

# American humor as unifying and divisive

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## *Abstract*

*Americans and American culture are famous for their sense of humor and a penchant for creating comic characters and examining society from the perspective of humor, a perspective which is known to aid in coping with diversity and change. This article examines the unique and invaluable virtue of humor in America: its ability to allow us to cope with the most important aspects of our lives in a structure which frames our problems as bearable and even as a source of strength and pleasure — a paradox which exemplifies the unity and diversity of American humor.*

American culture has always been famous for its sense of humor. From the beginning, observers have cited our penchant for creating comic characters, and for examining our society from the perspective of humor. The motives and functions of such social joking are complex and significant. Modern humor theory directs us to consider that humor is a way of processing and appreciating fundamental incongruities and conflicts, often ones with the gravest implications, dressing them in such a way that they seem less threatening, more acceptable. Louis Rubin, Jr., (1983) offers a concept, "the great American joke," in which he suggests that American humor has always been a way that we can test our ideals in the light of our realities and our actual social situation in the light of our ideals. My own view is that relatively stable and homogeneous societies have less use for humor than dynamic and heterogeneous ones. Humor is a valuable tool for examining and coping with diversity and change; its unique and invaluable virtue is that it allows us to deal with the most important aspects of our lives, for instance sex, politics, race and ethnicity, religion, and family relations, to list the most prominent, in a structure

which frames our differences and our problems as bearable, even as a source of strength and pleasure. Therefore it serves the apparently paradoxical purpose of promoting *both* unity and diversity.

American humor is prevalent in almost every sort of cultural expression. It permeates all kinds of literary activity, newspaper and magazine journalism, the graphic arts including cartoons, comic strips, posters, book illustration, and others, variety theater, night club and concert comedy performance, advertising, popular music, film and the broadcast media. Jokes, widely circulated in the public domain — orally and in recent years through photocopy and internet communication — also provide us with an important cache of texts for our inquiry. Comic literature is central to American belles lettres, of course, but it is in the popular culture and folk culture that our humor functions most energetically and effectively. Popular culture itself promotes both unity and diversity, since texts and images are public, available to a wide, even general audience, while they often serve particular groups, different points of view, and even specifically divisive purposes.

The earliest and probably most significant manifestation of American popular humor's propensity for exploring crucial dimensions of national identity comes with the creation of the wise fool comic character in the colonial and early national periods. The fool character is born in negative portrayals of Americans as rude, ignorant, bumbling boors — “Yankee Doodles” whose ridiculous figure and behavior are a source of amusement for Europeans, but more importantly for Americans who fear that democracy will elevate such low, common folk to positions of power, even dominance in the new society. To be sure, the earliest comic characters were fools to be laughed *at* for their failings and errors, negative examples of what must be ridiculed and overcome if the nation is to prosper. Both the authors of and the audiences for these deprecating portraits were of the more educated, more sophisticated segments of the society. They had a vested interest in voicing a concern that the democratic hero might be inadequate and that we must learn to repudiate the worst of their behavior and, as a society, to transcend their limitations.

However it is not surprising that the “Yankee Doodle” quickly became Brother Jonathan, a rustic fool who reflects ambiguous qualities, positive as well as negative, to be laughed *with* as well as laughed *at*. For one thing there is a cultural precedent for such ambivalence. The idea of a *wise* fool — one whose very ignorance and simplicity girds his virtue — can be traced back to the Bible (Ecclesiastes, for instance, in which folly is

wisdom and vice versa), and to European literature and theater in which the personae of folly are used to reflect honesty and clarity of vision uncorrupted by worldly deceit and hypocrisy. Another explanation is that an American democratic ideology was forming very quickly, one in which the idea of a simple, down-to-earth farmer or tradesman embodied the fundamental virtues of the new society and in which intellectuals and sophisticates represented the corruption of the old world from which the inhabitants of the new land sought to escape.

From this perspective, Brother Jonathan is an ironic hero. In an early play such as Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1789) for instance, Jonathan's simplicity prevents him from recognizing a "lady of the evening" for what she is — but the joke which paired him with her backfires as his virtue prohibits him from treating her as anything but a lady. Rather than being humiliated or corrupted, his "date" turns out to be a pleasant and morally acceptable experience for both of them. A later example, the creation of Seba Smith's Jack Downing (which spawned many imitators), offers a similar insight. Jack was created as a negative figure, one who could be employed to expose the human backbone of the Jacksonian democracy as dangerously ignorant of basic political realities and lacking the qualities which might keep the nation from the kind of mob ruin feared by such observers as Alexis de Tocqueville among many others. A piece such as *Jack Goes to Portland*, an often reprinted selection, shows us how the persona might be understood as both ridiculing and celebrating the common man. Jack is a negative fool all right, from his initial motive in visiting the state legislature (he is lazily hanging around while feebly trying to sell his ax handles) to his complete misunderstanding of its activities. His most dangerous error is to wonder why the discipline he has experienced in the militia cannot be applied to the workings of the legislative body. He completely misunderstands an argument over who was entitled to a "seat" in the legislature, observing that there were enough chairs for all who might want them. However as a naïf, Jack's scrutiny of the legislature serves more to expose the failings of the political process, for instance the illusion that a serious and open consideration of the issues was more important than party politics. His conclusion after his experience suggests that he has risen to the posture of a common-sense philosopher when he observes that politics is a waste of time compared with honest labor like gathering the hay (I doubt that Smith intended these conclusions, but it is not hard to see how they are plausible reactions to the text). Yankee characters such as Sam Slick are even more obvious in

their common sense perspective, exposing hypocrisy and vulnerability in more socially advanced, middle class citizens while he exploits them and triumphs over them.

Still later in the nineteenth century, James Russell Lowell, arguably the most educated and intellectual person in the country, creates another wise fool persona, Hosea Biglow, first to expose the folly of the Mexican war and later to oppose slavery. Hosea is a simple farmer employing the familiar device of publishing his common sense views at the instigation of his pastor who assumes that such ideas coming from a man of the people will have more credibility than they would coming from a more elevated source (which is, of course, why Lowell himself employs the device). Hosea's common sense vision — "What's the use of meeting goin'/every Sabbath wet or dry/if its right to go a-mowin'/fellow men like oats and rye" — provides a vantage point which is more acceptable and more useful to expressing a social or political position than would be more sophisticated analysis. Throughout the nineteenth century, a huge cast of such wise fool characters were employed in newspaper columns and on the lecture platforms, to express a wide variety of views, but consistently the division of the persona suggests that it is possible to laugh at the common man for his manifest failings, while at the same time, his position as a citizen in a democracy makes it necessary to consider that his virtues may indeed outweigh his vices.

Similarly in southwestern humor, fools, con men, and tricksters are available to provide us with amusement from both their foolish and morally suspect behavior. It is easy to laugh at Simon Suggs and Sut Lovingood, but it is hard to believe that audiences do not also side with their use of common sense, experiential wisdom and their constant exposure of the defects in their more socially acceptable opponents, the inhabitants of the polite, middle class guardians of civilization who are in the process of improving the manners and morals of the community. Suggs, for instance, makes fools of the frightened citizens in the face of an Indian uprising, but it is significant that *he* knows that there is no imminent uprising because he makes a point of keeping himself informed as to the feelings and movements of the Indians. Sut is a "n'er do well," to be sure, but his "pints" on the virtues of personal freedom and on enjoying life surely sat well, even with an audience which, in a more serious or sober vein, would still recognize the need to repudiate and even repress such behavior. The motif of the wise fool and his cousins, the con man and the trickster, can be traced throughout the nineteenth century and up to

contemporary American humor. He trots the boards of the popular theater, as the ubiquitous red-wigged Toby, for instance (a character whose lineage can be traced back to the *Commedia dell'Arte*) and he appears in non-rural, non-WASP clothing as Finley Peter Dunne's Mr. Dooley, the Irish bartender, as Leo Rosten's Hyman Kaplan, and as that wonderful creation of Langston Hughes, Jesse B. Semple or "Simple."

What these and the many similar ambiguous and ambivalent portrayals of the common man reflect, for us, is a debate about social class which is both divisive and at the same time unifying. It certainly reflects class conflict, and the fears on the part of the educated, sophisticated citizens that democratic man was dangerously inadequate and in need of ridiculing into social rejection and reform. At the same time, the positive dimensions of the characterizations lead to us what is perhaps an even more important conclusion, namely that the society at-large had developed an ideology in which the common man was to be celebrated as well as censured, in which his honesty, simplicity, free spirit, and self-confidence were as valuable as the traits which might come with more education and social restraint. This attitude remains viable, even central, to American culture throughout our history.

We will see other examples of it in the texts and images which we turn to next, in our survey, but one example of a more recent expression of it might be helpful. Norman Lear, the television producer who was profoundly influential, particularly to the situation comedy of American TV in the nineteen seventies, created Archie Bunker, the hero of the enormously successful show *All in the Family*. Archie, based on the British situation comedy, *Until Death Us Do Part*, was planned as a negative fool whose ignorant and boorish opinions were supposed to reflect the bigotry, insensitivity, and vulnerability to wrong-minded political rhetoric of the American working class. The problem is that Archie quickly became the most popular character on TV, not universally loved or admired, to be sure, but far from scorned or repudiated either. Lear notes that the character was softened somewhat, perhaps as he claims because Archie reminded him of his father. (Archie also reminds me of my own father.) A less personal and specific explanation is readily available for us. Archie is the familiar wise fool character which American culture had learned to appreciate over a two hundred year period. He *is* ignorant and he is boorish, but he is also blunt, outspoken, fierce in his protection of what he believes to be important, his family, his immediate community and his country. He is more often the victim of his "betters" than any threat to

him, and for many viewers the opinions he expresses are at least as acceptable as equally foolish ones expressed by his principle antagonist, his son-in-law Michael (or Meathead as Archie would say) who reflects an equally naive and simplistic liberal position while he lives parasitically off of Archie's limited largess. Archie's wife Edith, by the way, offers another dimension of the wise fool persona, the naïf who seems perpetually confused yet is more often right, accidentally, than either Archie or Michael for all of their self-confident bombast. Did *All in the Family* divide or unite Americans during that tempestuous period of unrest over the war in Vietnam, civil rights and racial tension, the generation gap and the divided values it projected, and the numerous other sources of cultural heterogeneity and instability? I would argue that it does both, by framing clear images of difference and at the same time suggesting a unified perspective which can be appreciated and understood by both sides of the cultural divide. Also, by ridiculing the two extreme positions — reduced during the seventies to the two terms “hard hat” and “hippie” — the program defines a more moderate, middle ground on which the larger public can stand (this tendency in humor and in popular culture to isolate people and ideas on the fringe of the more widely acceptable middle is itself an important one for understanding how popular humor can unify and divide at the same time!).

Before returning to this more contemporary material, it is useful to complete the historical overview of how American popular humor has both unified and divided us. During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the minstrel theater provided a popular variety entertainment which served a variety of cultural functions. Of particular interest to us in the present context is the image of the African American, the central focus of minstrel performance. At first glance it is easy to see the racist assumptions which form the basis for the organizing characters of the minstrel show, Tambo and Bones. These “end men” — symbolized by the use of blackface makeup (whether the performers were black or white) — clearly embody negative traits associated with African Americans. Stylized as rural bumpkins and/or as slick urban dandies, they are lazy, ignorant, promiscuous, intemperate, dishonest, and crude. It can be argued that portraying them in such an unadmirable light served to justify slavery and to retard the process by which society might accept African Americans as full citizens in a reconstructed nation. However as we have seen with wise fool characters in service to the examination of democracy's prospects, the endmen are not unambiguous characters who do not allow for the

expression of ambivalent attitudes. For one thing, their disrespectful treatment of the Interlocutor, the white man in the middle who usually was symbolically rendered as a member of the upper class, often in a top hat and tails or the nineteenth century equivalent of the formal dress of the wealthy classes, could easily be admired as legitimately subversive, particularly by an audience which had been culturally conditioned to regard the upper classes as embodying their own particular vices and vulnerabilities, and which was not entirely without sympathy for the fun-loving if morally questionable behavior — the heavy drinking, sexual adventuring, avoidance of hard work and fun-loving pursuit of pleasure, laughter, and freedom which was represented by the endmen. It is not surprising that the specific political and social opinions expressed by Tambo and Bones, in their comic conversations with their Interlocutors, often reflect shrewd, knowledgeable insight, and are quite likely to be popularly supported rather than scorned.

This is not to suggest that to laugh *with* Tambo and Bones nullifies the racism inherent in choosing the African American to represent these traits. Surely the white audience is quite likely to feel morally and intellectually superior to the blacks and to believe that blacks are more likely to be unwilling and/or unable to behave “correctly.” At the same time, the audience in the popular theater might very well be able to identify with such wise fools, con men, and tricksters — with whom they have been comfortable and sympathetic, and to see in their behavior a kind of “counter culture” celebration of behavior to which they themselves might be prone or toward which they have at least ambivalent attitudes. In a sense we might say that the minstrel show exhibits the spirit of carnival, which Bakhtin and others have observed to allow for the licensed expression of alternative beliefs and behaviors which society must tolerate and even accept at the same time it must restrict, control and reject.

Another example of such ambiguity with a similar possibility of both unifying and dividing potential is the popular theater of vaudeville and burlesque in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Immigrants of all ethnic groups provide the fodder for a comedy, in vaudeville and burlesque, which both makes fun of the “greenhorn” and of the various traits associated with these immigrant’s cultures, while at the same time it shows that all immigrant groups are in the same boat (as well as off it, if you will pardon the pun) and that the stereotypical cultural traits which are attributed to them are neither particularly dangerous nor even necessarily entirely bad. As is the case with the minstrel show’s portrayal

of African Americans, we need to begin by acknowledging that the treatment of the ethnic immigrant population is essentially negative. All the familiar aspects of ethnic humor are there. The characters exhibit all the characteristics catalogued by Christie Davies in his brilliant typology of ethnic humor — stupid or too clever, promiscuous or moralistic, cowardly or bullying, stingy or too careless with money and so forth. Surely an audience of second, third or older generations of Americans can feel superior toward all of the immigrants, and the Irishman can laugh at the German who can laugh at the Italian who can laugh at the Jew who can laugh at the Irishman, and so forth. Even a recent arrival can laugh at the exaggerated image and behavior of the comic ethnic characters, learn what not to be or do, and feel better about himself (not too likely to be a “herself,” given the largely male audience for these theatrical venues). The comedy of the vaudeville and burlesque theater can be mean-spirited, certainly, and it certainly can promote group unity and identity at the expense of other groups or other individuals. However, I would argue that it is more important, more instructive, that all of the members of the audience can see that all immigrants, all ethnic groups in America share common problems and even the common popular perception that they are “greenhorns,” united in a lack of knowledge of the culture, trouble with the language or with foreign accents, similar vulnerability to scams and to being exploited in the economy as well as similar economic distress, working class problems. Most importantly, united in a common humanity which allows for their problems and their flaws to be presented in a comic way, in a frame which allows them to be understood to be less threatening and less unacceptable. In most of the sketches, the immigrant characters not only survive the weaknesses which allow them to be ridiculed, they often triumph over them, forging an ironic victory, again in the tradition of the wise fools and related characters which set their stage.

Twentieth-century American humor shows examples of both unifying and dividing potential in all of the genres in which it has been expressed. In the nineteen twenties and early thirties — the so-called “golden age” of American humor, humorous magazine short stories, popular poetry, cartoons and comic strips, provided images of domestic life which may be seen to exacerbate the differences and conflicts between men and women. My favorite visual pun which I use to describe such humor is that “marital becomes martial with the blink of an i.” As several fine recent histories of women’s humor in America have demonstrated, misogynic humor can be found very early, and throughout in our comic literature. However these



studies have also pointed our attention to women's humor, much of which deals with the same stereotypes and the same portrayals of domestic conflict, but with, as we might guess, a different perspective on the rights and wrongs of the situation. Once again it is easy to see the divisive potential for this kind of humor. It replaces an "official" view of harmonious relations in which each sex knows his or her place and relishes it with one of much more discord. Covertly the male-female humor and the domestic humor of the early twentieth century is particularly important because it gives a voice, a comic voice, to new realities in the experience of both sexes and in their expectations for themselves and for their "significant others." By reversing the traditional view of males as dominant and females as submissive, as much of the sex based humor does, the comic perspective may actually alleviate some of the tensions which have been developing, and it may ironically try to achieve some mutual understanding, even harmony, while it capitalizes on difference and conflict. The "little man" who is so woefully discombobulated by the modern world, both domestically and more publicly, and the aggressive, combative woman re-frame the opposite situation and thereby perhaps suggest a more balanced, more equitable possibility.

There is also a lot of class conflict in the humor of the early comic strip and in the silent film of a decade or so later (turn of the century to the nineteen twenties). Much of the early activity in these genres of popular culture reflects an urban, male working-class perspective, complete with suspicious attitudes toward authority and toward the polite society, the dominant middle and upper classes. As early as *The Yellow Kid*, the first newspaper strip, and through the silent films of the late teens, these genres provide a comedy which may have given urban workers a sense of identity and common cause. Even the gender images and portrayal of domestic situation, mentioned, above, may support such a contention. As they mature into their second generation, however, both comic strips and comedy films grow out of this specific group identification and seek a larger audience, one which is not nearly as distinguished by class, geographical location, or to an extent, even gender. By the end of the nineteen twenties, it can be argued, both film and comic strips were seeking, at least, an undifferentiated or inclusive audience, in fact what one might call a "mass culture." Most critics would quickly point out that such an audience, such a unified popular culture, was never fully achieved, in comedy or in any other popular expression. It is still easy for the historian to identify popular humor which is aimed at specific groups — ethnic,

racial, class, rural/urban, regional, gender and so forth. At the same time the new, national mass media made it increasingly possible for people to see the same images and artistic expressions at roughly the same time, often providing common experience even if it was received through different cultural lenses. What I mean to say is that national magazines, film, syndicated comic strips, and later radio did provide a common popular comedy, and if there is other fare which is more culturally-specific with which it competes, and if a rural, fourth generation, WASP women might not appreciate a text in the same way that an urban, Jewish working class male might receive it, the sharing of some of the images and perspectives is still not irrelevant to an argument suggesting both unity and division as potential functions of a popular humor.

Horace Newcomb has termed television America's "most popular art." Television has indeed incorporated just about all of our popular culture, in one form or another, and therefore it is a repository of just about all types of our humor as well. The variety show of vaudeville, burlesque and the variety theater served the early days of television well, reflecting the reality that was already evident in live performance and in radio comedy, namely that images of ethnic, racial and gender-based humor had already given way to a more bland, less culturally distinctive comedy. To be sure some vestiges of the earlier humor can be found — Sid Caesar's ethnic accents and Yiddishisms sneaked into inappropriate texts for instance — but the first generation of TV comedy reflects the national or mass identity trend previously mentioned.

In the situation comedy, though, the genre which by far is the most popular form in the most popular art, two important exceptions deserve mention. TV's first generation gave the public *The Goldbergs* and *Amos and Andy*, two programs brought over from radio, which provide another interesting example of how the same comedy can be both unifying and divisive. *The Goldbergs* featured Gertrude Berg as Molly Goldberg, the matriarch of an urban Jewish family. The prevailing view, then and now (as I discovered when I presented a series of lectures on the image of Jews in American broadcast comedy at the Jewish museum in New York City sometime ago), is that the show presented a favorable, even lovable view of a Jewish family. Despite the comic Yiddish accents, the Goldbergs are indeed non-threatening and acceptable as an American family. Nothing in their makeup or in most of the plots reflects the more negative or anti-Semitic stereotypes which might have been inherent in a more critical humor. Even the Mom-dominated family with the father and the uncle as

rather weak, subdued characters is more in keeping with the traditions of the American comic strip and “little man” humor of the twenties than it is any indication of the notion of Jewish males as weak or less manly than others, though I did view at least one episode, featuring Arnold Stang as a complete loser who is incapable of physical labor and Mother-smothered beyond the usual limits of the more benign comic motif. Rosalie, the daughter, provides a positive image in the sense that she is entirely modern and American, fitting in comfortably with a mixed ethnic and religious public culture, and even the conflicts which this might cause with her mother are usually less ethnic or religious in nature than they are generation-based and therefore familiar to audiences of all backgrounds.

*The Goldbergs* in a sense set a tone for several later television sitcoms, such as *Briget Loves Bernie*, for instance, in which Jews are portrayed as having a distinctive cultural identity, one which is perhaps amusing for an audience only slightly familiar with it, but one which at least is devoid of sharp negative images. Ironically, perhaps, *Briget Loves Bernie* was taken off the air after some pressure was exerted by Jewish groups, not because the image of the Jews was offensive but because the show portrayed a situation in which a mixed marriage worked relatively well despite the comic interference of the two families, Irish Catholic and Jewish, in which mild, inoffensive cross-cultural misunderstanding generates the situational humor to be resolved by the end of the episode. These shows, and several others in which Jewish characters are portrayed as clearly identified by their ethnic/religious affiliation but in which the affiliation is largely irrelevant to structure, premise, characterization or plot, suggest that the idea of a cultural “mosaic” or an acculturation in which people can retain a distinct cultural identity without such an identity inhibiting their integration into the broader society, can be promoted by media comedy.

*Amos and Andy* presents a different problem. The show’s main protagonists are familiar from minstrel comedy; they are fools and con men whose antics have only the barest of redeeming features. To be sure they are not dangerous or entirely reprehensible, but they are clearly negative portrayals of African Americans. The prevailing critical view, indeed, is that they are an example of a racist exception in the otherwise unifying images of early television situation comedy. The fact that they inhabit an entirely black society in which whites do not figure at all lends credibility to that view, suggesting the viability of segregation at the very least, and stronger separating of blacks from American society more covertly. However, although the main comic characters are essentially

racist caricatures, most of the other blacks portrayed in the series are admirable, modern, well-spoken, successful people who are shown as negotiating all of the social and business activities of the society of that time without the slightest of difficulty. Perhaps one possible message is that the racist stereotypes are somehow the exception or some kind of intrusion of the past or of a portrait of a minority within a minority, laughable but not typical. Like *The Goldbergs*, and like the minstrel shows for that matter, *Amos and Andy* renders the stereotyped traits as at worst harmless and amusing, and at best as ambiguous, reflecting positive as well as negative possibilities for the characters.

The history of African American images in television comedy since *Amos and Andy* is also instructive. One early effort, *Julia*, placed Diahann Carroll in the role of an attractive, well-spoken, modern, sophisticated single mother whose situation, behavior, demeanor and weekly adventures were essentially no different than any other single mother characters in similar shows (she associates comfortably with whites; indeed most of her interactions with blacks other than her son comes when the show deals with her dating behavior). Indeed Hal Kantor, the creator of *Julia*, told me that my analysis of the show as reflecting a sixties integrationist push in the public culture was incorrect since he never intended the show to have any race-based message. It was, he insisted, purely intended to be a successful series employing an actress he liked and admired (his wife later confided, however, that she remembered how often her husband remarked that the series would show Americans that black people could be “just like everyone else”).

When Norman Lear created *The Jeffersons*, spun off from the popular *All in the Family*, he gave us a more ambiguous situation (comedy). The Jeffersons, like the Goldbergs, are a family whose ethnic distinction is clear, ever-present, and significant. They are conscious and proud of their African-American identity, and race is often discussed, sometimes comically other times more seriously, in the program. It is crucial to the program's premise — a successful, middle-class, black family with working-class roots — its characterizations, just about all of its plots, and much of its comic dialogue and “shtick.” At the same time, however, like the Goldbergs, perhaps the dominant message is that the Jeffersons are not all that different from other Americans. Theirs is the familiar American success story, George Jefferson, the patriarch is a black version of Archie Bunker (intentionally), Lionel, the teenage son is not much different from his white counterparts, and so forth. Some of the shows

which followed, such as *Good Times*, for instance, were more aggressively situated in a uniquely black cultural setting and featured more distinctly black images, but even with such shows, the dominance of the sitcom structure and the familiarity of the domestic sitcom premise makes them familiar to audiences of all races.

Still later, we have examples of competing premises, with shows like *The Cosby Show* reflecting a deliberately constructed image of upper-middle-class, African Americans who are tightly drawn to the old sitcom formula of middle class, ethnically unidentifiable models, with a racial consciousness which figures prominently in plot and dialogue. In other words, *The Cosby Show* projects an image of blacks as no being different from whites in every way except that they are conscious of being black and the social and political issues which necessarily affect them because of their racial identity. Such an image has obvious potential for fostering both unity and diversity. Shows such as *The Fresh Prince of Belair* have similarly mixed messages, employing familiar formats, characters, situations and other elements which enthusiasts of the genre can appreciate comfortably, regardless of their cultural backgrounds, while at the same time featuring almost constant references to race and to cultural backgrounds raise covert racial issues (by that I mean that the class conflict in the show, or the conflict between a youth with a ghetto background and one from a more privileged one, reflects racial stereotyping despite the fact that both characters are black). There are still several popular sitcoms on American television which wrestle with this problem, and to an extent the demographic date suggests a larger black audience for the shows which are more "black," that is, the shows which have a clearer African American cultural identity, with less of a component in which the characters strive to succeed in a white or white-like society. At the same time, just about all of the programs retain elements which make them comprehensible and acceptable to large, demographically broadly defined white audiences, and they allow for people of all races to view blacks in situations which are basically positive and which suggest the possibilities of cultural unity as much as diversity.

The final arena I would like to explore, in which American humor provides us with possibilities for both cultural unity and diversity, is the current controversy over the acceptability, even the legitimacy of humor which makes fun of cultural differences or minority status, particularly racial, ethnic, and sexist joking in the public domain. While this issue is perhaps in the domain of folklore as much it is in popular culture, the

media attention it has been given, the role of the Internet in providing publicly available texts, and the institutional base of most of the efforts at containing or eliminating such joking carries it over into our territory. It has become a matter addressed in the popular culture. Ethnic, racial, national-identity based, and sexist humor are universal phenomena. Every society in the world exhibits joking in which some groups, internal or external, are singled out for ridicule based on the ways in which they are different from the local, majority or dominant population. Every society features humor which outlines how men and women are different, the conflicts raised by such difference, and the superiority of one's belief and behavior to another's. Despite such universality and omnipresence, this kind of joking has been under considerable scrutiny and indeed concerted attack in contemporary American society. There are other manifestations of so-called "politically correct" efforts to reform American racism, sexism, ethnocentricity, and intolerance of various minorities and "different" peoples (including the handicapped, people with minority sexual preferences, the elderly, residents of particular regions among others), but the attention given to joking and other forms of ridicule is by no means insignificant. It has become a battle in which joking is actually prohibited in various institutions, particularly schools but others as well, in which it can be legally punishable, in which public figures and media personalities have lost their jobs, and in which people have become very careful about what they say, where and when, to whom. In my own classroom I have been cautioned more than once about using jokes, even as an illustration of points I want to make in my course on humor, with the funniest example coming from the accusation that a joke I made with the punch line that water polo is the most expensive sport because the horses keep drowning was relative of cruelty toward animals and therefore not acceptable! My purpose here, however, is not to ridicule the impulse to govern humorous expression, particularly in institutional settings in which they might indeed be manifestly, harmfully divisive. The issue is an interesting one, and as is usually the case, the extremists in both camps — the "hey-it-is-just-humor, -lighten-up" group who resent any restriction on freedom of speech, particularly that which they believe is supposed to be licensed by humor, and the "any-expression-of-ridicule-is-a-harmful-insult-and-should-be-repressed" contingent — need to consider the issue more calmly and more carefully.

There is no doubt that insult-humor or ridiculing-humor can be used to generate hostility toward members of particular groups or people

whose beliefs and behavior are distinct from those of others. It is more than likely that such humor can be used to justify and legitimate injustice, oppression and exclusion. In institutional settings, it is certain that a comfortable “climate” in which all individuals feel that they can live, learn, or work can be affected by insult humor, whether or not it is intended to be hostile, whether or not it is directed specifically at an individual who might be offended by it. I can give you numerous examples from my own experience where racial, ethnic and sexist humor made students sufficiently uncomfortable that their performance in a course of study became untenable (though in all of these instances, it should be noted, only a very few were so affected from a larger population of others who might have been similarly inclined — the response to such joking is a highly individual matter). There are also strong arguments in favor of licensing completely free expression of racial, ethnic, and gender humor. A useful discussion of this issue is the electronic mail “round-table” or “Debate” published recently in *Humor* (1997: 453–513).

There are a lot of possible motives and functions for insult-humor which singles out groups or types from others and holds them up for ridicule. In a work-in-progress, I have arranged them along a continuum which ranges through three categories from actual expression of hostility to self deprecation to ironic reversal in which the basis of the insult is turned around into a virtue and used against the attacker. Along each category in the continuum I arrange several plausible motives and functions. My plan is to map the territory in which such joking operates and to consider its various social and cultural meanings. This study will conclude, as this one does, that humor is potentially both unifying and divisive. Throughout American history, in most of the domains of expression in our popular culture, we have used humor to explore our differences of class, sex, race, ethnicity, region, religion and whatever else potentially divides us, and that exploration has the potential both to exacerbate and to smooth over those divisions.

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