

Study Guide *for* Black Humor:
Reflections on an American Tradition
with Gerald Early, Werner Sollors, and
Glenda Carpio

Chicago Humanities Festival
Education Programs | 2009 Curriculum Collection
Page 1 / 7



Chicago Humanities Festival
500 North Dearborn Street, suite 825
Chicago, IL, 60654
phone 313.661.1028
fax 312.661.1018
www.chicagohumanities.org
education@chfestival.org



GLEND CARPIO is associate professor of African and African American Studies and English at Harvard University. Her book, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* was recently published and she is currently working on a book tentatively entitled *Ambivalent Alliances: Black and Latina/o Fiction in the Americas*. A former teacher in the Teach for America program, she recently was awarded tenure at Harvard and received its Abramson Award for Excellence and Sensitivity in Undergraduate Teaching.

GERALD EARLY is the director of the Center for the Humanities and the Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters at Washington University in St. Louis, where he joined the faculty in 1982. He is the author of several books, including *The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (1994), which won the 1994 National Book Critics Circle Award for criticism.

WERNER SOLLORS received his Ph.D. degree from the Freie Universität Berlin and holds the Henry B. and Anne M. Cabot Chair as Professor of English and Professor of African American Studies at Harvard University, where he joined the faculty in 1983. He served as chair of Afro-American Studies from 1984-1987 and from 1988-1990.

GETTING TO THE CORE

An excerpt from “The Chitlin Circuit,” by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. from *The New Yorker*, February 3, 1997.

The setting now is the Sarah Vaughan Concert Hall—built in 1925 as a Masonic temple—on Broad Street, in downtown Newark. It’s a chilly, overcast Sunday afternoon, closing in on three o’clock, which is when the matinee performance of Adrian Williamson’s play “My Grandmother Prayed for Me” is supposed to begin. In every sense, we’re a long way from the Princeton campus, the site of the despond-drenched T.C.G. conference. On the sidewalk, patrons are eating grilled sausages and hot dogs. Older people make their way inside with the assistance of wheelchairs or walkers; younger ones strut about and survey one another appraisingly. There is much to appraise. These people are styling out, many of them having come from church: you see cloudlike tulle, hatbands of the finest grosgrain ribbon, wool suits and pants in neon shades. Women have taken care to match their shoes and handbags; men sport Stetson and Dobbs hats, Kente-cloth cummerbunds and scarves. There’s a blue velvet fedora here, electric blue trousers there, a Superfly hat and overcoat on a man escorting his magenta-clad wife. Bodies are gleaming, moisturized and fragrant; cheeks are lightly powdered, eyes mascaraed. Broad Street is a poor substitute for a models’ runway, but it will have to do until the theatre doors open and swallow up this impromptu village. There are nearly three thousand seats in the hall; within several minutes, most of them are occupied.



The Chitlin Circuit dates back to the nineteen-twenties, when the Theater Owners Booking Association brought plays and other forms of entertainment to black audiences throughout the South and the Midwest. Though it had a reputation for lousy pay and demanding scheduling—its acronym, TOBA, was sometimes said to stand for “Tough on Black Asses”—it was the spawning ground for a good number of accomplished black actors, comics, and musicians. TOBA proper had gone into eclipse by the decade’s end, yet the tradition it began—that disparagingly named Chitlin Circuit—never entirely died out. Touring black companies would play anywhere—in a theatre if there was one (sometimes they booked space on weekends or late at night, when the boards would otherwise be vacant) or in a school auditorium if there wasn’t. Crisscrossing black America, the circuit established an empire of comedy and pathos, the sublime and the ridiculous: a movable feast that enabled blacks to patronize black entertainers. On the whole, these productions were for the moment, not for the ages. They were the kind of melodrama or farce—or as often both—in which nothing succeeded like excess. But the productions were for, by, and about black folks; and their audience wasn’t much inclined to check them against their Stanislavsky anyway.

For more, visit <http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=1997-02-03#folio=048>

LESSON PLAN

by Greg Wright, Walter Payton College Preparatory High School, Chicago, IL

In his piece about the Chitlin Circuit, Henry Louis Gates talks about the need for black art, sponsored by black patrons, created by black artists, and viewed by a black audience. In the piece, he mentions the concerns that people felt when white audience members showed up to these black performances. Specifically, he writes about how these performances made fun of stereotypes in a way that could have been misinterpreted as evidence for those stereotypes should the wrong audience watch the plays. This concept about ownership of stereotypes illustrates an interesting conundrum. How do we successfully desegregate our society if our art forms change in meaning and tone depending on who is in the audience?

#1 The Black Identity

The activities in this lesson deal with the role of stereotypes in race-related comedy, specifically pertaining to black culture. As a result, any conversations would be remiss if the teacher didn’t begin the conversation by establishing the degree of prior knowledge in the room as well as some common terminology and history.

Having a conversation about the concept of the black identity is an interesting place to start. This will serve not only as a way to gauge the level of discourse for which students are prepared or the amount of prior knowledge and history that they have or lack,



but it will also be a great place to return at the end of each subsequent activity. Think of it as a guiding question: how does all of this affect what we view as black culture and what role does that play in our current society?

Here are some suggested questions to get the conversation going:

- Is there such a thing as the black identity?
- Who determines what that identity is?
- What role does the media play in developing this identity?
- How much room for diversity is there within the black identity?
- Is it possible for a black person to live outside of that identity?
- Do other racial groups have similar identities?
- If so, how are they similar and how are they different?
- What positive effects can a shared identity have on individuals or a culture?
- What negative effects can it have?
- What is the distinction between stereotypes and cultural identities?
- What role do other cultures play in defining a cultural identity?
- Can a non-black person share in the black identity?
- How does class factor into this conversation?

Purpose: These activities are designed to be helpful for teachers working with a variety of ages and content levels. This conversation may be very different depending on that environment. Depending on the racial make-up of a school alone, this conversation could take place entirely using personal experience or entirely based on assumptions. Either way, it is important to establish some shared definitions and concepts before launching into more specific conversations. Teachers should also make sure that they feel prepared and comfortable to host these dialogues. Many professional development opportunities exist that help to prepare teachers for conversations about diversity.

#2 Cosby vs. Pryor

Caveat: Teachers should be sure to watch selected comedy routines before they show them to their students to make sure that the content is age-appropriate.

- Find clips from comedy routines by both Bill Cosby and by Richard Pryor. <http://www.youtube.com/>
- Before showing the clips, ask students to look for the role that race plays in each clip. Ask students to characterize that usage: did the comedian avoid race? Exploit it? Utilize it effectively? Have them write down specifics to support their claims.
- After viewing the clips, discuss the similarities and differences. Did the comedians use race the same way? Did their different approaches have different effects? Were they performing for the same type of audience? Was one comedian funnier than the other? Did race factor into that? How did stereotypes play a role in the performance?



- Gates comments that Cosby is known for avoiding content that deals with race while much of Pryor's comedy dealt with race directly. Ask students to think about why each comedian would approach his work in that way. Does it make a difference?
- In terms of the black identity, how do these differing comedians fit into the picture? Is one comedian more "black" than the other? Does a black comedian have to talk about race? Does the content of either comedian affect the concept of a black identity? Does it change any definitions? Ask the students to think about what each comedian would say about the black identity.
- Finally, ask students to think about current comedians. Have comedians today followed in the path of Cosby, Pryor, or both? How has each comedian left a mark on the world of comedy? Which has had a greater impact?

Purpose: Cosby and Pryor represent distinctively different approaches to the role that race should play in comedy, but these competing approaches expand beyond comedy as well. Some people argue that artists should create art that deals only with their cultural experiences while others believe artists need to create beyond those distinctions. This conversation offers an interesting starting point for that debate.

#3 Comedy to Commonplace

- Have students look at images (videos or pictures) of old versions of white-manufactured comedies that included black characters. Consider Uncle Remus images or images of actors in black face. You can find these images easily enough on the Internet. You can even find Looney Tunes characters like Bugs Bunny in black face.
- After students have viewed the images, ask them to analyze the techniques that the creators of such comedies were using. What stereotypes did they rely on? How did they use or exploit those stereotypes? Is this type of comedy funny? Why or why not?
- After analyzing the comedy, have students discuss what type of impact these comedic choices had or could have had on the concept of black identity. Did aspects of those images become more than ignorant stereotypes? Can they see any similar choices or ideas in contemporary culture?
- After that conversation, show students images (again, pictures and videos) of certain contemporary black artists (T Pain, Lil' Wayne, and Soulja Boy make good examples for this activity).
- Ask the students to compare and contrast the two sets of images. How has the depiction of black people through the media changed over time? How is it still similar?
- Finally, ask them to evaluate this significance. How do these artists represent and affect the black identity? Do the images of them create caricatures of black people or



do they represent a majority of the culture?

Purpose: It is interesting to point out the progress or lack thereof in certain aspects regarding black identity and the media. What makes the conversation more interesting is the element of choice that seems to play a role in the contemporary depictions. Stereotypes once considered negative have become accepted and commonplace in certain segments of contemporary media. Is that acceptance an attempt to take ownership and diminish negative pressures, or is it the result of the bombardment of negative images from past eras of media?

#4 Audience and Reaction

- Have students pair up in groups based on their self-selected racial identity. This may be easier or harder to do based on your classroom population. It works best in a diverse classroom. If your student population is entirely one race, you may be able to alter this activity by doing the individual group work as a class. You may want to have a mixed-race category or to ask those students to join the group that they feel most culturally connected to in terms of traditions they practice at home.
- Once in those groups, ask students to create a list of funny quirks, behaviors, traditions, etc. that are commonplace within that racial subgroup. (There is a book/website called “Stuff White People Like” that may serve as an example.)
- After students have compiled their lists, have one representative from each group rotate to another group. (The group should be entirely of one race except for one student.)
- First, have the group that is the majority share their list. Then, have the student who is the sole representative share his list.
- After students have shared, bring the class back together. First, ask them how they felt when making the list. Was it funny? Was the experience enjoyable? Did any parts of the conversation feel derogatory?
- Next ask them how that experience changed (if it changed at all) once an “outsider” was introduced to the activity. How did it feel to have one member from another race listening to the list? Was the list still as funny? Did any group members feel concerned about sharing the list? Did the list still feel like the same list? Ask similar questions for the person who was the sole representative of the race.
- Then, have a conversation about these changes in feelings. Why is it easier to joke about stereotypes in a racially-segregated environment? Why is it harder when groups are desegregated? What is the concern? Was that concern felt by everyone? Does minority status or past oppression make it easier or harder to share jokes about your culture? Why?



- Finally, talk about what all of this means. Is it possible with today's access to segregated media by culture? If not, how can we distinguish what art/comedy is appropriate for what audience? Who should have access to making jokes based on stereotypes? Who should have access to laughing at those jokes? What is race-based humor appropriate? Is it ever? Can we make progress without the ability to laugh at race?

ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL

The Chicago Humanities Festival (CHF) creates year-round opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to explore, enjoy, and support the arts and humanities. We accomplish this by presenting programs throughout the year, culminating in two annual Festivals of the Humanities, one in the spring specifically for children and families and one in the fall for the general public. The CHF's mission of providing broad access to the humanities – at a low ticket price – depends in part on the generosity of its most committed and enthusiastic supporters.

www.chicagohumanities.org