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Black Female Comics and the Reform on Femininity
“The ideal woman is perceived as significantly less aggressive, less independent, less dominant, less active, more emotional, having greater difficulty in making decisions, etc., than the ideal man” (Broverman et al 69). “Do I look like a fucking lady or what? I like being a fucking lady, especially in the nineties; we can say what the fuck we want!” (Givens 1992) These competing ideals about femininity couldn’t be more contradictory of one another. Since the days of chattel slavery black women have been regarded as the “other” in American society. As women they lacked the superiority linked to the male identity but as black women, they never truly achieved model standards of “true womanhood” that were associated with being a white woman. Broverman’s description of the ideal woman reveals traditional notions of femininity that were associated with white upper and/or middle class women. Since the early 1990’s black women have embraced their otherness by refusing to assimilate to these conventional ideas and have instead redefined femininity. By embracing the physical, social, racial, and economic characteristics that define their otherness, black women have created a new mold for the real woman. Through their comedic performances, black female comics express these expanding notions of Blackness and femininity while further encouraging Black women to revel in their new found comfort with their bodies and their identities.

Merriam-Webster defines femininity as simply: of or relating to a woman; the opposite of masculinity. From this we can deduce that the essence of a woman (from a traditional standpoint) is simply possessing qualities that are not commonly associated with men. In her article Gender Issues in Mental Health, Sandra Friedrich states that these qualities include docility, weakness, dependence, and passivity. Men, however, embody strength, assertiveness, independence, competitiveness. For many years Black women tried to assimilate to these gender ideologies in a pursuit of white politics of respectability; attempting to prove that black women were real
women just like their white counterparts. Over time Black women’s efforts to assimilate proved to be in vain because their racial, social, economic, and political statuses presented obstacles that white women and white society in general, do not have to face.

In her book Black Sexual Politics, author Patricia Hill Collins outlines four key facets to hegemonic femininity which are important to understanding Black women’s need to challenge conventional ideology: Maintaining appropriate demeanor (physical and behavioral), maintaining appropriate sexuality, attaining appropriate economic status, and race (193-99). These facets construct a framework of conventional gender ideology that is restrictive to women of the 21st century, mainly African Americans. By rejecting conventional cues of appropriate conduct Black female comedians create a new oral tradition that reinstructs women to ignore these constraints and create a definition based on their identities.

Femininity is very focused on women’s physical attributes, placing distinctive value on hair texture and length, body size, skin tone, facial features and age. “Historically, in the American context, young women with milky white skin, long blond hair, and slim figures were deemed to be the most beautiful, and therefore the most feminine women” (Collins 194). Evaluated against these standards, Black women could never achieve feminine authenticity of white women because they can never become white. In fact Black women are the visible “other” that validates these notions of female beauty. “…Standards of female beauty have no meaning without the presence of Black women and others who fail to measure up” (Collins 194).

Ironically, this same view of femininity also suggests that women do not actively earn femininity in the same manner that men earn their masculinity. Men in American society typically earn their manhood by providing for a family or having sex with a woman; women instead achieve their womanhood by reaching their physical maturity. Therefore, physical signs
that a woman is ready to bear children—wide hips, supple breasts, and round butts—mark a woman’s status as a *real* woman. If a curvaceous figure is ultimately the physical marker of true womanhood, then Black women are in fact very feminine because Black women come in all shapes and sizes. Before the emergence of the neo-femininity movement of the early 1990’s, black women found it difficult to find comfort in their curvaceous bodies, varying skin tones and hair textures.

Black female comics such as Mo’Nique encouraged black women to celebrate their bodies in lieu of societal opinions in her performance on The Queens of Comedy.

Big girls get ya’ll fat asses up and take a motherfucking bow. That’s right big women represent! Do it, do it big women. I love you big women, handle your shit. Fuck you skinny bitches. Big women it’s our time. Big sisters ya’ll look good from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet…skinny women are evil and they need to be destroyed. It’s a new day. (Latham and Purcell)

Mo’Nique portraits black women, especially plus size women, as sexy, beautiful, and desirable. She does this by highlighting that plus size women can handle life, relationships, and even sex better than skinny women; *big girls* are even capable of stealing the attention of men who prefer petite women. “Every man wants to fuck a fat girl one time, one time baby. And once you go fat you never go back.” (Latham and Purcell)

Comedian Adele Givens uses the line “Blackbrownbeigecreamdamnnear-whitewomen with straightcurlybushykinkylongdamnneardowntothewaistmediumshorthairline” describe black women in a 1998 stand up performance, encouraging Black women to embrace the diversity among them despite what culture teaches about beauty. (Fulton 85)

Givens further encourages black women to ignore images of perfection that the media tries to assert are the ideal in her 2001 Queens performance. Givens asserts that the everyday woman is the real woman and is thus the real image of beauty.
Know that you are beautiful. Understand that. You know what happened; we started getting tricked by these magazines and these televisions. These bitches is tricking you. You think you can live up to the celebrity bitches, don’t you? Well, it can’t happen ’cause the hoes ain’t real. You know they build them bitches, you know that? . . . Ladies these hoes are not made out of the same stuff you made out of. You a real woman, them bitches are not. They’re there to entertain your ass. You know they ain’t made out of your shit ’cause you read about them going to the hospital for shit like exhaustion and dehydration. Now, what bitch you know so tired she got to go to the hospital? I know some exhausted bitches. I know some woman who got two jobs, six kids, no man. The bitch got things to do!...In the real world when you get exhausted you take a nap. (Latham and Purcell)

Like physical beauty, behavior is a very important aspect of feminine demeanor. As proscribed by traditional standards, to be feminine is to not act like a man. Friedrich argues that “Traditional femininity is defined as being nurturing, supportive, and assigning high priority to one's relationships…competitiveness, assertiveness, anger, and violence are viewed as unfeminine and are not generally tolerated as acceptable female behavior.” Collins reasons that appropriate feminine behavior constitutes being submissive to male leadership. (196) Under this standard of review, black women again could never be considered feminine. Black women have historically always been leaders within their households and communities. Assertive personalities have been crucial to the survival of the African American family, especially those with a female head of household. This assertiveness, while necessary for survival, often gives the stereotypical image of bitchiness, especially in context of black women. The emergence of a redefined sense of femininity, however, not only ignores the stigma of the “bitch,” it embraces it as an icon of strength that many Black women can identify with. The Bad Bitch, as Fulton describes, is an image that has become popular within hip hop culture.

Female MCs revise the standard definition of bitch, from an ‘aggressive woman who challenges male authority’ to an aggressive or assertive female who subverts patriarchal rule (2000:263). The term is an appropriation of misogynist discourse traditionally used to deride and insult women, but it now has a multivalent quality dependent upon use. (Fulton 87)
The emergence of the *Bad Bitch* is a marker of a very feminine independence that the new definition envelopes. “[A Black woman] becomes a ‘Bad Bitch’-e.g. a Good Black Woman-when she puts on her looks, sexuality, intellect, and/or aggression in service to African American communities” (Collins 124) Today’s *Bad Bitch* is a woman who is assertive, independent and confident. Bad Bitches have successful careers, take care of their families, lead their communities and look good while doing it all. Black female comics use the term bitch with both positive and negative connotations often in their performances with an ease that suggests that it is the same as any other word in the English language. Black female comics use the word *bitch* interchangeably with bad bitch much in the same manner that hip hop icons use the word *nigger*, removing the negative connotation and reducing its defeminizing power. In her performance in *Queens*, Mo’Nique addresses her constant use of the word bitch…

Ever since I came out here I’ve used that word [bitch] about 9000 times. We give that word so much motherfucking power. We are willing to leave our husbands and our boyfriends because he called you a bitch; it’s a motherfucking word. But if at that time, if that’s what you were representing, that’s what you needed to be called….If used at the right time, the proper time, it’s a beautiful word. (Latham and Purcell)

Black female comics’ use of the word bitch and other profanities displays another key position within the new scope of black femininity; a woman in today’s society can use any language she likes without conceding her status as a *lady*. Givens reiterate this concept in her Def Jam performances of the mid- nineties. Her classic line “Do I look like a fucking lady or what?” became her trademark and was used to convey the position that real women have the authority to challenge conventional ideas about acceptable (ladylike) behavior; today’s woman is in fact a bad bitch- free to say whatever she wants. In a 1993 Def Comedy Jam appearance, she discusses this “Freedom of speech” “I’m sick and tired of people saying what a lady can and
can’t do and can and can’t say. I feel like this, if a lady can suck your dick, then damn it we can talk about it. I’m tired of this double standard shit. (Givens)”

Blue themes such as this are very common in the stand up material of black female comics and is evidentiary of black women’s challenge to another essential benchmark of hegemonic gender ideology; acceptable sexuality. In attempting to attain true womanhood, women were required to assimilate to idealistic notions of sexuality; inhibiting women from exploring sexual experiences that were believed to be taboo. By assimilating to “acceptable” notions of sexuality, women are being submissive to the sexual desires of men and are allowing themselves to be objectified (and often commodified). With no control over their sexual agency, Black women became objects to be used for many different purposes. With the emergence of the hip hop generation, the media transformed Black women into objects of lust, male sexual prowess and ultimately disrespect. The female body became a hot commodity that could be consumed anytime by anyone via music, television, and film.

Historical notions of race and gender ideology presented black women in two stereotypical roles: the mammy and the jezebel. The mammy was completely asexual, devoid of any hint of sensuality and incapable of attracting men. The jezebel on the other hand, was hyper sexual to the point that she was promiscuous. These and images of women often conveyed through hip-hop presented women without control of their sexuality. The image of the jezebel supplied the “other” which justified the idyllic sexual purity (sexually repressed) that characterized white femininity.

The neo-femininity that has emerged since the nineties rejected sexual assimilation with intriguing force. Black women in the nineties liberated themselves from conventional restraints with a shocking twist to previous objectifications. This contestation is very vivid in the comedic
material of comics such as Sommore and Sheryl Underwood. Comedian Sommore and Underwood have become famous for their sexually explicit material that often preludes some social or political message. The two confidently brags about her healthy sexual appetite, sexual skills, and promiscuous acts. In her Queens of Comedy, Sommore appearance she describes a dream that she had about meeting St. Peter at the entrance gates to heaven.

Now, I’m standing in line at the gates of heaven. Foxy Brown, the rapper, is standing in front of me. Monica Lewinsky is standing in back of me. So Foxy Brown gets up to the gate, she say, “How you doing, St. Peter? My name is Foxy Brown, I’m a rapper. I’ve done some sins in my life but I’m still a good person.” He says, “Foxy Brown, my child, what part of your body have you sinned with?” She said, “My hands.” He said, “Go over there and rinse your hands out in the faucet and you may enter the gates of heaven.” Next, it was my turn. I went up to the gate. I said, “How you doing, St. Peter? My name is Sommore. I’m a stand-up comedian. I’ve done some sins in my life but I’m still a good person.” He said, “Sommore, my child, what part of your body have you sinned with?” Before I can say any fucking thing, Monica Lewinsky pushes me out the way and said, “Excuse me, but can I rinse my mouth out before this bitch put her ass in the water?” “You don’t know me. You, do not know me.” (Latham and Purcell)

Sheryl Underwood, also famous for her blue content, has a style that encompasses sexually explicit content as well as political, social, and economic issues. In a 2007 stand up performance on BET’s Comic View she recalls an experience with the child of a man whom she desired to have sex with. After telling the boy to wash up for dinner, he responds that since Underwood is not his mother, he doesn’t have to do what she says. Ignoring the boy’s age, Underwood quickly shouts back: “I’m not trying to be yo mamma I’m trying to fuck yo daddy. You need to stay out of my business you cockblocking bastard…always knocking on the bedroom door when I’m trying to suck yo daddy’s dick. (Underwood).

Another key standard of hegemonic femininity is ascribing to appropriate economic status. This standard affects views of femininity in many different ways. To be of appropriate economic status generally means belonging to middle or upper class. Taking this one step further, a woman is appropriately feminine when she is reliant on her middle or upper class
husband who can generally supply sufficient financial stability that will relieve the woman from
duties of working to earn income, and will instead relegate her to duties as a wife. To be of
appropriate economic status also means that an adequately feminine woman does not delve into a
career and thus does not seek financial independence. Finally appropriately feminine women are
not the heads of their households, are not single mothers and are certainly never the primary
breadwinners. African American women reject economic stipulations of traditional gender
ideology primarily because they typically could not reach these standards. Since slavery, Black
women have worked alongside men in order to ensure financial stability and mere survival for
their families. Moreover, today many Black women are single mothers and take sole
responsibility for the financial well being of their families in absence of husbands and fathers.
Black Americans’ inability to ascribe to upper/middle class status generally calls for two
incomes in order to ensure financial security meaning that many Black women cannot enjoy the
economic luxury of being housewives. Due to these factors, Black women were forced to define
a femininity based of economic standards that they could achieve. Since the 1990’s Black
women have increasingly entered “atypical” arenas of the professional world, flooding
traditionally male dominated fields of medicine, law, and finance. Single black mothers have
grown accustomed to raising families without the help of a man and have thus grown
comfortable in their place as the head of the household. In many Black families with only one
income, men are increasingly taking over duties of the home while women are positioning
themselves as the primary breadwinners. Mo’Nique reminds us of this in Queens when she alerts
the audience that she is the primary breadwinner in her house. Without emasculating her
husband, she proudly makes it known that he takes care of home while she earns the money.
The final facet of hegemonic femininity that Collins discusses is race. This idea is simple: traditional gender ideology equates true womanhood with being white. Therefore a black woman can never be a real woman and is not feminine, because she can never become white. Collins explains that Black women cannot achieve idealized femininity for the same reason that women as a whole cannot achieve the desired social script that white men occupy; in our society they are simply lower within the social hierarchy. (199)

Beyond the blue overtones, explicit language, and pride in being *Bad Bitches*, one of the most common notions of Black womanhood that resonates in the acts of black female comedians is pride in being Black. Black female comics make it a point of stating their pride in being a *sista* and often set aside a specific moment in their performances to display this pride. Mo’Nique, although, critical of skinny women, follows her Big Girls routine with a more unified message that there is nothing like being a sister. “You know what I’m most proud, just being a sista, no matter what size we are. Because there is nothing in this world like a sista, and brothas know it too” (Latham and Purcell). Messages like these reinforce the idea that black women are the epitome of beauty and femininity, despite cultural depictions.

One can discern the shift in views of femininity by examining the emergence of black female comics since the early 1990’s. These comics reject previous notions about femininity that excluded Black women by bringing a new definition to real womanhood. Black female comics bring a contemporary twist to oral tradition by outwardly displaying content, language, and behavior that was previously associated with being unladylike. By presenting this material to mainstream audiences, Black female comics help to liberate women from confirmatory notions of ideal femininity. Furthermore, through their comedic material, Black female comics reinstruct
Black women to take pride in the characteristics that previously marked them as the “other” in American society, and to revel in their status as *real* women.
References


