

What Makes Black Humor Black

Psychology of Humor

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African American (AA) culture is unique and different in its own way, and it is something we hold dear and seldom wish to share with outsiders, however in this paper I will do just that. I hope to be able to show exactly What Makes Black Humor Black by considering a few different aspects, I hope to mention. African American Culture based on African American Studies, Aesthetics of Black Comedy based on the standards of theatrics and live performance, Stereotypes and Racism and how that plays a role in how AA's interact with each other and other races. As well as using the material we learned about from Martin and Moreal in class.

African American Studies is an interdisciplinary academic field dedicated to the education of the history, culture, and politics of Black Americans (Gale, 2008). In the 1960s the nation experienced social unrest of a great magnitude, movement such as the woman's right movement, labor right movement and civil rights movement all took place at this time (DeMuth, 1964). However for this paper I will focus on the civil rights movement. At the university of California, Berkley the civil rights movement had a big impact causing students to discuss institutional racism and racial equality, this protest amongst many caused the addition on AAS into the disciplines among colleges and universities (Phillips, 2010). To many it seems useless to "educate white people about Black Power when many black people are still uneducated on the matter", stated by (Daily Californian, 1969). The members of the Afro-American Student Union (AASU) proposed an academic department called "Black Studies" in April 1968, members later stated "The young people of America are the inheritors of what is undoubtedly one of the most challenging, and threatening set of social circumstances that has ever fallen upon a generation of young people in history...." this helped build ground on their proposal to create a black studies department. Similar events happened among other campuses that then resulted in the development of Black/African American Studies (A Brief History of AAAS, n.d).

Next, in my research the origin of theatre seems to date back to the Greeks. The followers of Dionysus, god of fertility and wine, keep him entertained through dance and sacrifices of animals. One of his followers, a priest named Thespis, seems to introduce a new element, dialogue, with the chorus this therefore is the birth of theatre, Thespis being the first actor (History of Theatre, n.d.). From the 5th century BC comedies were performed in Athens as part of a three day celebration, however very few, eleven of forty written, survived due to their paling in comparison to tragedies. This article continues to go on and state how many comedies were

“satirize contemporary foibles [because they were place] in an unexpected context, whether by means of a fantastic plot or through the antics of ridiculous characters.” A well-known influencer of theatre is William Shakespeare, who is known for his comedies *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600), and *Twelfth Night* (1601). There are multiple types of comedy; satire, screwball comedy, black (grotesque) comedy, as well as romantic comedy. In the early 19th century England presented slapstick comedy, however comedy was still mainly intertwined with music hall theatre. The advancement of cinema in the 19th and 20th centuries created more access of comedians in the general public. Silent films featuring this became popular in American cinemas, and the rest is history. One of the most well-known comedic actors in silent film to this day is Charlie Chaplin (Meacham, 2010), who influenced mime artist and circus clown like Bozo in the United States (McCabe, 2005). This created a spiral effect that even turned to comedy over the radio, and eventually comedy shows on television like, *M*A*S*H*, *Seinfeld*, and *The Simpsons* (Meacham, 2010).

In our book we are introduced to several theories and I believe many play a part of why black humor is black humor. Relief theory was mentioned as a way to release tension and reduce nervous energy that can be caused by fear or awkward social interactions. Superiority theory is the idea that people laugh about the misfortune of others because the misfortune of someone emphasizes their shortcomings, so laughing for being better off than someone else. We briefly mentions situational humor which is more so when someone uses object and props to tell a story based on a situation. The incongruity theory states that the realization of the incongruity in a situation is what we find funny, Moreall mentions that the use of humor can be a healthier alternative to express oneself when coping, which is the part of this theory that I will focus on.

In the African American community comedians like Kevin Hart, Bernie Mac, Katt William, Chris Tucker, Dave Chappell, Tim Meadows, Sherri Shepherd, etc. are very well known in every household across our nation. Not only is their success inspiring but their comedy is relatable. For some reason there is an overarching theme of AA comedy. Their situational humor and their aesthetics on stage are similar across the board. Some main topics Black comedians talk about while on stage or in movies are stereotypes and social injustices pertaining to AA people. It would seem odd to poke fun of the things that hold you communities down however it is almost like a coping mechanism. This is an example of incongruity within our culture. When another race points out our shortcomings they are partaking in the superiority theory however when we do it, it is more along the lines of relief theory and incongruity, as well as humor being used as a defense mechanism. The topics are so relatable however because someone else is making these jokes we are able to disengage from our own reality and let the theatrics on stage take us away, however because of the realness I think we also experience the release of nervous energy because we are then slapped in the face with our reality at the same time. Theatrics are a huge part in Black Comedy, there are many time that I have seen comedy shows where comedians use props to get there point across, falling out in the floor to show the action of a child's tantrum, swimming atop a chair, etc.

All of these acts could be seen as obnoxious and even in some instances ghetto. Though in our everyday lives we wouldn't necessarily want to be seen as ghetto, because it has a negative and belittling aspect to it, we love to do so when comedy is involved. I want to know why this is, why do we use the stereotypes given to us by other races as comedic gold within our own race? I believe it is because we wish to feel better than the stereotypes given to us, and if we can make fun of the stereotypes that we are better than them, if we can make fun of them and act

like they don't apply to us individually then we can cope with the idea that our lives and the way we are treated is better than it actually is... we can be sold the ideas of the American dream if only we act like it was meant for us to obtain when it was defined. I've even experienced this myself:

I grew up in Downtown Kansas City with my fellow African Americans and there, there was nothing different about me, I wore the same J's as everyone else, my hair was braided with an abundance of beads at the ends, and my baby hairs? Laid! These were my people, I like them and them like me... and then my mother decided to uproot everything and give us a 'better start' north of the river. Here I saw that no one wore J's, little girl's hair was straight as a needle and laid flat on their heads, no beads, not ties... and baby hairs? HA! That was simply the hair atop an infant's head. This is where "Becky" rudely exclaimed that "black girls" were "ugly" and that my "mother left me stay out in the sun too long" [insert preadolescent eye roll]. This is the place where my mother began to tell me "be seen and not heard", "talk quiet and sweet", "do not cause a scene and do not talk back", and that "these people are very important". Here my mother taught me to mask the ghetto drawl of the inner city that I was so accustomed to and replace it with the proper enunciations of white dialect. I decided to follow my mother's words because I soon noticed that my differences were easily picked on by the white kids around me and that if I stopped being the 'stereotypical' black girl then I could level the playing field with my peers. Every morning I put on a façade of being a likeminded individual to make it through the day without 'incidents'. I told myself that if I can fake it, then I can be considered the same as the peers around me... and I truly began to believe it. Until one evening at the age of 20 I was sitting in my car parked in my coach's driveway, waiting for her to get home from teaching at the local high school, so that we could head to a track meet. I guess that a neighbor hadn't seen me around

the area, even though I've known my coach for seven years prior and visited her numerous times. A man walking his dog noticed me and began acting very weird, watching me in my car for a long time before continuing down the road to my coach's neighbor's house. He knocked on the door while continuing to nervously glance over his shoulder at me. There was no answer. At this point I began to watch him back, gaining clarity of what was going on and what predicament I was in. He continued to the next house, still watching, where he ran into two more white males. I guess he told them to come out to their driveway to give their input of what I may have been up to. Due to the heat I had had my windows down while I waited, therefore I overheard him talking to the neighbors saying "I am not trying to be prejudice, but you never know you know", "anything can be happening..." the other neighbors then went on to describe an incident that happened outside their home that ended with an African American male being arrested. Shockingly I laughed, I was just first handedly ripped from my reality, and shocked into being shown prejudice for the first time since I was younger, a feeling I didn't remember very well. I called my coach to let her know what was happening and to have a clear mind remind me to stay in the car and not go off on these men for their ignorance because like the old men said 'you never know what can happen nowadays'. I tried to remain calm but I was scared, and hurt, but I refused to let these men see themselves as better than me in another way. I would cry later. Now I needed to show my strength. Therefore I mugged them back the whole time they stared me down.

Due to my research and my own firsthand account I believe black humor is black humor because it is the way we cope with injustice of our current and past society. It is a way we can come together and tell our stories, trials, and testimonies without feeling judged, because in the end, even though others may feel the same, we can just dust it off and continue to act strong and

not vulnerably. In our culture being vulnerable in front of other, especially other races, isn't something we particularly partake in, because history has showed us over and over again that when we are vulnerable we are easily taken advantage of.

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