ETHNIC HUMOR: 
SUBVERSION AND SURVIVAL

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PEOPLE HAVE UNDOUBTEDLY ALWAYS LAUGHED AT OTHERS WHO SEEMED “DISTINCT,” to reassure themselves and to blunt the threats implicit in differences. Ethnic slurs in joking form have reflected the tensions of social difference in America, and they continue to serve important, though sometimes distasteful, functions in American life. Active and resurgent, intentionally cruel and demeaning, ethnic humor has a lengthy past characterized by resiliency and forward-looking adaptability. Ethnic humor against supposedly “inferior” social groups initially conveyed the thrusts of the well-entrenched members of society, the white, mostly Protestant “haves,” against the newly arriving immigrants or their imperfectly assimilated offspring, or against black slaves, freedmen, their children, and children’s children. It also designated other unequities typically of red, yellow, and brown complexions. Ethnic humor in the United States originated as a function of social class feelings of superiority and white racial antagonisms, and expresses the continuing resistance of advantaged groups to unrestrained immigration and to emancipation’s black subcitizens barred from opportunities for participation and productivity. In time, ironically, the resulting derisive stereotypes were adopted by their targets in mocking self-description, and then, triumphantly, adapted by the victims of stereotyping themselves as a means of revenge against their more powerful detractors.

Such humor is one of the most effective and vicious weapons in the repertory of the human mind. For this reason, Thomas Hobbes related laughter to power and traced the origins and purposes of laughter to social rivalry. The passion of laughter, he sensed, was nothing more than the proclaiming of “some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmity of others” or with our own
one-time lowly position." In the Hobbesian jungle of our contemporary world, ethnic humor’s primary form revolves around the stereotype. Highly developed images today, stereotypes may once have originated in the stuff of social reality, but they have long since been embellished and taken on a life of their own. As Gordon W. Allport has aptly noted, "Some stereotypes are totally unsupported by facts; others develop from a sharpening and over-generalization of facts." Yet, once formed, they assume certain features of a circular structure within which all behavior conforms to the internal directives of the stereotypical image.

Although ethnic humor demonstrates aggressive intentions, empirical studies suggest that it possesses a salutary side as well. Lawrence LaFave and Roger Mannel, for example, argue that some jokes of this genre actually compliment the maligned group. The disparaged group absorbs the barbs and, in fact, defuses them by passing them along as of their own manufacture. Thus, the humor of ridicule may serve to support the ladder for upward social mobility. In Buffalo, for instance, Polish Americans were reported to relate the following quips upon the elevation of Polish-born Pope John Paul II to the Holy See:

Why doesn’t the Pope let any dogs into the Vatican? Because they pee on poles.

When asked what he thought of the abortion bill, the Pope replied, "Pay it."

Alan Dundes suggests that such Polish jokes are demeaning, but Lydia Fish disagrees. She argues that they actually affirm ethnic pride. Is either position correct? A Yiddish joke, in which a rabbinical sage listened to a dispute, adds perspective. The rabbi found merit in each position. When the rebbetzin, his wife, complained that both parties could not be right, the rabbi impartially conceded: "You’re right too!" Ethnic jokes have occasionally appeared as light-bulb riddles:

How many WASPs does it take to change a light bulb?
Two. One to call the electrician and one to mix the martinis.

5Ibid.
How many Jewish children does it take to change a light bulb? None. "I'll sit in the dark!" the mother kvetches (whines)\(^6\)

Clearly, jokes of this kind reflect, or can be fused with, contemporary circumstance. The Polish joke cycle, as Dundes observed, transfers heat from other ethnic groups including Jews and blacks to the lower socio-economic classes in general.\(^7\) It could be argued, however, that Polish jokes also manifest revenge by blacks and Jews against whites, Christians or goyim, presumably for centuries of indignities.\(^8\)

Concealed by a "smile through one's teeth," aggressive humor or wit serves two salient functions: conflict and control. Conflict, which is implicit in a variety of forms—satire, irony, sarcasm, parody, and burlesque—reinforces the in-group and weakens the out-group. Stereotypes figure prominently in most conflict humor. Obstinately rigid, devilishly tenacious, the stereotypes have colored our thinking processes from early times. Because they are so deeply embedded in our individual memory and so firmly anchored in our collective folklore, stereotypes tend to be extremely difficult to dislodge. Witness, for example, the cartoons of Herblock, Jules Feiffer, and David Levine, the movies of Mel Brooks and Woody Allen, the standup comedy of Lenny Bruce, Dick Gregory, and Richard Pryor. Humor based on stereotype, the nastiest cut, can emasculate, enfeeble, and turn victims into scapegoats. Die Sturmer caricatures of the Jews spring painfully to mind."\(^9\)

In origin and development, ethnic slurs are best understood in historical context. The Irish, for example, became victims of Irish jokes soon after their arrival in the United States. Thus:

Why is the wheelbarrow the greatest invention ever made? It taught a few Irishmen to walk on their hind legs.\(^10\)

Reputedly the Irish embodied propensities for brawling, drinking to excess, contradicting themselves unwittingly, and making incongruous statements—bru-


tal or foolish behavior, in other words. Accident victims Pat and Mike have suffered a great fall. “Are you dead, Pat?” “I’m badly bruised, Mike, but quite alive.” “I hope you are but you’re such a liar, I don’t know whether to believe you.” Blacks sometimes employed these jokes because they conferred on themselves feelings of superiority over the Irish along with some degree of revenge against all white folk.11 A visitor in hell saw all kinds of ethnics—Germans, English, Japanese, and Negroes—burning in torment. “‘Where are the Irish?’” he asked. Escorting him to a room filled with Irish, the Devil said: “‘We are just drying them here; they are too green to burn now.’” At another level, an Irish orator covered a litany of ethnic achievements. “Who puts up all the fine buildings?” The audience responded on cue: “‘The Irish.’” “And who puts up the court house?” “The Irish.” “And who builds the state penitentiaries?” “The Irish.” “And who fills them?” “The Irish.”12

On stage, the Irish carved out a distinctive image for themselves. Vaudeville or burlesque teams including Needham and Kelly, Rooney and Rogers, the Shamrocks, and others, engaged in tongue-twisters, brawling, and blarney. They conjured up a vivid portrait described by “a figure in a derby hat and dudeman pipe, a melodic if not sentimental songster having a belligerent attitude, a love for the bottle, a penchant for politics, . . . a quizzical look.” In the newspaper comics, Irish folks inhabited shanties where the chimney, a patched stovepipe, pitched crazily. One needed a ladder to get into the house filled with children and dominated by a hot-headed, washer-woman wife.13

This kind of cruel caricature flourished at a time when the nation was confronted by a large number of impoverished immigrants who could not easily be assimilated. Older-stock Americans aimed jokes against these newcomers and their unusual customs as one method of promoting cultural conformity. The Irish responded to such oppressive humor, however, using a counter-assertion of aggressive humor in return. If, indeed, the Irish represented unwanted alien characteristics, they readily employed their own wits to criticize American values and peculiarities, and maintained thereby a measure of self-respect. Eventually Chicago’s Irish dialect commentator on public affairs turned the tide in favor of his countrymen. From his saloon on Archev Road, Mr. Dooley satirized fraud, pretense, and materialism in the American grain. He tackled Andrew Carnegie’s philanthropies at the time when they were almost universally celebrated. (“Ivry time he gives a libry, he gives himself away in a speech.”) He supplied the most cogent appraisal of reform politics:

12Ibid., 302–3.
Ethnic Humor

Th’ noise ye hear is not th’ first gun iv a rivolution. It’s on’y th’ people iv th’ United States batin’ a carpet. Ye object to th’ smell? That’s nawthin! We use sthrong disinfectants. A Frenchman or an Englishman cleans house by sprinklin’ th’ walls with cologne; we chop a hole in th’ flure an’ pour in a kag iv chloride iv lime. Who is that yallin’? That’s our ol’ friend High Fi-foreign bein’ compelled to take his annual bath. . . .

Mr. Dooley marveled at American society with its “inventions—the steam-injine an’ th’ printin’-press an’ th’ cottin’-gin an’ th’ gin sour an th’ bicycle an’ th’ flyin’ machine an’. . . . crownin’ wur-ruk iv our civilization—th’ cash raygister.” In retrospect Dooley stands equidistant between immigrant scapegoat Teague O’Regan, Brackinridge’s cunning but cowardly rogue figure in the Modern Chivalry series (1792–1815), and martyred hero John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Jesse Bier has suggested that Dooley’s unyielding opposition to American business, militarism, politics, and customs was a displacement of his Irish and his Catholic hostilities against the English. Dooley’s egalitarian needling deflated the powerful, a tendency rooted in Irish comic tradition. Indeed, Irish bards, as Vivian Mercier has argued, constantly stirred up trouble in Ireland. Dooley questioned the conventional wisdom of his day. He functioned as a critic with a paradoxical bent, in that he was “‘provincial and broadminded, anti-intellectual but thoughtful, pugnacious but humanitarian.’” In time Dooley seemed to grow more peaceful. Perhaps he, likewise, had joined the “‘cash raygister’” crowd along with other successful Irishmen. The Irish left ethnic humor to other ethnics who followed after them, principally Jews and blacks.

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Jewish ethnic humor builds on its folk sources, as these examples reveal:

An elderly orthodox Jewish man was walking his dog. He approached a stranger with an attractive dog. “What breed is he?” “A cross between a Jew and a mongrel” “Oh!” said the elderly Jew, “then he is undoubtedly related to both of us!”

Priest: “When will you give up those silly dietary laws?”
Rabbi: “At your wedding, excellency.”

Such jokes reveal distinctive aspects of Jewish humor, the wit of retaliation and the comedy of revenge.

American Jews found the origins of their comic voice in medieval Europe. Precursors of modern stand-up comedians, _badchonim_ and _marshalliks_ enjoined each other to "tell it like it is" well before the advent of Jackie Mason. A seasonal event, the _Purimspiel_ (Purim Play) sanctioned irreverent humor and granted license to a number of fools—the _lets_, _nar_, and _payats_—to act comically. Droll characters—_shnorers_, _shlemiels_, _shlimazels_, and _luftmenshen_—originated in the East European _shtetl_ or village. Some, like Moishe Chabad and Hersh Ostropolier, were real people. One night while dining, the story goes, Hersh broke into a loud wail. "Is there anything wrong?" asked the concerned proprietor. "Oy!" cried Hersh, "to think that for this little morsel of meat a great big ox had to be slaughtered." Fired from a menial job for excessive jesting, Hersh was hired by a melancholy Hassidic rabbi to serve as his court jester. The rabbi rebuked him on one occasion for spending so little time at prayer. Hersh protested:

You have so much to be grateful for! Your carriage and your fine horses, your gold and silver, your fancy dishes. But look at me. I have a nagging wife, my six children and a skinny goat. And so my prayers are very simple: "Wife, children, goat"—and I'm done.

As he lay dying, Hersh was visited by members of the Burial Society. He advised: "Remember my friends, when you lift me up to lay me in the coffin, be sure not to hold me under the armpits. I've always been ticklish there." He died with a smile on his lips, and laughed all the way to the grave (_keyver_). Like his fellow imps, Froyim Graydinger and Shayke Fayrer, Hersh played the wise fool. He unmasked the rich who pretended to be righteous and the ignorant who pretended to be learned. By reinterpreting his predicament, the fool triumphed in the end.

Other forms of folk humor flowered in the _shtetl_. Stories from the mythical village of Chelm parodied the Jewish preoccupation with learning bereft of common sense. They poked fun at sages fixed on millennial concerns, mindless of mundane reality. Children still love these stories, because adults act foolishly in them and education leads to futility. When two wise men of Chelm went for a walk, it started to rain. "Quick, open your umbrella!" "It won't help. My umbrella is full of holes." "Why then did you bring it?" "I didn't think it would rain." In another example of inspired nonsense, the village elders of Chelm

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refuse to grant a raise to the underpaid Messiah-watcher because, though the salary is low, the work is steady.\textsuperscript{20}

Some scholars contend that Jewish humor is a product of emancipation and did not blossom until the late nineteenth century, while others argue that following the Holocaust and the rise of a Jewish nation-state in Israel, this genre has expired. Jewish jokes attracted and stimulated Sigmund Freud, who, in his analysis of Jewish humor, found that it exemplified the "tendency wit" of skepticism and self-criticism.\textsuperscript{21} Freud's supposition finds confirmation in the penchant of contemporary Jewish comedians for assaulting established institutions, as in the antics of Groucho Marx, Sid Caesar, Lenny Bruce, Jackie Mason, Don Rickles, and Mel Brooks, to name only a few comic wreckers. Building on his mentor's work, Theodore Reik, like Freud, focused on Jewish wit's intimacy, its dialectical process, and its releasing of unmerry laughter at a moment of subjective truth or profound insight.

In Immanuel Olsvanger's comic treasure-trove, \textit{Royte Pomerantsen}, we discover this gem:

When you tell a peasant a joke he laughs three times; once when you tell it, once when you explain it, and once when he understands it.
When you tell a land-owner a joke he laughs twice; once when you tell it and once when you explain it—he'll never understand it.
When you tell a military officer a joke he laughs only when you tell it. Because he won't let you explain it and of course he does not understand it.
But when you tell a Jew a joke, he tells you that he's heard it already—and, besides, you're telling it all wrong.\textsuperscript{22}

Often some other national or ethnic representative appears in this kind of anecdote, but the Jew always gets the punch in the tag line and the rabbi frequently functions as a trickster. Does Jewish humor always indicate self-hatred? Most psychiatrists who treat this subject seem to have fixed on "psychic masochism" as their descriptive explanation. However, Elliot Oring delineates a basic dichotomy in humor theory between humanists and social scientists. While humanists prefer incongruity as the primary mode of humor, as they see it, social scientists stress catharsis via "drive reduction."\textsuperscript{23}


Unencumbered by such divergent and humorless theories, Yiddish writers Mendel Mocher Sforim and Sholem Aleichem created comic characters who snatched ironic victories from the jaws of defeat. They further improved that delicate balance between piety and complaint, the humor of marginality as epitomized earlier by Heinrich Heine and expressed in a joke cycle concerning cleanliness, sexual permissiveness, identity problems, and war. To explain what happened to this humor as it crossed the Atlantic Ocean to America, Lawrence Mintz has pinpointed four stages in the process: the first featured critical humor that targeted the out-group; the second involved self-deprecatory humor; the third stressed realism; and finally, the fourth stage reversed the first stage as the oppressed minority gained revenge by assaulting the majority culture. In stages one and four, critical hostility gained license. This helped to deflect aggression through ritualistic, as opposed to real, punishment, because, as Mintz argues, the joking relationships and resulting ritual banter serve to reduce irritants.

Jews in the United States in the nineteenth century were caricatured in jokes and cartoons published in Puck, Judge, Life, and Leslie’s Weekly. The jokes concerned money, bargains, and fraud (mainly arson). The graphic stereotypes reflected a mixture of “good” and “bad” traits. However maligned, Jews actually received better treatment than a number of other groups, particularly Italians, blacks, Chinese, and, surprisingly, Mormons. John Appel has charted the evolution of the Jew in caricature from the money bags of the fifteenth century to the long beards, grotesque noses, open palms, and pawnbrokers’ signs prevalent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European cartoons. In contrast to the Irish, for example, the Jews appeared more likable in American caricatures. Harry Hirschfield helped to create a counter-image with his Abe Kabibble comic strip in 1914. With his striped trousers, saucer eyes, small bulb nose, familiar accent and peculiar syntax, Abe represented middle-class Jewish aspirations. He loved family, country, business, and pinochle. As their co-religionists owned and operated many theatres, Jews flocked into vaudeville, where budding careers opened to their talent and chutzpe.

Old Jewish jokes found renewed expression on stage:


24Altman, Comic, 141–45, 163–68.
“She’s from a good family.” “The highest yichus (status). Her grandfather was a famous scholar.” “She’s rich.” “Her uncle is Rothschild.” “She has only one fault. She has a little hump.” “A hump!” cries the apprentice. “A regular Mount Sinai!”  

With a gift for cultural pastiche, Jewish comedians engaged in “ethnic acts.” Joe Weber and Lew Fields did Mike and Meyer, a “Double Dutch Act.” Mike, a fat little man in a bizarre checkered suit, yelled at Meyer, tall, lean, and unctuous, who twisted Mike’s nose. The shorter man flailed helplessly at his taller adversary. They argued over politics. Mike scored with his punch line: “Banners don’t vote. But d’ey shure do show which vay der vindt is plowing.” Mike was shoved off stage as he bellowed: “Dondt poosh me, Meyer!” When they meet again, they greet each other:

“I’m delightfulness to needt you.”
“Der disguzt ist all mine.”

Smith and Dale’s classic routine of 1906 was a thinly veiled Dutch Act. Beneath Dr. Kronkhite’s German accent coursed choice bits of Jewish humor.

Patient: “What do I owe you?”
Doctor: “You owe me $10 for my advice.”
Patient: “$10 for your advice? Well, Doctor, here is $2. Take it, that’s my advice.”
Doctor: “You cheap skate! You shnorrer, you low life, you racoon, you baboon!”
Patient: “One more word from you, you’ll only get $1.”
Doctor: “You . . .”
Patient: “That’s the word! Here’s a dollar.”

Jews also put on burnt cork. Blacking their faces to impart their shmal tz (literally, chicken fat; figuratively, sentimentality bordering on bathos), Sophie Tucker, Al Jolson, George Jessel, and Eddie Cantor became stars. Their black masks guaranteed freedom from conventional restraints. Perhaps the grimness of industrialization helps to explain the enormous popularity of Al Jolson, whose songs conjured up a mythical magnolia-scented South teeming with togetherness. If so, while Spenglerians were lamenting western decadence, and poets in exile were raining

metaphors of sterility on their respective wastelands, Jews were imitating the black libidinous style, and developing a coarse, vital humor with music to match.\textsuperscript{30}

The Marx Brothers carried on the vaudeville tradition minus the minstrel masks. Fortified with S.J. Perelman scripts, they plunged into gleeful nihilism. Listen to Groucho, the ‘‘shnorrer’’ as explorer. ‘‘When I came to this country, I didn’t have a nickel in my pocket. Now I have a nickel in my pocket.’’ Resigning from the Friars Club, he explained: ‘‘I do not care to belong to a club that accepts people like me as members.’’ Yet there were many more kicks for Groucho’s straightwoman, Margaret Dumont. ‘‘That remark covers a lot of territory,’’ he observed. ‘‘As a matter of fact, you cover a lot of territory. Is there any truth to the fact that they’re going to tear you down and put up an office building?’’\textsuperscript{31} No one remained safe from Marx’s demolition derby, least of all, Margaret Dumont, pillar of piety and symbol of WASP respectability.

Jack Benny, however, typified newer trends on radio. Born Benny Kubelski, he married Sadie Marks, who, like her husband, metamorphosed herself with a new nose and a new name into Mary Livingston. Ethnic humor issued only from the subsidiary characters in Benny’s cast, like Eddie ‘‘Rochester’’ Anderson, Dennis Day, Messrs. Kitsel and Schleppermans, who presented stereotypes reminiscent of those on the vaudeville circuit. Vain, stingy, pompous, violinist manqué Benny played the butt and imparted his Jewish flavor almost subliminally. As Harry Popkin contends, the Hitler years constituted a period of relative silence on Jewish topics and actual desensitization. After World War II, however, defiant in the wake of the Holocaust and proud at Israel’s birth, Jewish comedians as well as Jewish writers emerged from the cultural closet. Among them Sid Caesar, Jack E. Leonard, Milton Berle, Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth laughingly carried their low comedy into virtually every avenue of popular culture. They freshened up old stereotypes and injected doses of Jewish comic wisdom into American life. Their message was strong and clear: mir zeinen doh (we are here).\textsuperscript{32}

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Black comedians responded differently to the stresses affecting them than did their Jewish counterparts. True enough, blacks and Jews shared the humor of the


\textsuperscript{31}Bier, Rise, 270–71; Altman, Comic Image, 188–89.

oppressed. Inwardly masochistic, indeed tragic, externally aggressive, even acrimonious, their humor generated several distinctive forms of expression such as gallows humor, the ironic curse, double meanings, trickster tales, and retaliatory jokes.

Black humor’s outstanding traits include its play quality, which seeks to ward off punishment and thus permits quick retaliation; its deep scrutiny; and a type of control humor which is vital for the maintenance of a highly attuned and carefully sensitized community. Springing from its folk sources, Afro-American humor has proceeded mainly along two tracks destined to provoke laughter. Externally, it represents an accommodation to white society and functions as a mechanism for survival. Slaves used veiled humorous language to vent anger, just as they employed coded sayings to mask true feelings. The John-Master stories illuminate this process. John cusses out his massa whenever he pleases—whenever the massa is up at the big house and John is down in the field. John steals food and lies his way out of trouble by turning a pig into a baby and, when caught, reversing the magic. Slave stories featured outwardly docile subjects paying homage to their master as in this deathbed scene: “Farewell massa! Pleasant journey! You soon be dere, massa—[it’s] all de way down hill!” Some slaves refused to be buried in the same gravesite with their masters for fear that the Devil, “old Sam,” might take the wrong body. Blacks shortlled as they slipped past white scrutiny:

I fooled Old Master seven years,
Fool the overseer three.
Hand me down my banjo,
And I’ll tickle your bel-lee.34

John, the stereotype, epitomizes the rewards, the limits, and the hazards of the “trickster,” wherein even verbal facility and skill in role playing were not enough. In one tale, John’s absolute faith in prayer betrays him as the massa’s cruel children prey on his gullibility and pelt him with “God’s stones.” To track the inner feelings of the Afro-American in servitude, one has to turn to the animal trickster. Rabbit is correctly identified with the slave, yet he also mirrors the

33Boskin, Humor and Social Change, 49-56.
oppressor’s cruelty. Lawrence Levine cautions against simplistic equations. He prefers to view trickster tales as profound parodies of white society. Because the whites held such awesome power, their human chattels preferred to seek revenge disarmingly with guile and indirection. Even if the meek fail to inherit the earth, they might occasionally enjoy a last laugh. Slaves laughed “to keep down trouble and to keep our hearts from being broken.” As John Little put it, “I have cut capers in chains.”

Folktales, in the useful paradigm of Arnez and Anthony, constitute “an oral tradition in which the group pokes fun at its customs, idioms . . . folkways.” Such in-group humor fosters social cohesion. When black humor went public with burnt offerings, a ritual sacrifice occurred. In American popular culture, the black comic figure crept into our group fantasy as the smiling descendant of Pan. He lusted after chicken, watermelon, pig’s feet, and white women. He feared ghosts (particularly in white sheets) and spoke in malapropisms. White performers Thomas Rice and Dan Emmett swooped down South in the wake of Reconstruction to cannibalize black culture. Two blatant stereotypes surfaced, Jim Crow and Jim Dandy: the former, a rural, slow-witted buffoon; the latter, an urbane, effeminate city-slicker. Prodded by the upper-class, white-faced interlocutor, who played it straight, Coon and Dandy created havoc on stage. These types, contends Robert Bone, triggered laughter as audiences perceived the gap between affectation and reality. The travesty sought “to keep the pretender in his place.”

Sambo, Crow’s cousin, a Darwinian loser and preindustrial primitive, became the nation’s demeaned alterego or, in Bone’s formulation, its anti-self. To whites he was

slow-witted, loosely-shuffling, buttock-scratching, benignly-optimistic, superstitiously-frightened, childishly lazy, irresponsibly-carefree, rhythmically-gaited, pretentiously-intelligent, sexually-animated. His physical characteristics added to the jester’s appearance: toothy-grinned, thick-lipped, nappy-haired, slack-jawed, round-eyed.

Unlike Lear’s fool, Ahab’s Pip, or Bergen’s McCarthy, our Sambo lacked wisdom. He was, in short, a buffoon.

The white performer who put on his blackface minstrel mask was performing a rite of exorcism. He was operating a safety valve for repressed emotions. The black persona he portrayed—indolent, inept, indulgent—embodied the anti-self and

35Osofsky, Puttin’ on Ole Massa, 39–40; Levine, Black Culture, 118–19.
objectified the distance between social norms and man’s instincts. Imparting a
sense of freedom and inviting a return to childhood, minstrelsy answered deep
psychic needs for white audiences, “the mammy for security and comfort; . . .
the Negro male for ridicule and jest.”

For blacks themselves, this ridicule forged psychic chains: a bag for Uncle Ben, a box for Aunt Jemima, a cabin in the sky for
Uncle Tom, a pancake restaurant chain for Sambo, and a joke for Rastus.

To survive, the black artist had to participate in self-caricature. To succeed, he
had to perpetuate vile stereotypes. Billy Kersands juggled a cup and saucer in his
mouth. Ernest Hogan, Ma Rainey, and Bert Williams donned the mask to conceal,
as well as to express, true feelings. Williams, in fact, used two sets of jokes: one
for white folks, the other for black. As “Jonah Man,” Williams, helped and
comforted by “Nobody,” successfully pulled laughter from pain. Most of his
peers, however, coupled their painful indignities with derisive laughter. Kersands
and Hogan performed coon songs. Dunbar wrote them.

Blacks’ humor of accommodation was the only kind to which whites were
ordinarily exposed until recently. To laugh openly at “the Man,” “Mr.
Charley,” “Miss Ann,” “pig,” “honkey,” “vanilla” was to invite
certain punishment. Blacks, therefore, developed a gaming stance stoically
laughing on the outside to cope with their pain inside. Black humor served many
important functions including group survival, escape into pride and dignity,
self-criticism, and the resolution of conflict.

Getting past society’s censors, internal and external, as Freud maintained, brings pleasure even in the presence of
pain, because a joke saves energy normally expended on upholding inhibitions or
disguising aggression. Such jokes function, in fact, as miniatures of rebel-
liousness. In Daryl Dance’s rich anthology of materials, which often pits the
poor against those with power, one set of selections uses the Negro preacher as the
target to expose vanity, ignorance, hypocrisy, lechery, alcoholism, gluttony, and
materialism through his misadventures and misfortunes. For example:

The church people were having a party at which they served some punch, but the punch
was so weak that, every time they got a chance, some of the men would sneak in a bottle
and pour some whiskey into the punch. The Preacher enjoyed it so much, he just kept

38 White, “Burnt Cork,” 543; Albert F. McClean, Jr., American Vaudeville as Ritual (Lexington:
Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1965), 24–26; Robert Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth
Century America (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), 29; Huggins, Harlem Renaissance, 260–74,
or offers a brilliant analysis of travesty.

39 Toll, Blacking Up, 245–48, 254–59, 262, 274; Robert Toll, On with the Show: The First Century of
Show Business in America (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), 123; Morris Goldman, “The
Sociology of Negro Humor,” Diss. New School for Social Research 1960, iv, refers to the dual set of
jokes used by Bert Williams.

40 Boskin, Humor and Social Change, 57; Robert Brake, “The Lion Act is Over: Passive/Aggressive
nipping. Later, when he was called to pray, he said: "God, bless the cow that gave this milk." 41

When another minister and his son encountered a bear in the woods, the son urged, "Let us pray!" The minister responded: "Let us run. Son, prayers is all right in a prayer meetin' but they ain't no good in a bear meetin'!" 42

The elephant riddle-jokes, which achieved great popularity in the 1960s, frequently depicted the elephant as sexually superior, a crude disguising, in the suggestion of Abrahams and Dundes, for the stereotypical black male. Thus:

Why does the elephant have four feet?
It's better than six inches.

How do elephants make love in the water?
They take their trunks down.

In another cycle, the elephant is symbolically castrated!

How do you keep an elephant from charging?
Take away his credit card.

Before long, color riddles appeared, as:

What's black and has a red cape?
Super Nigger.

What is black and white and rolls in the grass?
Integrated sex.

The prospects of black liberation often spurred anxiety among whites, triggering repressive responses in turn. 43 At times, in the great urban riots of the 1960s, the responses and counterresponses could erupt violently and self-destructively.

Why then, was it that American audiences responded so favorably to black comedians in this period? Perhaps the answer lies in the role that standup comics play as cultural anthropologists. Lawrence Mintz's insight is crucial:

41Dance, Shuckin', 41–76; Levine, Black Culture, 321.
42For the "bear meetin'" joke, see Mary Frances Berry and John Blassingame, Long Memory: The Black Experience in America (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1982), 102.
As a licensed spokesman he is permitted to say things about our society that we want and need to have uttered publicly, but which would be too dangerous and too volatile if done so without the mediation of humor; and as a comic character he can represent, through caricature, those negative traits which we wish to hold up to ridicule, to feel superior to, and to renounce through laughter. Thus, for example, the blackfaced minstrels can be the objects of racist ridicule as a part of a ritualized experience in venting hostility and in defining socially undesirable behavior, yet at the same time they can function as positive, likeable spokesmen for topical satire. . . . Similarly the ethnic comedians could represent ‘‘greenhorns’’ to be laughed at for their ignorance, gullibility, poverty, and vulnerability, but laughed with for their street-wise insistence on survival and their ironic exposure of injustice. . . .

Stephanie Koziski has demonstrated that comedians can jar audiences into awareness of deeply buried cultural underpinnings. Like a Margaret Mead, the stand-up comedian ‘‘gets down’’ into primal roots. Comparable to the ancient storyteller in ‘‘primitive’’ cultures, he or she may also communicate shared values as well as the common knowledge.

Building of folk sources and in-group banter, black comedians joined their Jewish and other ethnic counterparts in imparting cultural commentary and anthropological insight. Dick Gregory carried the ball directly into enemy territory in the early 1960s. As a civil rights activist-commentator, he repeatedly scored:

Restaurateur: ‘‘We don’t serve Nigras!’’
‘‘That’s cool. I don’t eat them.’’

I sat in so long at lunch-counters. It took me ten years to discover that they didn’t have what I wanted.

It’s kinda sad, but my little girl doesn’t believe in Santa Claus. She sees that white cat with the whiskers and even at two years old she know damn well that no white man coming to our neighborhood at midnight.

Makes you wonder . . . when I left St. Louis I was making $500 a week for saying the same thing loud that I used to say under my breath.


Wouldn’t it be a hell of a thing if all this was burnt cork and you people were being tolerant for nothing?" Godfrey Cambridge laughed at his wife’s “Back to Africa” kick. “She did the bedroom in brown, the whole thing, drapes, ceiling, carpet, spread, pillow. One day she took a bath, came into the room and it took me three hours to find her.” Cambridge roasted whites, too, with his “How to Hail a Taxi” routine and their concern over property values. “Do you realize,” he asked, “the amount of havoc a Negro couple can cause just by walking down the street on a Sunday morning with a copy of the New York Times real-estate section under the man’s arm?”

Redd Foxx brandished his own weapons. He once threatened a less-than-enthusiastic, predominantly white audience with “Why should I be wasting time with you here when I could be knifing you in an alley?” He ruefully observed that the first black to receive an athletic scholarship from “Ole’ Miss” was a javelin catcher. He parodied Tarzan of the Apes and derided Long Beach, California, blacks as “the ugliest Negroes I have ever seen.” Foxx confessed the ambivalences inherent in mulattodom: “You wake up in the morning with a taste for... filet mignon with biscuits.” Unmasking Sambo, Foxx confided that “ ’Boss’ spelled backwards is double SOB.” He had come a long way from the restraints of minstrelsy.

Jackie “Moms” Mabley and, more recently, Richard Pryor also found rich veins of humor in folk sources. Mabley’s appearance, her references to soul food and her earthy wit established the appropriate image and tightened the bonds of kinship with her black audiences, while in comic reversals, she addressed powerful white men as “boy” and called prestigious white women “girl.” Once she offered an account of a major United Nations conference:

Aw, everybody was there. They had a ball. Yeah. All them men from the Congo, some of ’em was late getting there ’cause they had plane troubles, and they had to be grounded in Arkansas, Little Rock. One of them Congo men walked up to the desk in Little Rock and said, “I’d like to reserve a room, please.” The man said, “We don’t cater to your kind.” He said, “No, you misunderstand me. I don’t want it for myself. I want it for my wife. She’s your kind.”

Such humor, as Dwight MacDonald once observed, is like guerrilla warfare. Success depends on traveling light, striking unexpectedly, and getting away fast. Yet ethnic humor, because of its agitational elements, must return to the action repeatedly. Skirting the edge of gallows laughter, it cannot afford to escape into fatalism. Thus, in its quest for control over events and lives, ethnic behavior demonstrates that both oppressors and their adversaries use humor, but for strikingly different ends. The oppressors employ ridicule to maintain conformity to the status quo by adhering to iron-bound stereotypes. Ethnics in retaliation have created a world of internal joking where, in Langston Hughes’s observation, “certain aspects of the humor of minority groups are so often inbred that they are not palatable for outside consumption.” Moreover, they often reverse roles and turn the tables on their adversaries by striving for a language of self-acceptance. Poet Marianne Moore perceptively noted that “one’s sense of humor is a clue to the most serious part of one’s nature.” Mocking the features ascribed to them by outsiders has become one of the most effective ethnic infusions into national humor, particularly by Afro-Americans and Jews. Minority laughter affords insights into the constant and often undignified struggle of upwardly striving Americans to achieve positive definition and respectable status.

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31 Langston Hughes, “Jokes Negroes Tell on Themselves,” *Negro Digest*, 9 (June 1951), 25.