

African American female comedy: An insurrectionary act
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This presentation examines a layered linguistic strategy employed by a group of successful African American female comedians in performances before mixed gender African American audiences. In the male-dominated field of stand-up comedy, these women face a unique set of gender-related challenges arising from essentialist thinking and community tradition (Dance 1998) that forbids women to be funny in the presence of men. Stand-up comedy in the African American community is a communal event, with audiences verbally expressing their approval or disapproval as a performance progresses (Jacobs-Huey 2006). Male comedians have license to employ African American Vernacular English [AAVE] to help establish them as street-smart and in charge, while simultaneously building solidarity with their audiences (Rickford and Rickford 2000). Yet, tradition does not allow women to publicly employ those same linguistic resources; they are expected to maintain a prim persona, mediated by Standard English. The presentation shows through qualitative and quantitative analysis that part of the strategy that the female comedians employ to quell sexist responses involves establishing a “friendship” relationship with women in their audiences. They comedically employ practices such as self-disclosure and counseling, that researchers (Johnson and Aries 1998; Cameron 1989; Coates, 1997; Troutman 2001; Morgan 1996, 2002; Thomson and Murachver 2001; Jacobs-Huey 2006) associate with conversations between close female friends. Lonnie Luv, for example, confides in her female audience regarding her concerns with telling her supervisor of her aversion to the frequent potlucks held at her office. “You know, I can’t tell Amy, ‘Amy, I just don’t want to be in a potluck this month.’ Amy’ll get a attitude” (2002). The women onstage discuss topics stereotypically associated with women, such as cooking, childrearing, and appearance. Referring to Hollywood beauty icons, Adele Givens counsels her female audience, “Know that you are beautiful . . . We start getting tricked by these magazines . . . but it’s all about attitude” (2001). The friendship component is embedded in an aggressive approach where the comedians co-opt grammatical and phonological AAVE features and practices reserved for public use by men, sometimes surpassing men in frequency of use. For example, absence of post-vocalic /r/, a feature of AAVE, occurs more frequently in data from female comedians than from male comedians. Givens uses profanity at a rate of 9.2 per hundred words, as compared with an average 2.82 for male comedians in the same research. The usurping of “male” linguistic features and practices by women wearing silk and claiming membership in the community of women is a linguistic insurrection that challenges notions of what constitutes “femininity” and whether its characteristics are culture- or situation-specific and subject to change. The aggressive display of power in male public space, coupled with friendship practices, gains strong support from the women in audiences and respect from the men.