nothing but a child. Fourteen going on fifteen. And just as cute as I want to be. Hair hanging down my back, see I'm half Indian. And the other half, the beauty parlor takes care of that. And this old, dead, puny, moldy man. I mean an old man. Santa Claus looked like his son. He was older than his mother. Even when his sister died, we went to her funeral. After the funeral the minister went over tapped him on the back, said, 'How old are you, Pops?' He said '91.' He [the minister] said, 'Ain't no need in you going home!'

Mabley employs humor to empower herself and revise an oppressive past. When Mabley describes herself as "just as cute as I want to be" she implies that not only was

she naturally pretty, but had control over her looks. Thus, even under the control of her father, she declared self-possession through something as seemingly simple as her hairstyle. Even though Mabley's bits were often fictionalized, she was, in fact, forced into marriage at the age of fourteen. In this recording Mabley, under the persona of Moms, has a voice in her own archive—she re-members it. Or, as Elin Diamond suggests, Mabley acts as "not only a solo woman performer in view, but a female body that [produces] new means of imbricating the psychic and the historical…" (113). The process of remembering is, like theatrical and everyday performance, both an ever-shifting and embodied practice. In other words, memory for an individual or public is dynamic, and one cannot instigate memory without attention to the body.

Deborah Paredez confirms this relationship when she states, "Both memory and performance defy traditional notions of temporality through simultaneously repeating and revising cultural scripts or scenarios" (*Selenidad* 8). Mabley's first person account of her husband refuses victimization. To call her husband dead, puny and moldy renders him useless. Additionally Mabley distances herself from her husband by never calling him such. She purposefully creates gaps in her narrative. Jumping from the beauty parlor to "this old man" allows Mabley to erase details of the marriage. She chooses to tell her story on her terms, or as Shane Vogel describes, a diva tactic of "phenomenological unfolding through space and time as she interfaces with a public, masculine and economic world" (13). Mabley literally stitches together a new narrative structure in which she possesses power (youth, beauty, self-determination) and her husband is weak and voiceless. Mabley's "Good Old Days" bit purposefully and playfully manipulates

time and power in this story. She thus queers temporality in which she employs comedic performance to not only gain, but also reclaim subjectivity. By constructing herself as narrator and defiant subject of the story, Mabley creates a dialectical image—she is separated from the violence described in the story and is instead the subversive joke-teller/survivor.

Comedy was Mabley's mode of communicating a very specific kind of civil rights rhetoric that addressed issues of location, mobility and safety for Black Americans. Mabley explicitly expressed the kind of violence and isolation experienced by non-white people in 1950s and 1960s. Once Mabley began performing on the Chitlin Circuit, she never again lived in the Southern U.S., and would frequently refer to the South as "that other country" or a "foreign country" as a way to distance herself from Southern culture and point out the ridiculousness of Jim Crow laws and racism. In a performance recorded on *The Best of Moms Mabley and Pigmeat Vol. 1*, Moms says to her audience quietly, as if leaning into them to share a secret, "I just got back from down there…you know." She clears her throat, perhaps waiting for a verbal or nonverbal response from the audience. When she says, "down there," her voice goes low and dips as she enunciates and elongates "there." "You know" implies that her audience is on her side—that they have experienced or are aware of Jim Crow and racial violence, and that they also see the South as backwards. "You know" bonds the audience to Mabley and places all of them in firm opposition to Jim Crow South. This kind of generalization and stereotypical views of one part of the country also harken to the ways in which white people have used indirect language to speak of the "dangers" of Black and urban neighborhoods. We are unsure

here if she is speaking as Moms or as Mabley. This purposeful conflation of the self and persona make this bit urgent and timely, but also allows Mabley to speak of serious topics, while joking as Moms. Mabley continues her story:

> I didn't want to go, but you know, my children are down there. [...] And I tried to pass, you know? For anything except what I am, you know? And some of my friends from Montana, my children out there, sent me a cowgirl outfit. So I wore that the whole time I was there. I wouldn't wear nothing but this cowgirl outfit. They were nice to me! I was surprised. They didn't treat me bad at all. In fact, they called me after Will Rogers's horse: Trigger! Everywhere I go, they say 'Hi Trigger!' At least I think that's what they said!

The genre of standup lends itself to interplay between fiction and nonfiction. Narratives are often told in the first-person. The comic places herself in the center of hyper-realistic and/or ridiculous situations. Mabley tells the cowgirl story as if it were fact, although the truths of the circumstances are less important than the function of the joke. Mabley is a protagonist in her own making. As a survival strategy, Mabley tows the line between resistance and a performance of ignorance. To a sympathetic audience, she can easily express why the South is a hostile place for her without much explanation. Black mobility in the 1960s required a constant self-monitoring. Jim Crow laws, alive and well "down there" meant that despite Mabley's success and class status, she would still have to defer to state-sponsored segregation and the ever-present threat of violence and harassment. In an effort to pass for "anything except what I am," Mabley creates the comedic "stunt" through performance of satire and irony. Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque* defines the "stunt" as something that may be more helpful to marginalized groups within risky and unsafe places "where strategy is not possible" (23). The stunt is a performative tactic in which the improvisational, forceful display of the self involves "a

reshaping of the entire woman/space configuration away from the inner/outer dichotomies of bodily and spatial representation" (26). Mabley's cowgirl outfit carries with it historical and cultural codes incongruous with Blackness and femininity, as the cowboy operates as a symbol for white masculinity and power. Although Mabley fails to pass as such through costume, she performs resistance through the dress of a flamboyant cowboy.

If Moms cannot be herself in a particular space, then she will, as the joke goes, be "anything but herself." However, with her costume, invisibility would be impossible for Moms. Thus, she makes herself hypervisible—faking stupidity or an inability to hear the violent word of the presumably white residents, while affirming the exact fears of Black folks in the Jim Crow South. Verbal harassment follows her, but Moms uses the act of the comedic stunt to ironically play up the stereotype of a happy, ignorant Black body as a way to invade the strict, divisive and white/heteronormative space of the South. This disruption of space and Black female propriety is a mode of queering time and place. This public performance, fictional or not, fractures and disseminates the rural South as a quiet, serene and even quaint space. Mabley once again loosens the knot of nostalgia that holds tight to a happier South.

Like her vocal impersonation of the gay men in her "fairy" jokes, Mabley manipulates the usual gravely low tone of Moms and replaces it with a higher, crisper stereotype of a Southern male. "Hi Trigger" comes out of Mabley's mouth in a slow drawl. The words themselves, while seemingly friendly and welcoming, are haunted by the word Mabley did not (or would not) hear. Additionally, the tone of this character is

mocking, perhaps trying to instigate confrontation. Carpio's study on Richard Pryor's imitation of white vocality asserts that vocal performance and Black resistance can work in tandem. She argues, “Black Americans have not only created their own stereotypes of white Americans—of ‘peckerwoods’ and ‘honkies’ —but have also directed their laughter at the stereotypes with which they have been represented, appropriating those images in order to diffuse the power of humiliation” (86). This kind of performance reveals “the nature of the stereotype itself, showing what it masks and suggests, and what people, across gender and race, have invested in it” (86). "Hi, Trigger," then, is an important moment in this bit insofar as it exposes the looming threat of white people against black females in the South, but also shows Mabley as a virtuosic performer who employed vocality as a strategic tool of resistance. In the telling of this fictional joke, Mabley renders white men stupid while thwarting stereotypes of Black cheerfulness—thereby inverting each group’s supposedly customary role.

Both Mabley’s “Old Man” and “Trigger” bits find freedom within constriction. She displaces domestic and public violence against Black female bodies—distorting tendencies to gloss over or silence the past. These jokes brilliantly place fictional plots in conjunction with very real painful parts of private and public life. Manipulating time and space in this sense, “bring[s] into the open difficult but significant features of American [racial and gendered politics] and culture” (Carpio 82). Beyond opening dialogue, Mabley re-performs selfhood and subjectivity within the fictional world of the joke, but also in front of a live audience, and beyond space and time, through the recording of these jokes.

Also, Mabley reforms narrative and structure of the "good old days," and instead focuses on radical truth telling by employing the structure of fairy tales, and folk songs. These were long, drawn out winding stories with smaller punch lines along the way, and that then ended with a larger laugh. In *Out on a Limb*, Mabley tells her quare version of the fairy tale, Cinderella, which she calls, “Cindyella.” Moms begins with the age old opening of a fairy tale: "Once upon a time in a little town way down South lived a little girl named Cindyella. She had long black hair, pretty brown eyes, pretty brown skin, well let’s face it: she was colored." Moms describes her protagonist as pretty, but ends the description with the blunt statement “she was colored,” which essentially means that no matter her looks, Cindyella is the exact opposite of the Disney princess. The princess can only be fully characterized as good and innocent through specific kinds of white femininity and ideals of beauty: long blond hair, blue eyes, and light skin.

As Moms continues the story, she includes the same elements of the Cinderella fairy tale—an evil stepmother and stepsisters and a ball in the community that Cindyella was not allowed to attend. Rather than the royal family, however, Mabley explains that the Klu Klux Klan hosted the dance. White supremacists, in this story, hold power in the community and also give certain bodies access to pleasure and leisure through invitation. Mabley continues the story, "One day the mean old woman and her ugly daughters got an invitation to a prom dance. Was the biggest dance of the season. That was the time that they usually picked Miss Klu Klux Klan." Satirically, Miss KKK is the highest honor of the town and Cindyella needed to transform herself in order to be able to go to the ball, and potentially win the title.

> Just ‘bout that time, a knock came on the door, and guess who it was? Her friend, Bobby Kennedy! He had two magic wands in his hand. The Constitution and the Civil Rights Bill. He said, ‘Little girl, why are you crying so hard?’ She said, ‘Because I want to go to the Prom Dance at the University of Mississippi because my boyfriend James goes to school there.’ One wave of the magic wand and her raggedy dress had turned into a beautiful white lace dress. On her pretty black hair she had a pretty blue ribbon. She looked down at her feet and her shoes had turned to pretty glass slippers. She went over to the mirror and to her surprise she had turned as white as snowy bleach. She said, ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall who’s the fairest of them all?’ The mirror said, ‘Snow White and don’t you forget it.’

Mabley queers the fairy tale here by casting Cindyella's godmother not as a maternal figure, but as liberal ideology in the form of Robert Kennedy, the Constitution and the Civil Rights Bill. Mabley performs a tricky kind of terrain here, characterizing the State as that which holds the power to emancipate Black women, while simultaneously showing the futility of assimilation. Even as Cindyella "turns white" the mirror reminds her bluntly that she is not and will never be the "fairest of them all."

Mabley's jokes and political rhetoric often alluded to figures like Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, Adam Clayton Powell and others as the same kind of magical fairy godmothers that appear in Cindyella. She lauded these figures as the liberators of people of color in the U.S. —expressing a structural approach to social change through liberal ideologies. Consciously or not, however, Mabley's revised fairy tales and blunt truths about racial and gender politics in the United States in ways that also aligned with radical Black feminist rhetoric and performance. The Cindyella story concludes in, predictably, a similar fashion to the fairy tale. The clock struck midnight, and Cindyella's dress turned to rags. However, the ending is not happy as Mabley builds to her punch line: "Everyone was gazin’ on the floor at Cindyella. The little colored girl dancing with

the president of the Klu Klux Klan. This story is to be continued. Her trial comes up next month!" The Cindyella story initially tells a hopeful story of the redemptive potential of the United States through the Civil Rights Bill, Constitution, and help from Bobby Kennedy, but white supremacy constantly reveals itself to be embedded in everyday life.

Mabley also told poetic stories and sang songs of violence, mobility and desire for freedom. In one rhyming bit on her album *Moms Mabley at the UN* (1960), Moms plainly states, "To tell you the truth I'm scared as a son of a gun/And baby I'm too old to run/So I ain't Alabamee bound/'Cause I'm not gonna let the Greyhound take me down there and the bloodhound take me back/You know Moms is too hip for that!" Recorded during a performance at the Uptown Theatre in Philadelphia five years after the murder of Emmett Till and four years before the passing of the Civil Rights Bill, Moms expresses the ever present specter of state sanctioned violence and trauma inflicted on Black bodies in the South. Another small, but powerful bit from the *UN* performance demonstrates the constant tension of imagining and striving for a more racially egalitarian U.S.: "I had a dream last night/I asked for my equal rights/Somebody said, Moms you're next/And there I stood with a rope around my neck." She begins to sing to the tune of Ray Charles's "Georgia." The piano accompanies her, and she belts loudly in a declarative tone, "*In Georgia, Georgia/No peace will I find/'Till I catch a plane up North/And put Georgia outta my mind*." The piano continues and she shouts into the microphone, "Ray Charles can have it! You hear me?"

Mabley uses joke telling as truth telling. The comedic performance gives way to an angry confrontation with the seemingly hopelessness of change. She gives over

Georgia (and arguably the entire South) to Ray Charles not out of fear, but exasperation. She refuses to identify with the original song as it romanticizes a woman who possesses the name of a state that upholds and perpetuates racist laws and cultural practices. Moms dreaming of her equal rights implies that they are imaginable and within reach. Moms also asserts herself as a mobile woman who will not concede to segregation and racism. She does not, however, paint the North as a place of respite. After all, in her dream, Moms already has a rope around her neck. Her performance is thus a stand-in for freedom that the state will not provide. Laughter, while elusive and subjective, nonetheless restores Mabley and the live audience to powerful people unwilling to be in an unsafe and unwelcoming space. Her performance allows for Mabley (as both Moms and herself) and the audience to assert themselves as agents of resistance.

"Just Doing Her Stuff:" The Archive and Its Failure, The Diva and her Transcendence

As I completed the first draft of this chapter, Whoopi Goldberg's documentary, *Whoopi Goldberg Presents: Moms Mabley* was released on the cable network, HBO. I was excited about the prospect of seeing a new piece of material that contributed to Mabley's archive and, as I hoped, revealed new items of evidence that reflected Mabley's skilled, radical and queer artistry. The documentary is overall entertaining and insightful. I was grateful that the film showcased the few television appearances of Mabley as Moms, including her first set on the *Smothers Brothers' Comedy Hour* and a television special with Sammy Davis Jr. Goldberg admits that piecing together Mabley's life and career was difficult for the production team, and links this difficulty with the inherent

racial hierarchy of traditional archival methods. Gazing straight into the camera, Goldberg states, "When you look at the history [of Mabley], it's the history of Black folks in America. Because all of the information is not there. I realized that I was not in a position to do a biography." The film, even through its own resistance, problematically gives a liberal stance on Mabley's politics and persona and is, at times, another failure to Mabley's archive. I do not think *Whoopi Goldberg Presents: Moms Mabley* is a "bad" film. Nor do I think that is completely misrepresents Mabley. The film spliced footage, sound clips and other comics/cultural critics who admired her, and clearly pays tribute to this forgotten figure in Black performance history. However, even with rare footage and images of Mabley, the documentary fails to think beyond the constraints of the archive and heteronormative, liberal ideologies that Black silence queer lives and histories.

The film addresses Mabley's sexuality with an impulse to reveal and then quickly dismiss its influence on her comedic persona and politics. Right in the middle of the seventy-minute documentary, a slew of Mabley's former co-workers and her sister in-law talk about Mabley as "one of the guys." As one of the most successful female performers of her time, Mabley did spend a great deal of social time with other male performers. Norma Miller, a Black American dancer, often dubbed "The Queen of Swing," is the one who "reveals" Mabley's sexuality. Miller describes her admiration for Mabley as the "dominant force among Black female comedians." She explains that she met Mabley at the Apollo Theatre when they worked in variety shows together. "She and I shared a dressing room for two weeks," Miller explains. She then looks into the camera and pauses, a thin smirk begins to spread across her face as she says, "She and I and her

girlfriend."

The background swing music grows louder as the screen cuts to a photograph of Mabley, sometime in her middle age. She is in a tailored, three piece suit. In the black and white photograph, the suit looks to be tan or light brown. She wears a light shirt, dark tie and pocket square. In one hand Mabley holds a cigarette and is reaching into her pocket with the other hand. One foot casually rests on a chair. She gazes into the camera with a solemn, yet comfortable expression on her face. She wears no makeup. Her hair is cut to a short crop. She is unmistakably dapper and butch. Miller continues in her description of Moms' sexual and gender expression. She explains that her fellow performers nicknamed her, "Mr. Moms," as this suited her masculine dress and queer sexuality, but still rang true to her caring nature as a colleague. "When she walked off that stage she was 'Mr. Moms.' There was no question about it. […] We never called her lesbian. We never called her gay. That word didn't fit her. We just called her Mr. Moms."

Another shot of Mabley shows her in costume as Moms with two young dancers on either side of her. A woman sits on the floor, in between Moms' legs. They are glamorous and admiring of Moms as the women to her left and right gaze at her. Moms stares into the camera, a wide, open smile. This important and telling account of Mabley's queerness is never fully addressed again in the documentary. The one person, Miller, who refuses to conflate Mabley with Moms, and asserts Mabley's radical queerness, who describes Mabley as a performer and person who refused gender normative binaries, is essentially silenced throughout the rest of the film.

When Goldberg responds to this scene in the film she excitedly makes light of

Mabley's sexuality. Again, Whoopi stares right into the camera as if giving an interview or lecture. She has deemed herself the authority figure on Mabley. Shots of her interviewing fellow comics and historians often show her nodding in agreement, or asking follow-up questions to demonstrate her knowledge of Mabley. This authority becomes particularly problematic when Goldberg gives herself the last word in the subject of Mabley's desire for lesbian romantic relationships and the seeming ease of queer relationships during her lifetime. Goldberg states that queerness was matter of fact, implying Mabley did not experience discrimination. "At that time it was nobody's business. I think that she was a woman among men who was equal to those men, and they treated her like a man. And I think that is what helped give her the longevity." Goldberg problematically erases desire from queerness, linking Mabley's relationships with women with the fact that she worked primarily with men. She also asserts herself and historical authority when she states, "I will assume that when Moms came out of her costume and put on that silk shirt with those pants and had those women on her arm, I think everyone was like, 'Okay.'" This impulse to erase queer desire and performance by equating Mabley to "one of the guys" is seemingly progressive and nonchalant. But dismissing Mabley's sexuality, the struggles of Black queer people, and any links between Mabley's queerness and her politics is yet another failure to Mabley's archive and her impact on Black feminist comedy.

The documentary, even as it tries to disrupt traditional biographies and tell a different story of Mabley, repeatedly reifies and perpetuates the history of Jackie Mabley through the heteronormative, liberal ideologies. Comedienne Anne Meara, for example,

dismisses Mabley's skillful and exacting style of comedy and once again conflates Moms with Mabley. "She was a trailblazer. And she wasn't trying to be a trailblazer." Without pause, she slips into an (inaccurate) impersonation of Mabley's voice, gravely, low and a distinct stereotypical Black vernacular: "She was just tryin' to say her stuff, you know?" As if Mabley's artisty was accidental, as if Mabley had little drive to be as successful as she was and as if Moms' story was the same as Mabley's story, Meara disregards Mabley's skill and harkens to racist archetypes that characterize Black people as "naturally" gifted and happy to entertain with apolitical performance material and motives. Mabley's work, a distinct effort to standup in the face of abjection, is unfortunately downplayed and even silenced through this mainstream document of her work.

This particular archive of Mabley, then, concedes to the desires and biases of the living, rather than working towards a nuanced memorial to the dead and a critical historiographical reflection on how we remember Mabley. Cvetkovich theorizes the memorializing power of archives and the silence/absence around gay and lesbian archives. Documents and documentation operate not become not just a space and way of remembering for the living, but we hold responsibility to actively pursue and tell the stories of those who have been silenced by traditional archiving processes because normative methods of archiving often does not and cannot serve the particular needs of Black and queer communities. The archive is holding place. It is an entity that remembers, categorizes, and contains the stories of its subjects for safekeeping. The archive also silences. Who may access the archive, whose documents are kept safe, and

what counts as something or someone to be documented all exemplify power dynamics inherent in historiographical undertakings of various disciplines and subjects. However, because Mabley's comedy disrupted and dislocated dominant fictions of race, femininity and sexuality in comedic performance, she established unique interjections in how we tell the stories of our past and present.

Mabley transcends traditional archiving processes; she moves around and through history. Anyone who has heard Mabley's voice remembers it. Not only is her work funny and distinct in style, but also the sound of her voice is key to her work. Scratchy, low and booming, Mabley's voice is distinct and demands attention. Deborah Paredez describes the function of the diva's mouth as a powerful synecdoche for social and political dissent: "For the Black female diva, her open mouth is made all the more threatening because of the ways it is also haunted by the always-already-entertaining and potentially sinister minstrel mouth. Monstrous. And desired" ("Mouthpiece of a Movement" 3). This contention that the speaking voice, particularly the voice that speaks in public, challenges the status quo and systems of marginalization are not new. However, what Paredez argues, and I agree, is that that virtuosic solo female performer, which she defines as the diva, possesses a voice that can stand on its own as a tool of cultural resistance. Thus, even thirty years after her death, despite the lack of archival materials on Mabley's work, her voice is powerful enough to transcend time and space. Mabley's legacy is an archive of affect. Her wide-open mouth choosing to speak on her own terms exceeds our ability to accurately describe and keep her tightly within traditional documentation. Mabley's recorded voice lingers—its gruffness hard to forget. Her voice carefully crafts words to

evoke joy and laughter in her audiences, and also to re-member her own archive. It is, as E. Patrick Johnson would describe, "a performance of self for the self in a moment of self-reflexivity that has the potential to transform one's view of self in relation to the world" (13). Mabley's voice is the distinct and powerful instrument through which her words are remembered.

The conclusion of this work is not at all meant to resolve, but rather work through and suggest how to critically examine Mabley's quare feminist archive and the importance of archiving Black/queer feminisms. I am thinking particularly of Jomama Jones' wisdom during her *Inside the Diva Studio* performance three years ago in Austin, Texas: that what is essential to human experience is our connection to one another (2011). How may we, unapologetically, fight for and celebrate the Black feminist performers that have been disconnected from our collective cultural memory? To do this scholarship is to, much like the feminist artist, take up space—to not revise historical narratives, but to as Susan Bennett proposes, decompose it and start anew. As Bennett implores, and I agree, "…theatre history is a repository of knowledge and we need to look to its very architecture in order to effect change" ("Decomposing History" 84). Revisionist projects which seek to include women in theatre history can be useful, but Bennett is calling for a rewriting that is more nuanced. Revisionist history "consistently fails to tell the full story of women's contributions" (73). She wishes for what she names "decomposing history" to account for the extensive amount of theatre production by and for women. Thus, to archive Moms in this way is to seek unconventional texts, to read for artists' intent as inherently self-possessed and to document in ways that resist linear,

uncritical historiographical practices.

What I believe this project allows for is the initiation and continuation of a critical eye towards the archive's relationship to Black feminism, queer history and comedic performance. This work calls for more nuanced readings of historical contexts of performance and a theorization of how queerness moves fluidly from personal politics, sexual desire and the artistic work we create. Mis-remembering Mabley only perpetuates the silencing of queer voices and continues the violent assertion that Black lesbian/queer lives do not matter/are nonexistent now or in our past. Mabley and Black queer feminist artists like her challenge performance scholars, practitioners, and audiences to connect the past to the present and ourselves to performers who have profoundly shaped the stories we tell about our nation and ourselves. Most importantly, Mabley employed Black feminist humor to unite and ignite a sense of freedom—to revel in the joy that comes from laughter and to complicate and challenge racism and sexism. Indeed, this embodied action is one that should be taken quite seriously—for in all its playfulness, Black feminist comedic performance both exemplifies and demands a futurity of self-determination, empowerment and collectivity.

CHAPTER FOUR: "I Love You Back"

As comedienne and actress Mo'Nique steps out of a white stretch limo, she looks into the camera with a solemn expression on her face and declares, "Today is the day. And to be honest, I'm not quite sure how I'm feeling. 'Cause it's not *Showtime at the Apollo*, it's not *The Queens of Comedy*, it is the Ohio Reformatory for Women, baby." The Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW) holds over 2,000 convicted female felons who are under minimum to maximum security. Opening shots of the 2007 comedy special and documentary, *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!,* depict Mo'Nique walking into the prison dressed in a simple pair of jeans, a white t-shirt and black leather jacket, being patted down by one female guard, before interviewing several inmates. Some of the women are facing the death penalty, while others are serving sentences for lesser crimes such as robbery. Mo'Nique nods empathetically, hugs the prisoners and takes pictures with the guards. Spliced in between these scenes are various statistics about the prison, such as the fact that "80% of the inmates have a history of severe psychological, physical and sexual abuse." A voice over of Mo'Nique sounds as a group of prisoners surround her, laughing. She explains in the voice over, "Some people have said to me 'Why would you pick a prison? They've done such horrible things.' But they still deserve a little bit of laughter, a little bit of joy and a little bit of feel good. And I'm hopin' we can bring them some of that today." The screen turns black; then words appear: "Sometimes laughter is the only freedom someone needs."

This bold contention, that laughter is all that one may require to feel free, while an

exaggeration, points to how laughing fulfills an innate human need, and creates a sense of autonomy beyond the confines of the prison walls. Diane Davis concedes that it is this reason that laughter is a radical act. It "necessarily involves risk—there is no way of knowing what will be left in the wake of a laughter that shatters all the familiar landmarks of our thought." (9). This "risky business" can serve to disintegrate thinkable modes of hierarchy. Because laughter, when directed at hegemony, de(con)structs, loci of power. Not only to laugh in its face, but to render those deemed silent or absent, all at once loud and undeniably present. As is the case with Mo'Nique's performance at the ORW, what is "left in the wake" are the dissolutions of binaries between audience and performer, individual and community and restriction and freedom. Instead, Mo'Nique's Black feminist comedic performance and its subsequent laughter render these distinctions not only malleable, but "bursts" through them. An invitation, as Nietzsche would say, to "grow not only in one place, but everywhere" (331). As this chapter demonstrates, what happens in the "cracking up" are myriad affective and affirmative "bursts" towards Black feminist political thought and community building. *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!* exemplifies both the affective and political ramifications of a Black feminist humor and its ability, through the comedian and her audience, to create counterpublics and communities despite state restrictions.

This chapter addresses the promises as well as the limits of Black feminist humor as a method of community and coalition building. I show how Mo'Nique uses Black/feminist/queer methods of dissent—disidentification, erotic autonomy and intimate connection—through comedic performance. Engaging in these theoretical concepts

through humor expresses, encourages and makes space for dissent, sexual agency and hook's notion of productive sisterhood.[25] Mo'Nique does not pretend to fully understand the experiences of the inmates at ORW, neither does she conflate the women's experiences as monolithic. What this performance does do is show how laughter reaches through and across difference, and operates as a strategy to unite women in political solidarity.

Thirty-six years after Jackie Mabley's *Live at Sing Sing*, Mo'Nique's performance at the Ohio Women's Reformatory suggests not only a lineage of Black feminist comedic traditions, but also demonstrates an important shift in how comedy by and for women of color and their allies can create feminist community and coalitions in the twenty-first century. Mabley and Mo'Nique both offer unique and important moments in Black feminist comedy as defiant and transformative forms of performance. In the previous chapter on Mabley, I focused on what it means for Mabley's body to be onstage in juxtaposition to her male audience at Sing Sing, while this chapter identifies how Black feminist comedic performance operates as a mode of bonding among women. Mo'Nique's expressed nervousness as she entered the prison grounds highlights the high stakes of her performance. The added pressure Mo'Nique felt was perhaps because she was not only highly aware of her own body in the performance space, but concerned about the bodies to whom she was entertaining, and the potential transformation that

[25] For more on this, see hooks' essay in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, "*Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Among Women. hooks defines sisterhood as a model of solidarity that is based on self-affirmation, anti-racist politics, class consciousness and engage in an ongoing and reflexive "community of interests, shared beliefs, and goals around which to unite" (67).

could come from the performance.

Deborah Paredez articulates how performance is both constrained by, and may simultaneously transcend the limitations of the space in which the event occurs. "Performance accumulates much of its power as a spatial practice. Live performance, by its localized and ephemeral nature, offers a way to account for the specificity of historical, geographical and political location" (*Selenidad* 33). On the other hand, while the "here and now-ness" of a performance determines much of how we experience, discuss and archive its effects, the "magic" of live performance is that it can also point to and/or embody a sense of futurity. Paredez's articulation of this is worth quoting at length:

> But the magic of performance resides in its ability to encourage transcendence beyond discrete temporal boundaries. While performance only ever occurs in the present, it simultaneously lifts us out of this present, haunted by the ghosts of the past (invoking previous iterations of a role or a song) and gesturing toward future possibilities (creating structures of feeling or imaginative worlds) (*Selenidad* 33).

Mo'Nique employs Black feminist humor as a paradigm to move beyond the confines of the prison and loosen the temporal binds of the women's daily schedule and individual sentences. Like Paradez argues above, the performance transforms space and time, establishing and encouraging a connection between performer and audience member. The physical and communal act of laughing together shows the value of performance as, what Diana Taylor calls "vital acts of transfer" which provides particular opportunities for "learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge" (16). Mo'Nique and the audience push against systems and police that contain women's bodies. Laughter becomes a way to foster voice among imprisoned, and therefore, silenced women. Her

performance and their presence thus use laughter to revalorize embodied, expressive activities that encourage dynamic knowledge production among women. Release and freedom occur through exchange and bonding among audience members and with the performer—within the boundaries of prison. This is a vital act. Mo'Nique's performance lasts beyond her time onstage; if not creating, then demonstrating community among the inmates whose intimacies, joy and power exist not only in spite of, but also in direct opposition to state-sponsored silence and marginalization.

> Comedy that recognizes the value of female experience may be an important step in developing a culture that allows women to self-critically question the stereotypes that have governed our lives. A strong rebellious humor empowers women to examine how we have been objectified and fetishized and to what extent we have led to perpetuate this objectification. (Merrill, 1988 279)

Humor, then, becomes instructive—transmitting methods of political and social intervention and coalition building.

This chapter first closely analyzes Mo'Nique's performance in *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!* as Black feminist comedy that employs Jose Muñoz's disidentification and Black feminist conceptions of erotic autonomy. I then investigate some of the shortcomings of Mo'Nique's performance as she employs what I call, "scripted escapes," which still bond her audience, may foreclose a public declaration of systemic oppression. Finally, I examine the ways in which Mo'Nique successfully uses her time on stage to instigate intimacy between herself and the audience. By the end of Mo'Nique's performance, I show how Black feminist comedic performance can hold potential to supersede state restrictions on inmates' bodies and abilities to experience and express joy.

DISIDENTIFICATION AND BLACK FEMINIST HUMOR

Jose Muñoz's theory of disidentification is a performative strategy of subject formation in which marginalized subjects can point to the material effects of ideology on their bodies, cultures and everyday lives. It is a tactic that seeks to transform cultural logic from within. Disidentification "neither posits to assimilate […] nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (11) even as that ideology may seem indestructible or inescapable.

Mo'Nique's performance at the Ohio Reformatory for Women, while within the confines of the prison, seeks to bond and free the women in the audience through laughter. It is in this vein that I argue that Black feminist humor performs a particular kind of disidentification as it simultaneously works in and against cultural, performative and hegemonic constraints. Muñoz states that performative disidentification is a "response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual and national subjugation. These routinized protocols of subjugation are brutal and painful," and that this performance strategy is "about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence" (161). Muñoz asserts that performative disidentifications allow marginalized groups to work within their own "social matrix" to resist state power and create potential for counterpublicity. Muñoz clarifies that "counterpublics are not magically and automatically realized through disidentifications, but they are suggested, rehearsed, and articulated." Thus, while a literal escape from the confines of the ORW is, in many senses, impossible, performance acts as the medium through which the lived experiences of the prisoners become not only worthy of public discourse, but also

reshaped and reformed through the exchange of joke-telling and laughter. Of course, this reshaping could occur without comedy, but as I argue below, Mo'Nique expresses certain truths about prison life in a non-threatening way to the state, which makes this kind of dissent tolerable to those employed by the prison.

Mo'Nique functions as the intermediary between the prisoners and the state because comedic performance and disidentification, as Muñoz contends often goes hand in hand. Comedic performance works as a strategic, while simultaneously nonthreatening, mode of resistance. "Comedic disidentification accomplishes important cultural critique while at the same time providing cover from, and enabling the avoidance of, scenarios of direct confrontation with phobic and reactionary ideologies" (119). Muñoz's focus on comedic disidentification teases out and analyzes the comedic persona of performance artist Carmelita Tropicana. While this work is imperative to understanding the ways in which humor facilitates and exemplifies disidentificatory practice and politics, Muñoz's analysis falls short insofar as it lacks detailed attention to the inherent exchange that is a part of comedic performance—the kind of call and response between joke-telling and laughter that defies restriction. Thus, I am interested in exploring the disidentificatory practices that come from this back and forth between Mo'Nique and the prisoners. In other words, how, specifically, might comedic disidentification facilitate or rehearse a counterpublic under the gaze of the prison guards? The audience is, after all, literally surrounded by those that discipline them. Mo'Nique's blunt and descriptive style of joke telling as well as the set of the stage, however, allow for a powerful, albeit fictional expansion of the prison. It is the laughter

from the audience that I believe literally transforms the space from restrictive to joyous.

STAGE AS INTERVENTION

Highly policed spaces, namely prisons in the United States, structure the lives of the imprisoned as well as those employed by the State. Angela Davis argues that confinement, even with the goal of rehabilitation, has historically been a means of state control. "Correction" is directly linked to highly regimented schedules, labor and surveillance by prison systems (*Prisons* 67). Inmates adhere to strict protocols of routine that rely on and reward uniformity and isolation. Placing a stage, a space designated for ephemeral, live experiences that disrupt the mundaneness of reality, in the center of the prison grounds, automatically implies a potential for intervention at the ORW. The stage not only distances the prisoners and guards from daily life, but also, more importantly, facilitates different kinds of intimacies among the prisoners and within their environment. That being, intimacies defined by laughter and connectedness rather than a shared experience of confinement and control.

The ORW is located on 260 acres just outside the small town of Marysville, Ohio. As of March of 2012, the prison holds 2,295 inmates of varying security levels. The opening narration of *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!* splices photographs of current prisoners as well as (presumably) archival materials of ORW. The text that accompanies these photographs states various statistics and facts about the women housed in the prison. For example, 80% of the inmates "have a history of severe psychological, physical and sexual abuse" and "most of them began abusing substances between the ages of 10-14." These statistics, while dated back to the production of the film and are

now seven years old, nonetheless, demonstrate structural and systemic phenomena that are prominent across female prison populations.

The prison opened in 1916 complete with a fully functioning dairy and cattle farm, run by the inmates. The prison is still referred to as "the farm," as ORW is a facility that emphasizes communal rehabilitation. For example, the prison is one of the first in the nation to develop an in-house nursery program called The Achieving Baby Care Success (ABC'S). The Reformatory describes the program as one that "ensures that the mothers and infants leave the institution together." ORW also offers residential alcohol and drug treatment programs, family day camps during the summer months, and short-term offender life skills courses. *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!,* however, reminds viewers that "their [the inmates'] lives are devoid of nurturing and caring. Many of them came from abusive or destructive relationships. And that is the legacy they inherited."

Jonathon Shailor, a prison scholar and artist, states that the precariousness and importance of performance within a prison space is linked to the freedom that creativity spawns. He argues in the introduction to *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre* that,

> Theatre, in contrast to just about anyone's idea of social reform is notoriously noisy, playful and subversive, and therefore likely to be suspect in most prison settings […] In the prison setting, as elsewhere, the needs that theatre addressees are those of self-expression and identity, freedom (of the imagination), creativity, and community (19).

When Mo'Nique announces then at the start of the documentary that, "This is not the *Queens of Comedy*. This is not "*Showtime at the Apollo*," she articulates a deeper meaning than a reference to the make-up of her audience—incarcerated women, most of whom are women of color. Because the space of a prison is not designed for experiences

of joy, laughter and "feel good," Mo'Nique conveys the inherent riskiness and excitement of making possible the very real effects of theatrical experience within a space never intended for such community and improvisational joy.

Mo'Nique implements costume choices and set design to enact and facilitate a shared sense of community with the inmates at ORW. The third scene of the comedy special begins with a far away shot of Mo'Nique walking down a long, bright, white windowed hallway. Her back is towards the camera. In slow motion, she strides towards a door, assumedly leading outside to the prison grounds. A male announcer yells in a voice-over, "Put your hands together for the one, the only Mo'Nique!" We hear a crowd scream in the distance as the camera stays on Mo'Nique walking down the corridor. She is in an orange prison jumpsuit. This is in stark contrast to the hallway, which looks more like the hall of a university than a prison. The large windows on one side of the hall make the institutional space sunny and bright. Cut to the prison yard. The slow motion stops and we hear the energy of the crowd lift. It is no longer sunny, but looks cold and gray. The crowd screams louder as Mo'Nique walks up the steps of the stage. The inmates are dressed in navy blue hoodies over their various colored polo shirts because it is damp and misty. "Newbies" wear blue shirts, women who are under minimum and medium security wear lime green shirts, women wearing pink shirts signal that they belong in high security, and women who are under maximum security wear orange. Mo'Nique struts on stage. I mean, *struts*. One high-heeled sandaled foot in front of the other, she stretches her arms out wide—even shimmying a bit. She snaps her fingers to the song "It's A Big Girl

World." by Blondie Cantuc.[26] Her mouth is wide open—smiling. She reaches her arms overhead and claps to the rhythm of the song. The women in the audience scream and clap as Mo'Nique walks up to the microphone. Some of audience then waves their hands back and forth in the air. Mo'Nique steps up to the microphone, grabs it and screams an elongated "Hey!" She repeats this as the women yell back at her—a kind of call and response. The song fades and Mo'Nique screams, "What's happening! Yes, Baby!" She repeats and extends, "Yes!" And again with one arm raised in the air, pumping her fist, shouting a drawn-out "Yeeeesssssss! Yeeesss!!! Yes!"

Now that the camera shows Mo'Nique from the front, we see that while she is wearing an orange prison uniform, it has been customized. The neckline has been cut to a scoop—showing off her décolletage. Along the neckline, the uniform has been "bedazzled" with multicolor plastic rhinestones. The sleeves have been cut as well so that they come up just past her elbows. The prison number, on her left torso, reads 12345. Next to it hangs her prison visitor badge. The pants have been shortened and fringed to fall just below her knees. Painted on the legs of the jumper are flowers and a butterfly, also accented with rhinestones. She wears high-heeled thong sandals, gold chandelier earrings and a chunky gold bracelet. Her hair is in a tight bun on top of her head. She is wearing dramatic rose-colored lipstick and eye shadow.

As the women quiet down, Mo'Nique immediately addresses her ensemble: "I had my shit designed just for y'all. Now, don't y'all go fuckin' up your outfits tomorrow." She then points to her neckline, "I got my little rhinestones and shit. I

[26] Mo'Nique enters as the song's chorus plays: *It's a big girl world, bitch/bow down, bitch, bow down.*

shredded my pants up. Drew a little flower on *this shit* [emphasis mine]. Baby, I could be your cellmate, do you hear what I'm saying?" She points at the audience and shakes her hands to the rhythm of her own words, "I. Could be. Your. Mother. Fuckin'. Cellmate!" This is the first time that Mo'Nique utters this phrase. This subjunctive tense motions to the audience that while she is apart from the women's experience in the prison, she might be able to relate to them. "Could be" as Mo'Nique repeats throughout the performance, does not assume a shared understanding between Mo'Nique and the women, but rather opens up space to speak of common ideas around selfhood, race and sexuality—as Mo'Nique addresses during her set. Costuming, something that is not always imperative to a standup comedy show is, in this instance, Mo'Nique's first motion towards linking performer and audience.[27]

Mo'Nique's costume identifies with the prisoners, but with difference. This DIY version of a prison jumpsuit recycles and reforms the plain uniforms the inmates are forced to wear. Within the campy version of Mo'Nique's costume, the prison uniform takes on new aesthetics and meanings—it is gaudy, loud, sexy and individualized. Here, I employ Muñoz's definition of camp as a "strategy of representation, but also as a mode of enacting the self against the pressures of the dominant culture's identity denying protocols" (120). In Muñoz's readings of *Carmelita Tropicana,* he uses her over-the-top performance of Latina and lesbian identity to show how campiness, although

[27] Comediennes such as Phyllis Diller and Moms Mabley were famous for using costuming and makeup as essential to their comedic personas and as a way to comment on/critique normative notions of femininity and beauty. Contemporary standup comedy, however, includes costuming rarely. Mo'Nique's standup specials had never included costuming prior to this.

"overwhelmingly associated with the gay male subculture" nonetheless plays an important role in queer and female performative resistance (121). In fact, while Mo'Nique's uniform could be seen as a simple, fun or even an insulting play on the prison uniform, the over-the-top homemade look of the outfit fortifies the possibility for quotidian resistance. The uniform, like camp, as Muñoz describes, forms a kind of "artificial respiration; it breathes new life into old situations. Camp is, then, more than a worldview; it is a strategic response to the breakdown of representation that occurs when a queer, ethnically marked, or other subject encounters his or her inability fit within the majoritarian representational regime" (128).

Mo'Nique's outfit both highlights the lifestyles of the inmates as dictated by their uniforms, but also exceeds them. The women in the prison are required to wear certain colored polo shirts based on their security risk level at the prison. The uniforms they wear, then, literally mark their specific identities as inmates. She implores the prisoners not to "fuck up their outfits tomorrow." I believe this is strategic, rather than a literal request. Mo'Nique is performing for the prisoners, but realizes that they are in front of the guards. Mo'Nique knows that she has leeway with the rules of uniformity that the inmates do not. Bedazzling, literally tearing up the uniform and referring to it as "this shit" marks Mo'Nique's plays with ideas of freedom and power. The camped-out costume promises something more than reiteration of the mundane as well as the essentialized identities that the inmates' uniforms dictate. It also functions as an object that stands in for moving past "this shit." The costume, in all its gaudiness, highlights joy, individuality and beauty as subjective and accessible despite what the women are forced

to wear.

Her costuming, then, is a kind of *différance.* This "process of scission and division" in word and action allows Mo'Nique to be the surrogate rebel to her audience (Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*). She stands in as a rule-breaker and an individual among the prisoners not to prove or mark herself as a free citizen, but to push against the system in ways that her audience cannot. Displaying her own freedom by wearing a campy version of a prison jumper does not mock the prisoners, but rather works to transform their relationship to Mo'Nique. She wears an orange jumpsuit, the color that signals maximum security for the ORW inmates. This symbolic declaration that Mo'Nique is both dangerous and performing at the prison to give the women "a little bit of feel good" communicates Mo'Nique's solidarity with the inmates. The manipulation of the prison uniform also suggests that the audience can trivialize the very symbol that labels them as prisoners and to what level of security they belong. The costume is comical, but also and more importantly, critical.

Additionally, the costume is obviously homemade. This is not a designer appropriation of the uniform. Mo'Nique rather proudly boasts shredding the pants to knee-length, hot gluing plastic rhinestones and drawing on floral designs. Albeit rebellious and feminized, and arguably sexualized through its short length and low neckline, Mo'Nique delights in her outfits' own excessiveness and inventiveness. The costume engages in camp, typically associated with queer aesthetic practices, but also connects to a working-class woman of color expressive style. The costume relies on "the bold assertion of working-class racialized female style without apology and without a

distancing, appropriative wink" (Paredez 160). The costume iterates that she is both standing in camaraderie, while not trying to fully identify with her audience. She does not make herself into caretaker, or reduce the women's experiences to understandable to someone of Mo'Nique's class and fame status. The obvious difference between Mo'Nique and the audience's attire then, does not further distance them, but rather links them through comedic reiteration of the uniform.

Standup performances are usually characterized by a bare set—a single microphone or perhaps a stool for the comedian to occupy or place their water. *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!*'s set, much like Mo'Nique's costume, tows the line between elaborate and homemade and strategically disidentifies with the confines of a prison cell. After describing her costume to the women, Mo'Nique shifts to a serious tone. Her voice, raspy and commanding, tells the crowd, "When I came yesterday, I took a tour. And I came to see what y'all's cells looked like. I had to. Out of respect to see how y'all living. Now if I had to come in here, I want y'all to see what my shit would look like." A wide grin spreads across Mo'Nique's face. Her smile is bright and mischievous. She sweeps her arm to stage left to call attention to the set and announces, "This is what my shit would look like."

The proscenium stage is divided into three main stations. First, to stage left is a queen size bed with a red and green checkered comforter, large gold throw pillows and a bed skirt. The bedding is ornate and tacky. The gold fringes that border the throw pillows, for example, give a gaudy feel, and the bedspread looks to be polyester. To the right of a bed is a nightstand with a bright red cloth over it, a brass table lamp, a large vase with

white flowers and a telephone. Above the bed is an incredibly large poster of Mo'Nique. It is a headshot in which she is wearing a low cut black dress and a string of pearls. She gazes into the camera with a Mona Lisa-esque smile: calm and mysterious. The focus of photograph is soft; it looks like a 1980s "Glamour Shot." Mo'Nique describes the set of the stage as her version of a prison cell: "I would have me a motherfuckin' bed with linens I stole from Walmart. My picture would be my wallpaper. I would want to see a bitch who used to look like that everyday!"

Harkening back to the working-class aesthetics of her outfit, Mo'Nique repeats the simultaneous luxuriousness and cheapness of the stolen linens from Walmart. In a prison cell, however, such bedroom accessories are indulgent and worth celebrating. This juxtaposition between the brick wall and the large fluffy bed simultaneously highlights and dismisses the captivity of a prison cell through exaggeratedly lavish space. To stage right, a fake brick wall cheats out towards the audience. It partially encloses the stage, making it seem cozy. This side of the stage operates as the "bathroom." Two plant holders with fake flowers sit to the right of a white "porcelain" toilet and bidet. Mo'Nique points to the wall as she continues the cell tour: "Now there are two things over there. One is a toilet. Y'all know that right? That other thing is called a bidet." A bidet […] makes you feel good while it's getting clean bitch. You'd be washing your ass every second."

The crowd cheers loudly. This is the first official joke Mo'Nique tells three minutes into her hour-long set. However, there is no object of the joke. Rather, the humor comes from expressing self-empowerment—an ability to look at one's self every

day, sleep in a bed, and find sexual pleasure without relying on another being. And while Mo'Nique immediately establishes herself as able to create a bedroom that she desires, she offers the women an imaginary cell. The subjunctive mood of the text ("I would"/"I could") illustrates Mo'Nique's attempt to create empathy towards her audience. The scene does not say, "I would have this, and you cannot," but rather communicates that Mo'Nique knows their cells are uncomfortable. Through tackiness of the set and the homemade look of her outfit, Mo'Nique applauds the women on their ability to elude power and beauty despite their restrictive environment.

Performative spaces are important venues for both the examination and construction of cultural identification, and create a distinct kind of public community. Michael Warner elaborates the power of public spaces such as those made through performance. He argues, "when people address publics they engage in struggles—at varying levels of salience to consciousness, from calculated tacti to mute cognitive noise—over the conditions that bring them together as a public" (12). When marginalized groups address each other, for each other, they create counterpublics. Humorous forms of communication which operate as a rebellious feminist act may encourage counterpublic spaces simply as they are instances in which women are speaking together. Warner continues, "Public and private are bound up with the elementary relations to language as well as to the body" (24). Mo'Nique's explanation of her costume and set are the first of many instances in which Mo'Nique puts herself in the inmates' world of the prison, but remains steadfastly outside of it through fantasy and exaggeration. The set of the stage and Mo'Nique's costume perform a kind of disidentification in that harkens a prison cell

and uniform, but moves beyond them not just for comedic effect, but to point out the actual harshness of the prisoner's reality. The set, Mo'Nique's words, and the audience's loud cheers exemplify "strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power" (Muñoz 19). That is, Mo'Nique can safely and frankly manipulate the prison cell and her costume in ways that her audience cannot. For the time that Mo'Nique is onstage, the inmates are transported to a prison space that demonstrates individuality (through decoration), sexual expression (the portrait and bidet) and freedom of creativity.

EROTIC AUTONOMY

The next section of this chapter demonstrates the important connections between erotic autonomy and joyful expressions of laughter—specifically the ways in which Mo'Nique enacts these important aspects of Black feminist humor through the subject of sexual expression. Both sexual expression and laughter work as similar types of dissent because they are at once under the radar and "out loud." That is, the powers of the erotic and Black feminist humor both generate pleasure in the face of abjection. In the context of this performance these notions both work as embodied practices that facilitate and employ the female body and voice as a site for simultaneous pleasure and resistance. Like the manipulation of the uniform and the prison cell, the comedy becomes instructive: this is how we can now transform a restrictive space into one that can be freeing. If disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning, then Mo'Nique encourages erotic autonomy through disidentificatory humor. Laughter from the audience is not merely a response to the performer, but an active participation in which the women recycle and rethink the ways in which resistance can operate in their

community and generate erotic autonomy.

In Mo'Nique's recount of her tour of the prison grounds, she tells a story to the audience—one in which Mo'Nique and the guards discussed what the inmates are prohibited from doing and how they receive punishment. The prison guards explained to Mo'Nique that the women get "tickets" for breaking the rules. Mo'Nique recalls, "[I asked] what kind of trouble can they get in? They said 'fighting, being disrespectful, fuckin'…each other.' Then they said 'fucking themselves.'" Mo'Nique's facial expression shifts from curious, to indignant. Her eyebrows furrow. She places a hand on her hip and tells the audience how she interrupted the guards. "I said, 'Wait a minute! You can't give a bitch a ticket for fucking herself! Is that a crime? That I done fuck myself?'" She elongates the word crime and her fingers flick at her waistband, pantomiming masturbation. The audience begins to build in positive response—laughter mixed with affirming cheers and claps. Mo'Nique yells into the microphone, no longer enraged, but wide-eyed and unrelenting in her insistence that the rule is ridiculous. Her gaze moves past the audience towards the edges of the stage where the guards are standing and exclaims, "What kind of shit is that?" Mo'Nique turns back to the audience: "We're women. We're sexual fuckin' beings." Mo'Nique motions her arm in a circle; the "we" includes herself and the inmates. "So, then say 'I understand, we ain't tryin' to break the rule. You can't play with your figgy. So you gotta find another place on your body that you won't get a ticket for." Mo'Nique raises her eyebrows and cocks her head to the right. A mischievous smile spreads across her face as she places two fingers on the side of her neck and begins to rub in circles. Her face becomes serious and she rubs faster

and begins to moan, mocking an orgasm. When she finishes, Mo'Nique throws her hands in the air and yells, "I'm good!" The women cheer loudly as the camera pans towards the audience, many of whom give Mo'Nique a standing ovation.

Mo'Nique links womanness ("we're women") and sexual desire as inherent to their bodies, to their humanness. "You gotta find" implies that erotic expression and the physical release of an orgasm is how we (re)claim subjecthood. Here, I use the erotic as imbued in sexual expression, but also an element that moves beyond sex. Because Mo'Nique connects sexual expression and selfhood as essential to one another, I read her take on masturbation in conjunction with Lorde's conception of erotic autonomy. In *Sister Outsider,* Audre Lorde defines the erotic as,

> […] a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experience it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves (54).

The erotic is a resource, an affective spiritual modality "that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (53). Lorde claims that women's erotic power in Western culture has been suppressed, manipulated and silenced. From the Greek word, *eros,* Lorde refers to erotic as the "personification of love in all of its aspects," and more importantly as "an assertion of the lifeforce of women, of that creative energy empowered…" The power of the erotic is both an individual and collective cultivation, "the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language our history, our dancing our loving, our work, our lives" (55). Mo'Nique harkens to the power of the erotic. "We are sexual fuckin' beings,"

remarks both the individual and inherent nature of sexuality, and she includes all women in this, regardless of cultural, class or racialized experience. Mo'Nique cultivates and encourages women to tap into that powerful pleasure that is possible despite regulations from the prison.

Arguably, more significant than Mo'Nique's words as a comedic modality of freedom is the way in which this bit employs both the voice and body. Her "orgasm" is performed through very specific gesture and vocal affect. Mo'Nique places two fingers on the side of her neck—just at her pulse point. She closes her eyes and moans slowly. The audience immediately knows what is about to happen and cheers Mo'Nique on. Mo'Nique builds slowly—moaning in a deep, husky voice until she is screeching, "Oh shit!" She lets go of her neck and catches her breath. The joke gets the laugh, but the essentially the women join her in the orgasm. As she starts climaxing, so do they, through vocal response, clapping and laughter.

Theorizing parallels between laughter and sexual release are is not a new phenomenon. For Freud, we move towards the reaction to a joke, and the telling of a joke, are ways to, in a socially acceptable manner, explode with aggression and pleasure. While the relationship between the physical release of an orgasm and the physical release of laughter are rendered undeniable in this section of Mo'Nique's performance, there is a clear diversion from Freudian notions of both sexual pleasure and the point of joke telling. First, no male, not even a partner, is needed for the women to get off. Even more so, Mo'Nique expands how the women can experience sexual pleasure. Genitalia is not necessary, but rather a mindset that one deserves and has a right to desire themselves as a

maker and receiver of sexual pleasure. Additionally, the laughter, the economy of release that comes from the joke, is not aimed at an Other. Rather the laughter signals not only recognition that sexual acts happen regardless of the rules, but also that the women are empowered to masturbate. The only objects of the joke are the oppressive regimes that keep women's sexuality subject to discipline and punishment. Sexual release and laughter thus become parallel not as a mode of objectification but as embodied, self-defining practices that can, even momentarily lift one out of the confines of state and patriarchal supervision.

Lorde's connection of the erotic to joyful affect is apparent insofar as the erotic is an embodied practice and powerful when employed for feminist collectivity. Lorde contends that the erotic functions on two main levels. First, the erotic arises from "sharing joy" which in turn "forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (56). Laughter, in the context of this performance operates in the same way. Laughing together allows the women to connect across difference. Second, the erotic connects us to our individual capacity for joy—be that in emotional, physical or spiritual expression. To be in tune with our individual erotic power means, "we begin to demand from ourselves and our lives—pursuits that [work in tandem with] that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of" (57). The embodied act of performance and laughter, therefore connect us to the erotic within and facilitate opportunities to express and experience joy.

In the case of the prisoners, the very private act of masturbation becomes a direct

threat to the state and reason for punishment. Placing their experiences in the public, performative realm is thus a way to create oppositional knowledge. Like her explanation of her set on stage, Mo'Nique encourages the audience to work within their marginalized situation to imagine and create sexual agency for themselves. Employing tenants of erotic autonomy and disidentification through humor "reveal the shams, hypocrisies, and incongruities of the dominant culture [and] confront and subvert the very power that keeps women powerless" (9). Jacqui Alexander expresses the implications of performative acts such as these when she explains, "Erotic autonomy signals danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation. […] erotic autonomy brings with it the potential of undoing the nation entirely, a possible charge of irresponsible citizenship or no responsibility at all" (22). Mo'Nique establishes a narrative that places her as an ally to her audience. Mo'Nique's subject position (not imprisoned) allows her to vocally resist the state, and encourage her audience to resist within the system through their bodies, their desires and their abilities to give themselves sexual satisfaction regardless of state sanctions.

When Mo'Nique performs masturbation with her neck, she suggests the power of female eroticism that moves beyond heteronormative sex acts. The body is a useful, feminist and necessary site of resistance. Humor is a non-threatening medium, through which Mo'Nique demonstrates how, as Marvin Carlson describes, "…the body in performance provides not merely an alternative way of knowing, but a necessary subversion of the dominant symbolic order (169). Mo'Nique offers the audience not only laughter, but also instances of freedom from gendered and sexual restraint. The

masculinist joke form, typically aimed at sexualizing and objectifying the "butt of the joke," is reified and altered to disidentify—working within and against the state/domestic spheres. Laughter from the audience is a release, but also suggestive of the joy that results from spaces that privilege and celebrate women's sexual autonomy.

I think it is particularly interesting that the "other body part" Mo'Nique chooses is the neck—the place where the voice arises. We know that she is experiencing pleasure because she starts screaming. Pleasure and resistance therefore come through vocal affect. Patricia Hill Collins continues that kindling Black feminist thought is a method of breaking silence—it is not a discovery of one's oppression, but rather it is a way to articulate one's experience under oppressive regimes. Discovering outlets that allow Black women to articulate their experiences can be not only empowering for the individual, but the collective as well. "Breaking the silence represents less of a discovery of these unequal power relations than a breaking through into the public arena of what oppressed groups have long expressed in private. Publicly articulating rage typically constitutes less a revelation about oppression than a discovery of voice." (*Fighting Words* 47). Mo'Nique performs and reforms the orgasm not as a way to find her voice, but rather to be demonstrative of the power of voice as a mode of resistance.

Mo'Nique displays female "desire with difference." That is, Mo'Nique's exhibit of sexual freedom and expression directly turns against the notion that women should suppress desire, or express it only under the gaze of heterosexist culture/prison culture. I agree with Jill Dolan when she asserts, "…staging explicit representations of marginalized sexual practices in performance could incite direct cultural change"

("Cultural Disruptions" 336). Performing self-pleasure loudly, in public and on stage for a cheering audience proclaims and encourages female sexual agency. Similarly, she encourages her audience to break the rules of the prison by doing the same thing—by finding an alternative way to experience and express sexual gratification. The joke is risky not because it addresses sex, but because it does so in such a way to reveal the joy that can arise from female sexual expression. The scene is funny, but more importantly demonstrates the vital work of disidentification, that is the blurring and molding of desire, community and Black feminist enunciation of erotic autonomy. The audience cheers Mo'Nique on, and in this way, recognizes, relates and releases—through laughter—the communal freedom that comes from uncovering narratives of self discovery and frequently suppressed, and in this case, punishable, sexual experiences.

Rebecca Schneider's *The Explicit Body in Performance* traces, analyzes and theorizes how feminist performers use their bodies as the backdrop against which performance, feminist theory and political resistance occurs. Corporeality functions as a method of marking the historical, cultural, political, racial and sexual bearings of the female body. Schneider elaborates, "manipulating the body itself as *mise en scéne,* such artists make their own bodies explicit as the stage, canvas or screen across which social agendas of privilege and disprivilege have been manipulated" (20). While any female body onstage automatically brings to the forefront "the history of that body's signification, its delimitation as signifier of sexuality," the explicit body on stage and in popular representation, when employed by and for feminist audiences creates spaces in which the female marked body is not one marked upon, but marks itself as a site of

kinetic knowledge and self-naming in service of feminist representation and formation. Mo'Nique employs her body to encourage the audience to use their bodies as sites of communion, memory making and transformation.

The absurdity of masturbation on "another part of one's body" is nonetheless accurate—speaking to this laughter and staging the explicit body as feminist work which, as Diane Davis states, "is rather the most *absurd* response possible in any given situation. It respects no categorical distinctions and follows not social norms: the simply swoops in without warning, seizes the body, and challenges the boundaries of the ego…" (29). The laughter, the "cracking up," as Davis would say, is a visceral embodied mode of rebellion, a moment in which freedom is in some ways quite tangible. The consciousness breaks away from all but the body, and the body, no matter what, is where release happens

This moment of humor finds itself in line with Freud's theorization of humor. That is, the joke content and response from the audience is, at its heart, a drive to release. In this case, however, it is not our aggression towards another, but a laughing towards the nature of imprisonment, of the state, of patriarchy. Laughter, the agreement of the women embraces "...radical excess. Where we thought that was only One there, there insists wild multiplicity" (Davis 25). The telling and affirmative response to commonalities among the female body *dis/solve* a fractured, isolated experience of the women in prison. Instead, this work of explicating the body bonds the women within and beyond the space of the prison. The laughter becomes an affirmative explosion—simultaneously recognizing and acting out eroticism and autonomy.

In the space of a prison, one that finds nonheteronormative desire and self-pleasure as grounds for punishment, Mo'Nique places erotic autonomy and queer sexualities as the central survival strategy. She comments on the women getting in trouble for "fucking each other" as not necessarily gay, but survival, joking that while she identifies as heterosexual, if she was a cellmate she would, "role-play." Mo'Nique interrupts her own joke to have the "badest bitch" in the crowd stand up. A butch woman rises from her seat and the women around her cheer. Mo'Nique yells to her, "I'm yours!" This kind of explicit performance of sexual desire and satisfaction, even hypothetical or in joke-form "talks back" to the state. It is this "literalization, manipulated across the explicit body, [that] triggers issues of the state, the family, gender and race" (Schneider16). Mo'Nique makes visible and celebrates the ways women use intimacy as a means of creating a livable life. The comedic undertones reveal and fashion new possibilities for discourse around desire and queerness. Mo'Nique makes visible and audible the possibilities of erotic autonomy in spite of and against state restriction. "Getting gay" as survival voices rather than forecloses or shames women's abilities to find and act on lesbian desire as both rebellious counter-actions and also meaningful ways of self-satisfaction and community.

SCRIPTED ESCAPES

The title of this dissertation, *Modalities of Freedom,* asserts that generating laughter through Black feminist comedic performance can instill and work as embodied dissent from oppressions. Laughing is an act of freedom in the performances I examine insofar as it is unrestrictive and allows for a kind of corporeal release or decompression

of myriad cultural constraints. Modality is a method or a particular mode in which something is expressed, while freedom is the power to express joyful affect. *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!* takes these claims even further by insisting that laughter can be the "only freedom one needs." The special posits that laughter is not just a modality of freedom, but *the* gateway towards authentic self-expression.

Mo'Nique and the audience navigate the borderlands between everyday survival tactics and material critiques of the state. *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!* seeks to empower the inmates, while recognizing they have limited means to do so. In this sense she is working with Black feminist humor to engage and unite women in the audience. As I explore further, these instances engage in rhetorical turns that rely on and encourage personal responsibility and positive thinking through what I term "scripted escapism." The freedom Mo'Nique asks the women to obtain does not come from radical (and perhaps seemingly unattainable) political and social change. Rather, it resides in their abilities to generatively, beyond the confines of the prison, and also beyond patriarchal and white supremacy that guide the ethos of the nation's prison system and gender and racial inequity. Mo'Nique's performance, at times, thus settles for sentimentality and self-help rather than attention to and resistance against structural oppression. Throughout a section of her performance, as I will analyze in more depth, Mo'Nique commands the women in the audience, especially when they are having a difficult time, to imagine a particular elsewhere in which they are not only free, but joyous, sensuous, and in command of their bodies and environments. This particular modality of freedom privileges a survivalist epistemology—scripting empowerment

through imagery.

The line repeated throughout the performance, "I coulda been your cellmate," takes a distinct tonal shift towards the end of Mo'Nique's hour-long performance. Moving from present participle to conditional verb tenses, Mo'Nique proclaims instead of I "coulda been" to "*If* I was your cellmate." For the first time in the performance, she deliberately places herself in the position of prisoner. Mo'Nique begins a slow, sultry monologue by stating; "Baby, let me tell you something, if I was your cellmate, bitch in my mind, in my mind [...]" She is serious. Emphasizing each syllable—elongating and repeating, "mind." She says, "In. My. Miiiiiiiiind." The audience falls quiet as she continues: "I would wear a fabulous gown. Every fuckin' day. And I would *walk* [My emphasis]." She saunters across the stage, her shoulders seductively shimmying. The women in the audience begin to hoot and cheer at Mo'Nique. Her profile is turned to the audience. She dips her head down over her shoulder and speaks slow and low into the microphone: "Y'all would say 'Bitch, what color is your gown today?' I'd say 'Blue bitch!'"(*Cellmate*).[28]

Here, I believe is where Mo'Nique's strategy to give the inmates a sense of freedom falls short of providing the kind of community and Black feminist resistance that much of the performance fosters. Mo'Nique's approach to empowering the inmates in the audience, at times, undermines and condescends their material conditions. I bring up the limits of Mo'Nique's performance because, as Jose Muñoz articulates, "limits" mean

[28] Three years later, Mo'Nique won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for her role in the film *Precious: Based on the Novel* Push *by Saphire.* She wore a beautiful royal blue gown to the ceremony.

something other than failures when discussing dissentive performance strategies. Critics hold responsibilities to "call attention to some of the material and psychic forces that work against the disidentifying subject." I agree with Muñoz, and find Mo'Nique's tactics to, for the most part, be radical and uplifting. Her use of scripted escapes, however, make obvious that the inmates cannot always escape "the atmospheric force field of ideology. Neither [are they figures] who can effortlessly come out on top every time. Sometimes disidentification is insufficient" (162-163).

Scripted escapism asks the inmates to retreat into their imaginary and perhaps detract from the material realities that prevent women (especially those of lower/working class and of color) from being able to work outside state systems. This motion towards self-help or "therapeutic rhetorics" as communication scholar Dana Cloud argues, belittle rather than fulfill the difficult work of social change. I agree with Cloud's elaboration that states, "critique and self-awareness, however, are in a sense prepolitical events. When personal work and intellectual understanding become ends in themselves for feminist theory, the therapeutic motive cannot be far away" (105). This "therapeutic motive" seeks to rehabilitate the individual rather than critique systemic institutions that uphold governmental and cultural practices that oppress and marginalize not just women in the criminal justice system, but also those outside white, middle-class, and heterosexual norms. This script is similar to the times Mo'Nique offers the women options to maneuver around rules regarding sex and masturbation. However, this offering is less rebellious, and relies on imaginaries of capital wealth and consumer culture.

Mo'Nique extends this gesture of imaginary freedom and personal responsibility

to the entire audience when she encourages the women to make the most of their time at the OWR. She tells the women, "For those of you who are going home, get that number tattooed on your fucking arm, so when you think about doing some shit […] look at that bitch so you'll never want to come the fuck back in here again." At this point in the performance, the tone becomes very serious. The women clap in support, but unlike the more comedic scenes, there is little vocal response. Mo'Nique still maintains efforts to support, empower and build community among the audience, but does so in a way that preaches the importance of individualism and imagination making herself complicit in systemic and State controls. This is particularly evident when Mo'Nique gives the audience advice for coping with difficult times.

> Whatever you believe, that's what it's gonna be. If you believe that you in jail, guess what? You're in jail. But if you I believe I'm somewhere to make it better for me and my family, that's where you are. So whenever you feel like you're in jail, close your motherfuckin' eyes and go on a vacation, 'cause in your mind is where you are.

Under the guise of comedic performance, Mo'Nique attempts to offer the women with tools for survival that gives a sense of freedom with little attention to the actual conditions of their individual lives as well as the prison system. The "personal as political" suddenly becomes the only viable option for the audience. However, as Cloud contends, the "[personal as political] as the site of analysis and change, it collaborates with the liberal ideology's attempts to contain issues of power and struggle in the private sphere" (105). In this case, employing concepts of erotic autonomy or disidentifications through Black feminist humor contains resistance as individualized and there fore undermine attempts at challenging the State. This portion of the performance certainly

seeks to bind women and indicates both a sense of survival and subjectivity for those who are usually silenced by the prison system. Angela Davis argues, **"**There has always been a tendency to regard those women who have been publicly punished by the state for their misbehaviors as significantly more aberrant and far more threatening to society than their male counter parts (*Prisons* 66). Mo'Nique not only assumes guilt of each of the inmates, but also asks them to be come solely responsible for their rehabilitation. Privatizing social responsibility is (intentionally or not) a rhetorical turn that detracts from structural systems that work to uphold white, capitalist supremacy.

I Coulda Been Your Cellmate! was released at the cusp of a leap forward in Mo'Nique's performance career. Born Monique Imes on December 11, 1967 in Baltimore Maryland, Mo'Nique "always wanted to be famous" and a talk show host, but didn't know she wanted to do comedy. In 1987 she graduated from the Broadcasting Institute of Maryland. Shortly after, Mo'Nique's performing/comedic career began when she did her first open mic at the Comedy Factory Outlet in downtown Baltimore. Mo'Nique's standup career soon took off. She became the first female host on *Showtime at the Apollo* in 1989, and participated in the all female comedy special *Queens of Comedy* in 2004. From 1999-2004 she played the lead role on UPN's television series *The Parkers*. While Mo'Nique is now most widely recognized for her Oscar winning performance in *Precious: Based on the Novel Push by Sapphire,* Mo'Nique's career has spanned three decades, and she has donned many different roles and personas—such as actress, comedienne, author and talk show host. In *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!,* Mo'Nique hones and refines her performance persona as both outlandish and

inspirational.

Mo'Nique's blend of comedic persona/self-help guru began in when she became hostess and executive producer of the reality show *Mo'Nique's Fat Chance.* The miniseries aired on the Oxygen Network from 2005-2007 and was a beauty pageant for "fabulous and thick" women. Described by Ebony magazine as "passionate when it comes to negative portrayals of women" she saw the television show *Charm School* as an opportunity to instruct "the cursing fussing and spitting castoffs from the widely popular *Flavor of Love* series" how to "hang up their hoochie dresses and don pleated skirts and crested blazers" (*Ebony,* 69). Mo'Nique told *Ebony* magazine in 2007 that her reasoning for doing the show was not to judge, but rather act as a role model for the women. "I know their stories […] And I'm no better than those women. My path is just different." (Mo'Nique as quoted in *Ebony,* 70). While Mo'Nique expresses empathy and compassion for the women who seek her guidance, her tone of condescension is sometimes undeniable. Instructing the women to get their prison number tattooed on their arms, for example, asks the women to literally inscribe and reduce their experiences to personal responsibility.

The limits of this method of dissent are especially apparent given the lack of humor in this section of the performance. Mo'Nique assumes that the crux of her performance are the moments of seriousness, but actually, the most effective parts of the performance are when truth is revealed through jokes and laughter. When Mo'Nique moves away from comedic truth telling, she moves away from her reputation as a comic that can both make fun of and articulate the complexities of harsh oppressions. Her

seriousness, her insistence that we are "all one bad decision away" from ending up in prison, attempts to universalize the experience of the inmates. This work erases the specificities of not only imprisonment, but also the experiences of racialized and queer bodies in the audience. In her attempt to impart inspiration to her audience, Mo'Nique's performance becomes less nuanced. Issues of sexuality, intimacy, race and class recede into the background, as individualized blame and rehabilitation become the thesis of this bit.

I return to "limits" because I believe Mo'Nique's attempt here is not a complete failure. The scripted escape does offer up to the inmates a method of imaginary freedom that moves away from the strict temporality of the prison system—planned meals, sentenced time, supervised parole, one-hour visitation. While this advice is not radical or what I would affirm as a completely successful disidentificatory practice, it does empower the women to employ performance as Sydné Mahone would say, to make waves in their worlds by "shifting the coastlines of consciousness" (xxii). Mo'Nique's words, "In my mind," shows the power of the individual. The women's hyper-regimented world shifts from static to dynamic.

The very ordinary work of imagination, as Kathleen Stewart would say, is an effective affect—privileging the seemingly "fleeting and amorphous" as an "emergent assemblage of disparate forms and realms of life." These ordinary affects layer onto the self, engendering "attachments or systems of investment in the unfolding of things" (21). Mo'Nique's scripted escape in this sense transforms/unlocks potential—letting loose through imaginary sensory experience and dreams. The act of imaginary does not contain

women to their material lives, but allows for fantasy that requires and delights in the body. Mo'Nique's strut as she plays out this imaginary scene, the enjoyment of her beautiful blue "gown," and the ability to take oneself on vacation all place the body within luxury and leisure. Even as these scripts move away from the material conditions of the women's lives, Mo'Nique privileges the marginalized female body as one that is capable of self-empowerment, ease and freeness under various painful and restrictive circumstances. What "unfolds" then, is a revelation of the possibility of empowerment and erotic joy through individualized meditation.

When examining "scripted escapes" in this way, we see that community is not lost at the expense of self-preservation. The script instructs the women to create their own worlds in which they feel free, but to also make space for each other to do so. The script provides the inmates with a language and a code to express their support of one another. If a woman needs to escape into her imagination, Mo'Nique asks her fellow inmates not to interrupt her reverie, but encourage it. The question, "What color is your gown today?" supports a sometimes necessary fantasy. With the script, the women have a shared language and embodiment with which they can express opposition to the state without fear of repercussion.

The temporary release of laughter, the communal bonding of sitting through a performance and Mo'Nique's insistence that the incarcerated women deserve joy, is an imperative modality of freedom. In this way, Mo'Nique's performance instigates. It proclaims the importance of women's freedom of expression, joy and Lorde's "assertion of the lifeforce of women" (55). This motive towards Black/feminist agency, as I seek to

understand it, is a constant negotiation of working against, outside of, or maneuvering around systems of power. So while laughter may or may not be "the only freedom one needs," this performance shows how it is a vital component to everyday living. That is, laughter and joyful affect are not frivolous, but rather required for survival.

HAND HOLDING

Black feminist comedic performance insists on humor and joyful affect as essential to resistance and key to a/effective and accessible coalition building. To negate joy from political resistance would be to ignore a host of vital and creative forces that motivate us to live in sites of possibility and liberation—not to mention the imperative communal nature of a radical feminist/anti-racist work. The final section of this chapter uncovers and revels in the importance of community that erupts from and in this performative space.

The serious, motivational tone of the show continues. The energy does not drop, however. The women cheer, laugh and slap each other's arm in agreement. When Mo'Nique explains why she wanted to come speak to women who are incarcerated, she becomes ardent and stern—towing the line between comedienne and motivational speaker. Her voice drops in tone, but rises in volume. Her face is pursed and serious, and her lips tighten:

> You know why I'm talking to y'all individually baby? 'Cause I want America to see that y'all are real human beings. That you're real women. Cause often times we live in a society that will throw you the fuck away like you no longer exist, and like you're not valuable or worthy. So I'm talking' to y'all for a fuckin' reason. So when they watch this tape they can see [...] I want people to see you still exist up in this, motherfucker. You're real, baby, *You're real. You're real. You're real* [my emphasis].

The repeated sentence, "You're real" functions as a declarative assertion of the women's power and a motivational push towards subjecthood. The inmates, particularly the women of color, have been reduced to invisible by the state and U.S. culture. While the act of being on stage is one of social protest—moving from private to public—the Black female body on stage has been subject to unfair and oppressive scrutiny. As However, Mo'Nique declares the women's existence and deservedness to be seen and heard. The women's response at the word "real" is immediate and booming. Their cheers and applause overlapping with Mo'Nique's words make the performance a co-creation. Mo'Nique is not talking at the inmates, but with them. This call and response is an affirmation of each other, and solidifies a community in which Mo'Nique and the inmates establish themselves as worthy, real and powerful under the gaze of the guards.

Being placed outside of subjecthood, or abjection, as Darieck Scott explains in *Extravagant Abjection,* is the process by which points of identity (race, gender, class, sexuality and nation) become both compromised and indefensible. He describes, "Abjection is experienced in the realm where the development of object relations is delayed or strays—thus preventing, even if only transiently, the subject from making its "normal" appearance" (15). "You're real" repeated over and over as the women cheer louder and louder names the inmates. Mo'Nique, standing tall with the microphone in one hand, and a small towel she uses throughout the performance to wipe sweat from her face, breaks the rhythm of the performance to make the inmates visible and heard as they cheer in response to her affirmations. "You're real," along with the accompanying

applause both employ language and the body to show the women as both existent and united within the confines of the prison and their subject position outside of it as well.

In what feels like another spontaneous or unscripted moment in the show, Mo'Nique takes a pause and confidently declares, "Now I notice, they say you can't hug. You're not supposed to hug. This is a different kind of occasion. If you sittin' next to a bitch, grab her and hug her. This is a different kind of show." This time, when Mo'Nique declares this performance to be a "different" type of comedy special, she is no longer anxious. The difference is not about fear, but rather an active effort to use the stage to facilitate experiences for the inmates that are either uncommon or not allowed. The camera cuts to the audience. Two Black women in pink shirts grinning from ear to ear generously, thoughtfully and joyously embrace. They release and then turn to the women sitting on the other side of them and repeat the gesture. It is fleeting, almost instantaneous. The scene pans to a larger section of the audience. There is an incredible lightness on everyone's face. A woman wraps each of her arms around the shoulders of two other women in front of her. Mo'Nique continues to encourage the women: "Reach out and touch a bitch. [...] There you go baby. Sometimes just to reach out and hug somebody will make all the difference in the world. To wrap your arms around another human being to say, 'Bitch, you're still loved.'"

This moment embodies and sets the intimacy Mo'Nique creates among the women throughout the show. I believe the laughter spawned closer bonding, but this action is a kind of seal of community and coalition among the inmates and between the audience and Mo'Nique. Even as the guards get anxious, Mo'Nique speaks on the

prisoner's behalf. She holds up her hand as the women continue to hug and shouts, "I know Warden, I know. I know, sister. They ain't supposed to do it. But right now everybody's watching them [...] they ain't gonna do shit to nobody." Even the this moment of rule breaking, in rebellious touch between women, the surveillance of the state makes itself known despite the camera never showing the guards during the performance. However, the women continue to hug. The camera pans to close ups of women embracing one another, some in long, tight embraces. Others put their arms around each other quickly, laughing as if embarrassed.

The physical touch among women is in direct opposition to the prison rules. The women hugging illustrate the ways intimacy and joy are not only closely watched, but restricted by the state. Mo'Nique uses her celebrity status and role as intermediary between the guards and the inmates to bend and break the rules of the institution. She risks the performance not running smoothly, as the guards have the power to shut it down. Mo'Nique's performance itself institutes new rules, if only momentary, regarding what kind of authority the guards have, and in what ways the women are allowed to connect to one another. It becomes immediately apparent that not only does Mo'Nique hold an immense amount of power as the intermediary between the guards and the inmates, but also that the inmates greatly outnumber the prison staff. The result of this moment in the performance, even under the supervision of the state, demonstrates the kind of power performance holds to facilitate intimacies among the women that had been previously punishable.

In a possibly staged, but seemingly extemporaneous moment, Mo'Nique closes

her show by bringing "a sista who can sing" onstage with her. The audience cheers and a group of women begin pointing to one of their fellow inmates, shouting to Mo'Nique that she can sing. They push her out of her seat. She walks out to the aisle slowly, reluctant, rolling her eyes. She is a Black woman with chin length straight hair. She has a high-security uniform of a pink shirt, navy blue hoodie (unzipped) and baggy pants. Her clothes are too big on her; the sleeves of her sweatshirt go past her hands making her seem younger than she actually is. She walks on stage looking uncomfortable, shoulders slumped. She is much shorter than Mo'Nique. Mo'Nique guides her to the center of the stage and jokes, "Now if she can't sing, we gonna womp womp this bitch out of here." The woman seems to relax at this and laughs. Mo'Nique takes her hand. We see the woman mouth to Mo'Nique, "I love you." Into the microphone Mo'Nique replies, "I love you back," and puts her arm around the woman. The inmate takes the microphone and sings an a cappella spiritual hymn:

> *I don't know about tomorrow, I just live from day to day/I don't borrow from the sunshine/For His skies may turn to gray/And I don't worry about my future, For I know what Jesus said/And today He walks besides me/For He knows what lies ahead.*[29]

The woman's voice echoes in the outdoor arena. It is deep, booming and raw. She takes her time, elongating the ends of each line. Belting the words "He walks beside me." She fills the stage and the audience cheers to encourage her. Mo'Nique throws up her hands, purses her lips and shakes her head. She is moved, holding back tears and looking down at the stage floor. As the singer finishes, Mo'Nique grabs the singer's hand

[29] This song, although never explicitly stated in the film is a gospel song written by Ira Forest Stanpill in 1950. It is called "I Know Who Holds Tomorrow."

(we never hear the woman's name) with tears in her eyes and says, "Take your bow." The crowd continues to cheer. Mo'Nique holds up her right hand to testify the powerful impact of the inmate's song. Shaking her head with tears in her eyes. The two women, alone onstage, embrace.

Throughout the show and during the woman's song, the voice plays an important role in Mo'Nique's performance. Both laughter and singing spawn a performance of vocal affect—affirming, communal and inherently resistant against the silencing of women, prisoners, and people of color. hooks' declares in "Performance as a Site of Opposition": "Throughout African-American history, performance has been crucial in the struggle for liberation, precisely because it has not required the material resources demanded by other art forms. The voice as instrument could be used by everyone, in any location" (211). Singing and laughter become accessible yet fundamental modes of freedom. Mo'Nique continues to hold the woman's hand. Openly crying she states,

> I'm here for a comedy show. That's why I came here. That's why I thought I came here. 'Cause a bitch believes she's funny. But I gotta tell you something, I'm holding on to her [the singer] for a reason: 'cause I can't let her go yet. [To the singer] When you walk outta these doors don't you look back. Do you hear me? With a voice like that, the only person who can fuck it up is you. That voice ain't from nobody else but God […] So with that voice, you gonna touch a whole lotta people.

Mo'Nique turns to the prisoner on stage, looks her in the eye and implores her to not "fuck up again." Laughter provides the release from restriction, while the community built in the performance and a step further, transformation.

Mo'Nique tells the audience to "be cool" because she notices the guards growing nervous about a prisoner being on stage. It becomes unclear to whom Mo'Nique is

speaking—the guards, the audience, perhaps herself. She squeezes and shakes the singer's hand and states, "This right here is another woman. I don't know why the fuck she's here. That ain't my business. But right now, she's my sister. And we hand in hand." Mo'Nique turns to the woman and says, "When you opened up your mouth, beauty came out of it."

Mo'Nique is speaking directly to the woman who sings, but I believe this line symbolizes the power of Black feminist comedic performance and the laughter from this particular audience. Both singing and laughter reverberate, energetically enhancing the present moment and persisting into the future. Vocal affect from the gospel hymn and response from the audience throughout the performance create a sacred space. These kinds of vibrations hold "power to produce new possibilities for social attunement and new modes of living" (Wald 675). The singer, Mo'Nique and the inmates co-create collectivity through call and response, intimate exchanges of touch and a shared experience of the performance.

This chapter has explored how Black feminist humor is a unique performative tactic that holds potential to unite women and other marginalized groups together. The introduction to this dissertation posits the questions: can laughter generate a sense of freedom? This question continues to fuel and highlight the stakes of this work, but takes on new meaning given the context of *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!* Mo'Nique's insistence on the women's human right to feel joy and feel good means that laughter is a powerful testament to the political importance of comedy and Black feminist performance. I have shown the ways in which Mo'Nique employs the performative tools

of disidentification, erotic autonomy, intimacy and scripted escapes through comedic performance. Engaging in these theoretical concepts through humor expresses, encourages and makes space for dissent, sexual agency and coalitions across difference. *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!* exemplifies both the affective and political ramifications of a Black feminist humor. Mo'Nique was correct in stating that this show was not a typical comedy show. While the circumstances of the performance were different than that of an open mic, a show at the Apollo or *The Queens of Comedy,* it did not stray from what Black feminist comedic performance is. Rather, it epitomized it by generating unity and subverting (even momentarily) state control. The prison grounds transformed and transcended state rules into a celebratory, sacred arena. The time and place of the performance allowed women to come together, even if just temporarily, to privilege their own experiences, differences and joys. I contend that Black feminist politics, queer world making and intimacies among women not only are enlivened by, but also require expressions of joy and freedom. While unity is not a given across racial, gendered and sexual lives I believe Mo'Nique's comedy reaches across them in service of transformation and the community comes from the audience's vocality.

CHAPTER THREE: Conclusion

On January 6, 2014 *Saturday Night Live* producers announced that the newest cast member of the show, now in its thirty-ninth season, would be Sasheer Zamata. Zamata was hired after a very public controversy in 2013, centering on *Saturday Night Live'*s lack of Black women cast members. That September, cast member Jay Pharaoh had declared in an interview with MSNBC that *SNL* producers needed to "pay attention" to the deficiency of diversity on the program.[30] Pharaoh's comments spawned a host of media attention, and soon after, the show conducted auditions, rumored, for Black women only. Zamata made the cut, and she is the first Black female cast member since Maya Rudolph left the program in 2007, and the fifth Black female cast member in the show's history.

For Zamata's debut on the program on January 19, 2014, she kept a low profile—appearing in only two segments. First, she played a wife to Kenan Thompson. The joke progresses as such: the host of the show that week, Drake, tells the story of his Bar Mitzvah. As he toasts various members of his family, he thanks his Uncle Larry and Auntie Kim who "came all the way from Memphis." Uncle Larry (Thompson) walks to the microphone with a woman on his arm, played by Zamata. She is all smiles wearing a form-hugging black and white dress with an ornate hat, and cheerfully exclaims in a

[30] See, http://thegrio.com/2013/09/27/snls-jay-pharoah-on-a-mission-to-bring-a-black-woman-on-cast-they-need-to-pay-attention/.

high-pitched voice, "Mazel Tov!" Uncle Larry turns to Drake and says, "This is your Auntie Ronda." Drake, with a confused look on his face, asks, "Um, what happened to Auntie Kim?" Larry responds nonchalantly, "Oh, she back at the house." The couple continues to smile, and Ronda slightly shrugs her right shoulder. The debut of the first Black woman on *SNL* since 2007 featured her as a cheerful, complacent mistress. The audience laughs, not at Zamata's comedic skill, but *at* her character.

In the only other segment in which Zamata acted, she played pop singer, Rihanna. In a "Before They Were Hip-Hop Stars" sketch, Zamata blends the singer's persona with the teenage sitcom *Blossom.* Zamata dances around as Rihanna to the opening credits of *Blossom.* She grinds her hips with her hands on her bent knees, runs her fingers down her chest and shakes her rear at the camera. The juxtaposition, tattooed, hypersexualized Rihanna, against the backdrop of white suburban fashion and cheesy music was the crux of the joke. However, Zamata (who looks nothing like, and required no actual impersonation of Rihanna for the sketch) remained voiceless and was essentially a stand-in for a parody of Black female sexuality.[31]

In contrast, Zamata's work as a writer, improvisation performer with Upright Citizens Brigade, and standup comedienne before she joined the cast of *SNL* was decidedly political and actively engaged in unpacking the invisibility of whiteness, the ways in which casting agents consistently tried to exploit and stereotype her blackness and her own sexuality as a heterosexual Black woman in the United States. For example,

[31] Following Pharaoh's comments, cast member Kenan Thompson, in an interview with TV Guide, blamed *SNL's* lack of Black female cast members not being "ready" enough for the audition process. He also announced that he would no longer be dressing in drag to parody Black women celebrities or characters in sketches. See, http://www.tvguide.com/News/SNL-Diversity-Issue-Kenan-Thompson-1072056.aspx.

in an April 2013 performance in New York City, Zamata lamented her experiences of going on auditions and being asked to play Black racial stereotypes under the not so subtle code word, "urban."[32] That year, Zamata directed a short video for Upright Citizens Brigade with a similar storyline. Before her audition for *SNL*, Zamata was frequently featured in feminist media outlets such as *BUST* and *Jezebel.*[33] In short, the disconnects between Zamata's skills and interests as an artist are now overshadowed by her ability to be the one Black female on *SNL* to play out the desires and tastes of predominately white writers and audiences.

As Zamata's career evolves in the much brighter spotlight of mainstream fame, I am interested in seeing how she (and *Saturday Night Live*) navigates the frequent tokenism of minority cast members. How might Black feminist comediennes of her generation unfold their comedic personas and politics in a culture that both exoticizes Black women and claims to be "post-racial" and "post-feminist?" What do the legacies and roads paved by Wanda Sykes, Jackie Mabley and Mo'Nique have to offer women of color beginning their careers today? And, what are the limitations of these legacies if Black female comics (especially in mainstream media outlets) are yet again constrained by racist and sexist archetypes that continue to render Black women objected/abjected in the public sphere? For example, while Zamata is still a novice on the *SNL* cast, she seemingly continues to be unnecessarily muted. A recent episode of *SNL* depicted

[32] For footage of this clip, see http://sasheer.com/#ea0/custom_plain.

[33] See Kelly Maxwell's, "Funny Lady Gets Flashed and Then Makes a Video About It, Obviously" on bust.com, and Anna Breslaw's "Comedian Gets Awesomely Meta About Her Encounter With a Flasher" on jezebel.com

Zamata, Kenan Thompson and Jay Pharaoh as teenagers who present a rap to their white classmates about Black history month. The rap, titled, "28 Reasons to Hug a Black Man" lists reason number one as, "We deserve a chance," and reasons two through twenty-eight, "Slavery." While this skit certainly employed comedy to "crack up" history, Zamata's role in the trio was that of background singer. Her gender, used only for a distant melodic flare in the rap, is both exploited and, once again, relegated to the margins. What then, are the conditions under which Black feminist comics can create work (mainstream or otherwise) that places their own voice at the center of what audiences receive?

This dissertation demonstrates three complementary mechanisms of Black feminist comedy: "cracking up" history, queer/quare self-presentation and time, and community building. I showed how these theoretical and performance modalities shore up motions towards joy and freedom. I have examined Black feminist comedic performers who have stood up to and against the silencing realms in which Zamata currently resides. Wanda Sykes, Jackie Mabley and Mo'Nique Black feminist comedies expand ideas of Blackness, queerness, community and the genre of standup itself. In Chapter Two, I showed how comedic performance "cracks up" hegemonic narratives that relegate minority subjects, Black queer women in particular, to the very fringes of dominant narratives about the U.S. past. Wanda Sykes' demonstrated how joke telling offers up new ways of understanding time and history. I argued that joke telling is a method of dislocation whereby audiences can be transported or redirected away dominant narratives of history. I examined how Sykes imbue quareness into her performances, and

also the notion that laughter is, in and of itself, a queering of time. It synthesizes and crystalizes cultural/individual pasts and bonds us in a slowed-down present moment of communal engagement.

Chapter Three investigated the scarce and scattered archive of Jackie "Moms" Mabley. Through close readings of her recorded performances, I believe that Mabley's comedic persona and her work as an artist (quare and decidedly Black feminist) complicates and challenges what it meant to be a Black American comedienne, solo performer and diva in twentieth century United States. This work is the start of what I hope to be a continual project to piece together Mabley's disparate archive, and generate more discourse on her groundbreaking role in performance and United States' history. Finally, in Chapter Four, I showed how disidentificatory performance practices, performances of erotic autonomy and sporadic, improvised moments of intimacy through joke-telling, supersede rules of state restriction and containment, and thus facilitate community bonding. I examined Mo'Nique's recorded comedy special, *I Coulda Been You're Your Cellmate!* as a demonstrative artifact of this very kind of bonding. Mo'Nique employs humor as a disidentificatory performance strategy (within, but against the state) that engages the audience to reflect on shared experiences and create laughter to survive as autonomous subjects even while under the confines of state power. Performance of the erotic and dissentive motions against the state through improvised intimacies among the audience made Mo'Nique's performance a salient example of how comedy dissolves distances between audience and performance, and binds us together.

As I continue this research, I am interested in understanding more about how

Black feminist comediennes have worked together to create work that maneuvers within and around an entertainment industry that finds it acceptable to include only one Black actor or actress among predominantly white performers. I want to understand how Black female standup comics have dealt with the lineages of sexism and racism within the world of standup comedy. For example, given the historical connections between standup and Blackface/minstrel performance in the United States, in what ways did Black female standup comics in the early and mid-twentieth century work within and against legacies of white supremacy and misogyny in their personal and professional lives and how does this connect to what Black feminist comediennes are creating today? Collaborating with scholars working in radio, television and film studies, race and ethnic studies and other interdisciplinary scholarship, I wish to create more coherent curricula addressing the important roles female comedians have had in reflecting, resisting and/or reshaping culture. I want to continue to explore the question: what kind of intimacies, ephemeral and lasting, does the work of comedy and the act of laughter create among Black women, queer people and minority subjects?

The comediennes in this dissertation represent different styles of comedy, but across their work is a commitment to theorizing, through performance, the lived conditions of Blackness, gender, queer subjectivities and/or working class identities. While comedy is still underrepresented in performance studies scholarship, Sykes, Mabley and Mo'Nique show the ways in which joke telling can be a repository for unearthing and unpacking feminist and anti-racist discourse. This work matters for the performers themselves, but also reaches far into the audiences' psyche, because as

Haggins argues, "it is within spaces not marked as necessarily pedantic or particularly threating that people might actually become open to questioning their ideological presuppositions—whether during their spectatorial experience or in the post viewing musing" (243). The comic works as a messenger that both offers and creates new ways of knowing how laughter touches beyond the ephemera of the performance space. The Black feminist comic expresses and produces resonating affect. That is, the comedienne expresses an out-loud emotional state through humor, and in turn generates a new affective community. Gregory Seighworth and Melissa Gregg argue that affect (in this case, laughter) is action because it is "persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations" (1). Therefore, laughter is memory–laden affect: an embodied feeling that reminds us of ourselves and our relationships to culture.

Archiving Voices

This dissertation has been running alongside a seemingly unrelated project. In 2009 I began, after so many years of avoidance, listening to the archive of my father's morning radio show. He worked for a country station in Springfield, Illinois. The show ("Sid and Susanne in the Morning") is fairly apolitical, tailored to white audiences in and around the small state capitol. Because he passed away when I was very young, I have no understanding of whether or not my father would be able to make sense of my work, other than the fact that he was so kind to every listener that called in. His politics seemed to be that of Southern hospitality (he was from Texas), which I of course am suspicious of, having grown up in Chicago. I thought of listening to and writing about Sid as

personal, performative and a "side project." My work in his archive is about understanding what we cannot remember, understanding an ineffable longing and coming to, as close as we can, that which seems unreachable across space and time. The tapes of his voice have become the closest I will ever be to relating to him and laughing along with him. In the last weeks of finishing my final drafts of each chapter, the now obvious the overlap between the tapes of my father's radio show and my scholarship in humor studies became apparent to me. I do not believe the content of "Sid and Susanne" and the work of Wanda Sykes, Jackie Mabley and Mo'Nique aim towards the same kind of worldmaking. However, like the sad lyrics of heartbreak undercut through upbeat country rhythms, the kind of laughter and joking that results from the pain of social injustice and historically resonating oppressions, I am dedicated to understanding how our voices hold space for multiplicity: anger, hope, fear, fierceness, grief, freedom, joy.

At the heart of *Modalities of Freedom* is a deep commitment to theorizing the work of and archiving Black feminist artists who believe in the political and cultural power of a laugh and the ability for a joke to carry on in our individual and collective imaginaries. Laughter carries and connects, or as Jacob Smith says, "is a kind of suture between the rigid and the flexible, the social and the individual, the mechanical and the human" (22). In short, laughter is a distinct kind of action, a modality that binds us just as much as it expresses our individual desires, fears, histories and delights. The performances I explored in this dissertation demonstrate the ways in which humor holds concrete political dimensions, and shows what happens when we take, as Della Pollack explains, "A performance-centered approach to culture [which] displaces narrative into

practice" and ultimately "shifts culture itself into the subjective register of *what if, as if, could be*" (122). Pollack does not claim that performance is a cure-all for social ills, or that it is always successful. What she does interrogate, however, are the ways in which it can strategically point towards possibility. In other words, performance asks and stages what social and political equity require. The artistic works I examine throughout my dissertation demonstrate how performance reconfigures silence and marginalization into dynamic, shifting and affective work towards a better future.

My contention that humor is a kind of performance that unites communities and empowers individuals very much reflects Dolan's idea of the theatre as a Utopia—that performance and politics intertwine to give hope for our lives to be as "emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" as theatrical experience can and should be (*Utopia* 5). What I wish to name, however, is that because Black feminist humor so often negates the separations between performer and audience members, because laughter is inherently communal, and because Black feminist humor affirms racialized, gendered and queer experiences as valid, it holds the potential to bring women and their allies together in such a way where many other marginalizing performances fail or remain alienating.

My dissertation works to understand how Black feminist comedy gives scholars, performers, and audiences a lens with which to view the transformative clout of humor. This is not just to see how this form entertains, or expresses feminist political thought in an accessible way, but how it can provoke motions and actions towards political and social justice. Most importantly, the performers in this dissertation employ Black feminist

comedy to unite and ignite women with a sense of freedom—to revel in the joy that comes from laughter. Indeed, this embodied action is one that should be taken quite seriously—for in all its playfulness, Black feminist comedic performance both exemplifies and demands a futurity of self-determination, empowerment and collectivity.

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