

LTEN 185/ETHN 174

Spring 2007

Themes in Afro-American Literature: African American Humor

TTh 12:30-1:50 p.m.

Centre Hall 222

Professor Camille F. Forbes

Office Hours: TTh 10-11 a.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

20% journal

35% in-class midterm

10% attendance and participation

35% final exam

Policies

- Attendance is taken each class meeting.
- **Two 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.

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:**Journals:**

During the first four weeks of the course, you will keep a journal and submit it once. You are required to write **two** entries per week, and each entry should be one full page, 12-point font, single-spaced. This assignment gives you an opportunity to write informally about the texts that you are reading. Pick your own topic for discussion, but commit to it, and *do not summarize*. I want your *reaction* to the text. You may 1) analyze some argument that the text puts forth; 2) read a passage closely on it and reflect on its meaning, relating it to the course (and our classroom discussion). You will have a total of 7 entries for the assignment.

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.

Syllabus**PART 1: PLANTATION SURVIVALIST—THE TRICKSTER****Week 1 Apr. 3, 5** Introduction: What is African American Humor?**Tuesday April 3**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)**Thursday April 5**Lawrence Levine, excerpt from “Black Laughter,” *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*
Watkins, *On the Real Side* Chapter 1 (Slavery..)**Week 2 Apr. 10, 12****Tuesday April 10**(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)**Thursday April 10**“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 Apr. 17, 19 “Entertaining” slave and Blackface Minstrelsy****Tuesday April 17**

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

Thursday April 19Boskin, Chapter 4 “And Performing Today...”
in class: *Ethnic Notions* (1986)**Week 4 Apr. 24, 26 Blackface Minstrelsy to vaudeville****Tuesday April 24**

Watkins, Chapters 3 “Black Minstrelsy to vaudeville”

Thursday April 24, JOURNALS DUE AT BEGINNING OF CLASS

Thursday April 26

Boskin, Chapter 5 “Impressions in Boldface”
clip from Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000) and audio of Bert Williams

Week 5 May 1, 3**Tuesday May 1**

Boskin, Chapter 6 “Prismatic Projections”

Thursday May 3

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

PART 3: IN GROUP SOCIAL SATIRIST 1920s-ca. 1960/INTEGRATIONIST 1960-1970s**Week 6 May 8, 10****Tuesday May 8, IN-CLASS MIDTERM****Thursday May 10**

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

Week 7 May 15, 17**Tuesday May 15**

(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”

Thursday May 17

in-class: audio Dick Gregory, Dewey Pigmeat Markham, *Here Come the Judge!*
Moms Mabley, Flip Wilson, Bill Cosby

PART 4: AUTONOMOUS “IN YOUR FACE” COMICS**Week 8 May 22, 24****Tuesday May 22**

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

(CR) Excerpt from *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* “Ritual of Insult” (344-358)

Thursday May 24

in-class: audio and video Richard Pryor

Week 9 May 29, 31

Tuesday May 29 “Public Stages: Steppin in It”; “Racial Jokes Spur Apology from Friars”;
“After the Roast Fire and Smoke”

Thursday May 31 in class: Whoopi Goldberg, Chris Rock, Dave Chapelle

Week 10 June 5, 7

Tuesday June 5 “Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas”

Tuesday June 7 Review for final exam

FINAL EXAM: Thursday, June 14th 11:30-2:30 p.m.