

# AMST 395m: African American Humor and Culture

Spring 2004

Lec 10234R

M/W 8:30-9:50AM

VHE 206

**Professor:** Lanita Jacobs-Huey

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[Note: To get to my office, you must first enter the Anthropology Department at GFS 120]

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Office Hours: M/W 2-3PM; also by appointment. You can also contact me Monday-Friday via email.

Course Website: TBA (To be announced)

## Required Texts:

1. AMST 395 Reader (*Abbreviated as **RDR** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
2. Du Bois, W.E.B. 1997 [1903]. *The Souls of Black Folk*, Edited with Introduction by David W. Blight and Robert Gooding-Williams. Boston: Bedford Books. (*Abbreviated as **Du Bois** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
3. Gregory, Dick. 1995 [1964]. *Nigger: An Autobiography*, with Robert Lipsyte. New York: Pocket Books. (*Abbreviated as **Gregory** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
4. Hurston, Zora Neale. 1990 [1935]. *Mules and Men*. New York: HarperCollins. (*Abbreviated as **Hurston** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
5. Watkins, Mel. 1994. *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying - The Underground Tradition of African American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor*. New York: Simon and Schuster. (*Abbreviated as **Watkins 1994** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
6. Watkins, Mel (Ed.) 2002. *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books. (*Abbreviated as **Watkins 2002** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)

## Highly Recommended Texts:

1. Borns, Betsy. 1987. *Comic Lives: Inside the World of American Stand-Up Comedy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. (*Abbreviated as **Borns** in Reading and Exam Schedule*)
2. Dance, Daryl Cumber. 1998. *Honey, Hush!: An Anthology of African American Women's Humor*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company. (*Abbreviated as **Dance** in Reading & Exam Schedule*)
3. Zinsser, William. 2001. *On Writing Well*. Sixth Edition. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. (*Though optional, this text is highly recommended as a resource for your essay, and writing in general*)

**NOTE:** All course texts are **on reserve** in Leavey Library.

**Course Description:** This course examines a long tradition of African American humor in theatre (e.g., “blackface” minstrelsy), TV/radio (e.g., *Amos ‘N’ Andy*), literature/folklore, and, principally, Black or “urban” standup comedy. We will explore how these diverse comedic forms offer insights into shifting notions of race/racial “authenticity,” culture, language, and identity in and beyond Black America. Through an investigation of interdisciplinary theories of Black humor in folklore, linguistics, anthropology, and cultural/literary studies, we shall come to appreciate the themes/tropes, linguistic conventions, discourse styles, and performative genres that characterize the broad category of African American humor. Field visits to urban comedy clubs/shows and guest speakers will also afford our analysis of (i) comics and their audiences as co-producers of Black humor, (ii) the urban comedy clubs/show as a communal forum, and (iii) comics as members of a community of practice. Throughout the course, we will assess (iv) the politics of representing Black humor and laughter that have impacted African American humorists and their audiences in poignant ways throughout history.

**Grading:** There will be a midterm and final exam covering assigned readings and/or films. Your score on the midterm will constitute 25% of your grade and your score on the final exam will constitute 40%. Each of the exams will include short-answer and essay questions and will be non-cumulative. In addition, 25% of your grade will be determined by an 8-10 page essay (excluding bibliography of 5-7 sources) due at the *beginning of lecture* on **Monday, March 23, 2004**. This essay should provide a critical review of a “live” standup comedy performance observed at a local, urban comedy club or show. You may invoke one or several course themes (e.g., comic-audience dynamics; standup comedy as personal memoir, cultural or political commentary; gendered humor; standup comedy as a window into race, cultural identity, language, etc.) in your paper. Your essay **must adhere** to the following format: double-spaced, 12 point-font, 1” top, bottom, right, and left margins. (Additional guidelines, as well as sample comedy reviews, will be available on the course web page.) The remaining 10% of your grade will be determined by your class participation. As such, you are strongly encouraged to keep up with assigned readings/films so that you are adequately prepared to participate in class discussions. Extra credit opportunities will be offered in the form of a two-point “bonus question” on the midterm and final exam. The grading scale is as follows:

**Grading Scale:**

94-100 = A	87-89 = B+	77-79 = C+	67-69 = D+	≥ 59 = F
90-93 = A-	84-86 = B	74-76 = C	64-66 = D	
	80-83 = B-	70-73 = C-	60-63 = D-	

GRADE BASIS
Midterm: 25%
Essay/Comedy Review: 25%
Final Exam: 40%
Participation: 10%

**An Official Note on Examinations:** Make-up exams will only be given under extraordinary circumstances and will require documentation from a physician. The content and form of any make-up exam will be at my discretion. In any case, you should inform me via email or phone prior to missing an exam. If you feel you must reschedule an exam on account of having (a) two additional exams scheduled at the same time or (b) three exams in a 24-hour period, inform me *at least* two weeks prior to our scheduled mid-term. The final exam **must** be taken at the time noted below. Also, **no late** or emailed essays/comedy reviews will be accepted.

**Attendance:** A grading percentage will not be given for class attendance. However, consistent and punctual attendance in lecture and discussion section(s) is strongly encouraged to increase your understanding of course materials. Your record of attendance may also be considered in the case of borderline grades. It is ultimately *your* responsibility to be aware of class lectures and assignments. Should sickness, family emergencies, or other events necessitate your absence from class, I recommend that you consult your peers for copies of their lecture notes.

**Academic Accommodations:** Students requesting academic accommodations based on a disability should register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP when necessary documentation is filed. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible, preferably by or before fifth week. DSP is open Monday-Friday, 8:30AM-5PM. The office is in Student Union 301 and their phone number is 213-740-0776.

**Class Structure:** Class meetings will consist of lecture and discussion, with a clear emphasis on the latter. As such, it is essential that you keep up with the weekly readings and that you hand in assignments on time. This class also entails a field visit to an urban comedy club or show. A list of recommended comedy venues in Los Angeles area will be provided in class; the instructor might also arrange for a class visit to a local, urban comedy club to take place during the seventh week of class. During several lectures (see Reading and Exam Schedule), African American and/or “urban” comics will be invited to address class themes and field questions.

**Class Resources:** This course is a Blackboard course. Consult the course’s Blackboard web page for *weekly discussion questions* about assigned readings, as well as *course media* (e.g., photos, etc.) that relate to class discussions. You should consider the discussion questions to be an important resource as you prepare for exams. The course web page will also include *class information* (e.g., *syllabus*, *sample “standup comedy reviews”*, *essay guidelines*, *exam tips*) and other information related to the course.

## READING & EXAM SCHEDULE

- Week 1:** **COURSE INTRODUCTION, INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES TO HUMOR AND LAUGHTER:**  
 1/12 *What is humor? How is laughter produced? How has humor been studied?*  
 1/14
- *Class Overview:* Syllabus, Exam Policy, Essay Guidelines, etc.
  - Apte: Chapter 6: Humor and Language [in RDR]
  - Carrell: Joke Competence and Humor Competence
  - Purdue: Introduction; Joking as the “Ab-use” of Language [in RDR]
  - Zinsser: *Optional Text*
- Week 2:** **EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN HUMOR – ETHNOGRAPHY/FOLKLORE/LITERARY: How is everyday Black humor reflected in ethnographic/literary studies? What politics surrounded these comic representations of Black culture and identity?**  
 1/19 No Class  
 1/21
- Cross: Jokes and Black Consciousness: [*Optional*; in RDR]
  - Gordon: Humor in African American Discourse [*Optional*; in RDR]
  - Hughes: Jokes Negroes Tell on Themselves [in RDR]
  - Hurston: Mules and Men, Part I
  - Levine: Black Laughter [in RDR; *Optional*]
  - Washington: Zora Neale Hurston: A Woman in Half Shadow [in RDR]
  - Watkins 2002: Introduction
- Week 3:** **EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN HUMOR – THEATRE, TV/RADIO: When did “blackface” minstrelsy emerge and what opportunities were afforded to Black artists? How were African American “blackface” performances and, later, radio and TV shows like Amos ‘N’ Andy received by Black audiences? What did Black audiences perceive to be at stake in these comedic representations?**  
 1/26  
 1/28
- Coleman: Introduction [in RDR]
  - Ely: The Great Migration into America’s Living Room [in RDR]
  - Krasner: Introduction – Black Theatre and American Society [in RDR; *Optional*]
  - Smith: Chs. 18 & 22, *Bert Williams: A Biography of the Pioneer Black Comedian* [in RDR]
  - Watkins 1994: Ch. 3, Black Minstrelsy to Vaudeville ... *Black on Black* [in RDR]
  - Watkins 1994: Ch. 7: Radio and Early Television [in RDR]
  - Film: *Amos ‘N’ Andy: Anatomy of a Controversy*  
*Ethnic Notions* (excerpts)
- Week 4:** **BLACK/“URBAN” STANDUP COMEDY – ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES: How might an anthropologist study Black standup comedy and its practitioners (i.e., comedians, audiences)?**  
 2/2  
 2/4
- Borns: Audiences ... Make Laughter, Not War [in RDR]
  - Duranti & Brenna: The Audience as Co-Author [in RDR]
  - Jacobs-Huey: The Natives are Gazing and Talking Back [in RDR]
  - Koziski: The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist [in RDR]
  - Mintz: Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Medium
  - Watkins 1994: Prologue – Black Humor ... *What it is* [In RDR]
- Week 5:** **BLACK/“URBAN” STANDUP COMEDY – LANGUAGE, FORM, CONVENTIONS: What discourse styles and linguistic conventions characterize African American/“urban” standup comedy? How is culture reflected in comics’ use of language during joke-telling?**  
 2/9  
 2/11
- Apte: Chapter 1: Joking Relationships [in RDR]
  - Coleman: Black Performance in the African Diaspora [in RDR]
  - Greenbaum: Stand-Up Comedy as Rhetorical Argument [in RDR]
  - Morgan: More than a Mood or an Attitude [in RDR]
  - Roy: The Function of Irony in Discourse [in RDR]
  - Rutter: The Stand-Up Introduction Sequence [in RDR]
  - Film/Video: *Select Comedy Clips*

**Week 6: Midterm on Wednesday, February 18<sup>th</sup>!**

2/16 No Class

2/18 Midterm

**Week 7: RACE, IDENTITY, AND AUTHENTICITY: *How has blackness been defined in Black standup comedy? What constitutes one as racially “authentic” or “inauthentic” in urban standup routines (e.g., language, class)? What notions of (racial) identity are apparent in the popular comedic trope of Black-White cultural differences?***

2/23

2/25

- Apte: Chapter 4: Humor, Ethnicity, and Intergroup Relations [in RDR]
- Dance: “Just Like the White Man” [in RDR]
- Harper: What’s My Name [in RDR]
- McWhorter: The New Black Double Consciousness [in RDR]
- Film/Video: *Black Is ... Black Ain’t*  
*Select Comedy Clips*

**Week 8: BLACK STANDUP COMEDY AS POLITICAL CRITIQUE: *How does Black standup comedy function as a form of political critique? How do black comics make sense of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks? How do their jokes index questions of race, culture, and American identity post 9/11?***

3/1

3/3

- Du Bois: Introduction; On Our Spiritual Strivings
- Ellis: A Model for Collecting and Interpreting World Trade Center Disaster Jokes; Making a Big Apple Crumble [in RDR; *Optional*]
- Gwaltney: Introduction; A Nation within a Nation [in RDR]
- Jacobs-Huey: “The Arab is the New Nigger” [in RDR]
- Haggins: Laughing Mad [in RDR]
- Neuman: Hear the One About the Traveling Taliban? [in RDR]
- Williams & Williams: Chapter 5 [in RDR]
- Film/Video: *Select Comedy Clips*

**Week 9: BLACK STANDUP COMEDY AS CULTURAL COMMENTARY – HAIR NARRATIVES: *What cultural observations/critiques are apparent in black standup comedy? Specifically, how do comedy routines about black hair and skin color reflect a broader politics of hair and identity in African America?***

3/8

3/10

- Gwaltney: The Many Shades of Black [in RDR]
- Jacobs-Huey: Epistemological Deliberations [in RDR]
- Mercer: Black Hair/Style Politics [in RDR]
- Film/Video: *Select Comedy Clips*

**SPRING BREAK [No class]****Week 10: GENDERED HUMOR: *How are issues of gender/sexuality represented of black standup comedy? How does gender constrain who and what can be funny?***

3/23

3/25

- Apte: Chapter 2: Sexual Inequality in Humor [in RDR]
- Avins: Surely She Jests [in RDR]
- Berger: And Since Then: Standup Comedy 1975-1985 [*skim*; in RDR]
- Dresner: Whoopi Goldberg and Lily Tomlin: Black and White Women’s Humor [*opt.*; in RDR]
- Watkins 2002: Women and Men (307-310)
- Williams: Mabley’s Persona [in RDR]
- Video Clips/Film: To be announced (TBA)
- Guest Speaker(s): TBA

📖 **Comedy Essays/Reviews Due Monday, March 23<sup>rd</sup> at beginning of Lecture!**

- Week 11:** **BLACK STANDUP COMEDY AS PERSONAL NARRATIVE/MEMOIR:** *How do comics use the stage to make sense of their cultural identity, past experiences, and anticipated futures? To what extent are their experiences palatable, humorous, and universal?*  
3/29  
3/31
- Ajaye: Sinbad; George Wallace [in RDR]
  - Borns: Pith and Vinegar... Inside the Comic Mind [in RDR]
  - Gregory: Nigger; Read entire Text
  - Watkins 1994: Pryor and Thereafter ... *On the real side*
  - Guest Speaker(s): TBA
- Week 12:** **BLACK STANDUP: POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION:** *How do comics reconcile the art of standup comedy with the politics of representing Black culture, language, and identity before African American and/or mixed audiences? How is the controversial signifier “nigger” used in urban standup? How do debates concerning the use of “nigger” and “dirty/blue” comedy compare/contrast with earlier debates about Black humor and laughter?*  
4/5  
4/7
- Allen: Now That’s a Joyful Noise [in RDR]
  - Coleman: Black Sitcom Portrayals: The Good, The Bad, and the Worse [*skim*; in RDR]
  - Hammer: Must Blacks Be Buffoons? [in RDR]
  - Kennedy: Ch. 1, Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word [in RDR]
  - McWhorter: The Unbearable Lightness of the ‘N’ Word [in RDR]
  - Perret: Be Funny, Not Just Dirty [in RDR]
  - Watkins 1994 (news article): He Certainly Isn’t the First [in RDR]
  - Williams & Williams: Ch. 10 [in RDR]
  - Guest Speaker(s): TBA
- Week 13:** **BROADER REPRESENTATIONS OF “URBAN” STANDUP COMEDY:** *What familiar or distinct themes emerge in the standup routines of non-black (e.g., Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, European American) “urban” comics?*  
4/12  
4/14
- Basso: Joking Imitations of Anglo Americans – Interpretive Functions [in RDR]
  - Price: Laughing without Reservations [in RDR; *Optional*]
  - Santa Ana: Insurgent Metaphors [in RDR]
  - Schutz: The Sociability of Ethnic Jokes
  - Tuan: “I’m American with a Japanese Look” [in RDR]
  - Guest Speaker(s): TBA
- Week 14:** **RESOLVING BREACHES IN BLACK STANDUP COMEDY:** *How do comics resolve breaches during their standup routines? What discourse strategies do they employ to silence “hecklers”? What discourse skills are necessary when performing for Black versus White audiences?*  
4/19  
4/21
- Borns: Hecklers and Horrors [in RDR]
  - Audio: Excerpts of *Audio-taped Interviews with African American Comics*
  - Guest Speaker(s): TBA
- Week 15:** **BLACK/URBAN STANDUP COMEDY – NEGOTIATING RESPONSIBILITY, CHOICE, AND ACCOUNTABILITY:** *How do African American or “urban” comic celebrities negotiate the politics of their success? How do they reconcile communal notions of how they should “represent” their culture with the often conflicting demands of the entertainment industry?*  
4/26  
4/28
- Braxton: Spare the Rod, Spoil the Jokes (The Bernie Mac Show) [in RDR]
  - Calvo: Will This One Click? (*The George Lopez Show*) [in RDR]
  - Cheng: [Margaret] Cho and Her Mother of Comic Invention [in RDR]
  - Walker: Wayne Brady Talks About ... Critics Who Say He’s Not Black Enough [in RDR]
  - Film/Video: Excerpts of *I’m The One I Want* (Margaret Cho), *Mad TV*
  - Guest Speaker(s): TBA

**FINAL EXAM: Monday, May 10<sup>th</sup> 11AM-1PM m. VHE 206**

## **COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY (Textbooks in Bold)**

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