

Cracking up: Black feminist comedy in the twentieth & twenty-first century United States

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Amani Starnes

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I do not want the party to end.
 Sifting through invitation lists,
 I find myself waiting for folkx to arrive.
 And so I grapple with the awareness of absence,
 I swerve with the entanglements that
 Helped originate the alternate worlds
 That queer people of color seek in order to survive.
 And so, the party must go on.

Notes

1. see “We’re Gonna Party” by The Weather Girls.
2. Chambers-Letson xvi–xvii.
3. Chambers-Letson 41.
4. Chambers-Letson 59.
5. Chambers-Letson 82–83.
6. Johnson qtd in Chambers-Letson 82.
7. see “Call Me Mother” by RuPaul.
8. Chambers-Letson xiii.
9. Chambers-Letson 158.
10. Chambers-Letson 192.
11. Chambers-Letson 175.
12. Chambers-Letson 206.

Work Cited

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Pablo Ramirez
 Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA
 ✉ pramir30@asu.edu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8102-9643>

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Cracking up: Black feminist comedy in the twentieth & twenty-first century

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In her debut manuscript, Katelyn Hale Wood captivatingly spills the historical tea as she fills us in on the affective and political workings of hitherto under-theorized Black feminist comedic performance (BFCP). As she brings Black women’s humor into the fold of performance studies, Wood deftly employs Black queer and feminist theory to offer a clear and comprehensive interdisciplinary investigation of the underpinnings of the recurring, yet ever-changing phenomenon of Black feminist comedy in the United States. Flush with both sincere analysis and delightful punnery, *Cracking Up: Black Feminist Comedy in the Twentieth*

✂ *Twenty-First Century United States* serves up a smart entrée to the serious business of “cracking up,” the organizing principle of this study of BFCP and its eponymous title. In four chapters, Wood argues the foundational importance of BFCP and its constituent laughter. In “cracking up” audiences and flawed histories, BFCP literally and figuratively “stands up” to white heteropatriarchal power as it dismantles legacies of racialized and gendered oppression. Through case studies of some of America’s most audacious Black women comics, Wood showcases BFCP as an embodied strategy that not only entertains, but also destabilizes dominant narratives of race, gender, and sexuality.

Methodologically, Wood combines archival research and performance analysis to situate BFCP within a broader genealogy of Black performance traditions, showing how BFCP has evolved as a form of cultural labor that reflects and shapes Black feminist thought and performance practices. Wood traces Black feminist comedy back to its roots in the work of Jackie “Moms” Mabley through the eras of Black vaudeville and the Chitlin’ Circuit, to the Apollo Theater’s pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement, to the present. Wood demonstrates how BFCP disrupts and redefines existing cultural archives of the 1960s and 2007–2019. She delineates a pertinent and comprehensive theoretical framework for interpreting emergent BFCP of the past and present.

Chapter 1, “Laughter in the Archives,” delves into the legacy of Jackie “Moms” Mabley, the Black queer vaudevillian actor who, in the 1920s, emerged as the nation’s first standup comic and went on to lead a profoundly successful life as a comedian and activist. Wood argues that mainstream and scholarly texts have not only misremembered her contributions to Black queer theater and performance history but also erased or ignored evidence that Mabley’s work shaped and relied on a Black queer performance aesthetic. Thus, this chapter “cracks up the archive” (Wood 28), as it seeks out queer and feminist possibilities in the paltry annals of Mabley’s life and work. In doing so, Wood reveals how Mabley, using her comedic persona as “Moms,” served as a “political conduit” (32) through which Mabley could critique heteronormative power with audacious truth telling and embrace her own pleasure and desire.

The following chapter, “I Love You Bitches: Spect-actors and Affective Freedom in *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!*,” locates Black queer aesthetics in the more contemporary comedy of Mo’Nique. Wood turns to the 2007 filmed version of Mo’Nique’s standup performance at the Ohio Reformatory for Women, revealing how Mo’Nique and her audience use queer of color performance strategies and Black feminist comedy to undermine the protocols of incarceration. Wood highlights how Mo’Nique’s comedy promotes pleasure, sexuality, and solidarity to reject the dehumanizing discipline of the carceral panopticon. Through embodied pleasurable protest, manifested in her campy stage design, a fabulously chic redesigned prison jumpsuit costume, and invocations of Black women’s sexuality, Mo’Nique positions herself as a stand-in and advocate for the audience of incarcerated women. In articulating how Mo’Nique “cracks up the confines of our prison system with erotic expression” (65), Wood shows that the embodied acts of sexual release and laughter can coalesce into a form of affective resistance. Wood astutely notes how Mo’Nique occasionally undermines the solidarity she’s cultivated with the incarcerated women by aligning herself with prison guards or patronizing inmates with self-help advice. But because Mo’Nique co-creates felt liberation with her audience, these now empowered women can rescue this ebullient affective state from Mo’Nique’s blunders.

In the third chapter, “The Black Queer Citizenship of Wanda Sykes,” Wood highlights Sykes’ ability to “crack up” audiences’ notions of linear social progress that constructs US citizenship as being accessible to everyone and ignores the multi-faceted and diverse experience of Black queer womanhood. Sykes, wary of the enduring political and cultural contradictions that threaten her civil rights, points us to the regressive 2008 passing of Proposition 8, which banned same sex

marriage in California, in the same year America progressively elected its first Black president. Analyzing Sykes' 2008 remarks outside of the Southern Nevada LGBT Community Center, her 2009 comedy special, *I'ma Be Me*, and her performance at the 2009 White House Correspondents' Dinner, Wood demonstrates how Sykes uses comedic civil rights rhetoric similar to that of Mabley's. Like Mabley, Sykes operates as the figure of a Black lesbian truth teller who's all too aware of the threats to Black queer citizenship at any given time in America's past, present, or future. As US institutions buckle under political pressure to roll back civil rights, as evidenced by the repeal of *Roe vs. Wade*, the banning of books and diverse curriculums, and the dissolution of DEI and diversity programs across industries, this chapter resonates as being chillingly timely.


The book ends by recognizing the work of an up-and-coming generation of Black women comics leading a standup renaissance. Chapter four, "Contemporary Truth Tellers, A New Cohort of Black Feminist Comics," turns to comics Sam Jay, Sasheer Zamata, Michelle Buteau, and Amanda Seales, whose work responds to the sociopolitical environment of the Trump Era, new racism, and the Me Too and Black Lives Matter movements. Equipped with the advent of digital media to build new and diverse audiences, these women use their platforms and standup routines to create inclusive spaces for minority audiences, reject and critique neoliberal assimilation into heteronormative gender roles and traditions, tackle sexual violence in the entertainment and comedy industries, and critique white fragility. In a Black feminist tradition, these comics inspire audiences to break down power structures that harm rather than heal.

Among the book's greatest strengths is Wood's attention to embodiment in BFCP. This kind of attention conjures a vivid, almost corporeal experience of her close readings that evidences the power and import of the performances she analyzes. For example, Wood's identification and subsequent description of the "vibrational exchange" (78) Monique facilitates between herself and female inmates as an affective "[movement toward freedom]" (78) brought me to tears and drew me closer to these women. This is one of many instances in which Wood's writing maximizes the affective impact of the BFCP to which she attends.

Somewhat lamentably, the book leaps over the decades between Mabley's work, which ended in the 1970s, and Monique's standup of the early 2000s, wherein many Black women comics of note performed significant work worthy of inclusion in this type of analysis. But this historical gap inspires a suturing through future performance and theater studies work on BFCP and embodiment in this era. Otherwise, the book serves as an excellent model for effective performance studies writing and scholarship. Accessible and inspiring, *Cracking Up* deserves a place in the minds and on the shelves of graduate and upper-level undergraduate students and their instructors. Wood's study is no joke; it is a must-read for scholars working in the spaces of theater and performance, comedy, Black studies, queer studies, gender studies, and beyond.

Works Cited

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Amani Starnes
Pomona College, Claremont, CA, USA
 amani.starnes@pomona.edu

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