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Multiculturalism and Humor

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Ethnic humor in America has traditionally been prejudiced and racist. Jokes about ethnic difference are as American as apple pie. Each immigrant group in the US has suffered ridicule from other groups who got there first. Thus in American culture there exists a whole catalog of ethnic jokes based on crude stereotypes identified by names which in themselves are ethnic slurs--the Mick joke, the Kraut joke, the Chink joke, the Jap joke, Polack joke--as well as jokes about Italians, Jews, Hispanics, Indians, Blacks. In the current climate of heightened sensitivity to cultural difference in America, this low form of humor is unacceptable in public. Senator Alphonse D'Amato of New York (himself an Italian-American) was reminded of that fact recently when he had to apologize publicly for making ethnic jokes about Judge Lance Ito, the Japanese-American magistrate presiding in the O.J. Simpson murder trial.

Perhaps this change in public etiquette is one accomplishment of what we call "multiculturalism," the broad term which denotes the various efforts in the US to acknowledge cultural diversity and eliminate discrimination against people because of ethnic origin, gender, or sexual preference. Multiculturalism has its contemporary roots in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's, which led to laws curtailing discrimination and promoting equality.

Multiculturalism has gained legal and cultural power, but it has also attracted criticism as it has become bureaucratically entrenched. As a governmental policy which seeks to enforce tolerance and equality, multiculturalism can be very Puritanical in spirit. It frowns and scolds and censors. Comedians and cartoonists make fun of multiculturalism when they perceive its extremes in language and policy. Yet, humor can also promote what multiculturalism itself seeks--tolerance, understanding and even sympathy among different ethnic groups who can share a common human tradition of laughter.

To understand the complicated relation of humor to multiculturalism, we need to review briefly how ethnic humor in America has functioned historically, to look at how multiculturalism itself has become an object of laughter today, and to examine how humor can further the cause of sympathy and understanding between culturally different groups. Some of the most memorable examples of ethnic humor come from the two most dispossessed ethnic groups in America--African-Americans and Native Americans.

To illustrate the dangers of trying to be funny in public about race or gender, consider what happened to black comedian Whoopi Goldberg and white comedian Ted Danson. At a gathering of black and white celebrities, Danson performed in blackface--made up as a black man in the tradition of the old minstrel shows--and proceeded to crack a number of jokes about sex and race, referring often to his own affair with Whoopi. He used the word "nigger" frequently.

Several black members of the audience were offended and walked out. The press seized upon the incident as a scandal, and accounts of it filled the media. Danson explained in his defense that he and Goldberg had been receiving a lot of hate mail about their relationship, so they had decided to do a comic routine "that would bring racial stereotypes into the open." Goldberg said that she had actually written most of Danson's monologue herself.

Not all of the press comment was critical. Several of the black celebrities in attendance were said to have found Danson's performance "very funny." Frank Rich wrote in *The New York Times Magazine*, "What Danson and Goldberg did, and it is an achievement for which clowns are particularly qualified, is to blast open the excessively polite verbal and social codes that mask the truth about what people are really thinking and feeling" (24).

Audrey Edwards, a black magazine editor, had a different view of the controversy. "We are not at a point," she said, "where anybody can be comfortable with making fun of black stereotypes. For a lot of people, what took place plays into the old stereotypes about the master and the slave woman" (qtd. in Williams 1).

The incident dramatizes two important qualities of ethnic humor in America: ethnic jokes can break taboos and release suppressed emotions, but they always offend someone.

Laughter, Konrad Lorenz notes in *On Aggression*, "produces simultaneously a strong fellow feeling among participants and joint aggression against outsiders ... Laughter forms a bond and simultaneously draws a line" (253). Ethnic humor does this to extreme.

Consider the light bulb joke, a brief modern version of the ethnic joke.

Suppose I am Turkish and I ask,

"How many Americans does it take to screw in a light bulb?"
"Three. One to hold the bulb and two to turn the ladder."

We have a laugh at the expense of the Americans, exporting the unwanted quality of stupidity to them and feeling superior in the process. Suppose instead that I ask my fellow Americans, "How many Turks does it take to screw in a light bulb?" Now I draw the line around Americans, and Turks are excluded and offended. Perhaps it is better to ask, "How many Russians does it take to screw in a light bulb? We bond against an historical enemy whom we might want to patronize at the moment because we feel a little sorry for them. Laughing at an ethnic group serves to stereotype it and (in the language of multiculturalism) to marginalize it, make it Other. The essence of this kind of humor is ridicule, and comedy, Aristotle noted, is built on ridicule.

Blacks and Indians were ridiculed through two popular stereotypes--the Negro minstrel who grinned and danced and the somber Indian brave or chief who never smiled and spoke in pidgin English. The minstrel appeared in the early 1800's--not as a black entertainer, but as a white man who imitated a comic version of a black character by coloring his face black. The minstrel figure has a long and complicated history in American culture, since it began with whites acting out their version of a foolish black character, which in turn was copied by black entertainers; but the minstrel tradition had enormous power in creating a stereotype which cast black people as essentially comic figures in the popular imagination. Indians, because they usually spoke little English and rarely smiled when they were photographed in the nineteenth century, were characterized in the popular imagination as silent and expressionless. Both figures spoke in a humorous dialect (making fun of ethnic accents in English is a large part of American ethnic humor). Both figures were more the creations of the popular imagination than reflections of reality.

However, Blacks and Indians had ways of laughing at their oppressors. There existed in African-American culture a long tradition of subversive humor, even in the era of slavery. In his recent study *On the Real Side*, a history of African-American humor, Mel Watkins cites a slave narrative called "Puttin' on Old Massa." It contains stories like this: pretending not to know the difference between a lion and a donkey, slaves flatter the master by telling him how much he resembles a lion; then slowly the master realizes that they consider him not a lion, but an ass (67). The anecdote illustrates Freud's observation that jokes provide a kind of psychic release for the sorts of energies that society suppresses. Humor is liberating. "Humor is not resigned, " Freud says. "It is rebellious. Humor signifies the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure principle, which is strong enough to assert itself in the face of adverse circumstances" (qtd. in Lowe 442-443). Black autobiographies such as those of Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, or James Weldon Johnson regularly turn humor and ridicule against their white oppressors.

In both black and American Indian cultures, the Trickster figure personifies one subversive element of humor. In African-American folklore, the Trickster could be a figure like Brer Rabbit in the Uncle Remus tales, who fools other characters and lives by his wits. In Native American mythologies, the Trickster could also be a rabbit, but was more often personified by Coyote, a greedy, salacious, and changeable creature, half hero, half fool--an ironic and irreverent character who always manages to survive, and who represents vitality and continuity as well as the capriciousness of the universe. The heyokas, the sacred clowns of the Sioux, would paint each half of their faces with a different color, or shave half their heads, to symbolize the "laughing and the weeping" sides of reality. Indian people also had a long tradition of teasing, of using humor as "a way of controlling social situations and keeping individual egos in step with tribal concensus" (Deloria 147).

Laughter has historically been a way of retaining some dignity in the face of oppression. Most humor, Freud maintained, is mental release from suffering. Laughter is a kind of therapy. Both African-American and Indian writers remark on the importance of humor in the survival of both peoples during their painful history of oppression. "Humor is the best and sharpest weapon we've always had against the ravages of conquest and assimilation," says Paula Gunn Allen, Indian critic and poet (qtd. in Lincoln 7). A black counterpart writes: "In the grim and harsh reality of Black life in America the black man has been able to laugh as he probes his bleeding wound--to laugh instead of succumb to utter despair and defeat" (Dance 125).

In the 1960's, these native traditions of humor began to assert themselves during the period of the Civil Rights movement, when what we now call multiculturalism started to take legal shape. After being objects of ridicule, black and Indian figures began to turn the subversive elements in their humor publicly against the establishment. Dick Gregory was one of the first black comedians to direct this kind of humor against the status quo, to use humor as a weapon in the campaign for civil rights and racial justice. Here's a sample of Dick Gregory's ironic black humor, quite new in the 60's: "Isn't this the most fascinating country in the world? Where else would I have to ride in the back of the bus, have a choice of going to the worst schools, eating in the worst restaurants, living in the worst neighborhoods--and make $5000 a week just talking about it?" (Hughes 9).

After the passage of the first Civil Rights bill in 1965, other minority groups such as American Indians began to become more outspoken in their pursuit of justice and equality. This reawakening of voice and spirit can perhaps be symbolized by the fictional character of Big Chief Bromden in Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Bromden, as the reader will recall, has pretended for years to be deaf and dumb, but begins to recover his strength and dignity when MacMurphy gets him to laugh.

Vine Deloria, Jr., whose "Indian Manifesto" *Custer Died for Your Sins* became the foremost articulation of Indian political activism, draws on traditional Native American traditions of humor. In a discussion of Indian humor, Deloria complains that "It has always been a great disappointment that the humorous side of Indian life has not been mentioned by professed experts on Indian affairs. Only the image of the granite-faced grunting redskin has been perpetuated by American mythology" (146).

Indians, Deloria argues, are just the opposite of the popular stereotype. If anything, he says, they like to laugh too much. Indian humor directed at whites is typified by the many jokes about Columbus and Custer, two white men who occupy peculiar places in Indian history. "When Columbus landed, one Indian turned to another and said, 'Well, there goes the neighborhood.'" Indians say that Columbus "didn't know where he was going, didn't know where he had been, and did it all on someone else's money." (Columbus is a culture hero of Italian-Americans, but most other American minorities, Indians and Blacks especially, make him the object of jokes.)

In the aftermath of the Vietnam war, American comedy broke through more inhibitions and became more outrageous, following the lead of ethnic comedians. In the mid-70's, a new comedy program called*Saturday Night Live* debuted on national television. Its young comedians specialized in the very kind of humor I am considering--speaking the unspeakable and ridiculing. In a now-famous comedy sketch, they took on the problem of racial hatred and made it funny. A black comedian named Richard Pryor appeared on the show. Pryor had developed a reputation as "a dangerous genius, an explosive embodiment of Black Rage." The white comedian Chevy Chase played the part of a job interviewer giving a word association test to Pryor. The test began innocently with words like "tree" and "dog," but it soon became an exchange of racial insults:

"White," Chevy said. "Black," Pryor answered.
"Negro." "Whitie."
"Tarbaby." "What'd you say?"
"Tarbaby." "Ofay."
"Colored." "Redneck."
"Junglebunny. "Peckerwood!"
"Burrhead." "Cracker!"
"Spearchucker." "White trash!"
"Junglebunny!" "Honkey!"
"Nigger!" "Dead honkey!" (Hill and Weingrad 117-118)

Audiences laughed, and the moment became a kind of watermark in the history of TV comedy. Speaking the unspeakable provided a public catharsis. The two comedians succeeded in making fun of racial prejudice in a way that Whoopi Goldberg and Ted Danson did not.

Ethnic or racial humor in the media, however, offends more often than it amuses.. At the University of Michigan a few years ago, a student hosting a radio talk show asked listeners to phone in their favorite joke about race. This touched off both a

flood of callers with jokes and more callers outraged at the jokes. The student was suspended and Michigan began deliberating a way to prevent such abuse of public speech. The president of Michigan called on the university to set an example of how a diverse and pluralistic community can work for the larger society. One of the ways of ensuring ethnic harmony was to enforce public politeness by adopting speech codes, rules forbidding the uttering of insults on matters of race, religion, gender, or sexual preference. However, these speech codes, intended to promote multiculturalism, backfired. A widely-publicized case at my own university, the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, demonstrates why.

A group of women from a black sorority were singing in celebration late one evening and several students in a nearby dormitory shouted down at them to be quiet. The shouts included some insulting words, but when the girls confronted the shouting students, only one admitted that he had said something. He had called them "water buffalo."

He was charged by the university judicial officer with using offensive language and a punishment was recommended. The student refused to accept the judgement. The term "water buffalo" had no racial connotation, he said. It was a Hebrew word, and expressed in Hebrew something like the word "donkey" expresses in English.

The professor who was advising the offending student leaked the story to the *Wall Street Journal*, and soon *Time*, *Newsweek* and national television had stories about the "Water Buffalo" case and its denial of freedom of speech. The student became a minor celebrity and appeared on talk shows as a victim of unfair codes restricting speech. In the end, the girls who had brought the charges felt humiliated and dropped the case. The university, having learned its lesson, repealed the speech codes. The Philadelphia newspaper ran a cartoon of two water buffalos discussing the case, as a way of ridiculing the absurdities committed by supposedly intelligent people in a university.

Political cartooning is a category of humor which depends primarily on simplification and exaggeration. Political cartoonists have been one group of humorists who have both attacked the excesses of multiculturalism and political correctness and been attacked by groups who find their cartoons offensive and stereotypical. Cartoons are a kind of basic language; they simplify issues and controversies. The economy of the art, the very reduction of an idea to a minimum of lines and figures, is part of the humor. Since cartoonists have to represent groups and individuals by recognizable characteristics, they inevitably run the risk of stereotyping.

Consider the cartoons below (see Appendix). The first expresses the cartoonist's frustration about the offense of stereotyping, especially problematical for an artist who by his medium is limited to only a few strokes with which to make different

groups recognizable. To escape the accusations of prejudice by various groups, he makes everyone look alike--like the white male establishment!..

The second cartoon pokes fun at bureaucratic jargon, the official language of multiculturalism. The epitaph ("Biologically Animated" instead of "born," and "Respiratorially Challenged" instead of "died") pokes fun at the euphemistic language of political correctness, the kind of cautious, legalistic speech which takes excessive care to avoid giving offense. (The term "political correctness" itself comes from cartoons; it was coined in fun by a student cartoonist at Brown University, but became a rallying cry of conservative journalists.)

Euphemistic language is also the target of the third cartoon, together with the cigarette industry, which is under strong attack in the US. The reference is to the term "people of color," a multicultural phrase which gathers together Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Hispanics, American Indians--any people who do not consider themselves white. The tobacco executive in the cartoon thinks the phrase "people of smoke" will make smoking sound less objectionable, more socially acceptable and politically correct.

The fourth cartoon uses the characters of the Lone Ranger and his faithful Indian companion Tonto, the best-known cowboy and Indian in the entertainment industry, to comment on the recent successes of casinos on Indian reservations. (Gambling is legal on reservations because Indian lands are exempted from state prohibitions on gambling.) Tonto has reversed the stereotypical master-servant roles (and the historical relation of exploiter to exploited) by beating the Lone Ranger at strip poker.

Comedians fear the same kind of censorship as cartoonists do. The radio humorist and writer Garrison Keillor has complained about what he calls the "joke police," moralists who take offense at his jokes. Keillor made fun of the language of militancy in a manifesto for "Shy Rights." The very contradiction between shyness and militancy makes the piece hilarious. Pay attention to the familiar language:

> Sometimes I feel that maybe we shy persons have borne our terrible burden for far too long now. Labelled by society as "wimps" and "sissies" ... we shys are desperately misunderstood on every hand. Because we don't express our feelings, it is assumed we don't have any.
> Would anyone dare to say to a woman, "Oh, don't be a woman!" Would they dare to say to a disadvantaged person, "Don't be so disadvantaged!" Would they dare say to a Third World person, "Don't be so Third!" And yet people make bold with us whenever they please and put an arm around us and tell us not to be shy...
> To us in the shy movement, shyness is not a disability or a disease to be "overcome." It is simply the way we are. And in our own quiet way, we are secretly proud of it ... It is "Shy Pride. (Keillor 274)

Keillor's group is imaginary, but real life provides equally comic examples. A Long Island elementary school recently cancelled a production of *Peter Pan* after some local Shinnecock Indians complained that the song "Ugg-a-wugg" was

disrespectful of Native Americans. (In *Peter Pan*, the lost boys are captured by the Indians, who tie them up and dance around them, singing "Ugg-a-Wugg.") Taking his cue from this protest, a *New York Times* columnist satirically listed other musicals which could be discriminatory: examples include *West Side Story*, which ridicules Puerto Ricans; *My Fair Lad*y, which contains the sexist song "Why Can't A Woman Be More Like a Man" ; and *Camelot*, which "glamorizes extramarital sex between Lancelot and Guinevere" (Rich, 24). Not even children's literature escapes this kind of ridicule. A current best-selling children's book, entitled *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, is a satiric rewriting of fairy tales in euphemistic jargon.

Figure five turns us to the subject of children. It is not a cartoon, but a representation of Big Bird of *Sesame Street*, which has successfully used humor for a generation to promote tolerance and understanding between cultures.

Childhood offers both innocence from prejudice and its own possibilities for humor. Before the word "multiculturalism" was common, *Sesame Street* was providing a community of animals, cartoon figures, and actors across the spectrum of race and gender. The contemporary comedian who has most cultivated the humorous possibilities of childhood, and who has appeared often with the *Sesame Street*muppets, is Bill Cosby, himself a kind of Big Bird of American humor.

Cosby's humor is very different from the sorts of humor we have been looking at. His brand of comedy does not entail ridicule or speaking the unspeakable. Cosby rises above racial differences to find comic material in universal human conditions and relationships--childhood or fatherhood, for example, the names of two of his best-selling books. The long-running *Cosby Show* has also made comic use of childhood innocence. To illustrate, the small daughter Olivia asked about Santa Claus, "Is he white, black, Chinese, or what?"

The amazing success of the show, which had an unprecedented eight-year run from 1984 to 1992 as the top-rated program on television, has spurred a continuing debate among critics, white and black, about the show's reflection of racial realities in America and its influence on perceptions of race and even behavior. The show's critics felt that Cosby was wrong to avoid subjects such as crime, violence, housing discrimination, or interracial dating. They said he presented an unreal and idealized picture of the black family. Others defended the show for rising above differences of race, breaking stereotypes white audiences held about blacks , and providing a positive image of black families--the very goals that a policy of multiculturalism aims at.

Black comedians like Cosby and Richard Pryor both appeal to white audiences, but for different reasons. Cosby had a happy childhood, a stable family life, a college education, and avoided drugs and alcohol. As a comedian, he makes humor out of common human pleasures. In *The Cosby Show*, he took an older form of humorous

program, the family situation comedy, which had fallen out of popularity in the 1980's, and reinvented it with a black family as pleasant and agreeable as those happy white families in the TV Sitcoms of the 1950's and 1960's. Pryor, on the other hand, was raised by a single parent, dropped out of school early, and had a heavy cocaine habit. As a result, he generally makes comedy out a common human pain such as drug addiction, failed love or divorce, creating his own kind of humor out of the pain and misfortune of the ghetto.

In 1980, Pryor accidentally set himself on fire while free-basing cocaine (he was also smoking and drinking vodka at the time), and suffered burns over 50% of his body. He recovered, returned to comedy, and even transformed the pain of that experience into his comic routine which reminds the viewer that pain is colorblind. (One typical joke: "In the burn ward, everybody is the same color--Pink!")

Human suffering is not confined to any particular ethnic group any more than humor is. However, in American history, the suffering of minorities and immigrant groups has been disproportionate. Perhaps this is why these same groups have had a disproportionate influence on American humor--that is to say, minorities and ethnic groups have had a far greater influence on American humor than their numbers might lead one to expect. One historian of American humor goes as far as to say that "Ethnic comedians, especially blacks and Jews, have in many ways created the national sense of humor in America" (Lowe 452-453).

Comedians and cartoonists make fun of multiculturalism when it is taken to extremes. As a political policy which seeks to enforce tolerance and equality, as pointed out earlier, multiculturalism can be very Puritanical in spirit. It frowns and scolds and censors. But humour can also promote the ends which itself seeks--tolerance, understanding, sympathy--even affection among different ethnic groups who can share a human tradition of laughter.

As groups become more sensitive to perceived insults about ethnic origin, gender, sexual preference, or disability in our society, the need for comedy seems to increase as well--as if in response to some natural law of action and reaction. The ever-growing popularity in America of stand-up comedy, promoted through comedy clubs and cable television, has encouraged all sorts of ethnic comedy, by women as well as men. In addition to African-American, Native American, Italian-American, Polish-American and Jewish-American comedians, there are Asian-American comedians, Mexican-American comedians, Russian-American comedians, Arab-American comedians and Greek-American comedians. (Perhaps we may yet see a Turkish-American comedian!) These comedians poke fun at their own ethnic groups and at old ethnic stereotypes--but from the inside rather than the outside. That makes all the difference in the world. When you make a joke about yourself or your ethnic or minority group, it makes an audience laugh with you rather than at you. A particularly moving example of this truth was a recent television production featuring comedians with disabilities such as cerebral palsy,

deafness and paralysis. They testified that laughter helped them cope with their afflictions.

Ethnic groups in America have a long and divisive tradition of ridicule, of laughing at each other. Yet real artists of comedy can turn this tradition to advantage by making the various ethnic groups laugh with each other. Multiculturalism aims to assure equality and understanding among different groups of people, and humour can be one way of bridging those differences. Langston Hughes was calling for a sharing of humor between black and white writers as early as the 1930's, and the very titles of two of his books, *Not Without Laughter* and *The Book of Negro Humor*, demonstrate the importance of humor in his vision. The experience of laughing together can promote understanding between cultures like no other activity. Vine Deloria, the Indian, praised Dick Gregory, the black comedian, for introducing humor into the Civil Rights struggle in the 1960's. Through humor, he said, Gregory "enabled non-blacks to enter into the thought world of the black community and experience the hurt it suffered" (146).

Before I had ever set foot in Turkey, a joke told to me by a Turkish friend in America gave me just this sort of insight into a culture I knew little about.

The Turkish Prime Minister lands in Ankara and has to take a cab into the city. On the way in, the cab driver turns to him and asks, "Have you heard the latest joke about the Prime Minister?"
The Prime Minister is somewhat taken aback. "But I am the Prime Minister,'" he says.
'"That's OK," replies the taxi driver. "I'll tell it slow."

The joke exemplifies to me how all cultures use humor as a way of getting back at those in authority. It also shows how humor moves easily between cultures. (I subsequently made it into an American joke by substituting the American President for the Turkish Prime Minister.)

Humor has universal qualities that rise above cultural differences. "Laughter is what characterizes man," said Rabelais. Appreciating the laughter of another culture can create a kind of empathy for that culture and help an outsider to identify with it. Perhaps Vine Deloria, Jr., best expressed the importance of this aspect of humor when he remarked to a white audience interested in Indians, "One of the best ways to understand a people is to know what makes them laugh" (146).

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