Embodying Extraness: Leslie Jones's Black Feminist Comedic Strategy

Amani Starnes

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Abstract. This article takes up Leslie Jones's 2014 debut performance on *Saturday Night Live's* "Weekend Update," in which she introduced her "#1 Slave Draft Pick" joke. Within the framework of Black Feminist Comedic Performance (BFCP), I analyze Jones's performance to introduce the concept of "Extraness," a strategic mode of Black feminist comedic embodiment. I schematize Extraness as performing excessive acts of self-expression, subverting stereotypes, and articulating an affective and phenomenological outsideness. The concept extends beyond mere excess, evolving into a strategic technique for self-actualization and embodied critique as it confounds linear conceptions of time and progress. The article posits Extraness as the reclaiming of the unruliness assigned to Black women's bodies across time and space. I explore the dynamic relationship between the joke and audience perception, shedding light on the role of Extraness in shaping spectatorship, and highlight the complexity of Extraness, which may agitate some viewers' sensibilities while fostering a sense of community among others. I contend that Extraness, though challenging for some audiences, remains an essential tool for Black women comedians to confront and reshape narratives about their experiences.

On May 3, 2014, after a decades-long journey as a widely unknown stand-up, Black comedian Leslie Jones joked her way into the national consciousness after her debut appearance on *Saturday Night Live*'s "Weekend Update" with Colin Jost and Cecily Strong. She loudly and forcefully performed her now infamous "#1 Slave Draft Pick" bit, in which she ironically riffs on the hypothetical notion that she would have never been single during US chattel slavery because she would be able to birth hearty male slaves. In doing so, she performs an embodied critique of the United States' past and present treatment of Black people, particularly women, through Black Feminist Comedic Performance (BFCP), a performance style that scholar Katelyn Hale Wood argues can generate "oppositional knowledge, resistance, and empowerment" ("Cracking Up Time" 10). Within the analytical frame of BFCP, Jones deploys a mode of Black feminist comedic embodiment, which I term "Extraness." Attuning to Black women's subjectivity, Extraness describes a comedic deviation from dominative culture's prescriptions of "acceptable" behaviors. It encompasses reclaiming marginalized status through excessive acts of self-expression, challenging enduring racialized gender tropes, and embodying a positionality of phenomenological outsideness. This analysis highlights the need to bring comedy studies into the discipline of theatre and performance studies, as it evidences the inextricability of comedy from the embodied conditions of performance.

I propose that Jones's *SNL* performance and her subsequent response exemplify the comic mode of Extraness, which yields the BFCP outcomes of, per Wood, "cracking up" historical legacies of racialized and gendered violence in the United States and challenging "cultural, political, and historical narratives that caricaturize and confine Black women to the dominant imagination" (*Cracking Up* 4, 13-14). It can, ultimately, cultivate a "kind of commune" between comedian and audience through a shared "joy and resistance" (14, 16). I aim to introduce an emerging schema for Extraness so that we might begin to recognize it in Jones's bit. Then, I read the bit through the lens of Extraness, delineating how Jones uses this mode of embodiment to enact a social and historical

critique. Lastly, I analyze how the relationship between medium and audience perception expands how we might understand the embodiment of Extraness and its role in spectatorship.

A Theory of Extraness

While anyone can be "extra," I turn to Jones as I focus primarily on enactments of Extraness that interrogate the racist and sexist stereotypes of Black American women as existing and behaving outside the realm of what heteropatriarchy deems "acceptable." This behavior can look like taking up space, forgetting their "place" in a hegemonic social pecking order, and doing "too much." Through Extraness, Black American women comedians simultaneously reclaim this marginalized status and its associated behaviors as they challenge it. Through "excessive" acts of self-expression—frequently in the form of vocality, gesture, self-styling, language, and dialogic call and response—Extraness illuminates social conventions that have long marginalized the rich knowledge inherent in Black women's perspectives through embodied connection and shared laughter. Scholar Hortense Spillers contends that Black American women have always been at the center of dominative modes of culture's myths about race and gender. She argues that Black American women were figured into a mythologized Other to reflect what the dominant culture was not (Spillers 65). These myths include racist historical Black archetypes and their pursuant iterations, including the submissive mammy, aggressive bossy Sapphire, and the hypersexual Jezebel figures. Extraness riffs on and subverts these enduring gendered tropes to send up misogynoir.[1]

At its heart, Extraness is the reclaiming and reappropriation of the "unruliness" assigned to Black women's bodies across space and time. Writer Rebecca Jane Stokes places the internet memeification of "extra" around 2015 and defines it as someone who is "simply too much."[2] As an adjective, noun, or adverb, *extra* can mean "beyond or more than the usual, stipulated, or specified amount or number; additional; in excess of the usual amount"; and as a preposition, it means "outside, externally to" (*OED*). Urban Dictionary's most upvoted definition is, "over the top, excessive, dramatic behavior, way too much." The second, most approved definition adds that *extra* is "anything excessive, unnecessary, uncalled for, inappropriate, out of place, etc.; basically, anything that shouldn't be there or have been said" (Urban Dictionary). Extraness, therefore, is a *doing* of both a relational status and an affective state. It enacts a positionality of outsideness or additivity to social conventions or protocols that reflexively call attention to the performer, said convention, and the relationship between the two. At the same time, Extraness can be the quality and embodied action of how the performer expresses a feeling or idea.

I expand on existing literature in African American comedy and BFCP that attends to notions of excess as a strategic technique of self-actualization and social critique to articulate a particular mode of BFCP. Extraness builds on the work of scholars like Glenda Carpio, J. Finley, Bambi Haggins, and Katelyn Hale Wood, who understand the performed excess of emotion, unruliness, and absurdity housed in Extraness as part and parcel of the social, political, and emotional efficacy of BFCP. Carpio and Wood align with Black performance studies scholars like Soyica Diggs Colbert, Thomas DeFrantz, Anita Gonzales, Douglas Jones, Jr., and Shane Vogel, who contest that Black performance does not adhere to Western patriarchal conceptions of linear time and progress. I invoke this argument in my formulation of Extraness as a BFCP strategy that confounds notions of linear time and space. Ultimately, to enact Extraness is to resist the racist and sexist disciplining norms that continue to police Black women's bodies and spirits. An embrace of this outsideness facilitates a fugitivity that permits Black women comedians to avoid spiritual capture by white hegemonic norms and systems across history while simultaneously pointing them out.

The Bit

Seated behind the fake news desk, a calm Jones chats with Jost, the boyish white straight man in the skit. Despite her initial reserve and pedestrian outfit, something about Jones already seems exceptional: her straightened hair sticks straight up. The sheen and gravity-defying stiffness connote some styling effort, but its seeming lack of "doneness" raises an eyebrow or two. The quirkiness of her look comes ironically into focus when Jost introduces her as an "image expert." In a girly voice, Jones sets up her ensuing joke, explaining that the petite actress Lupita Nyong'o had been named *People Magazine*'s "Most Beautiful Person" after winning an Oscar for depicting Patsy, an enslaved Black woman who is routinely sexually assaulted by her white enslaver in director Steve McQueen's 2013 film *Twelve Years a Slave*. Jones sheepishly demurs, as if to provoke sympathy, "The way we view Black beauty has changed." Then, in a near-complete energetic reversal, Jones amps up. She proclaims, "Back in the slave days, I would have NEVER been single!" She gesticulates with extreme swagger and power, emphasizing her words with a raised finger like a rapping MC, pointing it confrontationally at the audience on the word *never*. The punctuated gravel of the word rings decibels louder than the rest of her sentence, endowing her with a power slavery would not—the right of refusal.

Here, Jones already flirts with the unruliness ascribed to Black women's bodies as she shifts from a gendered expectation of feminine quiet and submissiveness to aural rowdiness. Her eyes bulge. The sotto growl of her voice and the jabbing of her finger toward the audience begin to reflect an aggressiveness unbecoming of a "lady." She goes on to exclaim, "I'm six feet tall and I'm strong, Colin, STRONG! I mean look at me, I'm a MANDINGO!" Her repetition and shouting of "strong" grates our sensibilities. Her sly smirk as she says "mandingo" lets us know she knows this is absurd. As she "hails" assumptions about contemporary Western standards of Black beauty, here exemplified by the soft-spoken and petite Lupita Nyong'o, Jones establishes herself as being *outside* of these standards by harnessing the aggressive stereotype intended to degender Black women. Employing "too much" volume, provocativeness, and energy, Jones premises her bit on this Extraness, which she uses to disidentify from beauty norms as she begins toying with stereotypes.

Furthermore, Jones harnesses an *extra*temporal and *extra*textual reference, "mandingo," to play on cultural associations with the term to further explode racialized gender norms and their accompanying stereotypes.[3] Jones's invocation of the controversial term makes us wonder how she will be embodying her gender. Will Jones be impersonating a woman or a man? Is she toying with the racist female Sapphire trope or that of the male mandingo? Introducing the uncomfortable topic of US chattel slavery into the room, Jones has already placed her bit two standard deviations outside of acceptable subject matter while also invoking a complex history of the relationship between slavery, Black performance, and Black womanhood. Her performance now brings with it an *excess* of sociocultural history to be processed within the frame of this bit. It's all so excessive and seemingly ridiculous that Jones's and Jost's faces contort to suppress their uncomfortable smiles and the relief that might come from laughter.

But Jones relieves the felt tension in the audience, returning to a more "serious" self when Jost asks her, "Leslie, you're not saying you'd rather be a slave, right?" She squares off with Jost and makes eye contact. In a measured pointed voice, she says, "No, that is not what I'm saying. I do not want to be a slave. Hell, I don't like working for you white people now, and y'all pay me." The intensity and sincerity of her delivery signal an underlying anger at white institutions like *SNL* with which Jones has come to contend.[4] She betrays her understanding of her position not just on the margins of Western beauty standards but also on the fringes of the very white *SNL* comedic industrial complex. Squared up to Jost, challenging him as the inquisitive white male voice of "reason," Jones engages in a critical moment of Black feminist comedic praxis. Jones asserts the authority derived from her experience as a striving Black woman comedy writer and the expectation that she should and will be heard. It is at the same time a proverbial wink to viewers and Colin, letting them know that she is in control, self-aware.

With the audience on board, she returns to her overtop, Extra, emerging persona—a hybrid self that is part Leslie Jones and part imagined slave woman. "Back in the slave days, my love life would have been way better. Master would have hooked me up with the best brother on the plantation and every nine months I'd be in the corner having a super baby. . . . Shaw! Kobe! LeBron! Kimbo Slice! Sinbad!" Now standing, she towers over Jost. She punctuates the annunciation of each basketball player's name with a downward backhand, evoking both a tennis serve and a baby ejecting from her womb. Jones publicly reenacts the private labor of birthing enslaved children marked for sale. At the same time, her listing of Black men's names echoes Black Lives Matter's "Saying His Name," the movement's political rhetorical strategy of honoring and invoking the memory of Black people killed at the hands of the police, and the forceful downward motion of her arm conflates the promise of sports for Black people with the violent action of striking Black men down. It is disorienting, a temporally dislocated mourning of the inevitable loss of Black people to violent racialized systems. She imbues her performance with a historical excess of meaning that overwhelms and challenges our sense of history. Extratemporally, Jones collapses the distance between the auction block, the NBA draft, and her own Black womanhood.

Jones wraps up the joke with, "I'm saying I would be the number one slave draft pick!" This birthing scene, now enacted on her own comedic and identity terms, becomes an ecstatic release that breaks her free from disciplining norms. The seeming incongruity of this too-loud, too-big, too-outspoken woman remixing histories and stereotypes of race and gender ensures that her Extraness makes her anything but superfluous. It makes her undeniable. Through Extraness, Jones can agentially rescript enduring intersectional trauma. Jones's Extraness conjures affective succor for herself and a larger network of debased Black American women haunted by the enduring vestiges of slavery, entertaining audiences into seeing and feeling the force of the peculiar institution. Jones's Extraness enacts the BFCP outcome of "generat[ing] meaning *in addition to* the performance and also *within* it," as it "co-creates joyful and resistant community" (Wood, *Cracking Up* 14, 15). Much like J. Finley's formulation of Black women comedians' raunchy humor as "an unconventional mechanism of social redress" (785), Jones's Extraness generates an affective space where Black women spectators' laughter can be an empowering and humanizing act of self-recognition. Jones can affectively rescue herself in and through the expanse of herself, as the force of her Extraness helps willing audience members do the same.

Jones's bit exemplifies how Extraness operates in practice as she distills an excess of feeling, historical meaning, and adverse experience into a performance that moves both her and her audience. As a distinct strategic mode of BFCP, it fulfills the promise of BFCP to excavate uncomfortable truths as it fosters a sense of empowerment, joy, and community.

Audience Response

Not everyone laughed at Jones's joke. And if they did, it may not have been how she wanted. Her repartee with Jost, with whom she continually flirts, undermines the power of her joke. The preppy white Jost laughs when Jones hits on him, and indicates that, no, he is not attracted to her. Jost is placed in a representational catch-22. If he does not go along with Jones's joke, he betrays the comedic imperative to always "say yes." On the other hand, by facilitating the joke and laughing at the idea of Jones as a potential partner, he affirms his own role in the hegemonic social norms Jones ultimately critiques. As the skit's straight man, his reaction to the zany Jones dictates the takeaway, potentially causing a heterogeneous audience to miss the critical nature of the entire performance. It undercuts and muddies her embodied critique as it potentially traps Jones in stereotypes and reifies the "rational" white male perspective as dominant and valid. While challenging norms by radically laying claim to her own version of Black womanhood may be a worthy endeavor, telling her joke in this setting risks diffusing its provocation.

Immediately following and even during Jones's "Weekend Update" appearance, many viewers from myriad racial and gender backgrounds, particularly Black women, took to social media platforms to virulently denounce the joke as inappropriate and not funny. This *extra*theatrical mode of viewership created conditions where excessive or "Extra" emotional responses evidence a diverse audience in which some viewers maintain fear of the reperformance of shameful racial histories and satirical modes of performance. Some lambasted Jones's joke as "racist," "irresponsible," and "not funny," suggesting that issues of slavery and allusions to forced breeding were not acceptable fodder for comedy.[5] This backlash inspired countless think pieces, reviews, op-eds, and blog posts in publications like the *Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Beast*, *The Grio*, etc. Aly Weisman at *Business Insider* reported that one commenter, writer and social strategist Mary Pryor, appeared to conflate the meaning of the word *mandingo* with *monkey* when she condemned Jones, posting, "Slavery/Forced Mating/Monkey jokes aren't funny let @nbcsnl @Lesdoggg know don't give this a green light" (qtd. in Weisman). This confusion signals hurt at what Pryor believed was Jones's invocation of an enduring racist and dehumanizing conflation of Black people with primates. An *Ebony* magazine editor, Jamilah Lemieux, went on to weaponize this kind of racist rhetoric against Jones when she posted, "This Leslie Jones person is an embarrassment @msmarypryor. I'm so appalled right now. . . . So the Lupita moment had to be counteracted by a Black woman acting like a big loud monkey?" (qtd. in Weisman). At no point in Jones's performance does she act like a monkey. Thus, this critique begs the question of what a viewer like Lemieux reads into Jones's performance.

Lemieux arguably reperforms the kind of dehumanizing and racist white supremacist rhetoric that reifies the false dichotomy between "beautiful" and "respectable" Black women like Lupita Nyong'o and "appall[ing]" and "embarrass[ing]" Black women like Jones—the very attitude Jones's joke seeks to interrogate. Lemieux would later publish an article condemning Jones's joke and criticizing her relative emotional and historical intelligence ("Once Again"). In this way, Jones's Extraness cracks up "fictions of Black womanhood" (Wood, *Cracking Up* 6)—here, the fiction being that Black women must look or behave in a certain way to warrant their consideration as such. As Jones's Extraness performs behaviors *outside* of what critics deem acceptable for Black women, unearthing a shared discomfort and historically rooted pain in others, including other Black American women, it also exposes that racist and sexist attitudes can insidiously endure, influencing how some audience members do or do not wish to see race and gender represented.

These reactions unmask sexist double standards about who can say, do, and joke about what. Jones, in this *Extra-* or metatheatrical space, responded by invoking the historical precedent for incorporating the theme of chattel slavery to call out the sexist double standards over who can comedically traffic in this taboo. In part of her response on X to her naysayers, Jones wrote: "I'm betting if Chris Rock or Dave [Chappelle] did that joke or jay z or Kanye put in a rap they would be called brilliant. Cause they all do this type of material. Just cause it came from a strong Black woman who ain't afraid to be real y'all mad" (200). She is correct. Dave Chappelle and other Black male comedians like Richard Pryor and Key & Peele have extensively used slavery to humorously critique past and current social inequities in front of heterogeneous audiences. As scholars Glenda Carpio and Lisa Woolfork both discuss, Black men's jokes about slavery, particularly Pryor's, have been praised as necessary satire for driving home the enduring sociopolitical and economic influence of slavery and as a useful way for Black people to approach traumatic knowledge. Black male comedians can operate in masculinist paradigms that allow them to side-step the relationship between slavery and intersectional oppression. Reactions to Jones's use of slavery reveal a viewing public ill-equipped to interpolate the narratives authored and authorized by Black women about Black female experience.

Jones's unruly Extraness, in its lack of regard for the "right" kind of audience, forces some viewers to confront their own discomfort with or ignorance of the *extra*social themes and behaviors it enacts. Operating *outside* the bounds of decorum and political correctness, Extraness always risks agitating some audience members' sensibilities and felt truths as they pertain to race, gender, history, and society. Perhaps the biggest worries are that it reperforms, instead of reclaims, stereotypes and

diminishes hard cultural truths. Despite the multiplicity of Black women's perspectives that Extraness can convey, the burden of representation attached to minority performers' bodies continues to stoke audience anxieties about how Extraness might represent Black women as a fallaciously monolithic whole. Furthermore, as the temporal invocations of Extraness comedically disrupt linear notions of racial and sexual progress, Extraness triggers a fear of their regression. For Extraness to function best as a satirical tool, as with most forms of satire, the audience must understand and agree on the tragic absurdity of the tragic realities that Extraness sends up. Thus, Extraness confounds the tidiness of "universal" legibility and supersedes readings on which viewers can agree. This very supersession continues to be an aspect of the essence of Extraness.

Conclusion

Jones facilitates an Extraness in viewers' felt responses that can no doubt be socially and politically instructive. While debate over the morality or efficacy of Jones's performance circulated widely, the skit also strengthened a sense of community among Black women, like myself and her many fans, hungry for nuanced and cathartic performances that interrogate Black women's emotional pain while evoking laughter. My hope is that Black feminist comedy studies scholars who labor from the fringes of theatre and performance studies with insistent calls for attention and loud, *extra* attempts at weaving in a (bad) joke or two will be successful in this centering. Jones's still relevant slave draft joke, which she continues to perform to this day, serves as the ideal comedic frame through which to explore the embodied practice of Black feminist Extraness, as it returns to and theorizes the scene of the crime of US intersectional oppression. Black feminist comedic performances like Jones's contain and elicit vital knowledge about how this oppression continues to work through bodies and into US life. Utilizing performance studies frameworks that take the power of comedic embodiment seriously is essential in the collection and harnessing of such knowledge. Black Feminist Comedic Performance, in all of its Extraness, finds its rightful home in the vital capaciousness of performance studies.

AMANI STARNES is an interdisciplinary performance scholar, performer, writer, dramaturg, and producer whose research, writing, creative practice, and teaching center Black feminist performance. She has dramaturgically consulted and performed under the direction of lauded stage and screen directors including Lin Manuel Miranda, Tim Robbins, Donald Glover, Jill Soloway, Craig Lucas, Shatara Ford, and Young Jean Lee. Starnes holds an undergraduate degree in theater studies with a concentration in performance from Yale University. She is a PhD candidate in theater and performance studies with a minor in feminist and gender studies at Stanford University and will join the Pomona College theatre department as an assistant professor of theatre histories in the fall.

Notes

1. I follow Bailey's definition of "misogynoir" as the "uniquely co-constitutive racialized and sexist violence that befalls Black women as a result of their simultaneous and interlocking oppression at the intersection of racial and gender marginalization" (1).

2. See also Chery.

3. While "Mandingo" formally refers to a member of the Mandinka people in West Africa, in the US historical imagination, it evokes imagery of enslaved people in the Americas, generally men, thought to have been forced to brutally fight one another to the death. The term itself came to suggest the stereotype of a sexually hungry well-endowed Black man, animalistic and strong, fit for breeding and fighting ("Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes").

4. *Saturday Night Live* has consistently struggled to showcase Black actors in a nuanced way, as it upholds what Gray calls an "industrial and aesthetic apparatus" that privileges whiteness (7).

5. As Callahan observes, "Twitter [X] wasn't feeling [Jones's] repertoire." Posts on X included: @james3neal's "I will *not* be watching #SNL @nbcsnl again for a very long time. Slavery, forced breeding & 'slave drafts' aren't comedic. #Leslie Jones," and @CocoaPopps's " Slave jokes? No, not the way to introduce another black contributor to #snl If you're funy [*sic*], you can make other material funny."

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