

## AMST 395m: African American Humor and Culture

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Spring 2016

Lec 10434R

M/W 12-1:50PM

KAP 158

**Professor:** Lanita Jacobs

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Office Hours: M/W 11AM-12PM; also by appointment. You can also contact me Monday-Friday via email.

Course Website: Course materials are accessible through Blackboard at:  
<https://blackboard.usc.edu/webapps/login/>

### Required Texts:

1. AMST 395 Reader [RDR – in Blackboard under “Content”]
2. Gregory, Dick. 1995 [1964]. *Nigger: An Autobiography*, with Robert Lipsyte. New York: Pocket Books.
3. Haggins, Bambi. 2007. *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
4. Hurston, Zora Neale. 1990 [1935]. *Mules and Men*. New York: HarperCollins.
5. Watkins, Mel. 1999 [1994]. *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying - The Underground Tradition of African American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

### Highly Recommended Texts:

1. Watkins, Mel (Ed.) 2002. *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.
2. Zinsser, William. 2001. *On Writing Well*. Sixth Edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

**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 racial, gendered, class, etc. “authenticity,” language, and identity in and beyond Black America. Our investigation of interdisciplinary theories of humor in folklore, linguistics, anthropology, and cultural/literary studies will illuminate the themes/tropes, language and discourse styles, and performative genres that characterize African American humor. 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. Close readings of standup comedy and comedians and guest comic speakers will augment our analysis. At the end of the term, we will gain new insights into: (i) comics and their audiences as co-producers of Black humor, (ii) Black/“urban” comedy clubs/shows as communal forums, and (iii) comics as members of a community of practice with shared assumptions and specific rules of engagement. Towards this end, let’s create a mutually supportive learning environment wherein we can laugh and think!

**Grading:** There will be a midterm and final exam covering assigned readings and films. Your score on the midterm will constitute 30% 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, 20% of your grade will be determined by a 3-5 page essay (excluding bibliography of 3-5 \*scholarly\* sources [i.e., no Wikipedia, websites, magazine articles]) due by **5PM in my mailbox (“Jacobs” in KAP 352) on Friday, March 25<sup>th</sup>**. Late papers will be docked a minimum of three points. This essay should provide a critical review of a “live” and/or pre-recorded standup comedy performance, sketch, or scene. (If “live,” you must definitely gain the requisite permissions and observe judiciously!) 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: 3-5 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 made available in Blackboard.) 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 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: 30%
Essay/Comedy Review: 20%
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 & Resources:** 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. Course lectures will be made available in Blackboard, along with the Course Reader and other helpful information (e.g., Sample Comedy Essays).

## READING & EXAM SCHEDULE

- Week 1:** COURSE INTRODUCTION  
1/11  
1/13
- Haggins: Introduction
  - Watkins: Introduction: Black Humor ... *what it is*
  - Film: *Why We Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy* (2009; 95 min.)
- 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?*  
1/18 **No Class**  
1/20
- Hurston: Mules and Men, Part I (1-179)
  - Levine: Black Laughter [in RDR; *Optional*]
  - Watkins: Chapter 11: Folklore and Street Humor
  - Watkins 2002: Introduction [African American Humor; *Optional*]
  - Film/Clips: *To Be Announced (TBA)*
- Articles “in RDR” [in Reader] will appear in Blackboard’s “Content” section in “Course Reader” folder; articles are alphabetized according to the author’s last name.
- 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?*  
1/25  
1/27
- Chude-Sokei: Migrations of a Mask [in RDR]
  - Sotiropoulos: The “Coon Craze” and the Search for Authenticity [in RDR]
  - Watkins: Chapter 3: Black Minstrelsy to Vaudeville ... *Black on Black*
  - Watkins: Chapter 7: Radio and Early Television (*Optional*)
  - Film/Clips: *Amos ‘N’ Andy: Anatomy of a Controversy* (2008; 48 min.)
- Week 4:** BLACK/“URBAN” STANDUP COMEDY – INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES: *How might an anthropologist study Black standup comedy and its practitioners (i.e., comedians, audiences)? What interdisciplinary qualitative methods and modes of analyses might a researcher employ to understand comics and their art?*  
2/1  
2/3
- Koziski: The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist [in RDR]
  - Mintz: Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Medium [in RDR]
  - Rayner: Creating the Audience [in RDR]
  - Seizer: On the Uses of Obscenity in Live Stand-up Comedy [in RDR]
  - Scarpetta & Spagnoli: The Interactional Context of Humor in Stand-up Comedy [in RDR]
  - Film/Clips: *I Am Comic* (2010; 87 min.)
- 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?*  
2/8  
2/10
- Carrell: Joke Competence and Humor Competence [in RDR]
  - Evans: [How To Build The Ultimate Black Comedian](#) (*Optional*)
  - Greenbaum: Stand-Up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument [in RDR]
  - Morgan: More Than A Mood or An Attitude [*Optional*; in RDR]
  - Purdie: Joking as the “Ab-use” of Language [in RDR; *Optional*]
  - Watkins: Prologue – Black Humor ... *What it is*
  - Film/Clips: *Assorted Comedy Clips/Sketches*

- Week 6:** 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?*  
 2/15 **No Class**  
 2/17
- Thurston: How Black Are You? and Do You Know What An Oreo Is? [in RDR]
  - Film/Clips: *Dear White People* (2014; 1 hr 48 min.)
- Week 7:** RACE, IDENTITY, AND AUTHENTICITY IN STANDUP COMEDY (CONTINUED)  
 2/22  
 2/24 **Midterm**
- Gillota: Black Nerds: New Directions in African American Humor [in RDR]
  - Haggins: Chapter 1: From Negro to Black
  - McWhorter: The New Black Double Consciousness [in RDR]
  - Thomas: [Wayne Brady is a Standup Guy, But Don't Call Him A Comedian](#)
  - Walker: Wayne Brady Talks About ... Critics Who Say He's Not Black Enough [in RDR]
  - Film/Clips: *Select Comedy Clips/Sketches*
  - **Midterm on Wednesday, February 24<sup>th</sup>**
- Week 8:** STANDUP COMEDY AS POLITICAL CRITIQUE: *How does Black standup comedy function as a form of political critique? In particular, how do comics make sense of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks? How (and why) do their jokes interrogate questions of race, culture, and American identity post 9/11?*  
 2/29  
 3/2
- Du Bois: Introduction; On Our Spiritual Strivings [In RDR; *Optional*]
  - Jacobs-Huey: Performance Review: Brandon Bowlin [In RDR]
  - Jacobs: “The Arab is the New Nigger” [in RDR]
  - Lewis: Shut Up! No, You Shut Up! [in RDR]
  - Film/Clips: [How Pop Culture Can Help Us \(Appropriately\) Find Humor in 9/11](#); *Assorted Comedy Clips/Sketches*
- Week 9:** STANDUP COMEDY ROUNDTABLE  
 3/7  
 3/9 **No Class**
- Guest Speakers: *TBA*
  - **No Class Wed 3/9 (Reading & Writing Day)**
- 3/14-3/40 **SPRING BREAK [NO CLASS]**
- Week 10:** 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?*  
 3/21  
 3/23
- Gwaltney: The Many Shades of Black [in RDR]
  - Jacobs: Revisiting Hair [in RDR]
  - Jacobs-Huey: Gender, Hair, & Authenticity in AfAm Standup Comedy [in RDR]
  - Mercer: Black Hair/Style Politics [in RDR; *Optional*]
  - Film/Clips: *Good Hair* (2010; 96 mins.) or *Dark Girls* (2013; 71 mins.); *Assorted Comedy Clips/Sketches*
- 📖 **Comedy Essays/Reviews Due Friday, 3/25 by 5PM in Prof. Jacobs' mailbox in ANTH DEPT. (KAP 352)**

- Week 11:** **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?*  
 3/28  
 3/30
- Haggins: Chapter 4: Crossover Diva
  - Johnson: Manifest Faggotry [*Optional*; in RDR]
  - Krefting: Laughter in the Final Instance [in RDR]
  - Littleton & Littleton: The Color of Money [in RDR]
  - Williams: Mabley's Persona [in RDR]
  - Film: *Why We Laugh: Funny Women (2013; 87 min.)* or *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley (2013; 72 min.)*; *Assorted Comedy Clips/Sketches*
- Week 12:** **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?*  
 4/4  
 4/6
- Gregory: [Nigger](#) OR Mooney: [Black Is the New White](#) (**Your choice!**)
  - Haggins: Chapter 3: Post-Soul Comedy Goes To The Movies (*Optional*)
  - Watkins: Chapter 13: Pryor and Thereafter ... *on the real side* [*Optional*]
  - Film/Clips: *Jo Jo Dancer, Your Life Is Calling (1986; 98 min.)*; *Assorted Comedy Clips/Sketches*
- Week 13:** **BROADER REPRESENTATIONS OF "URBAN" STANDUP COMEDY:** *What familiar or distinct themes, comedic styles, and representational issues emerge in the standup routines and lives of non-black "urban" or "mainstream" comics? What does it mean to be deemed an "urban" comic?*  
 4/11 **No Class**  
 4/13
- Besinger: [Gary Owens Wants To Be More Than Black America's Favorite White Comedian](#)
  - Krefting: Laughing into the New Millennium [in RDR]
  - Lee: "Where's My Parade?": Margaret Cho and the Asian American Body in Space [in RDR]
  - Price: Laughing without Reservations [in RDR; *Optional*]
  - Santa Ana: Did you call in Mexican? [in RDR]
  - Film/Clips: *TBA*
  - **No Class Monday 4/11 (Reading & Writing Day)**
- Week 14:** **RESOLVING BREACHES IN STANDUP COMEDY:** *How do comics resolve breaches during their standup routines? Might various topics (e.g., slavery) "breach" even humor's play on incongruity? Why might audience's laughter (at the "wrong" place) breach comics' expectations – in catalytic and/or generative ways?*  
 4/18  
 4/20
- Borns: Hecklers and Horrors [in RDR]
  - Carpio: The Conjuror Recoils: Slavery in Richard Pryor's Performances and Chappelle's Show [in RDR]
  - Jacobs: Learning through the Breach: Language Socialization [in RDR]
  - Jacobs: On Richards, Race, and Empathy [in RDR]
  - Haggins: Chapter 5: Dave Chappelle: Provocateur in the Promised Land and Epilogue
  - McWhorter: The Unbearable Lightness of the 'N' Word [*Optional*; in RDR]
  - Seguin: Hecklers: A Taxonomy [in RDR]
  - Film/Clips: *Heckler (2008; 73 min.)*; *Assorted Comedy Clips/Sketches*

**Week 15:**

4/25  
4/27

**EXAMINING THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN STANDUP COMEDY: *How do comics reconcile individual and communal notions of how they should “represent” their culture with the oft-conflicting demands of the entertainment industry? How do comics define “success,” both for themselves and the Black community more broadly? To what extent is the success of individual black comics’ interdependent? What are the costs of comedic “success”?***

- Cosby & Poussaint: What’s Going On with Black Men? [in RDR]
- Haggins: Chapter 2: Murphy and Rock
- Littleton: Fame: Nobody Lives Forever [in RDR]
- Perret: Be Funny, Not Just Dirty [in RDR]
- Williams & Williams: [If I Stop I’ll Die](#) excerpt [in RDR]
- **Optional News Articles**
  - Allen: [Now That’s A Joyful Noise](#)
  - Braxton: [Spare the Rod, Spoil the Jokes](#)
  - Hammer: [Must Blacks Be Buffoons?](#)
  - Hester: [Analysis: Bill Cosby’s Tarnished Legacy](#)
- Film/Clips: TBA

**FINAL EXAM: FRIDAY, MAY 6<sup>TH</sup>, 11AM – 1PM, KAP 158**

**COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY (Textbooks in Bold)**

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- Hester, Jere. 2015. Analysis: Bill Cosby's Tarnished Legacy. *New England Cable News* (December 30).
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- Jacobs, Lanita. 2011. "The Arab is the New Nigger": African American Comics Confront the Irony and Tragedy of 9/11. In T. Gournelos and V. Greene (Eds.) *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Have Shaped Post-9/11 America* (47-56). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. [Reprint]
- Jacobs-Huey, Lanita. 2006. Gender, Authenticity, and Hair in African American Standup Comedy. In *From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair Care* (71-88). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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- Jacobs, Lanita. n.d. On Richards, Race, and Empathy. Unpublished Manuscript.
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