

LTEN 185/ETHN 174

Winter 2006

Themes in Afro-American Literature: African American Humor

MWF 11:00-11:50 a.m.

CSB 005

Professor Camille F. Forbes

Office Hours: MW 1-2 p.m. and by appointment

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Course Description

This course is a study of African American humor, particularly in performance, from slavery (ca. 18th century) to today. The humor of African Americans has historically been divided, consisting of humor created by and for a black audience, and humor performed for a white audience. We will investigate the origins of this division, and the ways in which African American humor has shaped American culture. Keeping in mind the social and cultural context in which African American humor emerged and developed, we will take an interdisciplinary approach to our subject. We will use various materials from cartoons, folklore, literature, and film (among others) to study the African American comic tradition.

Required Texts

Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester*

Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side*

Course Reader (CR) from University Readers—available online at universityreaders.com

Books available at UCSD bookstore or try half.com, amazon.com for used copies

Course Objectives

1. To gain through interdisciplinary study and understanding of the social and cultural uses and meanings of African American humor.
2. To create an encouraging learning environment in which you can think and work independently, and share your insights cooperatively.
3. To foster active and critical reading, writing, viewing and thinking. Challenge each other, challenge yourselves, and challenge what you read!

Course Requirements

15% 3 1-page typed critical responses (see group due dates, due beginning of class period)

25% in-class midterm (2/10)

10% attendance and participation

30% final exam (3/23)

20% 10-minute group presentation (10th Week)

Policies

- Attendance is taken each class meeting.
- **Three absences**, excused or unexcused, are accepted. All unexcused absences beyond that will result in final grade being dropped by plus (+) or minus (-) for each absence.
- Readings are to be completed by the first day for which they are assigned.
- **No** late work is accepted.
- **All work** must be completed satisfactorily to earn a passing grade for the course.
- Any and all assignments containing material and/or ideas that are not your own must include proper documentation of your sources. Plagiarism is a serious offense and will not be tolerated.
- No Internet sources for papers and no e-mailed assignments, please.
- Attendance during the **entire** presentation week (10th week) is **mandatory**. Final grade will be dropped by plus (+) or minus (-) for absence.
- **Mandatory** library visit (to be announced)

Letter grades correspond to GPA as follows:

A	4.0	B	3.0	C	2.0	D	1.0
A-	3.7	B-	2.7	C-	1.7	F	0.0
A-/B+	3.5	B-/C+	2.5	C-/D+	1.5		
B+	3.3	C+	2.3	D+	1.3		

Assignments Detailed:

One-page typed critical responses: You will be assigned a group (either 1 or 2), and will submit a reading response, as noted on the syllabus, at the beginning of the class period on those days. These are intended for you to engage with the ideas raised by readings, and will help you with your in-class contributions. I will give you a question to address the Thursday before the one-pager is due, which will help you as you write your response.

Midterm: Mid-quarter review of themes and material (lectures and reading) covered.

Final exam: A cumulative review of entire quarter's themes and subjects of discussion.

10-minute Presentation: Working in groups, you will introduce the life and career of comedian not discussed in class. You must use outside materials (beyond course packet and our other texts) for this project, and audio-visual materials all greatly welcomed!

Syllabus

PART 1: PLANTATION SURVIVALIST—THE TRICKSTER

Week 1 **Jan. 9, 11, 13** Introduction: What is African American Humor?

Wednesday Jan. 11

Watkins, *On the Real Side* prologue (Black Humor...what it is)

(CR) “Black American Humor,” *American Humor* (Spring 1977); “Storytelling and Comic Performance,” in *Talk that Talk* (431-434); Ralph Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke”; Lawrence Levine, excerpt from “Black Laughter,” *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*

Friday Jan. 13

Watkins, *On the Real Side* Chapter 1 (Slavery..)

Week 2 **Jan. 16 (No Class), 18, 20**

Monday **NO CLASS** **MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY**

Wednesday Jan. 18 (GROUP 1 critical response due)

(CR) Excerpts from *The Book of Negro Folklore*: “Rabbit Teaches Bear a Song,” “Brer Rabbit and Sis Cow,” (3-5); “Sheer Crops,” “John and the Lion” (13-18); Excerpts from *Talk that Talk*: “Br’er Rabbit and the Briar Patch,” (30-31); “A Laugh that Meant Freedom (367-368)

Friday Jan. 20

“Trickster, the Revolutionary Hero: (103-111); Excerpt from *From Trickster to Badman* (17-64); James C. Corrothers, “An Indignation Dinner”

PART 2: THE “ACCOMMODATIONIST” 19th C.-CA 1920

Week 3 Jan. 23, 25, 27: “Entertaining” slave and Blackface Minstrelsy

Monday Jan. 23 (GROUP 2 critical response due)

Boskin, Chapter 3 “Ladies and Gentlemen...”

Wednesday Jan. 25

Boskin, Chapter 4 “And Performing Today...”

Friday Jan. 27 in class: *Ethnic Notions* (1986)

Week 4 Jan. 30, Feb. 1, Feb. 3 : Blackface Minstrelsy to vaudeville

Monday Jan. 30 **(GROUP 1 critical response due)**

Watkins, Chapters 3 “Black Minstrelsy to vaudeville”

Wednesday Feb. 1

Boskin, Chapter 5 “Impressions in Boldface”

Friday Feb. 3 in class: clip from Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000) and audio of Bert Williams

Week 5 Feb. 6, Feb. 8, Feb. 10

Monday Feb. 6 (GROUP 2 critical response due)

Boskin, Chapter 6 “Prismatic Projections”

Wednesday Feb. 8

Watkins, Chapter 4 on “Vaudeville and Early 20th Century Black Humor”

Friday 2/10 IN-CLASS MIDTERM**PART 3: IN GROUP SOCIAL SATIRIST 1920s-ca. 1960/INTEGRATIONIST 1960-1970s****Week 6 Feb. 13, Feb. 15, Feb. 17**

Monday Feb. 13

Watkins, Chapter 9 on “The Theatre Owners Booking Association and the Apollo Theatre”

Wednesday Feb. 15

(CR) “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival” *American Quarterly* (Spring 1985); “Economy of Laughter” excerpt from *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*; “Contemporary Negro Humor as Social Satire, *Phylon* (4th Q. 1968); Watkins, Chapter 12 “The New Comics”

Friday Feb. 17 in-class: audio Dick Gregory, Dewey Pigmeat Markham, *Here Come the Judge!*

Week 7 Feb. 20 (No Class), Feb. 22, Feb. 24

Monday Feb. 20 NO CLASS President’s Day

Wednesday Feb. 22 (GROUP 1 critical response due)

(CR) “The Community of Laughter” excerpt from *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (358-366); “The American Negro’s New Comedy Act,” *Harper’s* (June 1961); “Moms Mabley and the Afro-American Comic Performance”

Friday Feb. 24 in-class: audio, Moms Mabley, Flip Wilson, Bill Cosby

PART 4: AUTONOMOUS “IN YOUR FACE” COMICS

Week 8 Feb. 27, Mar. 1, Mar. 3

Monday Feb. 27 (GROUP 2 critical response due)

Watkins, Chapter 13 “Pryor and Thereafter...”

(CR) Excerpt from *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* “Ritual of Insult” (344-358); “The Comedy of Richard Pryor as Social Satire” *American Humor* (Fall 1977)

Wednesday Mar. 1

Friday Mar. 3 in-class: audio Richard Pryor

Week 9 Mar. 6, Mar. 8, Mar. 10

Monday Mar. 6

“Whoopi as Actress, Clown and Social Critic” *New York Times* (10/28/1984); “Public Stages: Stepin in It” *New York Times* (11/7/1993); “Racial Jokes Spur Apology from Friars” *New York Times* (10/10/1993); “After the Roast Fire and Smoke” *New York Times* (10/14/1993)

Wednesday Mar. 8 in class: Whoopi Goldberg, Chris Rock, Dave Chapelle

Friday Mar. 10 PRESENTATIONS OF THE CLASS

Week 10 Mar. 13, 15, 17

PRESENTATIONS of the class

FINAL EXAM: **Thursday March 23, 11:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.**

10-minute Presentation Topics

Godfrey Cambridge

Stepin Fetchit

Redd Foxx

Ernest Hogan

Billy Kersands

Sam Lucas

Hattie McDaniel

Butterfly McQueen

Mantan Moreland

Timmie Rogers

Nipsey Russell

Slappy White