

Book Review

Lanita Jacobs. 2022. *To Be Real: Truth and Racial Authenticity in African American Standup Comedy*. New York: Oxford University Press. 201pp.

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Through years of watching and listening to live standup acts, interviewing comedians, and observing how current events make their way into the comedic psyche, anthropologist Lanita Jacobs has compiled a deeply personal, engaging, and real study. *To Be Real: Truth and Racial Authenticity in African American Standup Comedy* centers Black standup comedy as a stage for understanding notions of racial authenticity and “keeping it real.”

Finding solace in the performance of Black standup comedy specifically, throughout this longitudinal ethnographic study, Jacobs takes the comedy club as her haven. From attending multiple live comedy shows in and around Los Angeles over decades, and meeting and building relationships with the laborers of the comedic stage, Jacobs invests in the culture of this truly sacred fraternity of those who intend to make us laugh and becomes a part of it. As the genre of comedy is “characterized by expressive ‘lies,’ poignant ‘truths,’ and lively call-and-response, Black standup comedy offers a formalized and communal mechanism for commenting on daily and monumental tragedies, often in contrast to mainstream accounts” (p. 25). When the comedic subject matter is shifted to current political or social events, the Black comic often weaponizes their microphone for more than a laugh but also to be authentic, sincere, truthful, empathetic, or “real.” The main question that Jacobs asks throughout this book is “when, how, and most importantly, why Black folks feel compelled to ‘keep it real’” (p. 2). As a linguistic anthropologist, Jacobs catalogs the verbal strategies comics use to authenticate themselves as “real” or “real Black” and to coax audiences into endorsing their jokes about what Blackness, in its many forms, means (p. 4).

As America was built on racial hierarchy and injustice, Black Americans have historically used comedy as a balm for dealing with said injustice: laughing to keep from crying or laughing to keep from dying. With this history of employing comedy as armor in an unjust world, “realness” and speaking truth to power resonate as a cultural imperative to African American culture. Targeting moments where comics invoke notions of racial authenticity, Jacobs uses four case studies to make a case for how Black comics grapple with how to “keep it real” through empathy and critical perspective. Using “we” and “I” statements throughout, the Black comics (and Jacobs as well) signal in-group conversations, sincerity, and shared stakes in the ramifications of their comedic commentary. Focusing on the Black “comedic”

response to September 11, Hurricane Katrina, Michael Richards's infamous outburst at the Laugh Factory, and Kevin Hart as a modern-day trickster, Jacobs narrates how the "real Blacks" separate from the "fake," how empathy exists amidst the jokes, and how the power of community is profound when the proverbial shit hits the fan.

In Chapter 1 "The Arab is the New Nigger": African American Comics Confront the Irony and Tragedy of September 11," Jacobs discusses how Black comics responded in the wake of such loss, Jacobs noticed a very particular way that to the sobering moment. She opens the chapter with a joke, told by a Black comedian, "Black people, we have been delivered. Finally, we got a new nigger. The Middle Eastern is the new nigger" (p. 23), to which a Black woman in the audience responded with an emphatic "Finally." Jacobs feels the weight of this joke. As humor studies notes, through laughter, shouts, silence, or response, the audience of standup is a co-author in the comic's performance and evidence of a successful (or not) joke. Jacob never loses sight of this fact in her conversations with the jokes she uses as evidence throughout. The Black woman's response wasn't an attempt to wish ill on the Arab/Middle Eastern community, however, it makes clear the relief of Black Americans no longer feeling like a target of discrimination, even if just in this moment. The tragedy of 9/11 led to a comedic landscape of jokes being engineered as political commentary, implicating a larger shared history of racial injustice felt by simply being Black. At this moment, racial profiling seems to shift temporarily as comedian Eddie Griffin quips, "All of a sudden, I'm an American." Amidst the laughter, the ambivalent patriotism of Black-belonging after 9/11 is responded to with empathy, as the enduring struggle for Black people to be seen as American citizens is made more transparent. To be "real" or "authentic," Black comics joked about the fact that "if 'real niggahs' were on that plane" this wouldn't have happened because their "ghetto sensibilities" that may be prone to violence would kick in or as Dave Chappelle puts it, "terrorists don't take Black hostages" (p. 35). Beneath the humor and declarations of "real Blackness" in these jokes exists an incisive critique. Black people are negligible currency in U.S. politics, safe from the harm of terrorism because their lives are less valuable. When Black comics brought these truths to light, they were often met with a standing ovation, but still felt the pain behind the humor.

Chapter 2, "Why We Gotta Be Refugees?" Empathizing Authenticity in African American Hurricane Katrina Humor," addresses how Black comics and audiences wrestled laughter from the domestic tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, which caused fatalities in the thousands and property damage in the estimated billions, of New Orleans and its surrounding area (p. 41). Unlike 9/11, Hurricane Katrina had blatant class and racial ramifications: most of the storm's victims were in Black and poor communities. Therefore, the empathy of Black comics and their need to keep it real were loud and clear. The title of the chapter comes from a larger joke that questions

the racially cast language used to identify Black victims of the hurricane as “refugees.” The joke continues, “. . . Why can’t we be evacuees? We’re American citizens!” (p. 40). Directly in conversation with the previous chapter, Black bodies in America are often made to feel less valuable than their white counterparts. However, “Black comics recuperated Black storm victims as empathetic subjects” (p. 41). When Jacobs powerfully notes that, “comedy’s ability to trick tears into laughter lit into me during this tumultuous time,” it speaks true to the power of comedy in this moment of grief (p. 43).

Nationwide this moment of grief was responded to with pacification and attempted appeasement through donations, concerts, and telethons. These telethons, inadvertently, shed light on the fact that these plays at white liberal sincerity did not address an even deeper problem: one expressed through Kanye West’s teleprompter breach when he told America live that “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people!” (p. 47). Through vulnerable admissions of grief, despair, embarrassment, confusion, and rage, Black comics used their sets for cathartic release. Citing a comic named Alex Thomas’s intro, Jacobs notes the comic’s words: “Is it comedy time? I’m a vent! Did y’all see Kanye (West)? Audience members laughed, a few said ‘Yes!’ and Thomas reenacted, or better yet revised, West’s impromptu comments during the telethon and preserved West’s deadpan delivery for comic effect. ‘Bush don’t give a fuck about niggahs’” (p. 48). Through “venting” like this, Jacobs makes clear that empathy remained the relentless subtext and that Black comics used the shared experience of marginality to empathize with the storm victims. Using the “n-word” as an in-group marking in this matter made clear that the comedic empathy was translated as a collective “we.” Throughout the moments of Black Katrina humor, comics persistently used their rage to lead their sets with empathy and presumed the victim’s humanity, “teaching us once more that comedy can literally and figuratively save” (p. 77).

Taking a departure from her own live viewing experience, in Chapter 3 “On Michael Richards, Racial Authenticity, and the ‘N-Word,’” Jacobs confronts the infamous “racist” rant of comedian Michael Richards, where he repeatedly called a group of Black men the n-word. Jacobs resists the common dialogue that Richards’s rant exposed racist ideations and instead discusses how the aftermath of the rant exposed the industry’s lack of support for Black comic’s ability to “keep it real.” Jacobs breaks down the rant line by line to clarify how jokes can be (mis)interpreted and how audience responses fluctuate during the rant, problematizing the rant’s “humor” and improvisational skills amidst the litany of racist put-downs. White comics like Norm McDonald claimed that Richards’s exaggerated and loud performance of racism made it clear that in fact, he wasn’t a racist, because true racists are quiet or veiled (p. 95), while Dave Chappelle, although furious at first, commiserates with Richards having a bad set: “Hang in there Kramer! Don’t let ‘em break you,

Kramer!” (p. 102). The spectacle can be read as both a racist and hate-spewed rant and simply a bad set. In contrast, speaking to an all-Black audience, comedian Katt Williams jokes that Richards couldn’t have done that in a room full of Black people, “now he’s got to look out for real niggahs who’ll hit him” (p. 104). As noted by Jacobs, authentic Black folks here are read here as ones who will respond swiftly, even violently, towards comics who practice racism as sport.

What resulted from Richards’s rant was a “no n-word or face fine” policy by the Laugh Factory: a policy that didn’t sit well with Black comics. For Black comics, the n-word centers community and a “oneness” between the comic and a Black audience. The policy was met with uproar and community response of folks even threatening to boycott the Laugh Factory, as Black comic freedom was taken away because a white man weaponized the n-word in a racist tirade. As Jacobs writes, “The policy felt like an overcorrection, a punishing one that instigated outright mockery since it conflated Richards’s actions with the ever-complex uses of the n-word among African American comics” (p. 111). Although the policy was soon lifted, Richards’s outburst exposed the risks of comedy’s liberal mandate on free speech. Whose speech is free if the weaponizing of racist language makes Black comics arguably the most affected?

In her final case study, “It’s About to Get Real,” Jacobs considers, whether it makes sense to characterize Kevin Hart as a trickster. Tricksters “wear the mask” to speak truth to power and Hart’s masks are his apolitical comedic displays of self-deprecating humor and his emasculating tropes of Black men. These masks allow the trickster to win in a decidedly unequal game, giving Hart a universal audience in a world that doesn’t privilege Black artistry. Using African American folklore, Jacobs draws parallels to the canonical figure of Brer Rabbit, who represents Black people living within the American racial/social order that must often use their wits to stay alive against bigger and more privileged opponents. As a Black comedic performer who is now larger than life, Hart’s global stardom requires that he remain both authentic (“really Black” or, at least, Black “enough”) and sincere (earnest or truthful) to Black audiences (p. 117). According to Jacobs, “[Hart’s] ability to convey both racial authenticity and sincerity guarantees his spot in the Black standup game, and on top of the comedy game writ large – albeit, I argue – in trickster pose” (p. 117). Finessing these various guises, Hart can both remain true to his communal base of Blackness (n-word usage, employing his Black friends, taking care of his family, and practicing hyper-Black masculinity) and “trick” his universal audience base via the “little man” theme that saturates his comedy repertoire.

Jacobs admits that many of the Black comics she has interviewed would argue that Hart’s status as Black sufficiently qualifies him as a trickster because Black folks must routinely “wear the mask” to negotiate expectations and representations of themselves and Black folks more broadly (p. 123). If you are a Black person in Hollywood, being a trickster is arguably a necessity. Jacobs brings home the fact that

Hart is potentially in trickster pose when she notes that his most recent comedy shows and skits, when he is presently too big to fail, all hint at Hart taking off his mask to point out his trickster acuity. Whether through congratulating himself for only telling one “small guy joke” (p. 127) or apologizing during a set and taking personal accountability for past comments and jokes amidst “cancel culture” (p. 128), Hart makes evident some of the masks he wore through his rise to fame.

Lanita Jacob’s *To Be Real* is a must-read for scholars of anthropology, popular culture, Black Studies, and humor studies. Or simply, lovers of standup comedy. Allowing comics to read her work during her writing process and offer their thoughts, brought nuance to Jacobs’s writing and allowed her to navigate new spaces of inquiry. Laughing to herself and sharing her inner thoughts throughout the book strengthened her arguments and brought a closeness between myself as a reader and Jacobs as the writer: I felt that we were at the same table at the comedy club. Using standup comedy to wrestle with the “why” of racial authenticity in conversation with the ever-evolving scale of what constitutes “real” Blackness, painted a beautiful picture of how we can find truth, sincerity, empathy, strength, and joy in such a contested medium that often attempts to bring Black folks down. Jacobs’s work is integral in studying how Black folks found laughter, solace, and community through contemporary tragedies and events in standup comedy.