

ABSTRACT

ENGLISH

MASON, CHERYL BANKS B.A. FISK UNIVERSITY, 1974

THE DYNAMICS OF BLACK HUMOR FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA AND THE TRANSFORMATION FROM SLAVERY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Thesis dated May 2008

The purpose of this study is to bring to the forefront the importance of black humor in the lives of African-Americans. The cultural roots of black humor began in Africa and were transported to America where Africans were forced to live as an enslaved people. Humor is a defining factor which contributed to the survival of blacks living in an oppressed state. Black people continue to live in survival mode and the researcher evaluates how black humor is a significant component to overcoming a life of adversity.

All genres of literature evolve from one generation to the next. The genre of black humor is no different. This study will disclose how the dynamics of black humor evolve from the days of the enslaved entertaining the plantation masters, to the era of minstrelsy, and into the twentieth century with the rise of black comedy. Each period of black humor will demonstrate the profound effect humor has in the lives of black people.

THE DYNAMICS OF BLACK HUMOR FROM AFRICA TO AMERICA AND THE
TRANSFORMATION FROM SLAVERY TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

MAY 2008

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to extend my sincere appreciation and gratitude to the many individuals who supported me throughout this onerous task. I would like to thank all of the professors in the English Department for their dedication and passion for making the learning experience meaningful. I especially thank my thesis committee, Dr. Georgene Bess-Montgomery, and Dr. Alma Vinyard. They were extremely supportive and availed themselves to me whenever I needed advice or assistance. It is through their guidance I am able to successfully complete my thesis. Additionally, I wish to extend a sincere thank you to my sister friend, Sylvia Kirkland, who supported, motivated, and constantly encouraged me throughout the entire process. Her advice and guidance is greatly appreciated. I wish to express a special thank you to my sister, Pamela Banks Lee and my son, Devin Mason, who were always there for me when I needed their help. Finally, and most importantly, I wish to extend a loving thank you to my husband, Daryl Mason. He has truly been my strength and inspiration throughout the entire process. Without his genuine love, support, patience, and wisdom, it would have been incredibly difficult to complete the task of pursuing and receiving a Masters Degree.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This research shall disclose the various forms of black humor, and the dynamics of its evolvement from Africa with the onset of slavery, and into the twentieth century. Black humor is a literary genre; however, it does not share the same prestige as other literary genres. Extensive research has been done on black humor and much has been written on this subject as evidenced in this study. Black humor has been a driving force in the lives of black people for centuries, and still is. The realization of the importance of humor has not fully resonated; however, humor provides a powerful connection between all sectors of black culture. For blacks, humor is a connecting force which in some shape, form or fashion we can all relate to.

Humor is a universal ingredient in the lives of every culture. The cultural roots of black humor had its origins in Africa and were transported to America when Africans were forced into slavery. Living in an oppressed state, humor gave the enslaved the ability to endure living in bondage. Like all literary genres, black humor has evolved through the centuries adapting to new trends from one generation to the next.

This study acknowledges there was no escaping the control whites had over black life, black humor, and black entertainers. Black entertainers have endured the racist scrutiny of whites and have overcome much adversity. In spite of this adversity, we can trace the history of black entertainers delivering humor since the time of slavery. It is

fascinating to learn how the antics of slaves entertaining their masters, black minstrels entertaining in blackface, and twentieth century black comics having their say in today's comic arena, continues to have a profound effect on the lives of black people.

Black humor is an intriguing aspect of the literary cannon. This genre will be traced from slavery into the twentieth century and allow readers the opportunity to fully understand and absorb the value, history, and richness of black humor in the lives of black people.

CHAPTER 2

HUMOR DEFINED

Humor is a coping mechanism. It is an avenue which allows one to release stresses and frustrations. One can relate to having a bad day or moment, regardless of the situation, and someone tells a joke or a funny story which makes us laugh. If one takes the time to reflect on emotions felt during the time of laughter, the mental state takes on a different aura, if only for a brief moment.

There are many theories associated with humor. Dr. Chaya Ostrower's article on "What is Humor?" states there are several aspects of humor: the psychological effects of humor, medical healing associated with humor, and the relationship of humor to laughter. Ostrower provides a relevant definition of humor as follows:

Humor is a quality of perception that enables us to experience joy even when faced with adversity. Humor is comprised of three components: wit, mirth, and laughter. Wit is the cognitive experience, Mirth the emotional experience, Laughter the physiological experience. (1)

According to Dr. Ostrower, another advantageous outlet for humor is being a relief to the mind's body in stressful situations. Stress is an adverse condition during which one may experience tension or fatigue, feel unpleasant emotions and sometimes anxious, guilty, or resentful and experience humor at the same time. Humor must be interjected as one is experiencing the aforementioned emotions individually. Like beauty

being in the eyes of the beholder, humor is in the funny bone of the receiver of the experience (1).

Laughter contributes to one's health. It relieves stress, lowers blood pressure, helps control pain, changes moods, helps one to deal with problems, develops a sense of empowerment, provides a more objective view of events, builds morale, and provides philosophical instruction. Doctors now tell us that humor is an aerobic exercise and an internal massage, exercising the lungs and stimulating the circulatory system (Dance xxxiv).

According to the article "Humor – Release or Relief Theory, Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, Wit, or Derisive Humor, Other Views" (<http://science.jrank.org/pages/7770/Humor.html>), there are several central theories of humor, three of which are briefly described here: The Superiority, Incongruity, and Relief theories. The emphasis is on what humor can provide to people to make them feel better. The Superiority Theory provides artificial empowering, resulting in feelings of superiority. The Incongruity theory deals with frustration or injustice through resorting to divergent logic and contradiction. The Relief Theory is the removal of social restraints through the expression of things that are not defined. These psychological outcomes could, directly or indirectly, contribute to lower tension and anxiety as well as allowing for more positive moods and states of mind. Since humor often calls conventional social requirements into question, it may be regarded as affording us relief from the restraint of conforming to those requirements. Moreover, people who have been undergoing a strain will sometimes burst into laughter if the strain is suddenly removed (1).

Dr. Chaya Ostrower surmises that Freud regards humor as a means of outwitting the "censor," his name for the internal inhibitions which prevent us from giving rein to many of our natural impulses. She contends that according to Freud, the censor will allow us to indulge in these forbidden thoughts only if it is first beguiled or disarmed in some way. The beguiling is done, he thinks, by means of the techniques of humor. It is not only our sexual impulses that are repressed by the censor, but also our aggressive ones (2).

In *What is Humor?*, Dr. Ostrower states that the individual deals with emotional conflict or external stressors by emphasizing the amusing or ironic aspects of the conflict or stressor. Humor helps us by replacing distressing emotions with pleasurable feelings. Humor adjusts the meaning so that the event is not so powerful. Humor reduces stress by assisting us to view the world with perspective. Humor shifts the ways in which we think, and distress is greatly associated with the way we think. It is not situations that generate our stress, but the meaning we place on the situations (2).

CHAPTER 3

HUMOR FROM AFRICA TO SLAVERY

Humor remains one of the richest and most distinctive expressive treasures of the African-American cultural heritage. It is as varied and multi-faceted as black music and dance. From its plantation and slave shanty beginnings through its evolution to a premier attraction to television and in contemporary comedy clubs, concerts and films, humor has functioned not only as a survival tactic and buffer to social inequality but, also as an exuberant expression of the joy and humanity of the black folks who have created and continue to create it.

The roots of African-American comedy can be traced back to African griots and oral tradition. This form of communication is viewed as an esteemed dramatic, colorful speech, imaginative storytelling, irony, and libelous verbal satire. Those expressive traits survived the diaspora and were perpetuated by captive black immigrants, who after arriving in America, adapted them to the reality of a new language and adverse social conditions, and cleverly molded them into a uniquely American comic form.

African-American folktales have origins rooted in West African literary and cultural forms of expression. When Africans were taken from their homeland and brought to America as slaves, they also brought with them their individual cultures, languages, and customs. However, their white slaveholders attempted to suppress this aspect of their heritage. It was the creative genius of the slaves to find other ways of

expression, mainly storytelling and songs. It is incredible to see how African slaves could ever smile and laugh under the horrible and cruel circumstances imposed on them by the brutal slaveholders.

African proverbs and stories draw upon the collective wisdom of oral peoples, express their "structures of meaning, feeling, thought, and expression," and thus serve important social and ethical purposes: "The story itself is a primary form of the oral tradition, primarily as a mode of conveying culture, experience, and values and as a means of transmitting knowledge, wisdom, feelings, and attitudes in oral societies"; a central position is thus given to the story in the oral tradition (Agatucci 2).

The individuals captured into slavery were from the continent of Africa. The Africans were first introduced to humor through oral tradition by way of storytellers, frequently known as griots or bards. The roots of their African traditions remained with the enslaved; however, these traditions took on a different meaning. The enslaved Africans were forced to live in a culture foreign to their native traditions. Not all African traditions were lost as the captured enslaved began to live a different lifestyle, in a different American culture.

The animal stories, rhymes, work songs, riddles, plantation sayings, jokes, and tall tales or lies that emerged from slave shanties formed the basis of America's black comic tradition. The satiric slave humor, which frequently denounced bondage and ridiculed slave masters, generally went unnoticed. The humor was either masked or delivered in tongue-in-cheek fashion. From the late 1800s to the turn of the century, whites began to entertain white audiences by impersonating what they perceived to be the antics of

blacks. This popular form of entertainment became known as minstrel shows, and became America's most popular form of entertainment. If one critiqued the white entertainers mimicking blacks on stage, we can surmise that the performances distorted the lives, characters, and culture of black slaves (Cowan 16).

The whole body of folktales and spirituals arose from the experiences which slaves had on plantations, mingled with the memories and customs that they brought with them from Africa. They would tell stories using different methods such as acting, gesturing and singing. By these means, they were able to elevate storytelling into a unique art innate to their developing culture.

It is a difficult process for one manifestation of a culture to cross over to another culture. Humor presents even more difficulties than others. The folktales of our ancestors have not been given due recognition by sociologists. This is because black humor is alien to the typical forms of white humor. Extensive research reveals that people find humor in situations that involve obscenity, crippled physical conditions, filth and excrement, unconventional conduct, misery, discomfort, accidents, stupidity, mispronunciations, aliens, magical changes, in addition to those forms which are humorous to more sophisticated peoples (Schechter 12).

Similar verbal contests were common in West African tribal life. One school of sociologists believes that *the dozens* arrived on these shores in slave ships and that the subsequent disruption of the family life of plantation slaves stimulated playing the game. In fact, the most common theory of the origin of the term *dozen* is based on a recurring insult: an opponent's mother was said to be one of dozens of women available to her master's sexual whims. Mulatto slaves made this form of insult very popular.

An offshoot of the game was common among Ashanti natives, who chanted and sang ridicule verses known as *opo*. Ghanaian chiefs allowed public criticism of their stewardships through this form of witty expressions of protest. They believed that expressed invectives dissipated hostilities that otherwise might be organized into revolutions. Interestingly enough, some of the most effective politicians in contemporary American society carry it a step further, with the use of self-critical humor (13).

Some social scientists "give guidance to the meaning" by linking African culture with contemporary ghetto humor; one example they often cite is *the dozens*, a game of exchanging insults played in some American black neighborhoods; the combatant who can most effectively put his opponent down while "keeping his own cool" wins. Frequently begun in jest, often accompanied by a social consumption of alcohol, this game has more than once ended in violence and murder. It is characteristic of low income groups, and may be a form of social entertainment or a time-passing activity. The banter is a competitive game to see which of the opponents can more thoroughly insult the other, and ultimately "put him down". The attack may be against the opponent's status, potency, or the virtue of his sweetheart or his wife. When the game reaches the "mother" stage it is frequently a signal for blades to appear. The attacks may equally be made on the opponent's shade of skin, odor, cleanliness, or heterosexuality (12).

The practice of the dozens, sometimes known as mother rhyming, has been observed in various African-American communities as well as in a number of tribes in Africa, including the Yoruba, Efik, Dogon, and some Bantu tribes. Such play is one

aspect of a special kind of aggressive joking activity calling for verbal quickness and wit. These joking domains, whether in Africa or the New World, are always described in terms of the giving of license because of special relationships or festive occasions (Watkins 64).

Most slave owners forbade their slaves from speaking in their native African tongue. They were forced to speak English. The enslaved was also forbidden from learning to read or write because slaveholders believed that they were keeping their slaves in ignorance. If slaves were ignorant or unable to think for themselves, the thoughts of rebelling, escape, or the desire for freedom, would not be an issue. However, this was flawed logic. Despite their inability to read or write, the enslaved desired freedom and used their songs and stories to express this desire. Furthermore, the enslaved would make use of their songs and stories to educate their people, enlighten their minds, and free their souls. For example, the slave spirituals they sang were a means to communicate feelings of discontent, and homelessness as they longed for the native lands. However, not all songs were of disparity and loss. Slave songs also expressed feelings of love, joy, and hope. African slaves used their stories and spirituals as another means to communicate amongst themselves, and to outsmart their owners. This clever tactic involved the passing on of vital information concerning meeting places, plans, or dangers through the actual hymns and stories. Slaves were able to accomplish this by the use of hidden meaning in their words and the ultimate result was that they outwitted their masters and proved that they were not as inferior a race as the slave owners believed them to be (Papa 1).

The idea of a slave outwitting his master is seen clearly in many old folktales. Virginia Hamilton, a distinguished writer of fiction for children today, published a book called *The People Could Fly*, a compilation of African-American folklore stories. Papa states that one of the many folktales in Hamilton's book, reflects the idea that most slaves told stories in which the slave owner would be outfoxed by his slave. Papa provides the following brief summary of one of Virginia Hamilton's stories, titled "*The Riddle Tale of Freedom*":

"Now here it tis. Long time ago, there was a slave and a slave owner. They got along. They liked to joke back and fourth sometimes. Those two would exchange jokes and riddles. The slave man say, 'Mas, you give me a riddle today and I figured it out. Now, tomorrow, I'll give you one, and if you can't figure it out,' said the slave, 'you give me my freedom in the mornin, too.' 'All right,' the slave owner says, 'you bring me one in the morning.'" (qtd. in Papa 2)

A little further into the story we are told that the slave had an old dog that died the night before. His name was Love. The slave took a piece of Love's skin and tied it around his hand. He then goes to his master and tells him the following riddle. Papa continues to share excerpts from Hamilton's story:

"Love I see; Love I stand.

Love I holds in my right hand".

"Well I give up," the slave owner said. "So I have to give you your freedom because I said I would if I couldn't guess. But first tell me what the answer is." "Well here it tis," said the slave. "See wrapped around my

right hand? That's my dog skin, and his name was Love. Well, I was standin right here with it and I had it in my hand, just seein it. So that's why I tell the riddle." (qtd. in Papa 2)

Storytelling and songs were a favorite evening pastime for African slaves as was the telling of riddles. The humor in their stories and tales were imaginative and brought to life the tricksters, the magic and the excitement of the stories. The tales were often funny and could be related to the everyday lives of the slaves. As one might imagine, many of the stories were about poking fun at the master without the master realizing he was the brunt of the joke. Some of the stories attempted to explain the world's creation and where humans came from. Like modern-day fairytales, slave folktales included stories about the supernatural, legendary heroes, heroic deeds, magic, and witches. These types of tales were spellbinding for both adults and children and were a pleasant way to end the day.

Interpretations of slave stories might be compared to parables and became a teaching tool to communicate ideals, morals, and cultural values passed down through the generations. The stories and tales told were many and varied, but the humor in them was an enhancement to the stories told by the slaves. In fact, oftentimes the humor in the story was exaggerated to make it even funnier. The slaves took old stories and created new ones which related to the present aspects of their enslaved lifestyle. Blacks, even during slavery were very spiritual in their beliefs. Sometimes aspects of religion or Christianity, which slaves had been converted to, were interjected. The religious aspect of oral tradition is still seen in black churches and music today. Many modern-day

artists, specifically African-American musicians, have been influenced by the stories and tales of their forefathers and usually make reference to such experiences in their music. Spirituality in the lives of the enslaved never lost its African roots.

Storytelling and humor in an oral culture is a way to communicate because it is easier to remember information as a series of events involving people, animals, supernatural beings and other unique characters. Facts are more difficult to follow and to comprehend. It is important to note that most slaves were not educated and could not read, write, nor think critically. The skill of listening was an essential mechanism utilized to learn, laugh, cry, and simply survive being enslaved. The humorous aspect of storytelling lightened the burdens of the day and was used to inspire laughter and provide entertainment. As noted earlier, humor is a necessary ingredient and a coping mechanism in the lives of all cultures. This is even more significant because of the manner in which the enslaved were forced to live.

The art of storytelling allowed slaves the opportunity to express their emotions. The person who is telling the story usually begins slowly and builds up tension and finally reaches the exciting climax. Oftentimes, this is when the trickster is revealed in the story. At this point, the humor is clearly present and has a lasting impact on the listener. The impact allows one to recall the story and begin to laugh again. Imagine working in the cotton fields in the hot sun and suddenly you remember something funny that puts a smile on your face. It does not make the work any easier or the sun less hotter, but recalling something pleasant does somewhat impact your state of mind, if only for a brief moment.

By all accounts, black humor is rooted in Africa and was not lost in the bondage of slavery. The slave experience has become the major focus in developing African-American humor. As Africans began to experience the transformation from their native Africa to American soil as slaves, their world, culture and lifestyle took on a drastic new face. As a means of coping, they became remarkably resilient, inventive, and creative. In order to survive, the slaves quickly realized they had to adjust their entire behavior. Herded together with others whom they shared a common condition of servitude and some degree of cultural overlap, enslaved Africans were compelled to create a new language, a new religion, and a precarious new lifestyle (Simmons 2).

Many new black arrivals, whether coming in the seventeenth century, the eighteenth, or the nineteenth century, could immediately communicate with each other using a common Creole language that had facilitated commerce in Africa. The Africans also brought with them a vast storehouse of stories, along with other such expressive forms as songs, dances, styles of worship, games, patterns of adornment, and the like, that helped them maintain on the new continent. These familiar traditions were what the blacks had instead of freedom. Gates writes that according to Ralph Emerson, slaves had *rites* and not *rights*. Noted African-American author and black activist, Cornel West, says that while slaves were allowed rhythmic freedom, they were not allowed political freedom. Despite the ravages of the Middle Passage and the violence of slavery as an institution, one finds among African-American stories, characters, motifs, and styles of telling that bear the distinctive traits of their native African Culture. For example, there were many kinds of trickster tales (forerunners of the Brer Rabbit cycle) along with tales

of metamorphoses and wonder, which have distinctive counterparts in the New World (Gates 130). *The Flying Fool* is one such trickster tale:

This colored man died and went up there to meet his Maker. But when he got to the gates, St. Peter said that God wasn't home or having any visitors -- by which he meant no blacks allowed. Well, this old boy, he had been a good man all his life and his preacher had told him that Heaven would be his place, so he didn't exactly know what to do. So he just kind of hung around the gates, until one time St. Peter just had to go and take a pee. So while Pete was gone, this old boy slipped through, stole himself a pair of wings, and he really took off. Sailed around the trees, in and out of those golden houses and all, swooped down and buzzed some of those heavenly singers and all, and had himself a good old time. Meanwhile, of course, St. Pete came back and found out what had happened and called out the heavenly police force to get him. Well, this guy was just getting the feel of wearing wings, and he really took off, zoomed off. They had some little time bringing him down, him flying all over Heaven fast as he could go. Finally, they got him cornered and he racked up on one of those trees, and I tell you, he looked like a mess with broken wings and all. So they took him and threw him out the gates. Now here comes one of his friends, who asked him, "What happened, man?" He said, "Oh, man, when I got here they wouldn't let me into the white mans Heaven, but I grabbed me some wings and I had me a fly." He said, "Oh yeah?" Man said, "Yeah,

they may not let any colored folks in, but while I was there I was a flying fool.” (qtd. in Gates 142)

Slaves who survived their treacherous journey to America undoubtedly were overwhelmed with this debilitating experience. They were forced to succumb to the despair of their situation and resign themselves to living a life in bondage, a life of servitude. Many traditions of their African heritage gradually faded. Enslaved, they were no longer connected to their cultural tribes. Whites now referred to them as “darkies”, or the more commonly known term, “Sambos”. Sambo is a term both blacks and whites are familiar with. We hear this expression, but how does one define Sambo? What is Sambo like behavior? The *Free Dictionary* by Farlex (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Sambo>), defines “Sambo” as follows:

A black; sometimes, the offspring of a black person and a mulatto; formerly used colloquially or with humorous intent, but now considered offensive or racist by African-Americans.

Stanley Elkin, the author of *Elkin and the Problem of Sambo (Part One)*, describes the American stereotype of Sambo, and “Sambo-like behavior” as follows:

According to Southern slave owners, Sambo was the typical plantation slave. Sambo was docile but irresponsible, loyal but lazy, humble but chronically given to lying and stealing; his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk was inflated with childish exaggeration. His relationship with his master was one of utter dependence and childlike attachment: it was indeed this childlike quality that was the very key to his being. Although the merest hint of Sambo’s “manhood” would fill the

Southern slave-owner with scorn, the child, “in his place,” was both exasperating and lovable. (1)

“Sambo-like behavior” was also determined to be a social mask of survival.

Slaves who behaved like Sambos may have fit this racial profile as defined above, but they were playing a role of the loyal and congenial slave to simply survive. Sambo-like behavior was a veil to hide inner emotions of rage and discontent, as well an effective means of expressing these feelings. This behavior demonstrated resistance to efficiency, discipline, work and productivity. Where the master perceived laziness, the slave saw refusal to be exploited. In the vein of conforming, there was the public face for the master, and in the vein of survival, there was the private face that was reserved for the slave community. The basic ingredients for black comedy were being established. Ironically, contradiction and distortion became essential tools for the survival of the slave and the basis for black humor (Simmons 3).

The dual life of African-American slaves put forth the notion widely held by white America that slaves were “merry, frivolous, and happy-go-lucky, people.” What is known as the public face of the slave became a source of entertainment for the slave owner. Many journals, narratives and diaries from this time period portray the black slave as the ultimate entertainer. Every aspect of the public slave’s life was seen as a form of entertainment. Even when the slaves were not required to entertain, their leisure activities, what little leisure they had, was often observed with fascination. White observers were enthralled by their rhythmic movement and dance, their seemingly nonsensical antics, pulsating music and overall uninhibited behavior. Even religious and burial ceremonies were watched with amusement by whites when possible (Watkins 58).

Perhaps the most apt way to describe the public humor of black Americans prior to the mid-1930s is to say that it was nearly always masked. This is not only in the literal sense, but figuratively and psychologically. Grotesque, corked on blackface facades used in the minstrel shows took the United States by storm in the early 1800s. As an old blues tune put it: Got one mind for white folks to see, 'nother for what I know is me; he don't know, he don't know my mind (52).

Paul Laurence Dunbar states this position very well in his poem "We Wear the Mask":

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
 It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes
 This debt we pay to human guile;
 With torn and bleeding hearts we smile . . .
 We wear the mask.
 We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
 To thee from tortured souls arise.
 We sing, but oh the clay is vile
 Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
 But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask! (qtd. in Gates 918)

Slavery, of course, was the primary factor in molding these humorous tendencies. Although human bondage and oppression are hardly favorable circumstances for the development of a comic tradition, it was from this situation that both the indigenous and public style of black humor arose. Its form, from the beginning, combined cultural elements common to the numerous traditional African societies, from which the slaves

had been taken, and the new language, social institutions and behavioral patterns of ante-bellum America, to which blacks had to adjust (Watkins 56).

Forbidden to speak in their native languages (and usually because of the diversity of their various tribal languages, unable to communicate verbally with fellow slaves anyway), slaves initially communicated with each other through physical gesture, music and dance. Chanting, drumming, foot stomping, hand clapping and dance, were all an important part of the various rituals and religious ceremonies common to the West African tribes from which the slaves had been abducted. Moreover, in those tribes, dance was a highly esteemed art, which was, in itself, a means of communicating. For instance, Robert Farris Thompson in "African Art in Motion" quotes an elderly member of a Cameroon Ngbe society observing a dancer as follows: "I like him because he uses the conversation with his body. Even an old man can dance conversation" (56). Music and dance were common points of reference, which permitted initial communication among the transplanted tribal groups enslaved in America. And soon those activities became the focus of recreation and merrymaking among the slaves.

Another type of humor identified with blacks is Signification or "signifying" which refers to the art of verbally and humorously insulting a listener. Although it has antecedents in several cultures, it was promoted to the stature of ritual in many West African tribes and is still a revered street game among African-Americans. Its impact on comedy can be seen from minstrelsy to contemporary comedians such as Don Rickles and Richard Pryor and in such show business ceremonies as celebrity roasts. Tonal semantics is the practice of using voice inflection and altered rhythm of speech to convey meaning in discourse. With its use practically any word can assume totally contradictory

meanings. For instance, the adverb "yeah" can express anything from enthusiastic approval to sardonic incredulity (457).

These linguistic devices, like much slave music and dancing, served two purposes. In the presence of their masters, they could present the docile, grinning and submissive image required, and, at the same time convey to their fellows some of the unacceptable feelings of disrespect and hostility felt from others (457).

In the privacy of the slave quarters much of the pretense was dropped. Slave narratives and black folklore collections relate numerous instances of blacks shedding the "dumb coon" posture, which whites had come to accept and expect, while adopting a sharper edged humor. The following version of the story of Pompey and his master is a fine example:

"Pompey, how do I look?" the master asked.

"O massa mighty. You looks mighty."

"What do you mean mighty, Pompey?"

"Why massa you looks nobles."

"What do you mean by noble?"

"Why, suh, you mean looks just like a lion."

"Why Pompey, where have you ever seen a lion?"

"I saw one down yonder field the other day massa."

"Pompey, you foolish fellow. That was a jackass."

"Was it, massa? Well, suh, you look just like him." (qtd. in Watkins 67)

The adversarial relationship between black slaves and the white slave owners created an environment where blacks had to establish a dual personality. This translated

into the public and private humor of blacks. The wit that blacks used in dealing with whites was seen as a form of mental release when these same slaves were back in their quarters. The deliberate sabotage, work slow downs, or stoppages created by the slaves brought about great laughter when the slaves were in the company of themselves.

The enslaved had a public face and a private face. While this public face put on by slaves was intended as a survival technique, it also made blacks the object of ridicule, the court jester, the fool, the Sambo. Slaves became comic figures and the butt of the joke. The public face fit well within what whites believed about blacks at this time. They were childlike and needed to be cared for; therefore, slavery was necessary. This misconception only helped advance black humor. Humor served as a two-fold saving grace for the slaves. The more the slaves projected the witty antics, the more whites expected and enjoyed it. For the slave, these antics lessened the burden and the impact of the slave holder's hand. Also, this public face was a therapeutic technique for the slaves as it provided slaves with an outlet to communicate their true feelings about the whites they were making laugh. It was a source of enjoyment to know that the joke was on the white man who was being ridiculed to his face (Simmons 3).

This private humor was perceived as a way to ease the heartache associated with the daily life of the slave. The role of the Sambo, not only entertained the slave holder, but the slave as well. Imagine the feeling the slaves had when called up to entertain the slave holder and his company when only he and the other slaves knew the true joke. This private humor gave the slaves opportunity to escape mentally from the cruelty of their condition. Moreover, this private humor gave them a sense of power and control over those who unquestionably thought them to be inferior. The tradition that grew out of the

need for survival has become an integral part of the black experience in America. This experience reflects the history of African-Americans and the relationship that they have had with whites in America. This is an experience and relationship that continues today (4).

One must conclude that the slaves' humorous antics served two social functions on the plantation. One, it helped the individual slave to survive, to hide true feelings and true intentions from the slaveholder. Two, it allowed the slave-holding class to maintain its belief that the institution of slavery was not only benevolent but was a necessary shelter for the enslaved.

The enslaved used the tales of the trickster as another means to resist their condition. The humorous animal stories are examples of their rebellion. Joel Chandler Harris, who made *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings* popular, recalls stories he heard as a child growing up on a Georgia plantation. Much of the popularity of these stories during the 1760s was due to the "faithful darky" role of Uncle Remus, which was similar to the role of Uncle Tom of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Uncle Remus would tell humorous stories of how weaker animals like Brer Rabbit would become the heroes. The Uncle Remus character helps to establish a safe context in which these tales were told. The use of animals makes the tales more palpable for the white audience. Simmons provides the example of how Brer Rabbit convinces Brer Fox to throw him into the brier-patch after he had been caught:

I don't keer w'at you do wid me, sezee, "so you don't fling me in dat brier-patch!" After Brer Fox, convinced that the brier-patch was the worst fate he could inflict on the rabbit, frees Brer Rabbit and tosses him into the

brier-patch. Brer Rabbit escapes unharmed. “Bred and bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox – bred and bawn in a brier-patch,” Brer Rabbit hollers before scampering off to safety (qtd. in Simmons 5).

These tales were also used to teach morality within the slave community. In the animal tales the weaker animals occasionally tricked the rabbit, who was the trickster, when his behavior was perceived as arrogant and malicious. Simmons provides the following example from the testimonies of former slaves from the All Saints Parish in South Carolina: During a drought Buh Rabbit conceals the whereabouts of a well from the other animals. They then band together to lure Buh Rabbit to the villain Tar Baby. The moral here is that boastfulness, hoarding, and lying can be dangerous even for the trickster. One of the most popular of these tales is *The Turtle and the Hare*. Through these animal tales, the slaves found the perfect way to express their opinions about the truth of their condition (5).

Simmons goes on to state that after emancipation, the former slaves began to express themselves with fewer restrictions. The thoughts that they would have normally kept private began to emerge into the public after the constraints of slavery were lifted. She provides the following example:

Slave Owner: Ah, dear faithful, loyal Uncle Tom. Lincoln has forced you to accept freedom – against my wishes, and, I am sure against yours. Dear old friend and servant, you need not leave this plantation. Stay here with us; kindly, gently, self-sacrificing Uncle Tom!

Uncle Tom: Thank you, deah kine, lovin gen'rous Massa. I reckon I'll
 leave. But befo' I go I wants you ter know I will allus
 membuh you ez de son uv a bitch you is an allus waz! (qtd.
 in Simons 5)

In his *Retrospections of America: 1797-1811*, British comic John Bernard calls
 the American slaves "the great humorists of the Union." (qtd. in Cowan 1) As illustration
 of this great humor, Bernard offers several anecdotes in which a slave's
 misunderstanding or, at any rate, exotic way of seeing the world produces laughter in the
 white audience:

A slave remarks that a fly had alighted upon the nose of his master only to
 retreat immediately because it had burned its feet on the planter's
 alcohol-inflamed proboscis: "oo burn oo' foot at last, massa fly!"
 (Cowan 3)

In another:

A slave named Cicero imagines his deceased master has gone to hell.
 When berated by a white man for making such an insulting, disrespectful
 remark, Cicero replies that his master had told him "he would never be
 comfortable anywhere where he wasn' berry warm." (3)

At the distance of nearly two centuries, we can interpret these jokes as aggressive jabs at
 white authority. These slaves are not amusing in their simple mindedness but are
 cleverly masking insults with feigned ignorance. Even in jest, open mockery of the
 planter's facial features, or certainly more dangerous, the assertion that a white man has
 gone to hell, would call for severe punishment. Veiled in this way, however, the slave is

able to assert opinions with impunity, either because the white audience believes that no opinion is being asserted or because the opinion is lost in the laugh. This manner of execution serves to protect the slave from retribution, in other words, making his master laugh keeps him out of trouble (3).

CHAPTER 4

THE MINSTREL SHOW AND BLACK HUMOR

Entertainment has always been an important factor in the lives of all Americans and still is. African-Americans have always been noted for their talents in all genres of entertaining. As this study revealed in the last chapter, the enslaved were called upon frequently to entertain the master and his plantation guests. Singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, and acting are all arts that blacks have excelled in throughout the years. The grave exploitation of black talent surfaces to the forefront as we take a closer look at how the entertainers and their talents were frequently abused. This translates into huge profits for whites at the expense of blacks.

A clear revelation is that from the slave era well into the twenty-first century blacks were not given due recognition for their entertaining abilities. The enslaved were not rewarded or publically recognized for their creativity, originality, nor were they justly compensated. Black people have made major contributions to entertaining, only to have whites steal, cheat, and become wealthy from what they took from blacks. Mocking black dialect, mannerisms, dress, physical appearance, and culture became big business for whites. These characteristics were turned into an entertainment product that reached far and wide.

The start of what would become a major and very lucrative industry can be traced back to the days of the minstrel show. Whites copy practically every unique aspect of black culture. Whites want to be dark, so they spend millions of dollars on tanning products. One of the latest trends is that whites want to have larger lips,

so they have lip augmentation procedures done using Botox injections. These injections increase the size of one's lips. Ironically, large lips are one of the main features that white minstrels poked fun at about black appearance. An ad sponsored by *A Life Changing Experience* (<http://www.lipaugmentation.com>), provides us with the following ad, "All About Lip Augmentation", which is advertising the use of Botox injections to gain "full, luscious lips":

Full, luscious lips have always been sought after, regardless of age. A plump pout is considered to be a sign of youth and an icon of sensuality. Many people have searched high and low for the perfect kissable lips, and out of frustration or lack of information settled on collagen injections or other temporary injectables. I love full, pouty lips. In fact, I feel lips can be the most youthful aspect of a face, along with full, high cheeks. (1)

In the years following slavery, whites laughed and poked fun at black people's lack of the command of the King's English, exaggerated their physical features, and played up their shabby appearance. At first glance, these common characteristics are not unusual or necessarily humorous in the eyes of black folk. This was who they were as a culture. Whites managed to take all of these characteristics and package, shape, and mold them into a very lucrative entertainment business. This was the birth of the minstrel show.

People like to laugh. Anything that helps us forget for a time, the vexation, trouble and sorrow of daily life is to be welcomed and encouraged. There is no form of entertainment capable of producing so much innocent fun as a good minstrel show, and certainly there is nothing more popular with all classes (Townsend 12).

In grand style, white performers would blacken their faces with burnt cork or greasepaint, dress in costumes that exaggerated the way blacks dressed, and perform songs and skits that mocked African-Americans. Some of the most famous songs in American history, Dixie, Camptown Races, Oh Sussanah, and My Old Kentucky Home, to name a few, began as minstrel songs (12).

It is believed that the father of the American minstrel show was Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_D._Rice), who in the 1830s drew immense popularity with a song-and-dance routine in which he impersonated an old, crippled black slave named Jim Crow. His act included the then popular song and dance "Jump Jim Crow". Rice's brand of entertainment was highly racist, though not viewed as racist at the time. He was noted for playing highly derogatory imitations of black men. His greatest prominence came in the 1830s, before the rise of full-blown blackface minstrel shows, when blackface performances were typically part of a variety show or as an entre act to another play. Rice had been fairly successful as a blackface comedian. One day in 1828 in Cincinnati, he saw a black man or a street urchin singing this ditty:

Step first upon yo'heel

An' den upon you' toe,

An' ebry time you turns around

You jump Jim Crow.

Next time fall upon yo' knees

Then jump up and bow low

An'ebry time you turn around

You jump Jim Crow. (Townsend 10)

Rice jotted down the words, worked up a song and dance routine, and made a fortune. Other titles in Rice's productions were Jumbo Jim, The Virginia Mammy, and Bone Squash Diavolo. The term "Jim Crow," which today means any sort of discrimination against black people, came out of Rice's shows. Rice himself played the role of Jim Crow (10).

In *The Minstrel Show*

(<http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/jackson/minstrel/minstrel.html>), we are told that minstrel shows are characterized as a strange, fascinating, yet awful phenomenon. Minstrel shows emerged from late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries European traditions of masking and carnival type events. However, in the United States, minstrel shows began in the 1830s, with working class white men dressing up as plantation slaves. These men imitated black musical and dance forms, combining savage parody of black Americans with a genuine fondness for African-American social norms. By the Civil War the minstrel show had become world famous and respectable. Late in his life Mark Twain fondly remembered the "old time nigger show" with its colorful comic darkies and its rousing songs and dances. Minstrels were typically whites posing in blackface using makeup known as burnt cork. Occasionally there were black minstrel performances; however, blacks also performed in blackface using burnt cork makeup (1).

About the turn of the century, more blacks shared comic roles on stage; however, no attempt had been made to present "true black life", even in caricature, to the public. Black minstrels played the same roles as white minstrels and poked fun at blacks and black lifestyles. Laughing at blacks was what white audiences looked forward to.

Minstrels first appeared in interludes between plays in the legitimate theater. These lively little sketches became increasingly popular and eventually provided an entire evening's entertainment (Townsend 13).

Christy's Minstrels, the most renowned of the early shows, was established in Buffalo in 1842 by Edwin P. Christy. The original *Christy Minstrels* were a group of white, black-faced minstrel singers who crossed the country between 1842 and 1921, popularizing many Stephen Foster tunes. Stephen Collins Foster was born 1826 in Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania. Many of his songs were written for minstrel shows and were very popular. Foster wrote most of his well known songs between 1850 and 1860. A few of his more popular blackface songs are Ring de Banjo, Nelly Was a Lady and Way Down in Ca-i-ro. *Christy Minstrels* played to packed houses in England and America for a decade (13).

According to Jochen Schett, the minstrel show generally followed the pattern set by Christy. The first five texts are short skits. They all follow the same scheme - a dialogue between an intelligent person, who speaks in a somewhat pompous way and has a very good command of the language, and a quite dull person with a limited vocabulary, speaking a heavy dialect, which leads to constant misunderstandings. These typical roles are normally played by the Interlocutor and one of the two end men, Tambo or Bones. The Interlocutor was the personification of style and dignity, whereas the two end men indulged themselves in exaggerated gestures and childish antics. They were the real minstrel clowns. Below, Schett provides are a few examples of minstrel skits using Tambo and Bones: This skit is titled *Blackberrying*. Here Tambo plays the role of the Interlocutor. He uses a very sophisticated language with vocabulary that Bones cannot

comprehend. So he turns these words into words of his own vocabulary, which sound quite similar:

Tambo: No, Bones, you mean three days previous to her decease.

Bones: No, she had no niece.

Tambo: I presume he was a pretty good physician?

Bones: No, he wasn't fishin'; he was home. (Schett 1)

Another common pattern, according to Schett, is to use words with a more formal and a simpler meaning, for example the word *standing*. It can be used in the sense of reputation or simply as an expanded form from *to stand*:

Tambo: I mean he was a doctor of some standing.

Bones: No, he wasn't standing, he was sitting on a three-legged stool. (1)

The above examples are typical for comical dialogue, the way it was normally used in the first part of the minstrel show. In many of these skits the Interlocutor acts mainly as a stooge to give Tambo or Bones the possibility to present their jokes. The minstrel show usually concluded with an “after-piece”, another variety of entertainment. It frequently played up the combination of simplicity and low cunning attributed to blacks by the all-white audiences (Blacks were prohibited from acting in or attending these shows.) The “afterpiece” also parodied popular plays, operas, and important persons (1).

The popularity of minstrelsy coincided with public concern regarding slavery and the proper position of blacks in America. Precisely because people could always just laugh off the performance, and viewers did not have to take the show seriously, minstrelsy served as a “safe” vehicle for urban audiences to work out their feelings about the most sensitive and volatile social issues of the times. As the country was divided on

the issue of slavery, minstrels shaped white Americans' vague notions and amorphous beliefs about blacks into vivid, eye-catching caricatures. White minstrels literally acted out images of blacks and plantation life that satisfied their huge white audiences. Like every other aspect of the show, minstrelsy's racial content grew out of the intimate interaction between the performers and their vocal patrons. When public opinion shifted, the content of minstrelsy shifted. Thus, minstrelsy's portrayals of slavery and blacks reveal the evolution and functioning of American racial stereotypes better than any other source (Toll 65).

From the outset, minstrelsy unequivocally branded blacks as inferiors. Although it offered its audiences no heroic white characters, it provided even more certain assurances of white common people's identity by emphasizing blacks "peculiarities" and inferiority. Even sympathetic black characters were cast as inferiors. Minstrels used heavy dialect to portray blacks as foolish, stupid, and compulsively musical. Minstrel blacks did not have hair; they had "wool"; they were "bleating black sheep," and their children were "darky cubs." They had bulging eyeballs, flat, wide noses, gaping mouths with long, dangling lower lips, and gigantic feet with elongated, even flapping heels. At times, minstrels even claimed that blacks had to have their hair filed, not cut; that when blacks got sick and pale, they drank ink to restore their color and that people could grow "niggas" by planting their toes in the ground. Besides picturing blacks as physically different and inferior, minstrels set them off culturally. Minstrel blacks would rather eat possum and coon than anything else; after working all day, they could sing and dance all night without rest and they had different standards of beauty. Male minstrel characters described ideal women with feet so big they "covered up de whole sidewalk" or lips "as

large as all out doors,” or so large a lover could not kiss them all at once. In every way, minstrels emphasized blacks fell far short of white standards (67).

Further emphasizing how foolish they were, these egocentric “dandy darkies” claimed to be handsome, even though they had the exaggerated physical deformities common to all minstrel blacks. “Dandy Jim,” for example, boasted that every time he looked in the mirror, he knew he was “de best lookin’ nigger in de country.” After proudly bragging about the size of his “beef-steak lips,” he described going to a ball “wid lips combed out an’ wool quite tall.” Minstrel blacks got tricked out of their money by conmen, run down by trolleys, shocked by electric batteries, and jailed for violating laws which they did not understand. Pontificating on natural laws, a typical Brudder Bones observed that the world obviously did not rotate. If it did, he confidently pointed out, everything would fall off once a day. Another figured that he could get to China in four hours by ascending in a balloon, letting the world turn under him, and then landing in China (69).

Anti-intellectual minstrels were not against all knowledge, as a black character made clear in explaining his experience on a ferry ride:

When I got out a little piece from the shore, de man axed me if I knowed anything about frenologism. I told him no. Ah, says he, den one quarter of your life is gone. Finally he says, does you know anything about grammar. I told him no. Ah, says he, den one half ob your life am gone. He axed if I knowed anything about dickshionary, I told him no and he say tree quarters of your life is gone. We hit a rock an den I axed him if he

knowed how to swim. He said no. Den says I, de whole four quarters of you life am gone-sure. (71)

Besides stressing just how superficial and ludicrous these self-styled aristocrats really were, these songs truly delighted the white common people in the audience. While these performances were directed at whites as well as blacks, these parodies, which were performed in blackface and dialect, perfectly reinforced what whites wanted to believe about blacks. These images permanently stereotyped blacks (69).

Minstrel performers not only acted out the incompetent, stupid, and laughable black characters they created, they also used the stage as a vehicle to disseminate other important information. For example, minstrels explained new inventions, shared current events, and related their shows to everyday city life. Their shows confirmed to whites that as long as they were not black, life was good.

During slavery, blacks were required to perform for their white masters. Prior to the 1830s when minstrels began, blacks were involved in all kinds of entertainment: They are the fiddlers at the Virginia reels, the entertainers in local restaurants and saloons. Of course the blacks were not paid entertainers as were the whites. The arrival of the minstrels as a form of entertainment became the first type of entertainment that people could see outside of their local setting. The opportunity for the exploitation of the perceived lifestyle of the black slave, gave way to the discovery of a new form of paid entertainment (Simmons 7).

Many crafty minstrel blacks found ways to mock their masters and still avoid punishment: "We try to fool him [the master] bad when we can," one such character explained. Although most minstrel plantation parties were thrown by the master in the

quarters, some minstrel slaves, like the heroes of black folktales, threw their own parties in the Big House with “borrowed” supplies whenever their masters were away. Other slaves laughed openly at their masters. At one party, while “Ole Cuff” was playing his banjo, his master appeared, told him to leave, began to dance with his partner, and finally took his banjo. But “de way he make it play, he set Ole Cuff a laffin. Den massa run away.” Other slaves mocked their incompetent masters for being unable to saddle horses or for running into posts while chasing chickens; one even called his master a “stout old fool.” Somewhat more indirectly, but in the same derisive vein, Caesar told his “massa” he was saving his money to buy a place in heaven. When his master laughed at him and said if that was possible, he would have bought one years ago, Caesar, playing dumb, replied that he would buy one in hell then, “Case massa, I’be lived wid you a good many years, and I am bery anxious to stay wid you forever.” Other minstrel tricksters bragged that they stole from their masters. One took a bottle of brandy, and when caught with it empty, said in characteristic trickster fashion, “de nigger smooove him down” by joking that he guessed the bottle had broken. Another boasted that “Massa bought a bran new coat and hung it on the wall. Dis nigga’s gwine to take dat coat, and wear it to de ball.” From the slave owners’ point of view, such “typically Black’ behavior, which fit white expectations, was acceptable though not desirable. For black minstrels it was a way to acknowledge slave discontent and to get a laugh at the master’s expense without being too serious and not getting into serious trouble (Toll 74).

Before the Civil War, black men could not appear in minstrel shows because custom prohibited it. But there were several instances of black men putting on blackface minstrel makeup and imitating the white minstrel’s impersonations of blacks. These

shows were performed before white audiences. Later, in the twentieth century, several of the most famous minstrels were actually black men who wore makeup, the most famous being Bert Williams, who performed in blackface into the 1920s. Williams emerged as the nation's first black comic superstar and the first performer to consistently bring authentic black folk humor to the mainstream vaudeville stage. Williams became one of Vaudeville's top solo artists, but he first gained notice as half of the successful double-act "Williams & Walker." He and George Walker performed song-and-dance numbers, comic dialogues, skits, and humorous songs. At about the same time, black authors Charles W. Chestnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar began weaving examples of folk tales and trickster humor into their writings. In August 1887, the *Atlantic Monthly* printed Chestnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine", his first important work of fiction. Set in North Carolina and featuring an ex-slave storyteller, who could spin wonderful tales about antebellum southern life, "The Goophered Grapevine" appeared to be part of the plantation tradition of contemporary southern literature, typified in the work of white writers such as Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, who had made their fame writing nostalgic tales of the Old South in Black dialect. But Chestnutt's story was unique in two respects. It presented the lore of "conjuraton," African-American hoodoo beliefs and practices, to a white reading public largely ignorant of black folk culture. It also introduced a new kind of black storytelling protagonist, Uncle Julius McAdoo, who shrewdly adapted his recollections of the past to secure his economic advantage in the present, sometimes at the expense of his white employer. Another relative work of Charles Chestnutt is "The Passing of Grandisn". This is a clever burlesque of sentimental southern portrayals of master and slave relationships, depicting the ante-

bellum south with a comic exuberance (Gates 603). Like much of the humor in Chestnutt's and Dunbar's aforementioned stories was found in the trickster figures.

Paul Laurence Dunbar was best known in his own time for his lively and genial verse in black dialect. Although he was not the first African-American to write in this idiom, Dunbar demonstrated both the talent to feel the black life aesthetically and the craftsmanship to express it lyrically (905). Dunbar made his way to the top by remaking a regional persona into a racial one. The regional, or local color point of view, personified in a folksy, nostalgic celebrant of rural life and homely values had charmed readers of American regional poetry and fiction since the end of the Civil War era. During the 1870s and the 1880s, blacks such as Daniel Webster Davis, the "old-time black," an entertaining black-face variant of the popular local color persona, began to make a name for himself in American literature. His peculiar dialect lent an air of apparent authenticity to the stories he told of quaint, amusing, and contentedly dependent blacks in the pre-war and post-war South. Dunbar's poetry capitalized on the appeal that African-American folk life had in the South. His poem "We Wear the Mask" suggests that Dunbar may well have been aware of the liability of allowing his poetry to evoke an image of black folk that played on thoughtless prejudices and degrading stereotypes. Works by Williams, Chestnutt, and Dunbar remained a scarce commodity in the public domain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (906).

According to *"A Brief History of Blackface Minstrels and African Americans on TV"* (<http://www.bamboozledmovie.com/minstrelshow/briefhistory>), after the Civil War, black entertainers themselves began to enter the tradition, appearing in black-face makeup themselves and forming their own minstrel theatres, taking with

them the caricatures and stereotypes created by the white performers. Perhaps the first major black minstrel success was Brooker and Clayton's Georgia Minstrels, who hailed themselves in their advertising as "The Only Simon Pure Black Troupe in the World." In 1876, the black group known as Callendar's Minstrels broke the mold, and became the first African-American minstrel band to perform without black-face (1).

A few black minstrel performers emerged during the Civil War, but they became more prevalent by the end of the war. One of the first black minstrels was William Henry Lane, known by his stage name "Master Juba". White critics remarked on Juba's ability to tie his legs into knots and fling them about recklessly or make his feet twinkle until one lost sight of them altogether. They labeled Master Juba's performance as the authentic Nigger Dance. Lane, like all other black minstrel performers, built his act on the distortion and caricature that had already existed. These black entertainers were there to be looked at, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which audience's fantasy could rest. While this purpose might have had a host of different effects, its fundamental outcome was to further secure the position of white spectators as superior and controlling (Simmons 7).

Hundreds of white minstrels, performing in burnt cork, stole not only the Southern black's songs but his dance steps, his jokes, and his simple way of speech as well, which they distorted into what became known as "black dialect." White entertainers, Northern and Southern, literally made millions of dollars from black material. The blacks themselves, barred from most theaters as spectators and segregated in others, could seldom see a minstrel show, and at that time they were not allowed to perform in them. (7)

By the 1860s the black minstrel could not and would not break out of the stereotypes that had been established by whites. In order for blacks to keep and maintain their jobs as performers, they had to advertise themselves, ironically, as the “real” black, which is what the white audiences wanted to see. Black minstrels were forced to perform in blackface. They were forced to satisfy the desires of their white audiences: “They blackened their faces, and circled their lips in red and white, to make their mouths twice the normal size.” If blacks wanted to entertain and appear on stage, they had to perform in the style created by white minstrels or not at all. For some blacks, it was a matter of survival, no matter the degree of ridicule or racism involved (8).

A trend that would last well into the 1970s would be black entertainers being managed and their profits controlled by whites. Initially blacks owned their own minstrel troupes; however, whites began to realize the immense business potential of owning and operating a black minstrel. To this end, larger white minstrel shows systematically buying out the smaller black owned minstrels. This was frequently done through intimidation. Those black owners, who did not bow to the pressure, were often met with violence. White owners conspired with white booking agencies to lock out black owned minstrel shows in an attempt to put additional pressure on black owners to sell. All these factors worked together against black minstrel show owners and black performers to put them out of business. Black owners were forced to succumb to the take over. If black minstrels wanted to work, they had to do so under the ownership, direction, and management of the white minstrel show owners.

Although the focus is on the mid to late 1800’s, this sounds all too familiar. Black entertainers and their talents have not only been exploited by whites for years, but

their songs, dances, and music have made many white people wealthy. Blacks were not paid the same as whites for their talents. As one looks back at popular entertainers in the early to late 1900s, entertainers like Moms Mabley, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Ray Charles, to name a few, were exploited by white business managers. These entertainers were able to pack white establishments; however, they were not allowed to enter through the front door, use the same restrooms, sleep in the same hotels, or at in the same restaurants. Regardless, white people continued capitalize off of their talents. This is simply déjà vu to the era of black minstrel entertainers.

The minstrel show and the black minstrel himself were a disreputable lot in the eyes of a growing sector of so-called upper class blacks. It is also true that much of the best black talent of that generation evolved from minstrel shows. The composers, singers, musicians, speakers, stage performers, were all attracted to the minstrel shows. The exploitative type minstrel shows remained popular well into the early 1900s. White minstrels not only used the blackface mask to give the audience an idealized image of how blacks were supposed to be, they also used it in the way of the classical fool. In the tradition of the art of comedy, the blackface served as a mask that freed the artist from all conventions and allowed him to poke fun at everything. Through the antics and opinions of these characters, audiences could laugh at some of their own difficulties and anxieties while being assured that someone was more ignorant and worse off than they were.

The minstrel show in its final form was a huge entertainment product shaped for the needs of the audience. It consisted of different layers which had different functions. The black topics, which were closely connected to song and dance, supplied the people with stereotypical images of blacks and kept them from having to take blacks seriously.

The comical routines were pure entertainment to make fun of everything just for the sake of being funny. By lampooning contemporary fads, current plays or classical drama, they also gave the people a chance to laugh at themselves. Especially in the later years there was much social commentary, and minstrels, shifting away from black topics, took a closer and more critical look at life in the northern states. All these elements together made up the minstrel show with all its aspects, and only by regarding all these ingredients can one begin to understand the huge success of the minstrel show (Schett 2).

Minstrel shows, continued to be popular well into the 1950s and high schools, fraternities and local theater groups would often perform minstrel shows in blackface. For blacks, minstrel type performances became evermore unpopular and insulting, regardless of the venue in which they were being performed. During the 1950s blacks were more conscious of their race and human rights as individuals. Being the subject of entertainment that made fun of their culture and their race was unacceptable. Blacks became more involved in politics, thus they began to assert more political power. The true positive aspects of black lifestyle became important, and this new generation of blacks began to take actions and resist the minstrel type entertainment performed by whites. Significantly, one saw fewer blacks performing in blackface. As we move beyond the 1950s and into the twenty-first century, one must question whether minstrel shows ever really ended. If we look closely at the entertainment and artists of today, we can still see remnants of the original black minstrel shows.

Without question, there is a modern day presence of minstrelsy. The early cartoons in fact were so racist they were withdrawn due to massive protests by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Warner

Brothers' character Daffy Duck is a perfect example, costumed in full black, bearing big staring eyes, big lips and big feet, constantly made a fool of by the far wittier Bugs Bunny, dressed in full white. Some episodes originally had scenes with all the characters, Bugs, Elmer Fudd, and the rest, singing and dancing in blackface, but the scenes were censored for modern audiences. Tap-dancing arose from minstrel show performances depicting the clumsy shuffle of black people. Some media scholars posit that urban talk shows, which often present troubled minorities for public consumption, are a direct descendent of minstrel stereotypes. An excellent example that comes to mind is the Jerry Springer show. Others point to the detrimental depictions of African-American characters in currently running television situation comedy shows, such as "The House of Payne" as signs that the minstrel show continues to exert its influence. The setting is different, but the effect is the same. It is still a black culture marketed for white profit, with black performers tagging along for what they can get. Once again, performers claim that they represent black America authentically, while protests decry the caricature.

During the late nineties, in the black television sitcom Family Matters, the main character Steve Urkel was portrayed by black actor Jaleel White. Urkel was portrayed as a dimwitted nerd. His dress was totally backward: oversized eye glasses, big bulging eyes, white socks with pants, held up with suspenders, rolled up to his mid-calves. In light of researching the early minstrel shows, one can easily make a comparison. Urkle was a black kid whose appearance was stereotypical of how whites perceived blacks. His antics on the show can easily be compared to the buffoonish antics of black and white minstrels of the era.

Minstrelsy can be viewed and analyzed from many perspectives. The more one thinks about what has been learned about the “art” of being a minstrel, the more one can relate to and see this genre in many forms of entertainment today. Looking at the entertainment industry as a business conglomerate, one can also see that white artists continue to copy and use the original talents of blacks for their financial gain. Michael Bolton comes to mind with regards to recording a popular song originally performed by the Isley Brothers.

Michael Bolton saw the opportunity to make money by marketing the black artist’s music as his own and proceeded to do so. Bolton never expected any consequences for his actions. The Isley Brothers sued Bolton for recording his version of their original song, “Love is a Wonderful Thing” and won the lawsuit (as qtd. in “The Latest News.” *Michael Bolton on the Net*, <http://www.lauraforever.com/mbonthenet/latest.htm>). Bolton's court fight with the Isley Brothers came to a close when the San Francisco court upheld a 1994 lower court ruling that ordered the artist, Goldmark, and Sony Publishing to turn over \$5.2 million in profits to the Isley Brothers from the sales of Bolton's version of the song.

CHAPTER 5

BLACK HUMOR IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the early twentieth century the original blackface minstrel shows began to decline. New entertainers emerged and a variety of entertainment venues were made available to them; such as, outdoor tent shows, clubs, amphitheaters, movie screens, radio, and television. Racism and blatant prejudices continued to haunt black performers. Regardless of their talents, be it music, song, dance, or comedy, blacks were cautious that their performances were not perceived as offensive to white audiences. Black entertainers were conscious of delivering the type of performance that was expected of them. Buffoonery is what got black comedians paid, and buffoonery is what white audiences received. Repercussions for offending whites in any way still resulted in lynching's, beatings, and other racist forms of punishment. This was especially so in the South. Blacks more frequently than not, performed before white audiences. In some cases, the audiences included blacks who were allowed in remote spaces in the performance venues. One must question how black audiences perceived these performances. The performances were for the sole purpose of entertainment, and black people in attendance were there to laugh and enjoy the performance. The fun being poked at black people, and by black entertainers was humorous. One must surmise that blacks who attended these performances took on the attitude that it was okay to laugh at the fun being poked at them. On the other hand, there was a sector of black people who

perceived themselves as middle class and did not find the portrayal of black life or black culture humorous. In fact, many middle class blacks considered the buffoon type performances by black entertainers offensive. A positive aspect of black lifestyles existed that was totally ignored by these black entertainers. Either proponent could argue the pros and cons of black entertainers making a living portraying black people in a negative, stereotypical light.

Audra Burch (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-19288523.html>), writes that because of racism, black entertainers found challenges performing within the white community. They wanted to make a living entertaining; however, the element of severe racist repercussions was ever present. In addition to struggling with their dialogues, black entertainers faced challenges presented by the black middle class. The black middle class wanted to completely revamp black entertainment and the negative images and portrayals of black people. Middle class blacks did not want to be viewed as backwards, illiterate, or unrefined. They felt that buffoon type performances were not indicative of the black race. This style of comedy only fed into what whites believed about blacks and how they perceived black life. The black middle class who viewed this humor in a negative light, failed to realize entertaining was a job, and a means of financially supporting one's family. Lincoln "Stepin Fetchit" Perry made a fortune, \$3,000 a week, in his heyday playing shiftless, shuffling men on the big screen.

The middle class sector of the black race was in the minority and considered themselves a part of the elite black establishment. This small inner circle was not thinking beyond their limited personal lifestyles. There are many literary genres that posit elements of black humor into the work, such as, short stories, novels, poetry, plays,

music, songs and dance. Oftentimes the humor in many of these works is not immediately obvious to the reader. Humor must be clearly visible to be noticed. One has a tendency to think of writers, poets, and playwrights in a literary aura, with a tendency not to detect the element of humor often present. Humor makes us laugh, but ironically when we laugh, we do not always connect the laughter to the genre of black humor. Typically, in order for the connection to occur, one must be in a humorous setting, such as a comedy club, or attending a comedy play, or reading a funny novel, or watching a funny television show, to experience the humor present. Black humor is connected to many literary works as we shall continue to see.

Black humor is present in the lighthearted folktales of the slavery period, in the era of the blackface minstrels at the turn of the century, the comic servants of the 1930s, and the universal humor of today. As this study continues to view black humor and black comedy, one must recognize the black comedy entertainer who contributed so much to the successful evolvement of comedy and black humor. The list of names is enormous, but a few of the more notable comedians of this era were Moms Mabley, Pigmeat Markham, George Kirby and Redd Foxx, to name a few. These comedians paved the way for the successful careers of today's more notable talents, such as, Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Chris Rock, and Steve Harvey.

Wil Haygood, author of *Why Negro Humor is so Black* (<http://www.encyclopedia.com>), states that with the migration of blacks to larger cities, the “chitlin circuit” became a popular circuit for black humorists to perform. The “chitlin circuit” was associated with the South, out of the way theaters, low paychecks, funky hotel rooms, hot plates, and checks that might bounce. The smart comic demanded pay

in advance. The “chitlin circuit” meant work for black comedians. This circuit helped to start the careers of famous comedians Moms Mabley and Dusty Fletcher. These individuals were spawned by the society in which they worked and sweated. They were blacks working and living in American society. They were a part of the American culture. The black comic always had to be careful with his comic dialogue. Finding jokes to deliver in a land where pain was everywhere, or almost everywhere, and perform them with civility was a challenging task. Making sure their material was acceptable to whites, but not too offensive to blacks was a juggling act. If Nat King Cole, a very popular blues artist, could be dragged off stage by white thugs in Alabama, worse could befall a black comic with a chip on the shoulder. The challenge was to hold a mirror up to America. Regardless of the situation or location, black comics were always under the scrutiny of white America.

In the early 1920s, a new circuit opened for black performers. This presented an opportunity other than the ““chitlin circuit”” for black comics to work and perform. The new circuit was the Theatre Owners' Booking Association (TOBA) and was founded by F. A. Barraso, a Memphis based Italian businessman. Barraso owned several theatres in the South and gave black comedians the opportunity to play black theatres in major cities throughout the South and Midwest. Performers such as Pignatelli Markham, Spo-De-O-Dee, Ethel Waters, Buck and Bubbles, Mantan Moreland, Tim Moore, Kingfish from the "Amos and Andy Show", and Sammy Davis, Jr., all emerged from the TOBA circuit. The TOBA booked individual acts and complete companies. One of the more popular black shows was Silas Green from New Orleans (Watkins 365). An African-American,

Silas Green owned and ran a variety tent show (<http://en.wikipedia.org>), which in various forms toured the southern states between 1904 and 1957. Part revue, part music comedy, and part minstrel show, Silas Green told the adventures of short "coal-black" Silas Green and tall, "tannish" Lilas Bean. In 1940, Time Magazine said of the show:

This year their troubles start when they go to a hospital with suitcases labeled M.D. (Mule Drivers). They are mistaken for two medicos and end up in jail. The show is garnished with such slapstick as putting a patient to sleep by letting him smell an old shoe, such gags as "Your head sets on one end of your spine and you set on the other." Silas gets broad at times, but never really dirty. What keeps it moving are its dances and specialty acts, its gold-toothed but good-looking chorus. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>)

The TOBA engagements ranged from one night stands to week long bookings. In one sense the TOBA was a god-send for struggling black performers. For the lesser known acts, it created an avenue that offered bookings for extended periods of time and eliminated the desperate search for the next engagement. Securing the next engagement was not as much of a struggle for the more noted black comedians. Since TOBA could effectively determine which artists performed at specific theatres, it partially offset the sometimes unethical dealings of small time theatre owners who were known to withhold payment or cancel bookings on a whim. TOBA became a major source of working for black comedians (Watkins 366).

The stage comedy that flourished on the TOBA circuit went unnoticed by the mainstream and was frowned upon by bourgeois blacks. Although middle class blacks were embarrassed by the comic antics of their lower class brethren, under certain

conditions they would attend some of the shows. In the mid-twenties for example, the Howard Theatre in Washington, DC admitted only light-skin, presumably middle class blacks, to select Sunday night performances. This gesture sometimes prompted white entertainers to boycott the shows. Those whites who did attend the performances were there for the self-serving purpose of usurping the best of the material from the black entertainers for use in their own acts (369).

Audra Burch (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-19288523.html>), accounts that moving further into the twentieth century, it appears that a substantial change in black humor was imminent. On Broadway, while the blackface caricature remained in place, the switch from rural to urban settings allowed blacks more flexibility in their performance styles and dialogue, which never existed in minstrelsy, with the ever present plantation mentality. On the TOBA circuit and in small clubs and honky tonks, performing before black audiences, comedians were developing a freer style of comedy in which segregation jokes and a more assertive, dignified approach to humor was apparent. There were new comedians who refused to pander to white stereotypes by speaking in dialect, wearing ridiculous costumes or appearing in blackface. Included in this group were Nipsey Russell, Bill Cosby, and Red Foxx.

According to Wil Haygood (<http://www.encyclopedia.com>), as this new breed of comic surfaced, black performers became known as comedians; however, they still could not totally discard the popularity of performing in blackface in their comedy routines. The black comics' trajectory went from minstrel shows to outdoor tents; from honky tonks to Greenwich Village salons; from amphitheaters to the big screen. The venues were different but all brought laughter and varying styles of comedy

entertainment to audiences around the country. One may consider the laughter to be of a confused nature depending on the interpretation of the joke as it related to the social and racial climate of the day. What was clearly humorous and understood by black audiences did not necessarily have the same humorous appeal for white audiences. This is evidenced in a one liner by Richard Pryor. “I was a nigger for twenty-three years. I gave it up—no room for advancement”. This line was clearly not funny to whites.

In spite of the many challenges black comics faced, Haygood (<http://www.encyclopedia.com>), surmises that black humor is viewed as hilariously funny. Black humor is loud, profane, juicy, wondrous, willful, tricky, and sometimes delivered in coded language. It is well steeped in American history, blackface, Jim Crow laws, segregation, and the perceived semblance of integration. Performing comedy is difficult, and when it is awash in racial battling, it is even more difficult. Imagine looking in the mirror, watching the mirror crack, and trying to put it back together for a laugh. Black comedy can also be redemptive when it is shared. Black life, lived in the trenches, provides just enough comic relief to keep us going; keep us smiling. Haygood shares an account of a racial situation Adam Clayton Powell encountered when taking a train trip. This account provides us with an example of how blacks were able to interject humor when faced with racist situations:

In 1936 a young black minister by the name of Adam Clayton Powell was walking to a first class train compartment in Atlanta. Powell was so fair skinned he could pass for white. A porter who had looked over his shoulder out of curiosity wondered if the man he had just seen stepping into the train was a Black. Upon entering the first class compartment, the superior looked around and yelled out, “Hey, we believe there might be

a nigger in here"! Before eyes could rest suspiciously upon him, Powell hopped up and responded, "Where! You better find him and get him the hell out of here! What kind of train are you running?" Then the young minister sat down, like a king, like a rich white man, to enjoy his trip with dignity. The train pulled off (<http://www.encyclopedia.com>). Surely Powell was laughing hilariously on the inside. In Powell's passing for white, he accomplished having the last laugh, and enjoyed his trip in the same style as the whites in his company.

As black comic styles changed, mainstream America was not prepared to accept black humor that did not clearly mirror minstrelsy's stereotypical images and buffoonery of blacks. Most comics who stepped up from medicine and tent shows to the TOBA circuit had not eliminated all traces of the buffoonish, stereotypical black humor style. Initially, nearly all black comics still appeared in burnt-cork makeup, in acts that varied only slightly from routines established in minstrelsy. Like black musicians of the period, they were absorbing accepted mainstream forms and infusing those stage exaggerations with the real life humor they experienced every day in their own communities (Watkins 367-368).

Black humor, like music, was deeply embedded in the routine activities of daily life. It was part of the matrix of attitudes and behavior that extolled story telling, verbal play, and the ability to transcend mundane circumstances with spirited jesting. Black humor was undoubtedly seen then, as it is now, in the camaraderie displayed in barber shops and lodge meetings, the ritualized repartee of signifying, or the spontaneous quips that enliven all but the most sedate bourgeois interactions between blacks. Bringing comedy to the stage required not only altering images established by minstrelsy's

dimwitted stage black, but also absorbing standard theatrical comic elements and molding them into cohesive stage routines that had some basis in real life (368).

Black comedy themes explored on stage had nothing to do with whites or their lifestyles. Like blues artists, black comedians primarily focused on the immediate problems of their own day to day existence; such as, friendships, finances, marital and sexual relationships, and the pleasures of eating and drinking. In a rigidly segregated society, whites were largely extraneous to black existence and were absent from their humor. When whites did emerge as components in black humor, it was usually in regard to either a violent confrontation as a result of the period's rampant lynching's, or instances of white greed and deception. These experiences were usually treated with the utmost discretion. It was very risky, considering the racial climate at the time. Early twentieth-century black humor was the creation of the black common man who was excluded from mainstream society (368-369).

Into the mid-twentieth century, one begins to see a change in the delivery style of black comedians. An era known as the "Age of Soul" evolved as the newest form of black humor in America. It evolved in the same way literature does, one form or school developing from the last, each with its distinguishing characteristics more or less in the center. These characteristics in literature give a name to an "age". In humor, the content of jokes reflects the times, and in black humor they provide a way of analyzing the American race relations pattern as well (Schechter 179).

Contemporary black humor has many factors. It is the intelligence and gentility of Flip Wilson and his complete lack of self-consciousness when kidding black

stereotypes; the searing anger of Dick Gregory, a pioneer in Soul-Age comedy; the transition of Bill Cosby's non-racial comic dialogues to black consciousness; the staying power of a Moms Mabley; and the continuing banter of "dozens" contests in the ghetto. The Age of Soul also encompasses white humor about black people and the role of comedy in making whites aware of racial injustice and of their latent feelings of racism. (182).

Darryl Littleton, a stand-up comedian wrote a book entitled *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African-Americans Taught Us to Laugh*. Littleton goes by the stage name D'Militant, and recently did an interview with Tony Cox, host of National Public Radio show, NPR Hourly News (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7601368>). Cox asked Littleton how far would he say the content of comedy has changed, and what has brought about the change in the content of comedy? Mr. Littleton responded by saying, "Not really a lot of things have changed. We still use things like call and response, where we talk to our audience and our audience talks back to us."

During the Cox interview, Littleton stated that during the 1960s Dick Gregory became the first black comedian to achieve national fame by openly addressing political and racial issues. Dick Gregory, now better known as a civil rights activist than as a comedian, is more responsible than anyone else for directing humor away from the subtleties and innuendos of minstrels to unmistakably telling it like it is. He was the first black to satirize white prejudices and attitudes in front of white audiences and pioneered the use of political humor slanted to the race issue. Moreover, his presence, sharp wit and deep perceptiveness have made him an outstanding proponent of equal rights causes

wherever he appears. Littleton stated that in one of Dick Gregory's performances in Chicago, Gregory said in part:

You heard what Bobby Kennedy said ... that thirty years from this year, a black can become president. Wouldn't that be swinging? Can't you just imagine me president? And you back here in Chicago got a lot of problems, and you decide to call the White House, and I pick up the phone and say, 'Hey baby!' Wouldn't that be wild? Boy, if I was president of this country, I'd bring Kruschev over and give him some chitlins and he'd give us Berlin.

(<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7601368>)

Dick Gregory conceals none of his wrath. He told white audiences, "You gotta say this about the white race. Its self-confidence knows no bounds. Who else could go to a small island in the South Pacific where there's no poverty, no crime, no unemployment, no war and no worry, and call it a 'primitive' society!" His bitterness grows when the monologue reaches Southern whites. "A moderate in Natchez, Mississippi is a white man who hangs a nigger from a low tree. This is the only country in the world where a man can grow up in a filthy ghetto, go to the worst of schools, be forced to ride in the back of the bus, then get \$5,000 a week to tell about it," he would say on the nightclub circuit when racists dubbed him "the millionaire nigger". On southern swings Gregory would rub their noses in it by riding in a Lincoln Continental, wearing expensive tailor-made clothes and dining in the finest restaurants (Watkins 503).

Fully aware of his link with comedy's new straight talking social satirists, at the end of an act Gregory would often quip, "If I've done anything to upset you maybe it's

what I'm here for. Lenny Bruce shakes up the Puritans, Mort Stahl, the conservatives, and me, almost everybody." (503). By the mid-sixties as Dick Gregory became more involved in the Civil Rights Movement. His humor became more caustic and bitter. He also became more of a political and human rights advocate than a humorist. Gregory said that he views himself "as a social commentator who uses humor to interpret the needs and wants of blacks to the white community rather than as a comedian who happens to deal in topical social material". In reference to Dick Gregory, Redd Fox asserted, "a new brand of black comic has surfaced. He's clever, poised, informed and tells it like it is." (504) Dick Gregory's influence on this newly emerging type was enormous. He established a new voice and sound for black comics and satirists, which was not aggressive so much as non-ingratiating, less challenging and unapologetic; therefore, more real and more confident. Gregory's more "real" humor was not new to black Americans but it was a revelation to its new white audience. By introducing this type of humor to the public he opened the mainstream stage for many older black comedians, as well as a new group of younger ones who waited anxiously in the wings (504).

In talking about Dick Gregory during the Cox interview (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7601368>), Littleton shares that Dick Gregory turned away from the life of a full-time professional comedian because he saw limitations in the use of humor as a social weapon: "Humor has only helped the oppressed in one respect, as a narcotic. If humor were the weapon to solve the problem, there'd be comedians in the foxholes of Vietnam. As for me, humor was the only outlet to express my anger. Humor can no more find the solution to race problems than it can cure cancer."

Audra Burch (<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G1-19288523.html>), accounts that the 1970s brought Richard Pryor, regarded by some as the greatest black comic ever. Mel Watkins, author of *On the Real Side, a History of Black Humor*, says Pryor successfully squashed the negative inferences of using black humor in front of whites. On stage, Richard Pryor began to poke the same type of fun at whites as he did blacks. Pryor proved there were humorous aspects about whites that could be just as funny, if not funnier, than the fun poked at blacks. He made the connection and was not afraid to deliver the humor relative to both blacks and whites to entirely white or mixed audiences,

Richard Pryor took a giant step and moved away from the “safe” comedy dialogues of the forerunners of comedy. Despite the possible consequences of racists’ actions against him, Pryor began to use race and profanity in his performances before white audiences. The following is an example a joke Richard Pryor delivered as he transitioned his material from the acceptable norm in the presence of whites:

I remember tricks used to come through our neighborhood. That’s where I first met white people. They come down through my neighborhood to help the economy. Nice white dudes though . . . “Hello, little boy, is your mother home? I’d like a blow job.” I wonder what would happen if niggers go through white neighborhoods doin’ that, “Hey, man, is you momma home? Tell the bitch we wanna fuck.” (Watkins 543)

When whites became the brunt of Pryor’s comic dialogue, the humor did not have the same funny impact. Initially, the laughter was not as loud and hearty as when he poked fun at blacks, but that was soon to change. Pryor’s new style of

humor eventually broke the color barrier in comic performances for black comedians.

Richard Pryor was moving up quickly, but he had developed neither the style nor the comic material that would ultimately establish him as America's number one comedian. He was still working in the shadow of Bill Cosby and Dick Gregory. Pryor acknowledged that he was "probably the worst joke teller in the whole world". He turned more to stories in which he assumed the parts of different characters. When performing before white audiences, Pryor shied away from the more profane ghetto voices that often appeared in his acts before black crowds. The storytelling material would eventually dominate all of his performances. The choice was partly his own. He lacked the confidence in himself to make the ghetto characters acceptable to white audiences. A number of his advisors encouraged him to stay on the storytelling path. One agent told him, "Don't mention the fact that you're a nigger. Be the kind of colored guy we'd like to have over to our house". Bill Grundfest, owner of the Comedy Cellar in New York, accentuated the point when he said, "In those days, if Pryor hadn't done what we would consider white-washed material, 'Oreo' material, he never would have gotten to square one. Compromise was a necessity of the times". Richard Pryor recalled that "they were gonna help me be nothing as best they could." (Watkins 533)

Pryor was becoming not only disenchanted with constant comparisons to Cosby, but also annoyed with club owners, agents, and advisers who insisted he refrain from using street language, and added more biting racial material to his act. In 1966 and 1967, despite resistance, he began developing and using more ethnic material. Although not

nearly as trenchant as the routines he would present in the seventies, his “Super Nigger” dialogue is a good example of this transitional material:

“I always thought, why they never have a black hero. I always wanted to go to the movies and see a black hero. I figured out maybe someday on television they’ll have it, man. Look, up in the sky! It’s a crow. It’s a bat. No, it’s Supper Nigger. Able to leap tall buildings with a single bound; faster than a bowl of chitlin’s. We find Super Nigger with his X-ray vision that enables him to see through everything, except whitey. We find Super Nigger disguised as Clark Washington, mild mannered custodian of the Daily Planet, shuffling into Perry White’s office.”

“Hey, man, I’m quittin’, baby!”

“Great Caesar’s ghost, I can’t talk to you now”

“Talk to me, Jack, ‘cause I’m ready to quit man. I’ve had it up to here, you dig. Tired of doin them halls. Every time I finish, Lois Lane and them come slippin’ and slidin’ down through there and I have to do it over again. You dig it baby. I’m through . . . fire me!”

I can’t talk to you now. The warehouse is on fire.

What warehouse?

Dam, that’s where I got my stash.

This looks like a job for Supper Nigger.” (535)

Pryor began introducing more street types and observations mirroring the inflections and intonations of black street language. He also refined the intricate interplay between his narrative voice and his characters, moving closer to a comedy style

that Rolling Stone would call “a new type of realistic theatre.” The non-ethnic facade and debt to Cosby and others were fading (536).

Increasingly, Richard Pryor seemed determined to abandon the white-washed, “respectable” comedy that initially made him successful and couch his act in a voice that echoed black street humor. Pryor exclaimed, “Niggers is fun,” accentuating how “interesting being black is”. Ignoring advice given by the agent who told him to avoid mentioning that he was a “nigger”, Pryor began aggressively using the term to describe all blacks as he incorporated the voices and stories of the lower class, black working people, and hustlers he had known in Peoria, and on the black club circuit into his act (Watkins538). Pryor became confident in the direction he wanted to take his humor. Bill Cosby caught one of Richard Pryor’s performances in Los Angeles. Cosby recalled, “I was in the audience when Richard took on a whole new persona, his own. Richard killed the Bill Cosby in his act, made people hate it. Then he worked on them doing pure Pryor and it was the most astonishing metamorphosis I have ever seen. He was magnificent” (541).

Richard Pryor’s biography states that he is best known and loved for his live comedy where he presents the truth as he sees it in a hyperkinetic, expletive laid, free form style. His subject matter included black life on the streets, the drug culture, sex, and other topical issues, including tragedies in his own life. Pryor had a known cocaine addiction, two heart attacks, and quadruple bypass surgery. He set himself on fire, from which he suffered third degree burns over fifty percent of his body (Richard 3).

An astute observer of life, Richard Pryor gave voice to such marginal members of the black community as bums, winos, and junkies. Wino philosopher Mudbone is a

beloved classic character. With Mudbone, as with all characters, Pryor does not go for the easy ridicule but instead finds the precious humanity in even the most despicable. His white people characterizations are offered with such good humor and truth that those mimicked laughed the loudest (3).

For Richard Pryor, sex, profanity, and the word nigger became standard in all of his comedy routines. Reportedly a life altering change occurred in 1979 when he visited Kenya. The details of this experience have been kept private. The visit to Kenya resulted in Pryor's condemnation of the word nigger. Amazingly, his abandonment of the word in his stage performances attracted death threats, hate mail, and attacks on his home from some fans. In spite of these attacks Pryor stuck to his beliefs, still remaining amazingly funny to his audiences. Richard Pryor emerged at the right time and brought with him the incredible array of dramatic and comic talent needed fully to introduce and popularize that unique, previously or rejected part of African-American humor that thrived in the lowest, most unassimilated portion of the black community. As Redd Foxx and others have pointed out, Pryor before the sixties would probably have been banned from every club or theatre in America. The time for the surfacing of black humor, which had surreptitiously mocked those arrangements since slavery had arrived. In the end, it was Richard Pryor's finely tuned sensibilities and theatrical genius that brought racial comedy to the stage and edited its acceptance (Watkins 550).

There were other individuals who would emerge as successful comedians, and become popular in the world of comedy. Among them was Bill Cosby who worked as a substitute comedian at a bar in his native Philadelphia. There was Godfrey Cambridge, an actor who had worked his way from small off Broadway shows to an Obie Award

performance in Jean Genet's *The Blacks*, and a major role in Ossie Davis's *Purlie Victorious*, and was just beginning to test his stand-up comedy act as an emcee for rock 'n' roll shows. Comedian Flip Wilson was establishing himself as a regular at the Apollo Theatre after seven years of working small black clubs and dives throughout the country. There were others, of course, but these young black comedians along with veterans Redd Foxx and Moms Mabley, would soon inherit the throne vacated when Dick Gregory turned to politics. In little more than a decade, these contemporary comic talents, would totally alter America's conception of black humor (504).

With Dick Gregory maintaining a self-imposed exile from the comedy circuit, Bill Cosby ascended to become known as the king of black comedians. Cosby has explained that his humor is the situational type rather than verbal jokes. He creates the characters he portrays, and this inventive process was worked out in trial and error experiments. Much of his material is culled from newspaper reports in which the absurdity of actual events provides him with copy. He converts straight reporting into humor. For example, he read that a mass killer told the police in answer to their queries why he did it. The killer responded by saying "The voice told me to do it". Cosby changed this query to, "Take thy rifle; go out and slay". Cosby also has explained that he sees his humor as coming out of "seeing things cockeyed". He says, "When I was a kid I thought my parents were weird. Now I'm a parent, I think my kids are weird. They turn off reruns of I Spy to watch Bozo the Clown. I'm their old man; I think that's weird. Maybe it's me that's weird" (Schechter 199).

Cosby's ready acceptance by both blacks and whites for his mild manner, subdued humor, and his honest portrayals that evoke empathy, belies both his strong commitment

to civil rights causes and black consciousness. Over the years American magazines have helped foster his image; to *Ebony* in 1964 he was "Raceless Bill Cosby"; *Life* dubbed him "color blind comic"; and a *Playboy* interview headlined him as "the kinetic comedian-actor-singer-entrepreneur". Cosby's material has changed little during his meteoric rise, but his appearance and his propensity to speak out on race issues when away from the spotlight have undergone profound changes (200).

At the start of his career Bill Cosby was the epitome of the Ivy League Black. His clothes were Brooks Brothers-styled, his glasses dark-rimmed, his hair neatly cropped, and his demeanor calm and subdued. At least that is the way the media portrayed him. As the civil rights struggle heated up, Cosby's appearance changed toward greater identification with the doers in the movement. He adopted the Afro hair style, grew a Rap Brown-style mustache, and wore dashikis and mod-influenced clothes (200-201).

Cosby felt that in playing up his non-aggressive attitude to whites, the press has reduced his personality to a condition of Uncle Tomism. He felt that articles about him and interviews are edited out of all recognition. Another complaint he has is that magazines are more interested in printing photos of him than in quoting what he has to say. The reference to his affluence in the press also causes him much annoyance. This is because the expenses and taxes are never mentioned--only the vast gross sums. The core of his success continues to be the "colorlessness" of his comedy. He thinks there are some people who are disappointed because he does not tell his audiences that white people are mistreating black people. He says he is not trying to win converts on stage and does not think an entertainer can win converts (201).

Where Dick Gregory shattered the dam blocking more exposure for black comedians with his blunt, scorching commentary on racial intolerance; where Godfrey Cambridge made the bigot seem ridiculous in the eyes of other whites, and where Flip Wilson puts the lie to racial stereotypes by placing them clearly in view, Cosby has shown the way with his own presence toward an end result he describes as "getting down to the essential human being--the only difference is the coloring of the skin and this way, through entertaining, you strip the skin off" (204).

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

In this study the researcher has shown how the genre of black humor runs the gamut. Humor is and of itself, a necessary force in the lives of everyone, regardless of ethnic origin. Langston Hughes very pointedly defines humor as follows:

Humor is laughing at what you haven't got when you ought to have it. Of course, you laugh by proxy. You're really laughing at the other guy's lacks, not your own. That's what makes it funny –the fact that you don't know you are laughing at yourself. Humor is when the joke is on you but hits the other fellow first because it boomerangs. Humor is what you wish in your secret heart were not funny, but it is, and you must laugh. Humor is your own unconscious therapy. Humor can be like a dropped brick or the roar of Niagara Falls. Humor maintains its distance while at the same time keeping you company so long as you are capable of meeting it halfway. Humor does not force itself on you, in fact, cannot, because it has none of the qualities of a bad joke, none of the vulgarity of the wise crack, or the pushiness of the gag. Humor is a forgotten "Good morning" remembered tomorrow, a lent dime returned in needy time, a gesture from across the room better than a handshake, a friend who looks like a stranger but isn't because you realize you have known him all your life. Humor is

your own smile surprising you in the mirror. Humor's name is derived from the fact that the arrival is so "on-expected". Like a welcome summer rain, humor may suddenly cleanse and cool the earth, the air, and you.

(Spalding 428)

One must observe that regardless of the period in time, or the many talented individuals who contributed to black humor, there was no escaping the control whites had over black entertainers and black humor. White entertainers benefited in a variety of ways from every facet of black talent, especially financially. This is evidenced by stealing the material of the black entertainers and using it in their own acts. Whites controlled what comedy material was acceptable and what material was not allowed. Whites were there to dictate when blacks could laugh or not laugh. Despite the limitations placed on black comedians by whites, despite the power they held over them, despite the degrading aspects of black life, it is amazing how the genre of black humor evolved through the years. Significantly, due to the Civil Rights Act, blacks have been given the opportunity to become better educated. Black comedians and other entertainers are taking control of the day- to-day business aspects of their livelihoods. Black people have learned to conduct business and make decisions from a business perspective. Like white comedians, black comedians are now millionaires. This is greatly attributed to societal changes that have occurred through the years and the economic advancement from one generation to the next. Included in this evolvment are education, bad financial experiences, technology,

and entrepreneurship, to name a few. Schools are integrated; interracial marriages are acceptable; same sex relationships are becoming more and more engrained into the norms of society. No longer are black comedians at the total mercy of white owned agencies. When one visits an entertainment venues, regardless of the genre of entertainment, the audience is of a diverse mix.

There are many comedy shows on television today; to name a few, Def Comedy Jam, The Kings of Comedy, and Comedy Central, to name a few. In viewing black comedy performers, listening to their jokes, there is a significant difference in early black humor and the humor of today. For example, Chris Rock's jokes make fun of black and white people. He uses the word "nigger" and profanity in his delivery, but when the camera spans the audience, we see black, white, Latino, and Asian people laughing at his jokes. There are no pre-set limits for today's black humorists. From the time of slavery to the early to mid-twentieth century, the aforementioned delivery of humor by black comedians would have resulted in very harsh racial repercussions, including death.

The genre of black humor is an intriguing aspect of the literary canon. Typically, black humor is not studied as a separate literary genre. Although there is much written on the genre of black humor, the tendency is to focus on folklore, which greatly encompasses black humor. It is important that we recognize the significance of humor from both a literary and psychological perspective. One must value that humor is, has always been, and will always be, an integral part of black life.

To research black humor from the origins of Africa, to the kings and queens of comedy today, has been a phenomenal learning experience. It is fascinating to see how the antics of slaves entertaining the master, black minstrels entertaining in blackface,

twentieth century black comics having their say about whatever they choose and “telling it like it is”, has taken on a life of its own. Most importantly, new genres of comedy will continue to unfold as new generations and new forms of comic talent continue to arrive in the world of entertainment.

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