

## Being in on the Joke: Pedagogy, Race, Humor

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Comedian Dave Chappelle<sup>1</sup> has a parody of a 1950s sitcom where he plays a black milkman teasing his customers, a white family named the Niggars (“these are the Niggars that we like,” goes the opening song).<sup>2</sup> While the milkman, Clifton, enjoys using their name and attaching common racial stereotypes to the family, he also breaks into the humor, “I’ll bet you get the finest table Niggars ever got in this restaurant,” with a painful, closing aside, “Oh lord, this racism is killing me inside.” Humor’s jolting combination of pleasure and critique, I argue, can jump-start social justice education from its occasional lurch into unproductive, if earnest, oversimplifications. While many of us may use humor on an *ad hoc* basis, I will show how contemporary antiracist performance art uses humor intentionally. This use of humor to intervene in social justice issues has a long tradition. From the “sly civility”<sup>3</sup> of black etiquette to contemporary “humorous” engagement with racism,<sup>4</sup> black cultural practices and philosophies provide a counterpoint to the traditional earnest classroom discussion, and show how humor’s meta- and indirect pedagogies can communicate a critique of white dominance, chip away at white certainty, and build oppositional community that lives in and argues through contingency. I am most interested in the complex way that subversive humorous engagement disrupts the kind of reciprocal relationship critical pedagogy advocates, installing instead an engaged but nonreciprocal relationship. I see promise in using humor — simultaneously amusing and unsettling — to intervene in the usual resistances and earnestness in teacher and student contributions to social justice classrooms.

My general concern in this essay is to analyze black humor’s strategies of playing with the audience, disrupting passive spectatorship, and insisting on nonreciprocity, features that may be useful to intervene in stalled discussions. I begin by tracing a general history of humor’s relationship to power. I then focus on black humor and its traditional roots in signification, a form of metacommunication that simultaneously reflects on its own production and produces innovative readings that destabilize certainties. Starting with African traditions that inform later signifying practices, I argue that humor’s function as commentary on language moves it into the realm of social criticism that can establish relationships, yet hold them at a critical distance. Next I examine pedagogical applications of the social criticism in black antiracist performance art and black queer camp. In conclusion, I show that the nonreciprocity of subversive black signifying humor invites nonpassive spectators to become fuller participants in certain forms of knowledge. The signifying pedagogy derived from black humor traditions, through its pleasures and complexities, ultimately offers a way to move from spectator to participant, to a more knowing, critical partner in examining knowledge and forms of engagement. Everyone wants to be in on the joke, even if it means being part of the reason for the laughter and as such being part of the problem. The humorous performances I

examine, black queer drag and camp, a parodic antiracist white-authored website, and a black-authored reparations website, offer viewers edgy but alluring ways to see themselves and see how others see them, and in turn shift their view to how they perform their own identities and relations with others.

Being in on the joke has different implications for different people — as W.E.B. Du Bois put it, “to the black world alone belongs the delicious chuckle... We are the supermen who sit idly by and laugh and look at civilization.”<sup>5</sup> Still, to begin to understand jokes is to begin to understand the people who make them and experience some of their pleasure. That can confirm social distance and maintain it, or it might make that social distance itself a problem for further thought and action. If humor can incite response and thought it may undo the stymied impasse of a tense social justice classroom. By disrupting seriousness with laughter, humor can disrupt the sense that because social categories appear intransigent, all thought and action about them must remain stuck.

#### HUMOR AND STATUS

Humor has long been concerned with confirming and playing with social status, from trickster figures in African and American Indian traditions to the European tradition of court jester and multiple forms of carnival. According to historians, humor has shifted from status-based — higher-status people would make fun of lower-status people, or be amused by lower-status people, or even allow lower-status people to play with power to reinforce power’s reach — to incongruity.<sup>6</sup> Elliott Oring argues that humor has relied on “appropriate incongruity,” in which the hierarchy remains but is ridiculed.<sup>7</sup> His analysis emphasizes moving the audience into uncomfortable situations, yet still judges whether or not humor “works” from the perspective of the dominant audience. Even so, he maintains the importance of moving the dominant into new contexts, because in “familiar material, [w]e may see too little because we presume too much. We can learn from the humor of an exotic or unfamiliar group because it challenges our comfortable notions and plays havoc with our facile generalizations.”<sup>8</sup> In order to derive pleasure from humor, audiences need to move beyond their comfort zones and commonplace understandings. Though they may do so only to get the joke, the shift in understanding can remain beyond the time and place of particular jokes. Humor is an invitation to think differently, from another perspective, while at the same time inhabiting one’s own perspective; in other words, humor encourages one to learn.

Humor can reconfirm the status quo. In the model relying on common understandings of a stable hierarchy, humor either provided the carnival that reconfirms the hierarchy or demonstrated that those lower on the hierarchy are simply fodder for ridicule. Either way, humor was the trick of the powerful. Now, incongruity drives humor and it might be that the proliferation of sites of power makes it more difficult to use humor to assert one’s position in the world since what had previously seemed to confirm hierarchy is now uncertain. The vogue for incongruous humor may itself be an indication of changed power relations. That contemporary humor is often taken as evidence of aggression indicates that humor still hovers in and around questions of power and interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

This invitation to interpretation is a key to understanding the traditions of humor this essay engages. Henry Louis Gates describes the trickster figure as mediating worlds and discourses, arguing that they are the first literary critics because of their “language use ‘above’ that of ordinary language.” Shifting this analysis to social criticism, understanding language or context *as* language or context enables one to comment from a doubled perspective. As Gates explains, the African trickster Esu is double voiced, often portrayed as having two mouths, able to speak literally and figuratively, and shift from third to first person narration. Thus the trickster figure works the conventions of language to disrupt simple meanings and insist on indeterminacy in interpretation.<sup>10</sup> In *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott gives a different version of doubling in the intertwined practices of black entertainment and white minstrelsy, examining how “minstrelsy brought to public form racialized elements of thought and feeling, tone and impulse, residing at the very edge of semantic availability, which Americans only dimly realized they felt, let alone understood.”<sup>11</sup> Minstrelsy provided a vocabulary that edged toward forming white understanding of black and white, confirming white superiority but also drawing on white desire for black culture, yet whiteness disavows its desire for blackness, and thus it disavows its doubled perspective. As Lott puts it, we might now think of black-face as “a distorted mirror, reflecting displacements and condensations and discontinuities between which and the social field there exist lags, unevennesses, multiple determinations.”<sup>12</sup>

Simple laughter at a stereotypic figure is not the same as being in on the joke or understanding the critique embedded in parody or irony, but these are nonetheless related. Esu’s insistence on indeterminate interpretation and minstrelsy’s unintentional displacement of white racial longings can be seen on a continuum — the trickster figure and the related practice of signification problematize commonsense social categories, while minstrelsy plays with categories to hyperbolically reify them and deny their complexities. Noting the different strategies possible in race humor, Philip Sterling catalogues the use of humor in slave communities to pass on information about dangers and possibilities for resistance. He also notes that some themes passed back and forth between black and white communities, however different the intentions of the humor. For whites, jokes about black duplicity pointed to the need for racist vigilance, confirming white dominance (but also troubling it since its protection had to be embedded in humor, to say nothing of laws). For black people, duplicity was a strategy for maintaining oppositional community under conditions of white surveillance and control.<sup>13</sup> The contemporary performance-based pedagogies that derive from African American traditions show a continuation of the doubled interplay of aggression and invitation, but rather than remaining a separate tradition, black subversive humor increasingly addresses white audiences, working with and against white bias.

#### PEDAGOGIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SIGNIFYING

The forms of humor to which I now turn come from the tradition of signifying, and use its strategies of engagement in ways that make those strategies themselves, as well as their messages, open to innovation and available to the audience. They are

also related to camp and drag, which also use the doubled speech and open interpretations of signifying. Unlike the call and response of “playing the dozens” or “throwing shade,” where dialogic insults spiral into virtuoso performances among knowing participants, camp and drag often perform their significations to audiences of seeming outsiders. Black queer camp intentionally disrupts audience passivity in ways that make it difficult for white and/or straight spectators to maintain their spectatorial distance. Assuming its audience will find gender transgression grotesque yet also fascinating, camp pulls audience members into a critical analysis of their own discomforts with and attractions to cross-dressing and same-sex flirtation. Camp and drag rely on interaction between the purportedly “straight” audience and the queer performer, using provocation to reveal the audience members as active participants in their own seemingly “real” performance. Drag performances mark the earnestness of the spectator as being as much a pose as the queen’s fabulousness or spectacularity. That is, camp undoes the unmarked positions of whiteness, heterosexism, and gender stability, and thus positions the audience members as active participants. The gesture of earnestness — so familiar to all of us who do social justice education, who often find our eyebrows arching and our voices taking on that measured, reasonable tone of moral superiority — is in some ways placatory, reassuring our classes that we are thoughtful professors whose daily bread and butter is the management of important but difficult subjects. The gesture of camp is disruptive, sharp, critical, and yet also engaging. When camp eyebrows arch and camp voices rise, someone is in trouble, but that trouble is part of the pleasure of camp — an invitation to engage with the performance, not merely observe it.

The performances and websites I will analyze engage bias head on, but in ways that invite more complex interpretations of their own messages and subject positions, and thereby encourage their audience to engage in similar self-criticism. To examine the possibilities for humorous engagement with difficult issues, I begin with Marlon Riggs’s ruminations in “Unleash the Queen” about the indeterminacy of the performer/expert/pedagogue.<sup>14</sup> I use his essay to explore the method of camp to problematize self, performance, and audience, a method equally well applied to traditional drag performances and the race-related camp that is my focus. I then turn to other forms of performance art also in the black tradition of signifying and camp that practice humorous antiracist pedagogical work: the website *Black People Love Us* and Damali Ayo’s *How to Rent a Negro*.<sup>15</sup>

*Black People Love Us* creates a scene in which white people’s attachment to black people and white desire for black recognition are examined through what purport to be testimonials from black and white acquaintances, as well as through what appear to be posts from actual viewers of the website. The site simultaneously lampoons white desire for black recognition and affection and creates a meta-scene of discourse around the site’s truth, inviting readers to participate. Ayo’s work, while maintaining a parodic tone, insists on the nonreciprocity of its humor. No, she argues, one cannot rent a white person; while humor may intervene in inequality and enable different kinds of understanding, it does not alter material conditions. Humor

only shows what remains to be done. Read as texts that read their audiences, Riggs's and Ayo's works and the website maintain their humor as well as their critiques, allowing us to see the pedagogical strategy of discomfort<sup>16</sup> and pleasure, albeit an uncomfortable pleasure that plays off nonreciprocity, yet encourages something closer to a reciprocal relationship to form.

#### RIGGS AND THE DRAGS OF PEDAGOGY

The discourse of insult indicates connection, and potentially, as in insult contests, mastery of the situation. Camp's combination of defensive and offensive strategies means that its target is always ambiguous and multiple, "a waterfall of words" that momentarily suspends whatever is going on behind the mask.<sup>17</sup> As such, camp humor troubles the subjectivity of the performer as much as it troubles the audience. While a dialogic relationship between performer and audience is not possible, as I will shortly show, nonetheless each is implicated in identity critique and invited into a consideration of subject position, relationship, and responsibility. Riggs's turn to camp pedagogy in "Unleash the Queen" is occasioned by a broadcast of his film, *Tongues Untied*, and a subsequent discussion. He explains that the film's status as a "documentary" is disputed by hostile panelists: "You said in your video, 'Everybody on the block did that [that is, had sex with other men].' Well I don't know about your block, but my father was a Presbyterian minister, and it didn't happen on my block" (that is, there were no black gay young men).<sup>18</sup> The panelists claim that Riggs failed to tell the truth about black gay men's lives because he failed to reach a mainstream audience.

Riggs moves between voices to highlight what is being demanded of him and what he knows he has to refuse; the demands of the panel and the demands of his newfound popularity on the queer theory lecture circuit are of a piece: each audience wants his language to be altered to suit their need to understand only what they want to understand.<sup>19</sup> His essay intersperses theatrical asides and parenthetical notations to shift the address and to read the crowds for their passive consumption of his spectacle. The language of his commentary uncovers the languages of his interlocutors, indeed, uncovers the instability of all utterances that claim to describe a single truth. He pokes humor at their posturing and at his counter-posturing, critiquing those who revile and/or consume him as much as critiquing himself for reveling in the spectacle.

Riggs brings urgency to his performance of incongruity and juxtaposition, moving from the hostility of his reception to his T-cell count to his final, courteous call for more "realness," a kind of authentic performance that recognizes its simultaneous constructedness. He sees the camp self in as much trouble from itself as is its audience, because the hyperstylized critique allows the self behind camp to dodge the "real" experience of the words. As Riggs explains — or performs — his camp reading of queer theory, he simultaneously critiques his critics via his arch, camp persona, and explains what he loses as he switches to camp (that is, an opportunity to "share" his authentic self, which, really, he prefers not to). He moves around hurtful issues through an exaggerated camp persona that chides him for coming too close to a confession. This vacillation between "real" (authentic) and

“realness” (careful examination of the claim to authenticity) maintains an energetic exchange of subject positions and personas that defy an easy response, like the pace of drag queens’ “reading” or insulting/enticing an audience. The pace and facility with insult prohibits dialogue and works to keep the energy of humor/critique moving fast enough that a reversal from an outsider is difficult. That is, the pace of sharp humor and its defense against homophobia and racism make a counterattack less likely, especially given that most queens have much more experience dealing with discrimination than the audience usually has at responding to queens. In other words, this is a kind of humor that seems to invite mutual recognition and understanding from the audience, but strategically installs the impossibility of reciprocity. Camp, then, is not critical pedagogy.<sup>20</sup>

“ONE LOVE!”<sup>21</sup>

*Black People Love Us* and Ayo’s work are part of this nondialogic, signifying camp tradition. Like Riggs’s performances, their approach is seductive, mimicking the conventions of racist and antiracist thought and using the same juxtaposition of theoretical and humorous positions. Where Riggs ventriloquizes his opponents, *Black People Love Us* invites them into the spectacle as audience/critic/interlocutor/performer. At *Black People Love Us*, the audience is invited to be amused at white people Sally and Johnny’s repeated attempts to be loved by black people, watching as Sally is unable to identify Africa in a game of Pictionary or as Johnny is stumped by “R\_CISM” in a game of Hangman.<sup>22</sup> In “One Love!” their black friends finally lose their expressions of patience as Sally and Johnny appropriate black slang. The website seems either to stimulate earnestness, which turns to anger; generate knowing agreement and/or embarrassment; or incite anger, which frequently turns homophobic (perhaps indicating its relationship to camp). The site is an exercise in decentering whiteness that continually recenters itself via lampooning its own cultural incompetence at its most competent moments. As much as the performers are in on the joke, their poses of competence show that they remain the butt of jokes as well.

*Black People Love Us* has a very large section that tracks letters from viewers. The letters are testimonials of how the humor incited a visceral response and then troubled the reader’s interpretation, while maintaining his/her confidence in the truth of that initial response:

After looking at your website, I at first was appalled by the outlandish rhetoric that was used throughout it. However, the more I looked at the site the more I was conflicted in my views. At first glance this seems like a mockery of the black culture and made by ignorant people, however, it also seems like a mockery of white culture and its ignorance and constant quest to be “hip”. So as of now, I am leaning towards the satire aspect of this website and the ignorance that it is exploiting. I commend the creator for making this site, however it would have been nice to know who actually are the creators, because i dont believe it is just sally and johnny, rather a collaboration of them and soem black people. If this was indeed made by these 2 then I really do not know what to think, angry laughter is all i can see then.<sup>23</sup>

The site’s incongruity, execution, and broader possibilities for meaning invite very different readings. For other readers, the racist context of the humor undoes itself rather than stimulates that jolt of recognition, startle, and, however troubled,

resolution: "To take this as a joke, is not funny. Some people really think that you are for real. I just hope you are not people of color, doing this. Yes we all know how racism work is this country and AROUND THE WORLD. To make fun of it just lets people off the hook."<sup>24</sup> For still others, the near physicality of the context of racism itself provides the reason for amusement: "It was like being in a car crash, and then seeing that everyone in the car was unhurt. First, I looked on in horror as the page started to load, then I was over come with relief when I realized that you knew what you were doing."<sup>25</sup>

#### REPARATIONS FIRST, DIALOGUE MAYBE LATER

Now here we come to a problem with humor: it can just reassure us that no one was injured, that the audience need do nothing. It can potentially remove agency from the audience. Ayo's response is to add redistribution to the equation. Arguing that white people have rented black people for too long without paying, she contends it is time to just cut to reimbursement. Are you white and wanting to touch a black person's hair? \$100 per grab. Want to be publicly affirmed as a white person who isn't a racist or who is cool enough to have black friends? \$200 dollars per hour. According to Ayo's website, intentional contracts are only one option: "Retroactive billing: If you have received any of the above services prior to June 1, 2003, you may receive a retroactive invoice for services rendered. You value your reputation, so we know you want to resolve your outstanding debts." This includes the possibility of an "affirmative discount": "Tally your own bill, send payment...and deduct 5%!"<sup>26</sup>

Like *Black People Love Us*, Ayo's website and book contain a substantial letters section and a store as well, including "Touch your own hair" and "Hello, my race is..." t-shirts, pictures of your new black friend, reparations wear, and so on.<sup>27</sup> In line with the standard critique of multiculturalism as "multiculturalism" or "consuming the other," Ayo exploits shallow interests in difference to work commodification to her own advantage and, via calls for reparations and back rent, to broaden the benefits of her humor. Ayo does invite relationship, albeit commercial relationship. But like Riggs the shifting perspective of the performer moves the audience out of passivity and into responsibility; they can be in on the joke, and still their attempts at understanding can itself be a joke.

Ayo offers reparations instead of reciprocal, dialogic engagement. Her strategy highlights white desire for racial currency, and literally provides it through currency exchange. The give-and-take of racial exchange, she explains, may best be approached by understanding the economic base of racial difference; rather than address stratification through attitudinal change, she substitutes redistribution of wealth. Her call for reparations is likely pointed at antiracist white people (while being amusing to black people) and assumes that the white audience will be interested and engaged. She plays on the common frustration, "what can I do?" by suggesting concrete tasks. Recognizing that whites will engage in offensive behavior, she provides a way to compensate those black people who have to put up with white people trying to become educated. Her work also understands the need to make distinctions between kinds of racial ignorance, inviting knowing whites to give themselves a discount if they already know their racial debt.

In the end, these pedagogies of signification are pointedly both funny and very much not so funny. They draw audiences in with that car-crash effect — we are watching but also involved, as the flow of the humor’s narrative puts the spectator in the driver’s seat and then demands a toll. These interventions provide a way out of the stalled space of social justice pedagogy, because their humor is intentionally a vehicle for bending angry encounters into puzzlingly pleasurable encounters for speaker and audience as well. To be asked to pay a toll, whether in the sense of reparations or of learning more about African American practices to better understand the operations of signifying or camp, students at least see some sort of payback to their investment. They will understand better, or they will participate in future social relations better.

The humor used in these performances of antiracist pedagogy constantly disrupts the passivity of the audience/class — spectators are not only taken to school, but they are turned out into the world with a demand for compensation for their participation/spectatorship at the sites and in systems of oppression that motivate the sites. As strategies for intervening in the stalled earnestness of social justice and antiracist education, these sites provoke and provide suggestions for critique and engagement. If that invitation fails, as Ayo understands it may, the possibility remains to do nothing other than pay reparations — that is the bare minimum level of acceptable (in)action. So, it seems to me that the tactics of camp antiracist humor raise the bar for audience/class response considerably. Humor is fundamentally about rethinking and reembodying one’s relationship to the topics raised: one’s body, identity, gestures are all open to critique, and one responds via bodily acts — laughter, blushing — and thoughtful engagement. By making those processes central to their humor, black signifying pedagogy seeks to trouble its own language, widen its audience, and aim toward justice, however tricky that goal might be.

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1. Chappelle cancelled his Comedy Central show because white people were laughing in the wrong places.

2. Dave Chappelle, “The Nigger Family,” *Chappelle’s Show*, [http://www.comedycentral.com/motherload/player.jhtml?ml\\_video=11906&ml\\_collection=&ml\\_gateway=&ml\\_gateway\\_id=&ml\\_comedian=&ml\\_runtime=&ml\\_context=show&ml\\_origin\\_url=/shows/chappelles\\_show/videos/season\\_2/index.jhtml&ml\\_playlist=&lnk=&is\\_large=true](http://www.comedycentral.com/motherload/player.jhtml?ml_video=11906&ml_collection=&ml_gateway=&ml_gateway_id=&ml_comedian=&ml_runtime=&ml_context=show&ml_origin_url=/shows/chappelles_show/videos/season_2/index.jhtml&ml_playlist=&lnk=&is_large=true).

3. Homi K. Bhabha, “Sly Civility,” in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 99. I am taking this term out of the postcolonial context and applying it to postslavery U.S. race relations, but the dynamics Bhabha describes — the colonizer’s desire for affection from the colonized, and the colonized’s duplicitous use of civility — are apt.

4. Ron Jenkins, for instance, describes the use of humor to express a sense of freedom in jail, as black South African activists refuse to be further intimidated by police. See his “Ridiculing Racism in South Africa,” in *Subversive Laughter: The Liberating Power of Comedy* (New York: New Press, 1994), 79–106.

5. Quoted in Philip Sterling, *Laughing on the Outside: The Intelligent White Reader’s Guide to Negro Tales and Humor* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1965), 25.

6. Dexter B. Gordon pushes the history of humor back further, arguing that for Aristotle humor reinforced a sunny view of Greek hierarchy, while African American humor critiques racial hierarchy; see “Humor in African American Discourse: Speaking of Oppression,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 2 (1998): 254–76.



7. Elliott Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1992), 1.
8. *Ibid.*, x.
9. For a fuller account of this debate, see Oring, *Jokes and Their Relations*, which disputes the characterization of humor as aggressive; and Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, eds., *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humor* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), which is largely concerned with hostility in humor.
10. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 7–22.
11. Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.
12. *Ibid.*, 8.
13. Sterling includes a traditional joke where one slave brags to another that he cusses out the master whenever he wants. The other tries it and gets punished. The first chastises him that he doesn't "have the knack," and that insult should happen outside of his master's hearing. Sterling, *Laughing on the Outside*, 45.
14. Marlon Riggs, "Unleash the Queen," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle, Wash.: Bay Press, 1992), 99–105.
15. *Black People Love Us*, <http://blackpeopleloveus.com>; and Damali Ayo, *How to Rent a Negro* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2005).
16. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
17. Riggs, "Unleash the Queen," 99.
18. *Ibid.*, 101.
19. *Ibid.*, 101–2.
20. *Ibid.*, 99–105.
21. *Black People Love Us*, "One Love," <http://blackpeopleloveus.com/onelove.html>.
22. *Black People Love Us*, "Hanging Out," <http://blackpeopleloveus.com/hangingout.html>.
23. Keith RC II, quoted in *Black People Love Us*, "Your Letters," <http://blackpeopleloveus.com/letters.html> (errors in original).
24. Anonymous, quoted in *Black People Love Us*, "Your Letters," <http://blackpeopleloveus.com/letters.html> (all errors and emphases in original).
25. Keith, quoted in *Black People Love Us*, "Your Letters," <http://blackpeopleloveus.com/letters.html> (all errors and emphases in original).
26. Ayo, *How to Rent a Negro*, 20–2 and 27–8; and Ayo, "Rent-a-Negro.com Pricing," *Rent-a-Negro.com* (2003), <http://rent-a-negro.com/negropricing.html>.
27. Damali Ayo, "Tokens," *Café Press* (2007), [http://cafepress.com/r\\_a\\_n](http://cafepress.com/r_a_n).