

AMST 395m: African American Humor and Culture **UPDATED**

Spring 2010

Lec 10434R

T 2-4:50PM

GFS 107

Professor: Lanita Jacobs

Office: Grace Ford Salvatori Hall (GFS) 128

[Note: To get to my office, you must first enter the Anthropology Department at GFS 120]

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Office Hours: T 1-2 PM; also by appointment. You can also contact me Monday-Friday via email.

Course Website: AMST 395 course materials are accessible through Blackboard; to access, click on:
<https://blackboard.usc.edu/>

Required Texts:

1. AMST 395 Reader (*Abbreviated as **RDR** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
2. Borns, Betsy. 1987. *Comic Lives: Inside the World of American Stand-Up Comedy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. (*Abbreviated as **Borns** in Reading and Exam Schedule*)
3. Gregory, Dick. 1995 [1964]. *Nigger: An Autobiography*, with Robert Lipsyte. New York: Pocket Books. (*Abbreviated as **Gregory** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
4. Hurston, Zora Neale. 1990 [1935]. *Mules and Men*. New York: HarperCollins. (*Abbreviated as **Hurston** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
5. Littleton, Darryl J. 2002. *Black Comedians on Black Comedy: How African Americans Taught Us To Laugh*. New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books. (*Abbreviated as **Littleton** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
6. Watkins, Mel. 1999. *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying - The Underground Tradition of African American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor*, 2nd Edition. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books. (*Abbreviated as **Watkins 1994** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)

Highly Recommended Texts:

1. Dance, Daryl Cumber. 1998. *Honey, Hush!: An Anthology of African American Women's Humor*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. (*Abbreviated as **Dance** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
2. Watkins, Mel, (Ed.) 2002. *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books. (*Abbreviated as **Watkins 2002** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
3. Zinsser, William. 2001. *On Writing Well*. Sixth Edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. (*Though optional, this text is highly recommended as a resource for your essay, and writing in general*)

NOTE: All course texts are **on reserve** in Leavey Library.

Course Description: This course examines a long tradition of African American humor in theatre (e.g., “blackface” minstrelsy), TV/radio (e.g., *Amos ‘N’ Andy*), literature/folklore, and, principally, Black or “urban” standup comedy. We will explore how these diverse comedic forms offer insights into shifting notions of race/racial “authenticity,” language, and identity in and beyond Black America. Through an investigation of interdisciplinary theories of humor in folklore, linguistics, anthropology, and cultural/literary studies, we shall come to appreciate the themes/tropes, language and discourse styles, and performative genres that characterize African American humor. Field visits to comedy clubs/shows and guest comic speakers will augment our analysis. We will gain a better appreciation for: i) comics and their audiences as co-producers of Black humor, (ii) urban comedy clubs/shows as a communal forum, and (iii) comics as members of a community of practice with shared assumptions and specific rules of engagement. Throughout the course, we will also explore the politics of representation that have colored the experiences of African American humorists and their audiences in poignant ways throughout history.

Grading: There will be a midterm and final exam covering assigned readings and/or films. Your score on the midterm will constitute 25% of your grade and your score on the final exam will constitute 40%. Each of the exams will include short-answer and essay questions and will be non-cumulative. In addition, 25% of your grade will be determined by an 5-7 page essay (excluding bibliography of 5-7 sources) due by **5PM in my mailbox (“Jacobs-Huey” in GFS 120) on Wednesday, March 24th**. This essay should provide a critical review of a “live” standup comedy performance observed at a local, urban comedy club or show. You may invoke one or several course themes (e.g., comic-audience dynamics; standup comedy as personal memoir, cultural or political commentary; gendered humor; standup comedy as a window into race, cultural identity, language, etc.) in your paper. Your essay **must adhere** to the following format: 5-7 pages of text (no shorter/longer), double-spaced, 12 point-font, 1” top, bottom, right, and left margins. (Additional guidelines, as well as sample comedy reviews, will be available on the course web page.) The remaining 10% of your grade will be determined by your class participation. As such, you are strongly encouraged to keep up with assigned readings/films so that you are adequately prepared to participate in class discussions. Extra credit opportunities will be offered in the form of a two-point “bonus question” on the midterm and final exam. The grading scale is as follows:

Grading Scale:

94-100 = A	87-89 = B+	77-79 = C+	67-69 = D+	≥ 59 = F
90-93 = A-	84-86 = B	74-76 = C	64-66 = D	
	80-83 = B-	70-73 = C-	60-63 = D-	

GRADE BASIS
Midterm: 25%
Essay/Comedy Review: 25%
Final Exam: 40%
Participation: 10%

An Official Note on Examinations: Make-up exams will only be given under extraordinary circumstances and will require documentation from a physician. The content and form of any make-up exam will be at my discretion. In any case, you should inform me via email or phone prior to missing an exam. If you feel you must reschedule an exam on account of having (a) two additional exams scheduled at the same time or (b) three exams in a 24-hour period, inform me *at least* two weeks prior to our scheduled mid-term. The final exam **must** be taken at the time noted below. Also, **no** late or emailed essays/comedy reviews will be accepted.

Attendance: A grading percentage will not be given for class attendance. However, consistent and punctual attendance in lecture and discussion section(s) is strongly encouraged to increase your understanding of course materials. Your record of attendance may also be considered in the case of borderline grades. It is ultimately *your* responsibility to be aware of class lectures and assignments. Should sickness, family emergencies, or other events necessitate your absence from class, I recommend that you consult your peers for copies of their lecture notes.

Academic Accommodations: Students requesting academic accommodations based on a disability should register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP when necessary documentation is filed. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible, preferably by or before fifth week. DSP is open Monday-Friday, 8:30AM-5PM. The office is in Student Union 301 and their phone number is 213-740-0776.

Class Structure: Class meetings will consist of lecture and discussion, with a clear emphasis on the latter. As such, it is essential that you keep up with the weekly readings and that you hand in assignments on time. This class also entails a field visit to an urban comedy club or show. A list of recommended comedy venues in Los Angeles area will be provided in class; the instructor might also arrange for a class visit to a local comedy club. During several lectures (see Reading and Exam Schedule), comics will be invited to class to discuss class themes and field questions.

Class Resources: This course is registered on Blackboard. Consult the course’s Blackboard web page for lecture notes, discussion questions, as well as course media (e.g., photos, web links etc.) that relate to class discussions. You should consider the lecture notes and/or discussion questions to be an important resource as you prepare for exams. The Blackboard portal for AMST 395 will also include *class information (e.g., syllabus, sample “standup comedy reviews”, essay guidelines, exam tips)* and other information related to the course.

READING & EXAM SCHEDULEⁱ

- Week 1:** COURSE INTRODUCTION, INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO HUMOR AND LAUGHTER:
1/12 *What is humor? How is laughter produced? How has humor been studied?*
- *Class Overview:* Syllabus, Exam Policy, Essay Guidelines, etc.
- Week 2:** EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN HUMOR – ETHNOGRAPHY/FOLKLORE/LITERATURE: *How is everyday Black humor reflected in ethnographic/literary studies? What politics surrounded these comic representations of Black culture and identity?*
1/19
- Hurston: *Mules and Men*, Part I (1-179)
 - Levine: *Black Laughter* [in RDR; *Optional*]
 - Watkins 1999: Ch. 11 (*Folklore and Street Humor*)
 - Watkins 2002: Introduction [*African American Humor*; *Optional*]
- Articles "in RDR" will appear in either Ares Electronic Reserve or, more often, in Blackboard under folder titled "Course Resources" (once there, click on folder called "Select Course Readings").
- Week 3:** EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN HUMOR – THEATRE, TV/RADIO: *When did "blackface" minstrelsy emerge and what opportunities were afforded to Black artists? How were African American "blackface" performances and, later, radio and TV shows like Amos 'N' Andy received by Black audiences? What did Black audiences perceive to be at stake in these comedic representations?*
1/26
- Smith: Chs. 18 & 22, *Bert Williams: A Biography of the Pioneer Black Comedian* [in RDR; *Optional*]
 - Littleton: Chapters 3-4 (*Blackface on Black Face Crime; Two Coons Were Better Than One*)
 - Watkins 1999: Ch. 3 (*Black Minstrelsy to Vaudeville ... Black on Black*)
 - Watkins 1999: Ch. 7 (*Radio and Early Television; Optional*)
 - Films: *Amos 'N' Andy: Anatomy of a Controversy*, *Ethnic Notions* (excerpts)
- Week 4:** BLACK/"URBAN" STANDUP COMEDY – ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES: *How might an anthropologist study Black standup comedy and its practitioners (i.e., comedians, audiences)? What methods and modes of analyses might a researcher employ to understand comics and their art?*
2/2
- Borns: *Audiences ... Make Laughter, Not War*
 - Koziski: *The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist* [in RDR]
 - Mintz: *Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Medium* [in RDR]
- Week 5:** BLACK/"URBAN" STANDUP COMEDY – LANGUAGE, FORM, CONVENTIONS: *What discourse styles and linguistic conventions characterize African American/"urban" standup comedy? How is culture reflected in comics' use of language during joke-telling?*
2/9
- Carrell: *Joke Competence and Humor Competence* [in RDR]
 - Greenbaum: *Stand-Up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument* [in RDR]
 - Purdue: *Introduction; Joking as the "Ab-use" of Language* [in RDR; *Optional*]
 - Watkins 1994: *Prologue – Black Humor ... What it is* [In RDR]
- Week 6:** **Midterm on Tuesday, February 16th!**
2/16
- Week 7:** ISSUES OF RACE, IDENTITY, AND AUTHENTICITY IN STANDUP COMEDY: *How has blackness been defined in Black standup comedy? What constitutes one as racially "authentic" or "inauthentic" in urban standup routines (e.g., hair, language, class)? What notions of (racial) identity are apparent in the popular comedic trope of Black-White cultural differences?*
2/23
- Dance: "Just Like the White Man"
 - McWhorter: *The New Black Double Consciousness* [in RDR]
 - Walker: *Wayne Brady Talks About ... Critics Who Say He's Not Black Enough* [news article in RDR]
 - Film/Video: *Black Is ... Black Ain't, Select Comedy Clips*
 - Guest Speakers: *TBA*

- Week 8:**
3/2
STANDUP COMEDY AS POLITICAL CRITIQUE: *How does Black standup comedy function as a form of political critique? How do comics make sense of the September 11th terrorist attacks? How do their jokes index questions of race, culture, and American identity post 9/11?*
- Du Bois: Introduction; On Our Spiritual Strivings [In RDR; *Optional*]
 - Jacobs-Huey: Performance Review: Brandon Bowlin [In RDR; *Optional*]
 - Jacobs-Huey: “The Arab is the New Nigger” [in RDR]
 - Haggins: Laughing Mad [in RDR]
 - Williams & Williams: Chapter 5 [in RDR]
 - Film/Video: *Select Comedy Clips*
 - Guest Speakers: *TBA*
- Week 9:**
3/9
STANDUP COMEDY AS POLITICAL CRITIQUE: *How do comics make sense of race, nationhood, and Hurricane Katrina? How do their jokes evaluate notions of race and American identity in the wake of this disaster?*
- Jacobs-Huey: On Richards, Race, and Empathy [in RDR]
 - Johnson: Katrina’s Hidden Race War [in RDR]
 - Johnson: Body of Evidence [*Optional*; in RDR]
 - Kaplan: Black Anger and the Big Easy [in RDR]
 - Film/Video: *Trouble in the Water*
 - Guest Speakers: *TBA*
- 3/15-3/19
SPRING BREAK [No class]
- Week 10:**
3/23
STANDUP COMEDY AS CULTURAL COMMENTARY – AFRICAN AMERICAN HAIR NARRATIVES: *What cultural observations/critiques are apparent in black standup comedy? Specifically, how do comedy routines about black hair and skin color reflect a broader politics of hair and identity in African America?*
- Gwaltney: The Many Shades of Black [in RDR]
 - Jacobs-Huey: Gender, Hair, & Authenticity in AfAm Standup Comedy [in RDR]
 - Mercer: Black Hair/Style Politics [in RDR; *Optional*]
 - Film/Video: *Select Film/Comedy Clips*
 - Guest Speakers: *TBA*
- ☞ Comedy Essays/Reviews Due Wednesday, March 24th by 5PM in Jacobs-Huey Mailbox in GFS 120!**
- Week 11:**
3/30
ISSUES OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HUMOR: *How are issues of gender and sexuality represented of Black standup comedy? How does gender and/or sexuality constrain who and what can be funny?*
- Avins: Surely She Jest[s] [news article in RDR]
 - Dash: Introduction [in RDR; *Optional*]
 - Dresner: Whoopi Goldberg and Lily Tomlin: Black and White Women’s Humor [in RDR; *Optional*]
 - Johnson: Manifest Faggotry [in RDR]
 - Littleton: Chapter 13 [When We Were Kings and Queens]
 - Watkins 2002: Women and Men (307-310; *Optional*)
 - Williams: Mabley’s Persona [in RDR]
- Week 12:**
4/6
STANDUP COMEDY AS PERSONAL NARRATIVE/MEMOIR: *How do comics use the stage to make sense of their cultural identity, past experiences, and anticipated futures? To what extent are their experiences palatable, humorous, and/or universal?*
- Borns: Pith and Vinegar... Inside the Comic Mind
 - Gregory: Nigger (Read entire Text)
 - Watkins 1999: Pryor and Thereafter [On The Real Side; *Optional*]
 - Guest Speakers: *TBA*

- Week 13:**
4/13
BROADER REPRESENTATIONS OF “URBAN” STANDUP COMEDY: *What familiar or distinct themes emerge in the standup routines of non-black (e.g., Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, European American) “urban” comics?*
- Lee: Where’s My Parade: Margaret Cho and the Asian American Body in Space [in RDR]
 - Price: Laughing without Reservations [in RDR; *Optional*]
 - Add’l Readings TBA
 - Film and/or Guest Speaker(s): TBA
- Week 14:**
4/20
RESOLVING BREACHES IN STANDUP COMEDY: *How do comics resolve breaches during their standup routines? What discourse strategies do they employ to silence “hecklers”? What discourse skills are necessary when performing for Black versus White audiences?*
- Borns: Hecklers and Horrors
 - Littleton: Chapter 9 (I’ll Make My Own Damn Image)
 - Films/Guest Speakers: TBA
- Week 15:**
4/27
EXAMINING THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN STANDUP COMEDY: *How do comics reconcile the art of standup comedy (i.e., their artistic license) with the politics of representing Black culture, language, and identity before African American and/or mixed audiences? How is the controversial signifier “nigger/niggah” used in standup? How do comics define “success”? How do they reconcile communal notions of how they should “represent” their culture with the oft-conflicting demands of the entertainment industry?*
- Allen: Now That’s A Joyful Noise [news article in RDR; *Optional*]
 - Braxton: Spare the Rod, Spoil the Jokes [news article in RDR; *Optional*]
 - Hammer: Must Blacks Be Buffoons? [news article in RDR; *Optional*]
 - Kennedy: Ch. 1, Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word [in RDR]
 - Littleton: Chapter 25 (From Hambones to Hummers)
 - Perret: Be Funny, Not Just Dirty [in RDR]
 - Williams & Williams: Ch. 10 [in RDR; *Optional*]
 - Film/Video/Guest Speakers: TBA

FINAL EXAM: THURSDAY, MAY 6TH, 2:00-4:00PM, GFS 107

COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY (Textbooks in Bold)

- Allen, Marshall. 2002. Now That's A Joyful Noise. Los Angeles Times (March 2): B18.
- Avins, Mimi. 2002. Surely, She Jest. Los Angeles Times, (March 11): E1, E4. Berger, Phil. 2000. And Since Then: Standup Comedy, 1975-1985. In *The Last Laugh: The World of Standup Comics* (379-396). New York: Cooper Square Press.
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- Jacobs-Huey, Lanita. 2006. "The Arab is the New Nigger": African American Comics Confront the Irony and Tragedy of September 11. *Transforming Anthropology* 14(1): 60-64.
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- Johnson, A.C. 2009. Katrina's Hidden War. *The Nation* (January 5).
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- Lee, Rachel C. 2004. "Where's My Parade?": Margaret Cho and the Asian American Body in Space, *TDR* 48(2): 108-132 (Summer).
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Zinsser, William. 2001. On Writing Well. Sixth Edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

ⁱ This Reading & Exam Schedule may be modified over the course of the semester; updates will be posted in Blackboard and announced in class.