So What's Funny? Understanding Black Humor on the Web, A Folklorist's Perspective

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Introduction

Storytelling, limericks, songs, puns, and many other face-to-face avenues of both delivering and receiving humor are an integral part of the human experience. Part of the utility of humor is its ability to reinforce social bonds and shared identities through face-to-face interactional settings that are fundamentally embodied. With the recent and rapid emergence of the Internet—alongside social media platforms—a new type of jocularity has emerged that I term "digital humor." This new form offers both opportunities and limitations—mass proliferation and disembodiment, respectively. This paper explores the relationship and tension between these two aspects of digital humor through the window African-American humor. Humor has been a binding agent of the African-American experience in ways that comment both directly and subversively on racial hegemony. It has been an avenue for African-Americans to exert power, relieve frustrations, and *signify* his or her position, attitudes, and stance in a hostile world. With this history in mind, I explore digital humor on social media platforms in order to reveal how humor changes once it goes beyond face-to-face interaction; beyond traditional settings that rely on an embodied singular shared "Black" identity and ask: *what happens in virtual contexts that are disembodied?* I contend that this sense of shared identity becomes fractured along the lines of race, phenotype, class, and gender precisely because it is disembodied, distanced, and therefore available for critical scrutiny that calls into question what Black identity is and who gets to claim it.

Black Humor, A History

I begin with a fundamental premise: laughter is embodied. Laughter is a visceral bodily reaction to humor. Therefore, we cannot consider humor without embodiment. This concern with embodiment becomes politicized if we turn our attention to the topic of African-American humor because it implies the racialized black body. Black humor—within the context of the United States—is intimately tied to the historical experience of slavery: bodies in bondage. As author Glenda Carpio (2008) states in *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery,* "Black American humor began as a wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel" (4). In a historical context, humor was necessary for survival, it provided an expressive space where "bodies—otherwise considered disposable bio-commodities—[enacted] and [laid] claim to a life (bios) otherwise denied them" (Chávez 2015: 166). Often the institutions of both race and slavery were the targets of such humor. For instance, Carpio (2008) cites the tale of a black man that wanders into Mississippi and asks a white man, "Where do the colored folks hang out here?" Pointing to a large tree in the public square, the white man replies, "Do you see that limb?" (5-6). This tale, like many others, makes light of racial violence and may have been used as a coping method for African Americans in the U.S. South.

Given this potent motif, I use the concept "Black humor" in a dual sense. First, I take it reference African-American humor, or in other words, humor from the African-American folkloric tradition. Second, I take it to mean humor haunted by "the grim and harsh reality of Black life in America" (Dance 1977: 125). The term *black humor* (from the French *humour noir*) was coined by the surrealist theorist André Breton in the 1930s to refer to a sub-genre of comedy and satire where laughter arises from cynicism and skepticism, often relying on topics such as death. Returning to Carpio's tale, the joke at

the center of the story in her example shows, how black bodies are disposable, which therefore means it is emergent from a tradition grounded in the African American experience. His example also demonstrates Toni Morison's concept of social death, or the annihilation of human dignity. Literal death is the result of lynching, but I contend that social death is just as serious because it is the equivalent of the killing of the soul. Expressive culture—in this case humor about death, or *black humor*—allowed slaves and their descendants to gain symbolic leverage over their oppressors as a way to avoid social death. Therefore, the second meaning of black humor that I make reference to allows me to speak directly to the symbolic functions of black humor in its first meaning as an embodied aesthetic tradition of folklore created by black bodies. Traditionally, one medium for expression of black humor has been through folklore.

Folkloristics is concerned with the study of folklore as expressive performance. The discipline identifies three defining features that distinguish certain expressive practices as folkloric: they are (1) aesthetic in scope (artful); (2) democratic (are shared among a community); (3) enacted in face-to-face interactional settings. Therefore, one central aspect of folklore, as performance, is embodiment. Embodiment has been theorized extensively in sociocultural anthropology with respect to both material experience and social affects. However, I turn to the work of José Limón (1994) and his concept of the social body. In his book *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas* (1994), Limón argues folklore that deals explicitly with the body is often a symbolic representation of how society views the body—from taboos about sexuality and human waste, to racism and violence. Limón's work therefore allows me to consider both: (1) the embodiment of African American humor as folk performance; and (2) the symbolic cultural stance that African American

humor takes vis-à-vis the racism wielded against black bodies, so as to avoid social death historically.

Beyond skin color/race/ethnicity, black identity is the embodied experience of discursive tensions that arise between white America and black America—an experience part of the larger black diaspora, or a black global imagination conscious of its displacement, experience of anti-black racism, and the vital role of creating new social institutions outside of Africa. These tensions find release in various forms—in this case, humor—that allow for the generative persistence of individuals and the vitality of community. As Paul Gilroy (1993) states:

Because the self identity, political culture, and grounded aesthetics that distinguish black communities have often been constructed through their music and the broader cultural and philosophical meanings that flow from its production, circulation, and consumption, music is especially important in breaking the inertia, which arises in the unhappy polar opposition between squeamish, nationalist essentialism and a skeptical, saturnalian pluralism which makes the impure world of politics literally unthinkable. (102)

I dare replace the word music with humor. This sense of community—beyond nation and essentialist assumptions—has relied on the fact that each African American's situation and reality was similar enough that things such as humor carried meaning across contexts (i.e. different master, new place, etc..) A vital discourse of and in everyday life, humor breathed life into the otherwise inescapable death in America—death of personhood.

And as life slowly turns in America, moving from the tragic realities of slavery to the crushing frustrations of contemporary urban life, humor has also transformed to highlight

the absurdity of racial equality and freedom in America; and signifying has continued to play an important role. Just as Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston Hurston equate laughter with tears as cathartic treasures, then it is fitting that analyses of their works metaphorize their combined expressions of Black humor as a vehicle for resistance to power and domination (Woodard 1994: 432). It relieved the aches in their backs, dried the tears on their faces, and forced laughter even in the bleakest of situations. However, what happens when that humor circulates in mediated ways that are fundamentally disembodied (i.e. internet social media)? And so I turn to the notion of what I term "digital folklore" and the black body.

Everyday Moments and Soulful Humor

I present a humorous interlude at Notre Dame during an organization meeting that exposes and makes light of broader tensions:

Woman 1

Leans slightly in and crosses arms: "Why—in my math course—is the class explaining to the math Professor what they are doing wrong? Like bruh! Really!?"

Woman 2

Starts shaking her head and then makes a disapproving facial gesture and drinks imaginary iced tea: "This is what I **feel** when all the students go after the professor and T.A. with all types of disrespect as if they are experts."

While the first woman's statement is a quite literal observation of class tensions between students and professor, the second statement involves both the embodied and mediated forms of black humor. The ice tea gesture is a reference to the Kermit the Frog "but that's none of my business" meme, which began circulating in social media as early

as 2013. The meme is intended as a sarcastic postscript to an insult. However, in this case, the initial insult by Woman 2 is not verbal, but rather a facial gesture of disapproval with "attitude," which is then followed by the pantomiming of the meme. The physical gestures coupled with the statement "this is how I feel" necessitates that Woman 1 have access to the meme image and its meanings, but also to be attentive to the entire performance frame as one of humor where the body is central—pantomiming, gestures, etc. The discursive interaction continues:

But That's None Of My Business

Woman 1

"Nah, I just agree and keep my mouth shut. She ain't gonna take points off my grade cause she **feel** slighted."

Woman 2

"Right. I'll be like, 'Yaaa'll can argue with them, but I'll be over here minding my own business!' Ya **feel**?"

If we recall the defining features of folklore as performance, they are all present in this exchange: (1) the verbal interaction is occurring in a face to face setting; (2) the use of language has aesthetic qualities; (3) the expressive resources that are being used are part of a larger tradition of Black humor. Here, I will center on the use of **feel**, which

brings all of these elements together. While these two women are not explicitly speaking of instances of direct racism, they are performing in a safe space in which they can express themselves in ways that would otherwise mark them as Black racial others. The shaking of heads, expressive use of hands, these things are not insignificant. They are common forms of Black expression that are used to convey disapproval. There is **feeling** involved—the movement of bodies that feel, but also the face to face setting that allows interactions to emerge based on presumptions and shared feelings already there made possible by a physical coming together. This "**happening**" where people "**feel**" one another is made possible by a sense of shared identity that is assumed because members of the community have congregated to express and experience "the soul," as Roger Abraham discusses in his book *Positively Black*. This notion of "soul" refers to a cultural space where all the unpleasant past of Black America, or racial trauma, is transformed into a sense of shared history that must be overcome—one must have soul to survive. And soulful expressions are often those of humor. But does the soul survive in forms of expression disseminated online in ways beyond a physical community of **feeling** in each other's presence?

The Dark Web: Black Twitter, World Star Hip-Hop, Instagram, and the Racialization of Social (media) Space

Before we explore the meanings attached to the social media presence of African Americans on the internet, it is important to first note and examine where they are mobilizing, what platforms they are using, and why. A 2012 Pew Research Center study gives interesting statistics regarding the demographics of website visitors and social media users. The Research group compared three racial groups—Whites, African Americans, and Latinos—and separated them into spheres of young adult and older

adults. According to their findings, about 16% of African Americans use social media, which is larger than 15% for whites and 13% for Latinos. Perhaps even more surprising is the high number of African Americans who use Twitter and Instagram—about 26% and 23%, respectively. Why favor some platforms over others? I believe that certain platforms are more suited for the performative aspects of African American humor. In other words, sites like Vine, YouTube, and Instagram allow one to create videos and thus put on display the aesthetic competence of a "performer"—in this case video editor or meme creator—and the social media audience enters into an evaluator role, much like one does in person. Twitter seems to recreate a chain of discourse that is also suited for signifying and the dozens, in other words (pun intended), 140 characters are good for efficient speech play.

The increase use of social media among minorities, especially African-Americans, is a phenomenon that should not be overlooked, for this rise of social media use among minorities may be considered alongside the rise of internet activism. Groups are able to mobilize like never before and, more importantly, they are able to document instances of discrimination and violence. Twitter is especially suited for this because it allows topics to trend—like instances of violence or discrimination—and individuals can experience together a sense of awareness and solidarity even if they are physically apart. For instance, here at the University of Notre Dame a trending topic and hashtag in the fall of 2015 was #NDforMizzou, which allowed students to stand together with the African American students at the University of Missouri facing discrimination and personal attacks.

Using Twitter effectively requires three basic components: "A culturally relevant hashtag (cultural specificity), network participation (either a comment or a retweet) by

tightly linked affiliates (homophily), and a viral spread to reach 'rending topic' status (propagation)" (Brock et al., 2012: 534). These criteria also make twitter suited for much more than online activism. As Brock states "Twitter's discourse conventions, ubiquity, and social features encouraged increased Black participation; Black Twitter is Twitter's mediation of Black cultural discourse, or 'signifyin'" (Brock et al., 2012: 530). Given this dynamic, we may consider Black Twitter as a signifier for a sense of black sociality that is signified, and the sign vehicles are the tweets themselves. However, as already discussed, signifying is as much an interactional embodied experience as it is symbolic wordplay. In this way, being in the presence of others allows jokes to be responsive in the moment, allowing one to make better or wittier comments, puns, and the like. Twitter and other online platforms, however, are highly mediated, distanced from face-to-face interaction, and therefore humor is circulated in a disembodied way. One must now make inferences about the body solely on this distanced representation. Having said this, if the origins of African American humor are tied to physical spaces of congregation in the face of racial terror, what do we make of humor in the cyberspace of social media, particularly when these supposed safe spaces—like Black Twitter—are ghettoized in the mainstream much like actual urban spaces of color that have been abandoned by public policies and withdrawal? In other words, if the "racialization of space… is the process by which residential location and community are carried and placed on racial identity" (Calmore 1235, 1995), how are African American spaces of social media coated with racial meanings and racism?

Who's Black?

Face to face interactions can allow the suspension of judgment because of the level of comfort implied in exchanges guided by "**feeling**." However, ideas or thoughts shared online or via social media gives us a chance to retrace and pull apart statements. These two women at my university did as such when they were going through their Twitter feeds.

Woman 1:

"Ya'll seen some of these comments? It got me bent like, 'Why fam, Why?'" She scrolls through her phone looking hurt.

Woman 2

"You know they white, you know."

Woman 1:

Continues to scroll through the comment section and shakes her head. "This one said she's black!"

Woman 2

"Ya'll liars. All damn liars! How can she say she's black and write that!"

Face to face interactions enable a slight suspension of reflexive judgment by both listeners and speakers because the exchange is fleeting, it is not archived and available for scrutiny later. However, this is precisely the dynamic of social interactions online. While the "speaker"—person tweeting, posting, or otherwise—may be performing in the present, those "listening" are displaced temporally and spatially from the utterance. So, one can scrutinize verbal play and humor after the fact with a fare more critical eye. Furthermore, the "speaker" is ultimately invisible: their sex, gender, and race are anonymous and therefore their African American identity is up for question. This is what

these two women were in fact doing. When it comes to humor, the online world seems to decenter senses of solidarity and cohesiveness based on assumed shared racial identity. However, I am not saying that there exists no continuity between social media and the offline "real world," for this is where social media derives its content. As Florini (2013) states, "'signifyin', dissing prioritizes verbal dexterity, wit, and wordplay" (229). This cultural tradition informs the construction of Black identity online, especially in the twitter-verse and thus in a way is a marker for a sense of Black authenticity. This is to say, those who are literate in African American humor can signify with the best of them, allowing "users to perform their racial identities 140 characters at a time" via Black twitter, for instance (*ibid*: 224). Here are a couple of examples that play on Black radical politics.
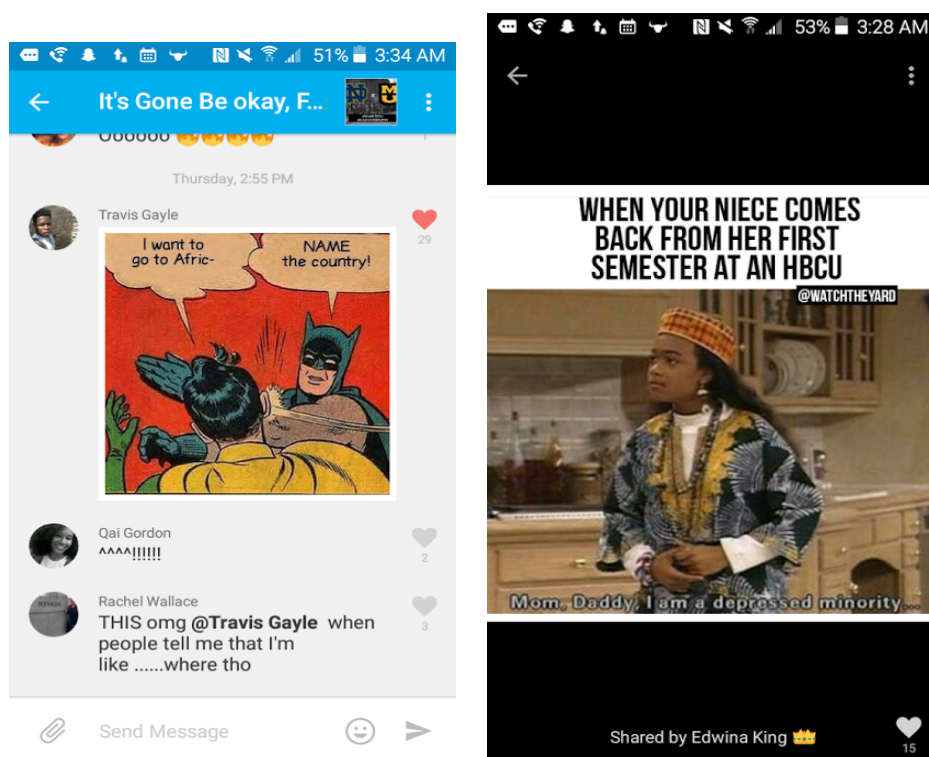
Ultimately, what these example demonstrate is that in order for race to function online as a symbol of solidarity, "racialized users must make those identities visible

online" because in "social media, those signifiers can be obscured or even imitated (e.g., by a deceptive avatar)" (Florini 2013: 224). Recall the two women in the ethnographic example above. Michael Warner's (2002) concept of the counterpublic is useful to think about this. He writes:

> The subordinate status of a counterpublic does not simply reflect identities formed elsewhere; participation in such a public is one of the ways its members' identities are formed and transformed. A hierarchy or stigma is the assumed back. (37)

Although the power of the counterpublic is something to consider, the web has another danger—anonymity and therefore textual and visual statements are taken out of context. One example of this tension is World Star Hip Hop (WSTHH), which has mixed responses and views. While many people see it as a detriment to Black identity because it circulates unfortunate stereotypes, it could also be seen as a hallmark of self-deprecating Black humor as a way of dealing with extreme circumstances. Unlike Black Twitter, which is anonymous, the identities of WSHH users are known. In fact, WSHH has been dubbed the Black YouTube. Often one encounters the shared view and celebration of what it means to look Black and have Black features. For instance, movements like embracing natural hair, dark skin, and full lips have created a repertoire of photos dedicated to such features and beyond.

Going Viral—"I'm not Black, but I find it Funny": Black Humor, Racial Humor, and When Jokes Fail

Viral: This phenomenon is defined by the circulation and recirculation of a social media visual or textual representations at an incredibly fast and massive rate because "highly mediated and highly capitalized forms of circulation are increasingly organized as continuous ("24/7 Instant Access") rather than punctual" (Warner 2022: 69). One

common example of this propagation is the popular image known as a "meme," some of which circulate stereotypical ideas about being Black. These are types of circulating slurs that attain a virtual life online. Typically, no one knows the identities of those who create these images. Such memes such as these rely on a familiarity with African American bodies, style, and aesthetics, but such humor may descend into the realm of racism once it begins to diminish human dignity. In other words, at times this humor can rely on a racialized fantasy of what it means to Black and therefore reminds us of the first form of American popular entertainment—minstrelsy. The popularity of minstrel shows has much to do with the way people consume back identity today. These "images of Negroes were shaped by white expectations and desires not black realities" (Jones 2003: 29). Here are few examples:
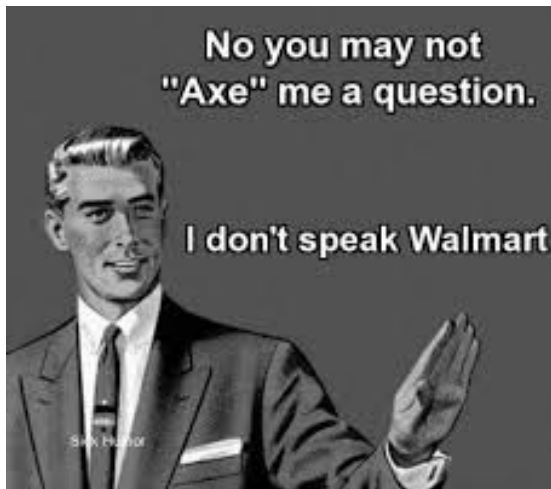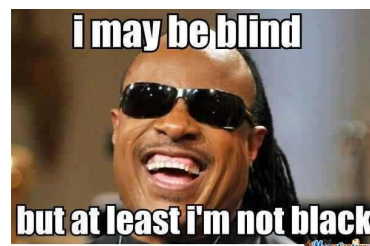
Final Post: Black Identity, the New Media Age, and 21st Century America

The binding agent of Black identity, according to Paul Gilroy, relies on a historical sense of social trauma and how cultural practices congeal through that experience as a way of getting on with living, perhaps with soul. Therefore, the folklore that emerged from that experience spoke to it as a way of both coping and creating bonds. Ultimately, social media is an interesting forum to explore in a very real sense what Black identity means for Blacks and non-Blacks in todays 21st century America. What do people think about Black folks, specifically? How do Black folks see themselves? Here, expressions that circulate in social media, as I have demonstrated, can be self-deprecating, stereotypical, racist, humorous, and the list goes on, but they all say something about how Black identity is being constructed and how Black lives matter.

This area of inquiry is of importance, particularly given the recent emergence of movements such as Black Lives Matter, Unapologetically Dark, and other race-centered initiates that have strong digital components and that are entirely about the experience of black bodies and black expression. It is my opinion that those on social media can choose to be mindful of what gets propagated and what gets left behind, particularly in an era when most people have a digital life that they constantly curate. What is lived in the moment and what is consumed after that moment is passed? And how do these fluid boundaries impact the everyday? For me, the focus has been folklore—African American humor, specifically —and I have demonstrated different types of humor that emerge in the space of social media. However, the importance of any identity is that it's dynamic, fluid in nature, and is always reconfigured. Social media is a tool to do this in the present. Black humor, thus, may be taking different forms, but I **feel** certain it will continue its discursive ingenuity.

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