

***Cracking Up: Black Feminist Comedy in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century United States.* Katelyn Hale Wood. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2021; Pp. 204.**

*Cracking Up* by Katelyn Hale provides a worthy addition to Humor Studies and an invaluable contribution to scholarship that explores Black feminist performance and comedy. Although often marginalized in performance archives, Black women comedians are “integral in the trajectory of stand-up comedy” (4) and occupy a vital cultural and political role as “storyteller, truth-teller, protest leader, and critical historiographer” (148). Wood’s four central chapters illuminate the ways that Black feminist comics have advanced feminist, Queer *and queered* expressions of joy and opposition to anti-Black racism — a vital act of social critique that is at once liberatory, recuperative, and agency-building.

Beginning with a telling juxtaposition of stand-up pioneer Jackie “Moms” Mabley and concluding with comic Wanda Sykes’ 2019 portrayal of Mabley in *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, Wood demonstrates the “politic of joy” that defines Black feminist stand-up. The contributions of the artists she explores perform necessary cultural and political work, generating a productive nexus for the “pleasures, communities, and spiritual experiences that thrive in the face of, and in spite of, legacies of racialized grief.” Wood points out how these performances offer “both visceral and epistemological” insights that are facilitated not merely by performer, but audience as well (4).

The text’s methodology bolsters its impressive rigor as well as its readability. Incorporating issues central to and lenses employed by canonical Black feminists (e.g. Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins), Wood also integrates (and at times, critiques) theoretical frameworks from humor scholars (e.g. Henry Bergson, Sigmund Freud), while at the same time making astute use of queer scholars who conspicuously consider intersectional issues of race and power (e.g. José Esteban Muñoz, E. Patrick Johnson). This interdisciplinarity offers a worthwhile resource to scholars of Black Feminism, Humor Studies and African American Performance.

Wood incorporates a materialist historiography that gainfully attends to specific cultural and political realities; performer and character identities; performance implements such as costume, props, set design, marketing, make-up, and sound; and, of course, content. Wood’s archival labor is buttressed by analyses that integrate considerations of spectatorship, both original and subsequent, with the latter nodding to video and digital spectators after the live event — what Wood terms “mediated” audiences. These live and mediated audiences, whether incarcerated women watching Mo’Nique’s 2007 stand-up live and in person at the Ohio Reformatory for Women, or the consumers who view the same performance (and its editorial choices) after the fact, always exist as a requisite component of performance in Wood’s examination. *Cracking Up* also maintains an investment in contextualizing and acknowledging the multivalent connections shared by what initially and wrongly appear as disparate and/or disconnected performers and

performance strategies. Not unlike *Cracking Up*'s subjects, Wood repeatedly reveals (and celebrates) the political, Black feminist, and often queer throughlines of performers and performances over multiple decades. In a kind of "meta" technique, the text practices the Black feminist and queer methodologies that Wood brings to light in the individual performers/performances themselves.

Wood's first chapter supplements the still-under-researched figure of stand-up and Black feminist icon Jackie "Moms" Mabley. Initiating what she terms an "archival intervention" (23) into the overlooked achievements of Mabley, Wood expounds on Mabley's rhetorical and performance-related innovations that lay the groundwork for the intersectional and radical Black feminist subjectivity that will benefit Black/Queer women comics and their audiences into the next century. Despite the limitations of Mabley's performance archive to date, Wood fruitfully situates "Mabley's dynamic civil rights comedy within Black feminist and Black queer performance aesthetics" while also "re-contextualiz[ing] histories of stand up" itself (27). As she does throughout, here Wood advocates for a productively fluid archive of Mabley that "centers [her] comedy as decidedly Black, feminist, and queer," making sure to "read against histories that attempt to quiet or make mutually exclusive such identity markers and performative strategies of resistance" (32).

Focusing on actor and comedian Mo'Nique's 2007 stand-up special *I Coulda Been Your Cellmate!*, chapter two skillfully invokes José Esteban Muñoz's theory of "disidentification" and concretizes the multiple ways that *Cellmate!* builds queer- and Black-feminist-informed communities while simultaneously establishing opposition to the carceral state. More than just Black, queer, feminist dissent, Mo'Nique's stand-up event and subsequent/mitigated performances of it achieve a "cracking up" of the racist and heteropatriarchal status quo, often through a reclamation and celebration of Black/queer women's erotic power. This chapter also presents a valuable offering to the field of Prison Studies, as Wood shrewdly explores the matrix of the audience's (1) "Black feminist elsewhere" that is both "imagined and material" alongside (2) an "imaginary release from imprisonment and surveillance" that accompanies the literal "physical release of laughter" (54).

Chapter three investigates what Wood describes as the queer temporalities that exist in the comedy of Wanda Sykes. For Wood, Sykes' stand-up prompts a productive subversion of linearly-organized temporalities and myths of American progress. Looking specifically at Sykes' repertoire from 2008-2016, Wood unveils the ways that Sykes' Black feminist comedy challenges more than just white supremacy and homophobia, but in fact cracks up notions of citizenship and progress that are invested in heteronormative, homoliberal taxonomies. Said another way, beyond its initial mocking of white supremacist and homophobic history, Sykes' work advocates a disruption of restricting (and false) temporality as experienced by queer bodies of color.

Wood's final chapter contemplates Black feminist comics' articulation of collective and individual mandates for equality and justice within the twenty-first century landscape of misogynist, anti-Black, anti-trans, and homophobic violence. Wood considers how the stand-up of Amanda Seales, Sasheer Zamata, Sam Jay, and Michelle Buteau advocates a specific kind of Black feminist agenda whereby comedy functions as critique of "the new racism" of the twenty-first century. Incorporating recent cultural phenomena (and resistance strategies) such as #MeToo, Wood effectively unpacks the post-Obama/Trump-era appeal for "new waves of stand-up comedy" that gainfully "combine[s] comedy and a desire for social justice" (110).

*Cracking Up* reveals how Black feminist stand-up shapes Black subjectivity, while also disrupting modes of oppression that inspire discrimination and violence. Making expert use of her foundational concept of "cracking up," Wood concretizes the ways that Black feminist comedians successfully and queerly influence national character and identity. Indeed, as they facilitate and celebrate embodiment, these truth-tellers breach anti-Black and heteropatriarchal narratives through performer and audience, alike.

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