A Brief History of African American Humor

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The assistant director at the humanities center I supervise is a Chinese woman who used to be a practicing archaeologist. She grew up in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, lived in Tibet for five years, and did not come to the United States until the 1980s. Despite being an American citizen, she still deeply identifies with China. Once she wanted to prove a point to me about the cultural nature of humor, so she translated for me a popular urban Chinese joke. She thought it was hilarious. Not only did I not get it, it seemed incomprehensible to me. It was not only not funny, it was nonsensical. That was the point she was trying to prove: in our global world, humor is something that does not translate well. “Every group has its humor,” she said, “and understanding that humor determines whether you are an insider or an outsider. In America, there are a lot of different groups with insider humor. Can you understand how another group laughs at itself? And why?” I thought her observation was incisive. In the United States, with its many different groups, humor is the insider’s marker. Humor is an important creative act that binds a group together, gives it an identity, and defines its view of itself and the world outside itself. In the United States, a country that seems at times confused or unsure about assimilation versus pluralism, group humor is complex in its function and meaning. To understand how a group constructs itself through humor is not easy. A group’s humor might contain elements of self-hatred as well as elements of self-protection. How can an outsider understand all or any of this if people in the group do not themselves fully understand the complexity of their humor and, as might be the case with many in the group, do not like the humor of their group?

Much commentary has been written about racial humor in the United States. And why not? It is a rich subject with a history dating back to the days of nineteenth-century minstrelsy, which gave us a complex intergroup humor of white performers pretending to be comically stereotyped versions of blacks. When, after the Civil War, this form of entertainment finally permitted black performers, they, too, had to act in the traditions of the art, playing comically stereotyped blacks. Black comic performers like George Walker and Bert Williams, who became an enormously successful team in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, performed what would be called “coon” roles. James Weldon and Rosamund Johnson, Will Marion Cook, Bob Cole, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Ernest Hogan, and other black song...

Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition

Gerald Early, Glenda Carpio, and Werner Sollors

The 1949th Stated Meeting, held in collaboration with the Chicago Humanities Festival on November 14, 2009, at Northwestern University School of Law

The five illustrations were drawn by Academy Fellow and novelist Charles Johnson.
In the late 1920s and 1930s. When Fetchit became popular with white audiences, black commentators, civil rights leaders, and black intellectuals began to condemn him as something abhorrent, as politically retrograde, as a horrible stereotype of the Old Negro, so to speak. But Lincoln Perry, who created the character of Stepin Fetchit, for years developed and honed his act by performing in front of black audiences who rolled in the aisles laughing. They loved him when he was performing in all-black venues. He performed the same act in Hollywood films and became one of the most criticized men in the national black community. Why? All Lincoln Perry was trying to do was take an ethnic character he had created and make it cross over to wider audiences as an American type, not unlike the Yankee Peddler or the American backwoodsman. However, Perry was too successful and became tied as an actor to his character in much the same way that Paul Reubens became tied to his 1980s character Pee-wee Herman. His character ceased to be an artistic creation and was interpreted instead as a pathologized projection.

Why couldn’t Stepin Fetchit be seen as an American type like the neurotic Jew or the singing cowboy or the Irish Catholic priest? Lincoln Perry had great success getting whites, as well as blacks, to laugh genuinely at his creation. The problem was that blacks thought whites were laughing for different reasons. Fetchit, like minstrelsy, politicized laughter. He posed a difficult question with his characterization: what exactly made him funny to his audiences? The problem in America with group humor is not that outsiders won’t get the joke you make about your own group but that they will get the joke at your expense. Does humor not cross your own group but that they will get the joke you make about your own group but that they will get the joke at your expense? The problem in America with group humor is not that outsiders won’t get the joke you make about your own group but that they will get the joke at your expense.

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the television program. The NAACP was successful, and the show was canceled after two years despite enjoying good ratings.

By the early 1950s, black actors generally avoided comic roles. The major black actors who emerged in this period – Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, James Edwards, Ruby Dee, and Dorothy Dandridge – did not do comedy, possibly because Hollywood was afraid to cast them in such roles but probably because the actors felt comedy carried the taint of minstrelsy. These black actors felt themselves to be the children of Paul Robeson, and they were highly sensitive to the idea of playing demeaning roles. And nothing demeaned a serious black actor quite like comedy, especially when it meant being funny for a white audience.

Many people, especially those who have never watched the 1939 epic *Gone with the Wind*, are convinced that Hattie McDaniel’s Oscar-winning role of Mammy, the stereotypical overweight, nurturing, bossy slave woman, was a comic role, not the dramatic role it actually was. Louise Beavers’s Mammy-like performance in the 1934 version of *Imitation of Life* was also largely a dramatic, not comic, role. These were the two most substantial roles for black actors appearing in Hollywood films before World War II, and while both films attracted black audiences – *Imitation of Life* more so than *Gone with the Wind*, which was not critically well received in black newspapers – the films were meant for whites. Thus, black audiences felt uncomfortable with the black roles, sensing that they were more comic than they actually were.

Lena Horne, endorsed by Walter White of the NAACP as the antidote to black servile comic actors, starred in *Cabin in the Sky* and *Stormy Weather*, musical motion pictures that were produced in 1943, had primarily black casts, and were made to appeal to African Americans. One of Horne’s roles was clearly comic – the sexy black temptress, another stereotype that would ensnare Dorothy Dandridge in the 1950s. Black audiences on the whole felt more comfortable with the humorous stereotypes in films made explicitly for them. (After World War II, Ethel Waters would replace Hattie McDaniel playing “Mammy” roles, and singer/dancer Pearl Bailey would become a new comic voice as the sassy, outspoken black woman, a sort of black Eve Arden.) The political issues involved in the depiction of blacks in film for both black and white audiences and for black actors were so complicated, so fraught with hazard, that the line between what was comic and what was dramatic was blurred.

More than a little controversy arose among blacks when Poitier and Dandridge agreed to play the leads in Otto Preminger’s 1959 film version of *Porgy and Bess*, roles that neither Poitier nor Dandridge wanted to do because they felt the characters were racial stereotypes. The fact that *Porgy and Bess* is not a comedy but an important opera (the only performable opera featuring blacks in all major roles) was probably the only reason these black actors agreed to play in it at all.

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In light of all of this, Bill Cosby emerged in the 1960s as an extraordinarily important figure in American entertainment. When he was given a lead role in the television series *I Spy*, he became the first African American to star in a dramatic series. However, Cosby had come to the attention of the public as a stand-up comic. From 1962 to 1965 he rose rapidly, playing all the noted comedy clubs and releasing a hit comedy album, *Bill Cosby Is a Very Funny Fellow . . . Right*, in 1964. Cosby was one of three important black stand-up comics to appear in the 1960s who were very different from the type of black comics who had existed before. The other two were Dick Gregory and boxer Muhammad Ali. All three were “clean” comics in the sense that they did not aim their material at an adult audience by using obscene language or discussing sex. Each was the result of the civil rights movement.

Early in his career, Ali became a juvenile comic, reciting humorous verse as a way of bringing attention to his boxing matches. He even recorded an album of such poetry for Columbia Records in 1963, with liner notes by poet Marianne Moore. When he joined the Nation of Islam (NOI), shortly before his 1964 title bout with champion Sonny Liston, his comic antics took on a much more political edge. For a time, Ali’s comedy bothered many sportswriters and boxing fans because it made it seem as if he did not take his sport seriously. Blacks were also bothered in the early days of Ali’s career because they felt his comedy was demeaning and made Ali look silly in comparison to the great race hero Joe Louis, who never joked and rarely smiled publicly. Later, his comedy tended to denigrate the politics (as Ali chose to define them) of his black opponents.

Ali’s comedy also bothered the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, who hated sports, especially boxing, though when Elijah Muhammad censored Ali, it was not for his comedy. (Members of the NOI almost never smiled publicly and were known, in fact, for being grim and puritanical. They could express humor at times, however, in the sermons they delivered to the faithful in their mosques, usually at the expense of whites or establishment blacks who were considered Uncle Toms. It must be noted as well that Ali’s comedy was unusual for a high-performance athlete – although the subject of race, sports, and comedy is historically and culturally complex and worthy of considerable explication in another context – and certainly for a boxer.) In 1969, while in the midst of his three-and-a-half-year exile from boxing because of his opposition to the draft, Ali was suspended from the NOI and shunned by its members for one year for expressing in an interview a willingness to return to boxing to make money. Muhammad thought Ali was groveling, degrading himself and the organization.

Gregory, who made the civil rights movement and race part of his routine of acerbic, wry observations on American cultural and political hypocrisy, belonged to a school of liberal, Cold War political comics of the day that included Mort Sahl, Tom Lehrer, and Vaughn Meader. Ali combined elements
of Jerry Lewis with the comic bragging of Depression-era baseball pitcher Dizzy Dean Gregory, and Ali racialized their types of comedy in a new way, making their white audiences aware that they were speaking as black men. Of course, Williams and Walker, Stepin Fetchit, and Amos and Andy were also making their audiences aware that they were “black men,” but Ali and Gregory were self-aware and were not making humor that could in any way make whites laugh at the spectacle of their own degradation, their “naturally comic” position in life, or their naturally fun-loving, carefree disposition. I might add here that singer/actor/songwriter Oscar Brown, Jr., also popular at this time, was like Gregory in that he occasionally did humorous political songs with a withering satirical edge; for example, “Forty Acres and a Mule,” about reparations for slavery, appears on his 1964 album, Mr. Oscar Brown, Jr. Goes to Washington.

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Cosby never made a point of reminding his audiences that he was black. He avoided being political – to the point of not even casually mentioning political figures of the time – and this probably had a great deal to do with his enormous success. Nipsey Russell and Flip Wilson, both successful crossover black comics of the day, generally avoided politics as well.

In this respect, Cosby was not a bridge figure when it came to bringing a version of black stand-up comedy off the “Chitlin’ Circuit,” the circuit of black theaters and urban venues where a constellation of black comics – including Moms Mabley, Pigmeat Markham, Redd Foxx, and Skillet and Leroy – normally performed for black audiences. Although some of Mabley’s and Markham’s recordings for Chess Records were given radio airplay, by and large these were adult comics whose routines were far too raunchy for children. Cosby’s comedy, which he mostly performed for integrated or largely white audiences, was not closely related to what these black comics performed for black audiences. The form of black comedy seen on the Chitlin’ Circuit would be exposed to wider audiences in the 1970s through the crossover success of Redd Foxx, and many of his comic peers would wind up appearing on his hit television show, Sanford and Son, where they performed cleaned-up, watered down versions of their acts. Neither blacks nor whites seemed troubled by this, and the show was popular with both groups, although some more-militant black intellectuals condemned the show as minstrelsy.

During and after the civil rights years, Marxist and nationalist blacks regularly condemned most black comedy as a form of minstrelsy, in effect saying that blacks could never escape these stereotypes and that making whites laugh was politically disempowering and socially degrading. Most blacks, especially among the black elite, likely would have been unhappy had the Redd Foxx – Chitlin’ Circuit– style of black humor been widely exposed to whites in the 1950s, when it was seen (again, especially by black elites) as low-class entertainment.

Bill Cosby was, in effect, a middlebrow comedian. His routines about growing up in a normal American family and being an American dad made not only Cosby but also a fantasy image of the black family mainstream in the days of both Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s report on black family pathology (*The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*) and such television comedies about white families as *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave It to Beaver*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *Make Room for Daddy/The Danny Thomas Show*, and *Father Knows Best*. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, many African Americans, in their militancy and their quest for cultural authenticity, were more apt to feel that Chitlin’ Circuit humor was an honest and compelling expression of blackness and would aggressively identify with it.

The backlash against Richard Pryor was part of a larger dissatisfaction among many blacks with the new, gritty, ghetto image of blacks that was portrayed in popular culture, especially in blaxploitation films such as “Shaft,” “Superfly,” and “Black Caesar.”

During the age of integration, from the 1950s to the mid-1960s, black performers and black audiences were freed from certain types of confinement that dictated how they were expected to relate to the larger white world around them. Black performers did not necessarily have to do race-based acts or make use of comic racial stereotypes. Black audiences, during this time, felt more comfortable with this form of group humor being performed for white audiences. In fact, black audiences were sometimes visibly proud of this.

In the 1970s, Richard Pryor arrived as the major black comic of the day. Indeed, Pryor became one of the seminal stand-up comics of post–World War II America. Although Pryor started out in the 1960s very much in the vein of Bill Cosby, doing mainstream, television-safe comedy, he had shifted by the early 1970s, when he began to use obscenity in his work. This was around the time that George Carlin, a white stand-up comic who became a major figure as well, changed his act from mainstream to more edgy by incorporating profane language.

For both comics, profane language was used not so much to deliver raunchy jokes but to be political, antibourgeois, and anti-establishment. They were largely building their 1970s routines around the sensibility of comic Lenny Bruce, unquestionably the most influential and most controversial of all postwar stand-up comics. Pryor, in effect, became the anti-Bill Cosby. And although
Pryor was enormously popular, he faced a backlash from some blacks who were especially disturbed by his excessive use of the word nigger. W. E. B. Du Bois, in a 1942 article about black humor and black audiences, wrote, “The use of the word ‘nigger,’ which no white man must use, is coupled with innuendo and suggestion which brings irresistible gales of laughter.” So, Pryor was following a tradition in black humor and, in becoming the anti-Bill Cosby, was in many respects reinventing an older black-comic practice for contemporary audiences, both black and white. Indeed, the fact that Pryor attracted a large white audience in addition to appealing to blacks may have had something to do with the black press criticizing his use of the word nigger. (In the 1920s and 1930s, segments of the black public criticized filmmaker Oscar Micheaux for using the word “nigger” in his all-black cast films; some strenuously criticized Paul Robeson for appearing in the film version of Emperor Jones (1933), where the n-word was used several times.)

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As nearly all blaxploitation films were ultra-violent and action-oriented, comedy became, ironically, an antidote. Bill Cosby appeared in a series of clean comic films directed by Sidney Poitier – Uptown Saturday Night (1974), Let’s Do It Again (1975), and A Piece of the Action (1977) – that were meant to combat blaxploitation cinema. Who would have thought that a family-oriented message of racial uplift would now be found in black comedy and that someone like Sidney Poitier – the ultra-serious, dignified black actor of the 1950s and 1960s – would direct comic black films? But Bill Cosby’s clean comedy of the 1960s made it possible for blacks to do comedy and still maintain their sense of racial pride – not to be the objects of laughter at their own expense. Indeed, these films enabled blacks to reconstruct their humor of the era of Walker and Williams without the tint of degradation. As Du Bois noted in his observations on black humor: “[Black comic actors] imitate the striver, the nouveau riche, the partially educated man of large words and the entirely untrained,” which is precisely what these films did. In fact, these comedies even made fun of blaxploitation films themselves. As it turned out, the pressure on Pryor was sufficient to make him abandon the use of the word nigger for a time; in some ways, this in-group protest slowly became the undoing of his act. Regardless of whether this response was a misdirected act of group self-censorship, it should hardly seem surprising, coming from a persecuted minority that can never quite be sure how it can or should protect itself, especially from its own impulse to find sources of its degradation funny.

By the late 1970s blacks were divided over the image of blacks in popular culture and in comedy in ways that were similar to the divide blacks felt about Stepin Fetchit, com ic actress Hattie McDaniel, and Amos and Andy. This divide continues to persist. The more things change, as the old saying goes, the more they remain the same. But as any good historian will note, this was not quite the same at all. No conflict is ever repeated the same way, if only because the actors always change and so does the audience.

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Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition

Glenda Carpio

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Many critics have noted that men have had much more freedom in doing physical comedy because they have had an easier time displaying their bodies than have women. One can easily see how race would further complicate this dynamic. Erika Kreger reminds us that in the United States not until the late nineteenth century did critics come to see wit and humor as incompatible with femininity. Indeed, she argues, in “the mid 1800s, women humorists were often popular and acclaimed.” Yet the humor they practiced was neither necessarily politically radical nor performed; it was largely textual. Performing on stage was not an option for women, especially women of color, unless they joined vaudeville shows, where their place was decidedly ambivalent. The woman entertainer was usually included to “make the place fit for decent women, yet everyone ‘knew’ that she was not decent herself.” Women could also join the minstrel troops of the late 1860s, but there they were usually featured as giddy sex objects and burlesqued in much the same ways as plantation stereotypes of African Americans.1

Traditionally, women across divisions of race have been relegated to restrained wit – sly humor but not the raucous, screaming, demonstrative kind.

Against this background we have some significant pioneers. Among white American women we have Lucille Ball and Lily Tomlin, to name two giants, and among African American women we have the early blues singers Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and later Nina Simone, who sang of wanting “a little sugar in my bowl . . . a little hot dog between my rolls.” Later figures such as Whoopi Goldberg and Anna Deavere Smith have experimented with comedy and performance art. The so-called Queens of Comedy, including Adele Givens, Mo’ nique, Cheryl Underwood, Laura Hayes, and Sommore are comediennes whose work was first showcased on HBO’s Def Comedy Jam in 2001. Their work plays off the persistent stereotypes of black women as domineering, often large, emasculating women who fail to conform to essentialized notions of womanhood. We also need to look at the present-day work of Wanda Sykes, a comedienne who has been able to find a middle ground in creating an embodied form of comedy, one that does not erase her sexuality, as with the grandmotherly Moms Mabley, or depend upon it, as with Josephine Baker and the Queens of Comedy.

For centuries, African Americans have faced racism, in its various manifestations and guises, through a rich tradition of humor. And for centuries, people who oppressed them found that humor puzzling – how could a people so oppressed find any reason to laugh? Minstrelsy went a long way in “explaining” the puzzle: black people laughed because they were simpletons.

Yet black American humor began as a wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community. Until well into the twentieth century, however, that humor had to be cloaked in secrecy lest it be read as transgressive and punished by violence. Hence the popular slave aphorism, “Got one mind for white folk to see / ’Nother for what I know is me.”

Despite the life-threatening injunctions against black laughter, African American humor flourished at first under the mask of allegory and increasingly in more direct forms. It developed a Janus-faced identity. On one side was a fairly nonthreatening form that catered to whites’ beliefs in the inferiority of blacks while usually masking aggression. On the other side was a more assertive and acerbic humor that often targeted racial injustice but was generally reserved for in-group interactions.

For black Americans, humor has often functioned as a way of affirmaing their humanity in the face of its violent denial. In order to confront the maddening illusions of race and the insidiousness of racism, black folk have laughed long and hard, perhaps in the tragicomic notes of the blues or in the life-affirming spirit of righteous insurgency – or both. Black laughter is, however, not only a coping mechanism, although most people think of it only in this fashion. Black humor is also a rich source of creative energy. Still, by most accounts, African American humor, like other humor that arises from oppression, has provided a balm, a release for anger and aggression, and a way of coping with the too-often-painful consequences of racism.

In this way, black humor has been linked to one of the three major theories of humor: the relief theory made popular by Sigmund Freud, which posits that we laugh as a way to release pent-up aggression. Freud claimed that “tendentious jokes” – of which he identified two main kinds, the obscene and the hostile – allow the joker and his audience to release energy used for the purposes of inhibition. Much, but certainly not all, African American humor can be understood as a kind of relief-inducing humor. Indeed, under the violent restrictions of slavery and segregation, African Americans developed the art of tendentious jokes so well, in particular those that mask aggression, that often they left whites “with the baffled general feeling that [they had] been

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2 An expanded form of the background presented here can be found in Glenda R. Carpio, Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
lampooned [before their very eyes] without quite knowing how. Among themselves, however, African Americans have expressed aggression toward their oppressors more openly.

African American humor is also, although less commonly, linked to a second major theory of humor: the superiority theory, which posits that we laugh at other people’s misfortunes. The traditions of signifying, “playing the dozens,” and “boasting and toasting” belong to this kind of humor, although in the verbal battle of “capping” and “yo mamma” jokes verbal wit is savored over mean-spirited competition or put-downs. The signifying tradition is generally considered an example of mother wit and departs significantly from the Freudian model of humor, which stresses sublimation, because it relishes exposure and does not depend on the joke form. Instead, this humor is mainly attitudinal and visual and depends on the verbal dexterity of the dozens, the toasts (long, metrically and rhythmically complex compositions), and the telling of “lies,” or stories. Signifying remained largely segregated until Richard Pryor broke out of his original image as a slim, mild-mannered comedian who, believe it or not, never cursed and usually told charming jokes patterned after Bill Cosby’s material. Pryor began performing revolutionary acts for mixed audiences in the late 1960s, and thus was largely responsible for desegregating African American humor. Black comedians before Pryor, notably Moms Mabley, Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, Flip Wilson, Red Foxx, and Bill Cosby, had introduced aspects of black humor to mixed audiences, but it was Pryor, after a remarkable self-transformation, who brought all aspects of black humor to the stage. In a sense, he “outed” black humor from the closely guarded circles within which black folk had kept it since slavery.

Rarely is black humor connected to the third (and for me the most interesting) theory of humor: the incongruity theory, which suggests we laugh when our expectations are disturbed. The humor of incongruity generally entails the playing of “what if” games that suspend normativity. These are games that momentarily reconfigure habits of mind and language and that can lead to what Ralph Ellison, after Kenneth Burke, called “perspective by incongruity.” At its best, the humor of incongruity allows us to see the world inverted, to consider transpositions of time and place, and, especially when the humor is hot enough to push our buttons, to question the habits of mind that we may fall into as we critique race.

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This is the kind of humor I deal with in my book, where I especially focus on how writers and artists from both the civil rights/Black Power and post–civil rights/Post Soul generations stage “rituals of redress” with respect to American slavery. At the center of the project is a concern about the abiding impact of the racial and gender stereotypes produced by slavery and how artists and writers use humor to confront the legacy of these stereotypes.

Although the history of early African American women comics has been largely ignored, Jackie “Moms” Mabley has received critical attention. Born in 1897 in North Carolina, Mabley became a dancer and singer by the time she was sixteen but quickly turned to comedy in traveling tent shows. Early in her career Mabley assumed the character of an elderly earth mother. As Mel Watkins puts it, “The guise provided the buffer or intermediary necessary to quell resistance to a woman doing a single comic routine.” For Lawrence Levine, “The appeal of Mabley’s humor was precisely its degree of folkishness . . . Her antique clothing, her easy manner, her sense of kinship with her audiences—marked by her references to them as ‘children’—her lack of pretentiousness, the easy familiarity of her language, her movements, her dialogue, were at the core of her vast popularity.”

Mabley challenged the notion of black women as domineering andemasculating while offering black Americans group recognition, a sense of affiliation, and comfort. But Mabley’s approach was not without risk. Her decision to adopt a grandmotherly persona reinforced a notion of black femininity patterned after the asexual Mammy figure. For, although she was known for telling risqué, even bawdy jokes (usually about how much she liked younger men), she used the mantle of her grandmotherly figure and demeanor to hide any real possibility of marking her body as sexual. Her guise would ultimately betray any gesture toward a liberated sexuality.

Josephine Baker, by contrast, combined sex appeal and comedy in her dance performances. She famously used a skirt of bananas to flesh out but also to mock the primitive persona she had established in her debut in Paris in 1925. A beautiful woman and gifted dancer, Baker exaggerated stereotypes of black female sexuality by performing numbers such as the Danse sauvage while minimally clad in a “primitive” costume: bare-breasted but with feathers, wings, and other such signifiers attached to her extremities. Often she would be chased and captured on stage by white hunters.

Baker sought to command some authority in her self-production as the primitive sexualized Other, combining a form of feminine sexuality with a clownish disposition. As Susan Gubar puts it, “Throughout her career, Baker sauced her sexual numbers with comically exaggerated, antic gestures: silence the Real Side: A History of African American Humor from Slavery to Chris Rock (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2002); and Levine, “Black Laughter,” in Black Culture and Black Consciousness.

eyes in burlesque fun] that distressed her from the sexual frenzy she was putting on display.”6 Baker also made a point of contrasting her on- and off-stage personas to emphasize the artifice of her act. Off stage she was a sophisticated and glamorous beauty and later in her career a devoted civil rights promoter. And long before Angelina Jolie, she adopted children from all over the world and raised them in her castle in France.

Yet Baker was so typecast by her early role that she encountered a great deal of difficulty when she tried to develop her singing and acting in pursuit of a more sophisticated persona in the 1930s. In particular, she became almost synonymous with her skirt of bananas, which took on a life of its own. “Oh! How this idea has turned ridiculous!”

The incongruity theory of humor . . . suggests we laugh when our expectations are disturbed.

Baker said of the costume, “How many drawings and caricatures it has inspired! Only the devil, apparently, could have invented something like that.”6 While the identity of the costume designer remains unknown, Baker’s appeal in her primitive guise is all too clear. Baker became the banana belt, thus inadvertently conflating two forms of colonialist consumption: that of a colonial product that, like sugar, tobacco, or coffee, has frequently been associated with pleasure; and that of black female bodies. During the 1930s, Baker made overt efforts to work against her typecasting, especially by adding androgynous twists to her act. She also redefined her famous skirt. She turned the bananas into “absurd signifier[s] of black male phallic threat.” As early as 1927, the bananas had “become ever harder and more threatening” – so much so that they looked more like spikes than bananas.7

What happens when the black female performer focuses on form as much if not more than on content? What happens when she skillfully manipulates triple jeopardy, strategically de-emphasizing one aspect (in this instance race) while highlighting another (gender)? Wanda Sykes adopts the laid-back attitude of Moms Mabley without denying her sexuality. She also uses her body to address issues of gender without eroticizing her own status as a black woman. Her performance Tongue Untied (2003) is a measure of the progress, albeit slow, we have made since Mabley and Baker. But this style of manipulating race and gender is also particular to Sykes, who, at least in stand-up (she is still relegated to the role of the maid in films—see Monster in Law and even Chris Rock’s Down to Earth), shows a great deal of talent and promise for what may become the future of black women comedic performers in the public sphere.

Tongue Untied begins with Sykes addressing politics. By starting with politics, a realm long denied to women, Sykes distinguishes herself from performers like the Queens of Comedy and other female comedic talents across gender and race. After four segments in which she addresses political issues – a critique of George W. Bush’s engineering of war and his manipulation of fears about weapons of mass destruction – Sykes turns to topics that are more traditional in the work of women comedians; namely, issues involving gender and sexuality. However, she approaches these topics in surprising ways. One skit focuses on Sykes visiting a strip club in Florida, where she plays the role of a highly ironic participant observer, a woman witnessing straight men as they satisfy their cravings to see women’s bodies. “How do men ever get any work done?” Sykes asks facetiously, referring to the obsessive ways men can fetishize women’s bodies. At any given moment, the intense longing to see women, especially the most tabooed parts of their body, may take hold of a man, rendering him helpless. “Let’s go look at it!” one of them may say in the midst of work and take off to the strip club. Sykes’s participation in the whole enterprise softens this potentially chastising gesture, allowing her audience to laugh at the obsessions that besiege men without rendering them the butt of the joke. She then skillfully transitions into a satire of the obsessions that besiege women, turning the tables on members of her audience that might have felt privileged. Throughout the skit, she de-emphasizes her racial identity, though she casually makes it part of the show through particular language choices and allusions. She also moves on the stage in a manner that marks her as a sexual being without making that sexuality the defining characteristic of her identity. The fact that Sykes recently came out as a lesbian also marks our reading of her performance, enriching our understanding of how she manipulates stereotypes of race and gender without making her own body bear the burden of that manipulation.

Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition

Werner Sollors

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Black humor literature is similar to the literature of existentialism in that it begins with the same assumption—that the world is absurd.” This is how Alan R. Pratt defines the term in the introduction to his edited collection, Black Humor: Critical Essays. He then illustrates his definition with a passage from Jean-Paul Sartre. Postmodern authors, most notably Thomas Pynchon, are among the best practitioners of black humor literature. Pratt also offers a number of alternative terms for black humor, among them apocalyptic comedy, dark comedy, pathological comedy, nihilistic humor, tragic farce, and comedy of the absurd.

In his book Black Culture and Black Consciousness (1977) the late historian Lawrence Levine highlights how absurd the rules were that governed the worlds of slavery and Jim Crow and how this very absurdity invited numerous African American jokes that were recorded long before existentialism. This gives the term black humor a specifically racial meaning and context in America.

Levine mentions the “story of a slave who was caught killing and eating one of his master’s pigs and who mockingly rationalized his act by arguing, ‘Yes, suh, Massa, you got less pig now but you sho’ got more nigger.’” Here the principle of ownership is turned against itself by a witty slave. Levine also tells of the white deacon in Mississippi who walks into his church and finds a Negro standing there. “Boy,” he calls out. “What you doin’ in here? Don’t you know this is a white church?” “Boss, I only just got sent here to mop up the floor,” the black man informs him. “Well, that’s all right then,” the deacon responds. “But don’t let me catch you prayin’.” The punch line speaks volumes about Jim Crow religious hypocrisy.

The witty repartee seems to restore justice within the realm of humor for a second, fending off the possibility that outsiders will “get” black humor at the expense of blacks (as Gerald Early put it) and giving whites the uneasy feeling that somehow they have been lampooned by black laughter (as Glenda Carpio said). However, many other jokes suggest the insurmountability of the burden of race by taking for granted the absurdity of the world made by slaveholders and segregationists.

Glenda Carpio writes in Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery that “African American humor has been, for centuries, a humor of survival. It has been a safety valve, a mode of minimizing pain and defeat, as well as a medium capable of expressing grievance and grief in the most artful and incisive ways.”

A black man is going to the voting booth to cast his vote. The sheriff tells him, “Boy, first you’ve got to pass a reading test. Read out this here headline,” and he hands him a Chinese newspaper. As if he were reading the headline, the black man slowly and deliberately enunciates, “Negroes won’t vote in Mississippi again this year.” The response is ingenious, in part because it acknowledges the continuation of the grievance of voter disenfranchisement.

A conductor who tells a Negro passenger to go to the Jim Crow car gets this reply: “I done quit the race.” Here the humor points to the strange fact that unlike pretty much all other social categories, being a Negro is apparently not one that can be shed.

The absurdity of the rules that governed the worlds of slavery and Jim Crow invited numerous African American jokes that were recorded long before existentialism.

In the Harvard library catalog, I found a book called Black Humor, which was humorously located on the Black Power shelf. Published in 1970, it was authored by Charles Johnson, who later became a National Book Award-winning novelist. (Anyone interested in black humor should be sure to read Johnson’s Oxherding Tale.) Black Humor, a short book of cartoons, contains inappropriate-seeming pages on slavery and its legacy. For example, the caption under a sketch showing figures in the hull of a slave ship reads, “Say, why don’t we have a sing-along?” (Figure 1). A cartoon of a slave auction shows a man at a podium with a placard proclaiming, “We give trading stamps” (see page 29). Similarly, a two-panel cartoon shows a Klansman kneeling at his bedside (Figures 2–3). He prays, “Give me the strength to eliminate the inferior people ruining my nation.” The next panel shows God’s apparent answer, ironic and subversive: “Sho’ nuff, boss!” As Bill

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1 I wish to acknowledge Leslie Berlowitz, who kindly invited me to participate in this panel, and Glenda Carpio, Gerald Early, and Jennifer Kurdyla, who made helpful comments. Charles Johnson was not only generous enough to grant permission to reproduce pages from his book Black Humor, but he also redrew five images to go along with his text from 1970. These newly drawn images are published here for the first time.


3 Lawrence Levine, Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 309.

4 Ibid., 312.

Cosby has said, God clearly has a sense of humor. One of the cartoons has acquired a particular poignancy in the past year. A mother is shown talking to a friend. The woman’s young son is nearby, jumping on a white-looking doll. The caption below the image reads, “He may never be president, but he’ll make a great militant” (Figure 4).

As “a mode of minimizing pain and defeat, as well as a medium capable of expressing grievance and grief,” versions of black humor permeate American culture, as is visible in A New Literary History of America, a book I had the pleasure to coedit with Greil Marcus. The book represents America in 219 chronologically arranged essays written by 201 authors, among them Glenda Carpio on Thomas Pynchon and Gerald Early on The Wizard of Oz, Tarzan, and integrating the military.

The specific black humor strain in A New Literary History of America appears in W. T. “Rip” Lhamon’s essay “Rogue Blackness” (1830), which argues that Melville was reacting to the minstrel show number “The Black Barber” when he penned the literally double-edged scene in which the slave rebel Babo holds the razor against Captain Delano’s neck: “The famous shaving scene at the center of Melville’s ‘Benito Cereno’ (1855) tried to live up to the grave humor that Dan Emmett and Eph Horn had been performing on the minstrel stage for a decade and a half. This same blackface-derived shaving scene would still be reincarnate in Charles Chesnutt’s ‘The Doll’ (1912).” Lhamon also finds that the opening words of Frederick Douglass’s first autobiography (1845) copped Jim Crow’s come-on:

Rice: “Come listen all you galls and boys / I’s jist from Tuckyhoe.”

Douglass: “I was born in Tuckahoe.”

Lhamon goes on to speculate whether Douglass, like Thomas Rice, was thinking of that other Tuckahoe, the Virginia plantation that was the boyhood home of Thomas Jefferson, Mr. “Created Equal” himself.

John Edgar Wideman, who wrote the essay on Charles W. Chesnutt for A New Literary History of America, comments that Chesnutt and Ralph Ellison are two authors who have noted with a distinct sense of humor that their “characters commit the unforgiving mistake of allowing themselves to fall asleep within someone else’s dream, the dream that blacks and whites coexist peacefully, voluntarily, in a just, mutually beneficial arrangement. The wake-up call of riots, Ellison’s staged in Harlem and Chesnutt’s set in Wellington, North Carolina, expose the dream’s fragility.” One of the micro-stories Wideman contributed to Best African American Fiction 2010 explores similar themes:

**Message**

A message in red letters on the back of a jogger’s T-shirt passed by too quickly for me to memorize exactly. Something about George Bush going too far in his search for terrorists and WMDs. A punch line sniggering that Bush could...
have stayed home and found the terrorist he was looking for in the mirror. The message clever, I thought, and jacked the idea for my new line of black-lettered T-shirts: America went way too far looking for slaves. Plenty niggers in the mirror for sale.¹¹

The “mirror” or “tarbaby” effect of white “hallucinatory” perception of blacks is also apparent in novelist Ishmael Reed’s essay in *A New Literary History of America* on Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, an essay that begins with the ironic comment that “structurally” the novel “is about as solid as a New Orleans levee” and ends with a passage rarely highlighted in discussions of Huck Finn:

Huck cries, “I want my nigger,” like the children of the suburbs who are addicted to gangster rap, like the white Southern children after the Civil War who craved their coon songs from New York. Twain exposes this bizarre hunger, this exotic yearning of those who despise blacks yet wish to imitate them. Who wish to be called “honey” by them. Who wish to be “petted” by them. Who wish to burn them, cut out their very entrails, and take them home with them. If you can’t give us our nigger, they seem to say, we’ll make do with Elvis. . . . Twain knew. *I want my nigger!*¹²

George Schuyler must be the godfather of black humor. His thoroughly irreverent novel *Black No More* (1931) is unsurpassed for its raucous jokes about the joke that is race. Jeffrey Ferguson (who wrote the entry on Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* in *A New Literary History of America*) finds in his study of Schuyler that the wisdom “of black humor. . . resided in its sharp recognition of the ludicrous and outlandish in American race relations.”¹³


functionality outside of the US cannot be guaranteed. Buyer will receive a certificate of authenticity. . . . Benefits: . . . 2. This Blackness may be used for writing critical essays or scholarship about other blacks. 3. This Blackness may be used for making jokes about black people and/or laughing at black humor comfortably. . . . 4. This Blackness may be used for accessing some affirmative action benefits. (Limited time offer. May already be prohibited in some areas.) 5. This Blackness may be used for dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny. 6. This Blackness may be used for gaining access to exclusive, “high risk” neighborhoods. 7. This Blackness may be used for securing the right to use the terms ‘sista’, ‘brotha’, or ‘nigga’ in reference to black people. (Be sure to have certificate of authenticity on hand when using option 7.) . . . 9. This Blackness may be used to augment the blackness of those already black, especially for purposes of playing ‘black-er-than-thou’. . . . Warnings: 1. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used during legal proceedings of any sort. 2. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while seeking employment. . . . 5. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while making intellectual claims. 6. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while voting in the United States or Florida. 

The auction was held in August 2001 but was removed by eBay after only four days for inappropriateness. “Keith Obadike’s Blackness” had attracted twelve bidders, and the highest bid was $152.50 when it was pulled.

Perhaps it does take an existentialist’s black humor to make sense of race in America.
Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition

Figure 5

Seller assumes all responsibility for listing this item. You should contact the seller to resolve any questions before bidding. Auction currency is U.S. dollars ($) unless otherwise noted.

Description
This heirloom has been in the possession of the seller for twenty-eight years. Mr. Obadike's Blackness has been used primarily in the United States and its functionality outside of the US cannot be guaranteed. Buyer will receive a certificate of authenticity. Benefits and Warnings: 1. This Blackness may be used for creating black art. 2. This Blackness may be used for writing critical essays or scholarship about other blacks. 3. This Blackness may be used for making jokes about black people and/or laughing at black humor comfortably. (Option4 may overlap with option2). 4. This Blackness may be used for accessing some affirmative action benefits. (Limited time offer: May already applicable in some areas.) 5. This Blackness may be used for dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny. 6. This Blackness may be used for gaining access to exclusive. "high risk" neighborhoods. 7. This Blackness may be used for securing the right to use the terms 'black', 'brotha', or 'nigger' in reference to black people. (Be sure to have certificate of authenticity on hand when using option3). 8. This Blackness may be used for instilling fear. 9. This Blackness may be used to augment the blackness of those already black, especially for purposes of playing 'blackest-than-thou'. 10. This Blackness may be used by blacks as a spare (in case your original Blackness is whapped off you). Warnings: 1. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used during legal proceedings of any sort. 2. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while seeking employment. 3. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness he used in the process of making or selling 'serious' art. 4. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while shopping or writing a personal check. 5. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while making intellectual claims. 6. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while voting in the United States or Florida. 7. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while demanding fairness. 8. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while demanding fairness. 9. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used in Hollywood. 10. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used by whites looking for a wild weekend. ©Keith Townsend Obadike #4

Bidding

Your bid is a contract - Place a bid only if you're serious about buying the item. If you are the winning bidder, you will enter into a legally binding contract to purchase the item from the seller.

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