The Arab Is The New Nigger: African-American Comics Confront The Irony And Humor Of September 11th

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Celebrity Politics & Public Life

A presentation to the Celebrity, Politics & Public Life faculty seminar

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**The Norman Lear Center**

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.

**Celebrity, Politics & Public Life**

Since Fall 2000, the Norman Lear Center has sponsored a popular faculty seminar series on Celebrity, Politics & Public Life. Faculty and deans from over 20 departments convene three times each semester to develop an interdisciplinary analysis of political life in this country as it is shaped by popular culture. The project is co-directed by USC History Department Chair Steven J. Ross and Leo Braudy, Leo S. Bing Professor of English. Our topics have ranged from Elian Gonzales and Timothy McVeigh to Angela Davis, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Edward G. Robinson. The group includes professors and deans from anthropology, art history, cinema-television, theatre, ethnic studies, American studies, German, sociology, business, political science, economics, education, policy and planning, philosophy, gender studies, art history, psychology, communication, journalism, English, and history.

**Participants**

Roy Aarons, Journalism  
Johanna Blakley, Norman Lear Center  
Leo Braudy, English  
Mary Dudziak, Law  
David Eggenschwiler, English  
Alícia María Garnica, English  
Arnold Heidseick, German  
Nicole Hodges, American Studies  
Randi Hokett, Cinema  
Cynthia Hudley, Education  
Stan Huey, Jr., Psychology  
Judith Jackson Fossett, English  
Lanita Jacobs-Huey, Anthropology  
Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology  
Michael Miklos, English  
Bryce Nelson, Journalism  
Phuong Nguyen, English  
Judith Peres, Norman Lear Center  
Jennifer Stoever, American Studies  
Janelle Wong, Political Science

**The Executive Committee for 2002/2003**

Leo Braudy, English  
Selma Holo, University Galleries  
Marty Kaplan, The Norman Lear Center  
Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology  
Dana Polan, Cinema/Television  
Steven Ross, History  
Marita Sturken, Communication
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Introduction by Professor Jacobs-Huey

As a linguistic anthropologist writing a paper, Professor Jacobs-Huey felt that the best place she could go to find out how African-Americans really felt about 9/11 would be the church, the barbershop or beauty salon, or the comedy club. In October 2001, she became a regular at comedy shows in the Los Angeles area, where she interviewed comedians, club owners, promoters, and club-goers. Although the African-American community is generally suspicious of research, she successfully interviewed 35 comics about how 9/11 impacted their work.

Among the comics that Jacobs-Huey followed, but didn’t necessarily interview, were Don “D. C.” Curry, Chris Rock, Paul Mooney, Dominque, Earthquake, David Williams (a.k.a. Dogface), Shang Forbes, Ian Edwards, Dave Chappelle, Tony Rock, Frantz Cassius, Glenn B., Ralph Harris, Courtney Gee, Chris Spencer, Michael Colyar, Scruncho, Geoff Brown, Thea Vidale, Arie Spears, Loni Love, Brandon Bowlin, Ray Chatman, and Faizon Love. Jacobs-Huey approached them as “ethnographers of the everyday” who interact directly with an African-American audience that does not necessarily identify with the grand narrative of “American unity in the face of terrorism,” which was to be found everywhere in the mainstream press.

Jacobs-Huey was curious to find out why the following observations got huge laughs or supportive applause from black audiences:

- Middle Easterners are the “new niggers.” All racist hatred will be directed at them instead of at black people.
- Blacks aren’t very concerned about 9/11 because they’ve been dealing with white terrorists all their lives.
• If the planes had attacked Compton or Harlem, there would’ve been no news coverage of the event.
• If there had been any street-wise black folks on the hijacked planes, we wouldn’t be in this mess, because they wouldn’t have been afraid of box cutters.
• White folks have angered bin Laden, and now black folks have to go fight the war.
• Al-Qaeda would turn over bin Laden in a second if the US government got them all hooked on crack.
• After John Allen Muhammad and John Lee Malvo were charged with the sniper shootings in D.C., one comic lamented that “we niggers again.”

Jacobs-Huey concluded that these jokes revealed the weakness of the distinction between the “Us vs. Them” rhetoric that white America embraced after 9/11. America itself is divided, and in this breach, comics address the ambivalent patriotism to be found in the African-American community.

**Group Discussion**

English Professor Leo Braudy commented on how carefully comics must calibrate transgressive commentary, and how much of that calculation depends on timing. Susan Sontag, for instance, was blasted for her remarks about 9/11 in *The New Yorker*, but she probably would have attracted little media attention if she had made the same remarks a little later. Comics are expected to push the envelope, but there’s often a big difference between saying what no one dares to say, and saying something that’s funny. When the two are the same, the comic will probably earn a big laugh.

Professor Jacobs-Huey pointed out that there are often two types of positive responses from audiences when comics present themselves as truth-tellers: either the audience believes it, too,
and so they are amused that the comic has uncovered the truth, or they are amused by the “insanity” of the comic’s position.

Michael Miklos, a graduate student in the English department, mentioned how comics must adjust their remarks based upon their own celebrity. Miklos saw Margaret Cho perform right after 9/11, and because of her high profile, she had to be more politically-correct than other, less famous comics needed to be. She didn’t mention 9/11 during her show, but at the end, she called for a moment of silence - a gesture not in keeping with her bad-girl image.

English Professor Judith Jackson Fossett indicated how important it is to consider the context of a comedic performance when evaluating the cultural resonance of a joke. A joke does not have the same valence when it’s taken out of a performative context, it’s changed entirely when it’s told by someone else. The format is extremely important as well: was the joke told on television? In a movie? On the radio? In a club? Was it a televised performance of a joke told at a club? Fossett mentioned how black audiences have become a kind of stock character on television shows like “Showtime at the Apollo.” Fossett, who couldn’t recall if she’d ever been to a comedy club, cautioned Jacobs-Huey about making any general conclusions about the African-American community based on her observations of African-American audiences in the “microcosm” of Los Angeles comedy clubs.

Jennifer Stover, a graduate student in American studies, noted that both of the comics that Jacobs-Huey had mentioned in her paper who were heckled for their 9/11 jokes were women. She asked whether gender affects the receptiveness of the audience to politically or socially-sensitive jokes.

Jacobs-Huey responded that she hadn’t noticed that women comics were any less cynical than their male counterparts about 9/11. One comic, for instance, complained on stage that 9/11 was only a tragedy for her because it made her late for her hair appointment. However, Jacobs-Huey
had observed that it was still very difficult for women comics to get away with talking explicitly about sexual issues, while male comics do it all the time.

German Professor Arnold Heidseick suggested that Jacobs-Huey take into account the function of satire in comedic performance: satire often utilizes exaggeration and distortion in order to ask the audience to question social standards; satire often invites the audience to agree that there’s something wrong with the status quo.

Professor Braudy mentioned that the African-American comics that Jacobs-Huey had studied were part of the Juvenalian satiric tradition, “speaking truth to power.” Unlike Jack Benny’s genial humor, which merely commented on people’s foibles, these comics are part of a tradition which includes Richard Pryor and Dick Gregory.

**Suggestions for the Paper**

- Compare black humor at other historical moments, including the performances of Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor. Look especially at Pryor’s jokes about the Vietnamese being the “new niggers” during the Vietnam War
- Consider different genres of comedy and their political implications
- Compare the give-and-take of the comedy club scene to other situations where performers and citizens engage in political discussions
- Compare these comics’ remarks to those of Bill Maher, or other white comics. Is there a continuum of critical responses to nationalism?
- Build up the class critique that remains imbedded in the paper
- Consider positioning the paper as a commentary on post 9/11 nationalism, putting the paper in the broader context of “citizenship”
- Evaluate whether this counter-narrative has affected the national mainstream narrative of “American unity”