



**11th Annual Conference on Language,
Interaction, and Social Organization (LISO)**

**Ethnography of Performance:
Methodological Insights from an
African American Standup
Comedy Study**

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Getting to Know One Another

- ◆ Who we are?
- ◆ Where are we from (institution)?
- ◆ How do our research interests relate to issues of performance?



Workshop Agenda/Goals

- ◆ What do “ethnographies of performance” entail?
- ◆ What specific cases – our own or others – are relevant?
- ◆ How might methodological issues pertinent to the politics of (re)presentation and translation inform our individual research and collective scholarship on performance?



A Few Givens

- ◆ As ethnographers/researchers, we have all grappled with these dilemmas in one way or another
- ◆ We likewise have pertinent insights to share
- ◆ Understanding some of the political dimensions of representation is **KEY** to a broader understanding of how language as/and performance are perceived and realized – in essence, understood – in our interdisciplinary studies



Case Study: African American Standup Comedy Post 9/11

◆ **The catalyst of 9/11**

- To what extent did African American and other “urban” comics find humor in the wake of such wide-scale tragedy and loss?
- What might their shared laughter say about matters of race, identity, and nationalism post 9/11?
- Finally, did some jokes succeed while others failed? Why or why no?



Multi-Sited Ethnography of Black Standup Comedy

- ◆ **Initial 15-month intensive ethnographic study**
 - 4-5 club visits per week in first month, 2-3 visits per week in subsequent months (**October 2001-December 2003**)
 - 1-2 observations/tri-weekly (**January 2004-Present**)
- ◆ **Observe urban comedy shows and competitions in and beyond Los Angeles**
- ◆ **Conduct ethnographic interviews with 35+ comics, club owners, promoters, club-goers (150+ hours)**
- ◆ **Frequent bystander in comics' “backstage” conversations**



A Word on Ethnography

- ◆ **Long-term participation in social life of community**
 - Inductive Reasoning
 - Observation, note-taking, interviews, transcription, “triangulation” – ((repeat))
 - “Corporeal epistemology” – Kondo
 - entails seeing with all your bodily senses
- ◆ **Entails two seemingly contradictory qualities**
 - Participation to gain “emic” or insider perspective
 - Detachment to gain “etic” or outsider perspective
 - You are not always in control of your positionality



A Word on the Ethnography of Performance

- ◆ **Ethnographies of Performance entail the study of:**
 - Language as/and Performance (e.g, poetry, standup comedy, preaching, speeches)
 - Public spectacle/rituals
 - Public figures (e.g, campaigns)
 - Popular Culture
 - Embodied performances (e.g., dance)
- ◆ **Ethnography in/of sites of performance can entail particular challenges**
 - New forms of vulnerability, both for you and your research participants
 - Necessitate creativity in “ways of observing and seeing”
 - Can require novel forms of reciprocity



Exploring Standup Comedy as an Ethnographer

◆ **Entering the Field**

- The self-conscious ethnographer

◆ **Strategic Presentation of Self**

- Conveying humility (**upside-down business card**)
- Constructing positionality as the “non-groupie” (**clothing, gaze**)

◆ **Strategies of Observation**

- Notetaking
 - **From index cards to napkins**
 - **From “front stage” to “corner stage”**
 - **Physical positionality impacts “ways of seeing”**
 - **Figure out where you need to be to learn what you want to learn**



Exploring Standup Comedy as an Ethnographer

◆ **Strategies of Observation**

– **Notetaking in pursuit of “thick description”**

- Details of comic’s routine, including change across time and context
- Comic’s clothing/dress
- Comics’ disposition before and after onstage performances
- Audience dynamics and quotes
- Breaches (e.g., hecklers, bombs)
- Aspects of the built environment
- Comics’ “backstage” conversations
- Researcher’s motivations, fears, insecurities, passions



Exploring Standup Comedy as an Ethnographer

◆ **Strategies of Recruitment**

- Letters
- Walkups/Face-to-face
- Email
- Word of mouth

◆ **Developing Rapport and Trust**

- Time, Time, and more Time
 - The day “Chris” spoke to me

◆ **Entail new ways of envisioning “reciprocity”**

- Sharing abridged reviews via email
- Discovering later on that my notes “travel”



The Politics of Representation in and beyond the “Field”

◆ **Ethnography of Performance**

- Necessitate careful negotiation of **multiple audiences**, accountabilities, positionalities, and “voice”
- Much at stake in analyzing performance
 - Likelihood of observing “failures”
 - Intense vulnerabilities
- African American standup comedy wrought with intense politics of racialized (re)presentations
 - Insistence on comics’ artistic license often competes with communal concerns around “Good” versus “Bad” depictions of Blackness



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The Politics of Representation and Reciprocity

- ◆ **Writing “The Arab is the New Nigger”**
 - Simultaneously a means of sharing what I’ve learned and gesture towards reciprocity
 - Comics’ access to this manuscript had important consequences



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 - **Evolving Coda: The Arab is **not** the “new nigger” (Eddie Griffin)**
 - Comics’ input afforded a “richer” understanding of complexities of the sardonic “Arab as new nigger” stance
 - Repositioned me as “the writer”



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The Politics of Representation and Reciprocity

◆ Other Critical Engagements

- An informal review of a film screening is edited for inclusion in comic's press packet
 - Re-editing “my work”
- Ethnographic notes compel one manager to push for a collaborative book project
 - The wager
- Sharing equipment and acting as an “extra”
- Comics' increased expectations that I will “write to them” after the show



The Politics of Representation and Reciprocity

◆ **Research Implications**

- What happens when a different sort of “reciprocity” is expected of ethnographer?
- How do these expectations shape researcher’s sense of accountability?
- What responsibilities do researchers have to their subjects?
- What implications does this type of reciprocity have for both my increased visibility as “the writer” and positionality as “a researcher”?
- Can this ethnographer keep her promise in response to the wager?



The Politics of Representation and Reciprocity


- ◆ **Are further compounded by this fact:**
 - Just when you think you've arrived
 - Just when you think “you're in there”
 - You can be sobered by the realization that you (as a researcher) and your research participants are different in important ways
 - **Power to represent**
 - **Perspectives on your collective engagement**
 - **Expectations of your relationship**

Others Lessons and Insights




- ◆ **Researchers of performance can also learn from “failures” in the field, erroneous assumptions, and interpersonal breaches**






Failures, Erroneous Assumptions, and Interpersonal Breaches

- ◆ **When those interviews didn't record (&!@#)**
- ◆ When comediennes scoffed in the balcony
- ◆ The “diss” or when the comic I thought I knew didn't speak



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A Point That Bears Repeating:

- ◆ Just when you think you've arrived
- ◆ Just when you think "you're in there"
- ◆ **You can be sobered by the realization that you (as a researcher) and your research participants are different in important ways**



A Point Worth Noting

◆ **And this is NOT a “bad” thing!**

- Yields “thicker” accounts of performance and performers
- Illuminates the intersubjective dimensions of our research
- Makes us and our readers cognizant of the politics of representation that shape our fieldwork endeavors from start to finish



Evolutions in My Own Ways of “Seeing”

- ◆ **Listening closely to comics’ routines and self-other-critiques**
- ◆ **Attending to dilemmas of observation, presentation, representation, and translation**
 - Helps me to see Black standup comedy as a performative site ever-wrought by the politics of (racialized) representations
 - Helps me better appreciate the role of the audience as co-participants in the production and interpretation of Black humor
 - Helps me appreciate my own role in the making of this “story”/these stories



Where I Am in this Journey

- ◆ **Initial & Tentative Publications**
- ◆ **Curricular Inspirations (African American Humor & Culture, The Practice of Ethnography)**
- ◆ **Secure “footing” in LA comedy scene**
- ◆ **Ethnographic Notes (2001-Present, 100+ pages)**



Where I Want (Need) To Be

- ◆ I want to move from merely framing comedy as a form of socio-political critique
 - to *also* show comedy to be a performative site where notions of truth and authenticity are routinely interrogated and constructed
- ◆ I want to move from generic/sterile “scientific” writing about comedy
 - And get closer to the ‘truths’ embedded in the multi-genred space of my ethnographic notes



Where I Want (Need) To Be

- ◆ I want to tell stories to multiple audiences about such topics as:
 - “Africa” in the African American comedic imagination
 - Communal deliberations about “O-J”, Kobe, Michael Jackson in “urban” comedy clubs and what they tell us about African American notions of collective responsibility and “airing of dirty laundry”
 - Gendered realities in the world of Black standup comedy
 - Individual trajectories of comics and what they say about notions and the pursuit of “success” among Black performers
 - How comics’ individual search for “voice” mirrors and has abetted my own pursuit of “voice”



Where I Want (Need) To Be

- ◆ **Mainly, I want to explore notions of “Truth” and “Authenticity” in African American Humor**
 - Ethnographic Interviews take me part of the way
 - (But) I must also begin conducting videotaped observations of comics’ standup routines and audience dynamics
 - The visual is an important window into the nuances of the audience as co-participants in comedic performance and interpretation



What Gets In The Way?

- ◆ **Tenure Demands**
- ◆ **Teaching Demands**
- ◆ **A Second More Noble and More Prestigious Research Project**
- ◆ **Fears, Insecurities**



Fears/Insecurities

- ◆ **What at all do I have to say that's worth listening to?**
- ◆ **How can I possibly do justice to the complexity of comics' routines and personal lives?**
- ◆ **Some people won't like what I write**
- ◆ **They [comics] are going to tell me "no"**
- ◆ **I won't be able to meet their expectations**
- ◆ **This work won't help me gain the respect of my peers**



Cultivating Inspiration and Passion

- ◆ **Teaching can keep you honest and committed to what it is one preaches**
- ◆ **Go so far in your work that it's hard to turn back**
 - **One Caveat: All in good time**
- ◆ **Silence your internal censors**
- ◆ **Heed the advice of writers**



What Writers Teach Us

- ◆ **We write to find out what we know and what we want to say.** William Zinsser, *Writing to Learn*
- ◆ **Other people's rules are shackles on the mind. Timidity never produced a good piece of writing.** - William Zinsser, *Writing to Learn*
- ◆ **When you try to capture the truth of your experience in some other person's voice or on that person's terms, you are removing yourself one step further from what you have seen and what you know.** – Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*



What Writers Teach Us

- ◆ **It was my very commitment to writing that kept me from it ... You love your work, so you don't touch it. You love your writing, so it's the very thing you must not do at all. You could not tolerate it if it did not come out well. You could not tolerate yourself. You are thinking about the work, thinking about yourself, looking at the surface of the water, looking at the choppy surface looking back... The trick, obviously, to writing ... is to give up on oneself. It is to evade oneself, to push one's own resistant ego down in to the hot closet of darkness and hope to get some work done before the thing springs out of its jack-in-the-box again. It is to take a leap of faith.** Bonnie Friedman – Writing Past Dark: Envy, Fear, Distraction – and Other Dilemmas in the Writer's Life



What Writers Teach Us

- ◆ **If there's one truth that comes out of your writing education, one single nugget of plain truth you can walk away with, it will be this: you're on your own.** Brett Lott, *Before We Get Started: A Practical Memoir on the Writer's Life*



Talk about Your Work: Public Presentations Keep You Honest Too

◆ May 7, 2005 – Email to Club Manager

- Hope all is well. ...some time ago, I spoke with you about the possibility of taking my comedy project to another level; instead of merely writing about it, I would start videotaping comics sets'. (Some things can't be conveyed in print). You mentioned this would be okay, so long as comics' consented. With my hair book submitted and classes ending, I want to make a move in this direction this summer. I haven't asked comics' yet, because I wanted to get your consent first. But I know that the Comedy Union is a place I'd like to spend some time, either the Monday, Friday, or Saturday show. My hope is that I could videotape comics' sets and provide them with copies of their specific sets as a gesture of reciprocity. I also hope that you (and comics') trust my interests are long-term and scholarly. I wanted to put that out there and see what you thought. Thanks for considering. Lanita



Final Remarks

- ◆ **Ethnographies of performance are intersubjective endeavors**
 - Entail risk and vulnerabilities
 - Entail sensitivity to presentation of self, shifting positionalities, and the politics of representation and translation
 - Require time to build sufficient trust and rapport with those we observe
 - Require commitment to honing “voice” that does not waver in its commitment to the “truth”



Final Remarks

◆ Ethnographies of performance

- Require critical reflexivity, or asking:
 - Who am I to be doing this?
 - How am I positioning myself/positioned?
 - Am I where I need to be to see what I need to see?
- Necessitate overcoming fears that occasionally beset us as researchers
- Call for diligence and sometimes “getting in over our heads”



Final Remarks

- ◆ **Writing as a Metaphor for Ethnographic or Scholarly Research**
 - Must silence critical voice within
 - Must “give up” the book – the article in order to gain it
 - Must write constantly and critically to nurture our distinct “voice” and find our truths
 - Must realize that finding and refining the truths of our findings, as well as our distinctive voices, are, ultimately, **up to us**



Questions to Consider

- ◆ How might methodological issues pertinent to the politics of (re)presentation and translation inform our individual research and collective scholarship on performance?
- ◆ How does our racial, gender, class, etc. positionality impact our ways of “seeing”?
- ◆ Are we where we need to be to see what we want to see?
- ◆ How can “critical reflexivity” inform our scholarship on language as/and performance?



Questions to Consider

- ◆ Are there stories we want to tell that are not being told? Are there different styles of writing that we'd like to use but are not? Why? What's stopping us?
- ◆ How might we better appreciate and examine the role of audience as “co-author” in performative contexts?
- ◆ Is it okay to speak of notions of “authenticity” and “truth” in a climate that disavows the singularity and legitimacy of these terms?
- ◆ What else should we consider? What else is missing in this conversation?



Stop for Discussion
(scroll back to questions)