

Chris A. Kramer

An existentialist account of the role of humor against oppression

Abstract: I argue that the overt subjugation in the system of American slavery and its subsequent effects offer a case study for an existentialist analysis of freedom, oppression and humor. Concentrating on the writings and experiences of Frederick Douglass and the existentialists Simone De Beauvoir and Lewis Gordon, I investigate how the concepts of “spirit of seriousness”, “mystification”, and an existentialist reading of “double consciousness” for example, can elucidate the forms of explicit and concealed oppression. I then make the case that subversive humor is an effective means to bring to consciousness the inconsistencies and incongruities of the *serious* oppressors. I also illustrate how humor can act as a bulwark against the rise and persistence of oppression by (non-violently) attacking the absolutist stance on human nature maintained through the use of dominating and “authoritative” language and action.¹

Keywords: oppression, freedom, existentialism, humor, incongruity, human nature

Chris A. Kramer: Rock Valley College, USA. E-mail: c.kramer@rockvalleycollege.edu

1 *Becoming* human

In a speech to the Plymouth County Anti-Slavery Society in 1841, Frederick Douglass humorously reverses the traditional power relationship, playing the southern preacher who perpetually reinforces the assumed natural essence of the slave:

Oh, consider the wonderful goodness of God! Look at your hard, horny hands, your strong muscular frames, and see how mercifully he has adapted you to the duties you are to fulfill!

¹ This paper should be read as an introduction into the intersections between the disciplines of humor research, oppression, and certain existentialist motifs. It is hoped that the broad insights gained here will be more fully analyzed in future works. I am currently working on a paper addressing a theory that sees humor as an error-detection device of our heuristics (Hurley et al. 2011). These heuristics are integral in forming stereotypes, positive and negative, accurate and inaccurate. Interweaving cognitive science, psychology, analytic and continental philosophy, I suggest that a non-violent weapon in the fight against damaging stereotypes is humor.

While to your masters, who have slender frames and long delicate fingers, he has given brilliant intellects, that they may do the thinking, while you do the working. (Douglass 2011)

Not only is Douglass mocking the functional roles – presumably set in religious stone – of slave and master, but also their respective natures as portrayed by his caricatured preacher. He is using the language of the slave-owners, manipulating the very words of his oppressors in a manner that immediately and disarmingly exposes the error of their beliefs: this is a man who can think; he is a human being who possesses a creative wit. Significantly, the power or “high prestige” as Jean Harvey (1999: 49) calls it, represented in preachers both then and now, lends added credence to their claims, regardless of truth. Furthermore, the repetition of these stereotypical clichés (echoed by those in power, and eventually even by the powerless themselves) slowly compounds the problem, allowing such ideas to gain traction, and to become commonplace to the point where they become trite truisms, not only among those who possess social power and wish to maintain it, but also for those without power who have every right to be dissatisfied with the status quo. Paradoxically, the latter might internalize the presumptions behind the stereotypes, and unwittingly become facilitators and perpetuators of their own oppression.

In contrast to the quotation above, one of the key passages from Douglass’s *Autobiographies* illustrates a decisive moment in his two-hour physical confrontation with the slave-breaker, Covey. Here he addresses his developing perspective on his nature and his feeling of what appears to be latent human freedom: “I was *nothing* before; I WAS A MAN NOW” (Douglass 1994: 286). Lewis Gordon comments on Douglass’s use of language, pointing out that he “makes a classic existential distinction between remaining and living in *My Bondage My Freedom*: ‘I remained with Mr. Covey one year (I cannot say I *lived* with him) . . .’ the former analogous to *being-in-itself*, a form of being suited for “things,” and the latter to *being-for-itself*, a form of being with open possibilities, with self-reflection – in other words, *human being*” (1994: 56). This distinction can also be applied to Douglass’s own evolution of thought about himself and the episode with Covey: earlier in the *Autobiographies* he states “[t]his battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my *career* as a slave” (Douglass 1994: 65), while later he says “. . . this battle with Mr. Covey, – undignified as it was, and as I fear my narration of it is – was the turning point in *my life* [emphasis mine] *as a slave*” (Douglass 1994: 286). “Career” could relate to the being-in-itself and “life” to the being-for-itself.

Could this transition for Douglass, or anyone else in a similar situation, have been possible without the physical, *violent* struggles with Covey? Douglass is asserting his humanity forcefully, but not through mere brutality that would only

feed into the manufactured stereotypes about slaves. What are the other methods Douglass identifies of “repelling the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant” (1994: 286)? I will argue that a non-violent option available to the oppressed is humor, a tool Douglass himself used to great effect, in particular through the re-signification of the established discourse, which enabled him to assert his *human* power. But before we can explore the use of humor to attack oppression, the object of that subversive humor needs to be addressed.

2 The mystifications of the serious

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Simone De Beauvoir embraces the uncertainty and ever-changing boundaries of human nature. In fact, the use of the term “nature” is already presuming too static an idea of what it is to be human. For De Beauvoir, oppression comes from those whom she refers to, in an existential sense, as “serious” people.² These are individuals who attempt to find comfort in the firm, unchanging foundations and values that are seen to be pre-determined.³ De Beauvoir sees the serious man as manufacturing certitude, and this mystification is not only a fleeing from one’s own responsibility to act in an unstable world, but it is a mind-set that leads to the stifling of genuine options for others as well. The plantation owner, for example, places the slaves into a world that the slaves have not helped to establish, and so in this sense the slaves are akin to what De Beauvoir calls ‘grown-up children’ (1976: 37), but children bereft of a spirit of playfulness. The injustice occurs when the oppressor convinces himself that he has a superior nature, which leads to the presumption that the oppressed possess a necessarily inferior nature. This can become normalized and ultimately dogmatized on the part of both the oppressor and the oppressed.

The “Sambo” stereotype of the slave typifies this relationship, but not in the crude fashion the purveyors of that stereotype assume. William Cowen quotes the British “comedian” John Bernard, who unwittingly – truly lacking wit – paints the slave as happy-go-lucky and childlike, in his natural state (this, of course, is inconsistent with the stereotype of the violent, savage slave, held simultaneously by the same people), claiming that “‘with all the ignorance of the child he

² Henceforth, “serious” and any variant will imply the existentialist sense unless otherwise noted.

³ See Gordon (2000: 69). One benefit the serious might derive from this static world-view is a feeling of freedom *from* choice. If values are determined in an absolute sense through nature, and coincidentally nature has placed me and people like me in a superior standing, who am I (or anyone else) to complain? As will be seen below, the humorist elegantly de-ossifies the fabricated structures of the serious.

possesses its disposition for enjoyment . . .”. Cowen continues: “Bernard fails to imagine that such comic actions and sayings might not be in the Nature of the slave but emerging from cultural necessity; that it might be a survival technique, an act performed for the dominant race to ease interactions” (2001: 1–2). But humor is more than a mere defense mechanism or social lubricant; it can be a tool for exposing the hypocrisy and incongruities of oppressors, and at the same time, it must be cautioned, as a means for maintaining control:

The reason for such intentional self-blinding among the planters and their guests, a willingness to see this Sambo character as real despite certain opportunities for seeing it as a mask, may be simply a desire for it to be real. On top of needing to convince themselves that slavery was not only an acceptable practice but one that was in the best interest of both races, the slaveholders would have felt better sleeping at night believing that the servile population surrounding and outnumbering them were happy and child-like. (Cowen 2001: 8)

But it is a nature of mirth that is unjustifiably projected onto the slave from outside, one that fails to accept any other reality.

The mystification that De Beauvoir calls the *spirit of seriousness* seeks absolutes that cannot be questioned and against which rebellion is inconceivable. She considers one of the means a tyrant, for example, has at his disposal to preclude the possibility of rebellion:

In order to prevent this revolt, one of the ruses of oppression is to camouflage itself behind a natural situation since, after all, one cannot revolt against nature. When a conservative wishes to show that the proletariat is not oppressed, he declares that the present distribution of wealth is a *natural* fact and that there is thus no means of rejecting it. (De Beauvoir 1976: 83)

Likewise, when a slave driver wishes to keep his “property” in line, what more efficient manner is there than to make the (hitherto) human being believe she is a mere thing, and that there is nothing that she can or – more importantly – ought to do about it: “The slave is submissive when one has succeeded in mystifying him in such a way that his situation does not seem to him to be imposed by men, but to be immediately given by nature, by the gods, by the powers against whom revolt has no meaning” (De Beauvoir 1976: 85). There is comfort in “knowing” there is nothing that can be done. There are similarities here to what Gordon calls “political nihilism” – the view that the government either cannot or will not do anything to address one’s political needs. He notes that “a consequence of this social problem is the widespread credo, ‘Why bother?’” (Gordon 2000: 72). Indeed, if an enormously powerful government is incapable of accomplishing anything, what can one person achieve? But this apparent comfort is false, and it

takes quite extraordinary effort to rationalize the culpability of the oppressor in the face of the freedom and humanity of the oppressed.

Embracing stereotypes that pigeon-hole a slave's position as a seemingly natural way of life is not the only way to oppress another person. As De Beauvoir hints above, proposing a *supernatural* cause of one's condition can sometimes be more effective. Douglass sees through this mystification: "For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others" (2003: 92). They are the serious men who appeal to necessity and meaning delivered by the Divine. The certitude of defenders of slavery leading up to the Civil War was quite often supported by invoking the decree of the Creator, the one being who could not be doubted. This justification is most blatantly and unapologetically proffered by the Reverend Thornton Stringfellow in his *A Scriptural View of Slavery*: "I shall be able to make it appear that the institution of slavery has received . . . the sanction of the Almighty . . . that it was incorporated into the only National Constitution which ever emanated from God . . . [and that] its legality was recognized, and its relative duties regulated, by Jesus Christ in his kingdom" (1963: 88). For those who fervently believe in God, slaves included, there is no more certain justification than that which comes directly from the Almighty or one of his presumed spokespersons. We might call this a "super-mystification" that drastically reduces the options of the oppressed, and in doing so limits the scope of their potential creativity.⁴

The perpetuation of the stereotypes and oppression of slavery is not obliterated after the laws of the state proscribe the "peculiar institution." As a result, there is both misconstruction, and perhaps a degree of willful ignorance. This is noted by Ralph Ellison, who finds that "The white man's half-conscious awareness that his image of the Negro is false makes him suspect the Negro of always seeking to take him in, and assume his motives are anger and fear – which very often they are" (1964: 69). Gordon makes a similar point: "Our first observation is that racism is a form of dehumanization, and that dehumanization is a form of bad faith⁵ – for to deny the humanity of a human being requires lying to ourselves about something of which we are aware" (2000: 85). The method of mystification succeeds to the extent that the oppressed might come to see themselves as the

4 See Morreall (1999: 103) and below in my conclusion on Play and Oppression on what John Morreall calls a playful creativity, a trait certainly possessed by comedians like Richard Pryor. See also Carpio (2008: 79–80) for Pryor's humorous critique of Biblical accounts of divine punishments and rewards.

5 In the context of this paper, "bad faith" primarily means a form of self-deception and/or rationalization of the sort described by Gordon (2000: 75).

objects they are (apparently) perceived to be by their oppressors and succumb to that point of view; some perhaps even with a sense of relief that the freedom and anguish of choice is circumvented.

On the other hand, there is a path that people from Frederick Douglass to Richard Pryor take that resists this mystification. It is a conscious confrontation that does not deny or rationalize the cruel reality of history and the humiliation of oppression. It is a perspective or attitude that arises from the conscious realization of the ambiguity of their existence as both a slave-*thing*, for Douglass, and at the same time an *existentially* free human being; or in post-Jim Crow America, as both a *Negro* and an American.⁶ Furthermore, as Mel Watkins observes, “the American Negro has had subtlety and irony forced upon his art” (1999: 68), and this leads to “double-vision.” Iris Young adds that “[t]his creates for the culturally oppressed the experience that W.E.B. Du Bois called ‘double consciousness’ – ‘this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’” (1990: 60). But if this were the extent of such consciousness, then one might either despair of being a mere object, or perhaps a life of “miserable ease” (to borrow from Nietzsche) could follow from a resigned acceptance of the mystifier’s tales. Thus, Young continues: “Double consciousness arises when the oppressed subject refuses to coincide with these devalued, objectified, stereotyped, visions of herself or himself. While the subject desires recognition as human, capable of activity, full of hope and possibility, she receives from the dominant culture only the judgment that she is different, marked, or inferior” (1990: 60).⁷ How is one to respond to the judgments of her oppressors and to her own consciousness that now attends to the ambiguities and inconsistencies within which she finds her conflicted self? First there needs to be recognition that there is an incongruity.⁸

3 Laughing at seriousness and despair

Think about the comments of one of the few survivors of the Holocaust, Viktor Frankl:

⁶ “The American Negro novelist is ‘inherently ambiguous’ . . . he moves toward fulfilling his dual potentialities as Negro and American” (Ellison 1964: 118).

⁷ Consider Lewis Gordon’s analysis of what results from Frantz Fanon’s encounter with the white boy who immediately categorizes him by way of a visual schema that is *super-imposed* upon Fanon (Gordon 2011: 20).

⁸ I follow John Morreall (1983: 38–59 and 1987: 128–138) on this general point regarding incongruity.

To discover that there was any semblance of art in a concentration camp must be surprise enough for an outsider, but he may be even more astonished to hear that one could find a sense of humor there as well Humor was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humor, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds. (1984: 63)

The parallels between the American slaves and the European Jews are evident: “Just as the Jews used intellect [wit] to score psychic points against the Nazis, American blacks ‘have savored language as a means of conflict and control’ against what they perceive as the white power structure. The black pose was called ‘puttin’ on ole massa [the old master],’ an antebellum forerunner of the practice labeled psychological resistance in the Holocaust” (Lipman 1991: 43). On a variation of the theme of double-consciousness, humor can be used as a means of recognizing the fact of the oppression on the one hand, and the fact of one’s creative freedom on the other, even if the latter is not made readily available to the oppressors.

It is a worry that the dual aspect of black humor is seen primarily only by blacks (perhaps until the comedians Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor). The serious, while capable of laughter, manifest only one-dimensional views of the humorous black person, or black person who is humorous. The double-consciousness is not yet *intersubjective*, to use a Husserlian term, in the sense that the authentic humor of blacks is not adequately experienced by whites; at least, not by the serious who cautiously avoid feelings of empathy towards non-whites. If this were due only to a lack of competence in the recognition of incongruity on the part of the white audience then the complexities of bad faith would not arise. But this is not the case: “As folklorist and historian Robert E. Hemenway wrote, bondsmen and chattel ‘were participating in an elaborate ritual of self-delusion [The slave] had always known what the truth was, and his master had known that [he] did Both knew that they were participating in a verbal hoax’” (Watkins 1999: 35). Of course, the slave is in a very different position than the master, so the use of “self-delusion” does not apply equally, as the slave plays the game largely out of self-preservation.

The *real side*, as Watkins puts it, invoking Richard Pryor (Watkins 1999: 40), remains invisible to most of the white population. They tend to see what they wish to be the *only side*: blacks as *naturally* amusing creatures. Take, for instance, an example from Glenda Carpio’s *Laughing Fit to Kill*:

Consider a well-known folk-story in which a slave is caught eating one of the master’s pigs. The slave admits his guilt saying, “Yes, suh, Master, you got less pig now but you sho’ got more nigger.” The tale effectively makes a burlesque of “the entire notion of *ownership* in

human beings,” as the slave carries the master’s objectification of his body to the outmost absurdity. (2008: 4)

Indeed, the humor is multi-tiered here, since the laughter it invokes in the slave holder reduces the chances of violent reprisal,⁹ but at the same time the hyperbole reveals the oppressors’ absurd logic that equates the property in the pig with the “property” in the slave – a manufactured heuristic that crumbles beneath the efficient exposition by the slave himself. However, if the slave holder is laughing it might only be at what he takes to be the *innate* funniness of black people: any recognition of the intelligent creation of humor in the slave is sublimated or purposely effaced; otherwise, there would be a tacit acceptance of the slave’s – perhaps all slaves’ – intelligence and capacity for wit. But then, upon what could slavery be justified?¹⁰

The songs, dances, and most importantly here, the subversive jokes told and performed by the slaves – including Douglass – were not only used as a means of distancing themselves from the horrors of their captivity, although that was surely one of the additional benefits of maintaining a humorous attitude,¹¹ but they were also a means of illustrating the inconsistencies of their racist oppressors, often through overt exaggeration of the absurd beliefs held by these serious men. This humorous hyperbole highlights the static and mechanical views of the oppressors, and the plain reality that stands in stark contrast to the supposedly unassailable world-view the slave drivers manufactured. But sometimes even the most obvious incongruities remain invisible, and the very popular black-face minstrelsy is a case in point. These early parodies of black people featured white actors (who had painted their faces black) imitating prototypical black stereo-

9 Both Carpio and Watkins (1999: 32) note the worries of differing interpretations of this situation; it could be seen as an instance of playing into and perpetuating the stereotype of “black masochism and self emasculation”, as a means of attaining what one wants with impunity, or, as argued below, a means of distancing oneself from oppression and at the same time a non-violent protest against it.

10 Some might respond that the slaves themselves and especially the black performers in the twentieth century literally played into the stereotypes perpetuated by the oppressors, making them “complicit” in their own subjugation. I will address this concern in a future work, but see Jenkins (1994: 183) and especially Watkins (1999: 34 and 126). See also Gordon (2005: 375–376) on the paradox of the commodification of black authenticity, and Carpio (2008: 105) on the “N” word becoming commercialized in the 1990s, and especially Harvey (1999: 13–14) and Kruks (2001: 60 and 66) on the view that “compliance [is often] a rational survival strategy for many women.”

11 See Carpio (2008: 4–5).

types such as Jim Crow, and portraying them as inherently inept and clown-like. The whites in black-face were mocking what they saw as incompetence or foolishness on the part of the slaves, but it was really a mockery of themselves – they were unknowingly mocking the slaves mocking the slave-owners. As Jenkins points out, “the performers didn’t realize that some of the minstrel show dances, like the cakewalk, looked silly because the slaves had invented them to parody the pretensions of their masters. This led to the ironic situation of whites dressed as blacks mocking black dances originally created by blacks to parody the dances of high-society white folk” (1994: 183). But this is, after all, a one-dimensional perspective constructed and perpetuated by whites, one that precludes them from “getting” the jokes that are actually at their own expense. However, once the necessary cognitive shift is made by the whites in question (a shift that might require some instigation, such as the goading of an agile humorist) the possibility for humor is there, and perhaps more importantly, so is the prospect of enjoying this newly discovered oscillation between different perspectives, which could lead to some degree of open-mindedness.

4 How humor can work against the spirit of seriousness and oppression

4.1 American slavery

Frederick Douglass was an excellent orator, and one of the tactics he often used in both his speeches and his interactions with those in power was humor. Douglass comments toward the end of his last autobiography that he had “been greatly helped to bear up under unfriendly conditions, too, by a constitutional tendency to see the funny side of things” (1994: 470). One story Douglass retells concerns a train trip, during which he had one of the few available large seats all to himself. Douglass, covered up, is trying to sleep – and presumably is not immediately recognizable as a black man – when a white man comes to sit down next to him. Douglass facetiously cautions, “Don’t sit down here, my friend, I am a nigger.” The other responds, “I don’t care who the devil you are, I mean to sit with you.” Douglass then retorts, “Well, if it must be so, I can stand it if you can” (1994: 470). Surprisingly, the two men are able to sit together and even engage in polite conversation for the duration of their travels. For the readers of this exchange, there is a shift that takes place. The white man does not know at first that Douglass is black, and so has no concerns about sitting next to him. But Douglass’s unexpected and humorous comment reveals a truth, and at the same time exposes

a false stereotype in the awful term he employs, uncovering an openness in the white man that might otherwise have remained hidden.

Granville Ganter supplies an astute analysis of this case that is representative of Douglass's style and method:

As is typical of Douglass's rhetoric, the story turns on several ironies, not the least of which is his preference to be treated like an equal citizen despite the fact it might bring temporary discomfort. The story is important, too, because of the egalitarian turn of Douglass's final remark. His grumbling consent to the white man's request reverses the roles of a painfully familiar racial tableau in which the person of color requests a seat. (2003: 535)

The expectation of the audience listening to or reading this story is that Douglass, the black man, will be the one who is asked to move, and likely without humor. But we are encouraged to change perspectives and actually *see* this situation in contrast to the common realities of Douglass's day. Ganter continues: "Most importantly, however, the scene is characteristic of the dialectic between violence and humor that animates much of Douglass's rhetoric: the affectionate and benevolent term *my friend* hardly belongs in the same sentence with the word *nigger*. This contrast between pain and pleasure characterizes many Douglass anecdotes" (2003: 535). The "reversals" in the anecdote indicate neither an acceptance nor a denial of all the rhetorical (and historical) brutality signified by that term, but a defusing or even de-mythologizing of it. But in order to succeed in that endeavor, the ugly word is *used* meta-linguistically. In other words, Douglass is not trapped within the boundaries of the oppressor's lexicon; instead, he stands above such limited discourse, directing words and language along a novel course. His ability to weave in and out of the linguistic domains of the oppressed and the oppressors alike places him in a unique position to notice, highlight, and perhaps even begin to resolve the incongruities and all-too transparent iniquities of his age.

Douglass is exposing the error in the racists' heuristic that presumes a static and essentially child-like, naïve, and incorrigibly ignorant slave or black person. Here, he reveals that he is not an example of a "typical case" that will enable the racist to arrive quickly and simply at the conclusion that Douglass, an individual, can be used to represent all blacks (Gordon 2000: 88). To the extent that he can, his unmistakable wit must then transfer to *all* of those so categorized, or "subsumed under the same concept", to invoke Schopenhauer. Indeed, I view Douglass's use of the phrase "a nigger" to be a meta-reference¹² to all of the humans,

¹² This reference is intentional: Douglass is displaying his awareness of the situation into which he has been thrown (Young 1990: 41), and at the same time he is creatively stepping outside of it

including himself in that moment, heuristically corralled together within that disgusting conception. In other words, Douglass is not concerned with making the case that only *he* is a human with dignity, but all of those *like* him are as well. This forces the holder of the black-as-ignorant stereotype to at least consider a possible flaw in his thinking, and could compel him to amend it altogether, as the cognitive dissonance that is brought to the surface is generally uncomfortable enough that one would want to resolve it in some way.¹³ To the extent that Douglass succeeds, he sets the groundwork, through humor, for the white oppressor to recognize Douglass as an individual human being with an intellect, one who is not merely an exception to the rule of white superiority with which the oppressor is familiar.

In contemporary marketing parlance, Douglass's comment, and of course the performances of Richard Pryor and others, were able to *re-brand* common stereotypes in a way that sought out the latent openness in an otherwise ambivalent populace and redirected such thinking for their own rebellious purposes. Stereotypes become enmeshed within a given culture and spread like annoying commercial jingles: this is even more evident today with the advent of mass media.¹⁴ Interestingly, this is one way that rebellious humor can be co-opted in a fight against oppression. Carpio makes a similar point regarding the satirical and humorous anti-slavery works of William Wells Brown: "If, as Brown realized, slavery has always been mediated by mass cultural representations, to manipulate popular images, such as stereotypes of race and gender, opens up the possibility of turning the consumption of race upside down. By reappropriating commodified mass cultural images of slavery, Brown . . . turned stereotypes of race and gender into vehicles for the critique of their commoditization" (2008: 71).¹⁵ The humor draws the audience in, since they are interested in what the wit has to say, if only at first for the entertainment value.

through facetiously taking on the shibboleth in order to reveal its inconsistencies and, in a purely logical sense, the fact that it is an instance of the fallacy of hasty generalization. But were he to respond solely in logical terms, his point would have been much less effective.

13 See Hurley et al. (2011: 51, Quoting Marvin Minsky) on the analogy between a "morally wayward thought" and a "logically inconsistent thought."

14 A humorous story is like a meme that cannot be stopped. This is one of the reasons rebellious humor can be so successful in reaching distant and disparate audiences. See Provine (2000: 129–133) on the laugh *epidemic* in Tanzania, and Carpio (2008: 80 nt. 17) on the replication of Richard Pryor's subversive performances by various audiences.

15 This is not to ignore the very real possibility that the attempts at dislocating negative stereotypes can fail (Carpio 2008: 13–14). I am currently working on an essay in which I argue that all stereotypes are wrong whether or not they are presumed to hold a positive valence.

Advocates of the Incongruity Thesis of humor might note that Douglass, in the train, is not speaking superficially: there is a need for cognitive shifting that would not be present had the white man used the same language to explain why *he* would not sit with Douglass. The incongruity is no longer the object of our amusement – if there is still amusement – when the same anecdote is told by a person in a position of power.¹⁶ Consider when Socrates claims to be the most attractive man in all of Athens. He, as well as anyone who can see his face, knows full-well this is simply false, and it results in humorous laughter: he was a bit of a goblin in terms of appearance. But notice that if someone like Alcibiades or indeed, Brad Pitt, says *exactly* the same thing as Socrates there is no incongruity at all, only superiority, and the humor dissipates. Imagine Pitt, who possesses the *power* of physical attractiveness, walks into a philosophy conference and says “I am the most handsome man here”.¹⁷ If there is still laughter, especially from Pitt, it is not *humorous* laughter, it is the laughter of derision at those who are deemed inferior. It is like the laughter of God in the Bible and John Morreall’s exegesis is correct: “The laughter of Yahweh . . . is only the laugh of scorn, not the laugh of humor” (1999: 46-7). What could an omniscient being find incongruous, after all?

4.2 After slavery and Pryor

Well after the life of Douglass and his struggles against oppression, African American humor continues to develop, but always connected to the trials of slavery. Ron Jenkins notes that “The laughter of Afro-Americans is spiked with the collective memory of slavery. No other genre of American popular comedy is as directly linked to freedom and the struggle to survive” (1994: 180). He goes on to cite examples such as Richard Pryor’s 1976 album *The Bicentennial Nigger* – heavily loaded with irony – that pulls the audience in, perhaps unwittingly on their part, through the apparently innocuous use of humor and the deliberate use of ambiguity. This combination enables him to release his growing frustrations, but in a relatively “safe” manner. Pryor’s claim that he is celebrating “two hundred years of white folks kicking ass” brings out the laughter in the (black and white) audience, but it is multi-dimensional in much the same way that Socratic irony can make a point for readers that *might* be lost on his immediate interlocutors, but is at least available to them. Like Douglass, Pryor is able to draw in his audience to the point where the message will inevitably be received, but perhaps not as

¹⁶ See Harvey (1999: 14) on this point.

¹⁷ This is an example from Kramer (2012).

expected. It is received because the audience comes to expect that there is a conclusion or punch line that they know they will enjoy, so they choose to wait and even work for the hidden meaning often lurking beneath the surface of putative nonsense or hyperbole. In this way it is more than mere irony, which need not be humorous, and which usually has less payoff for the listeners.

Consider the closing track from *Bicentennial*, which should be quoted in full with, in this case, Caprio's parenthetical explications:

Ise sooo happy cause I been here 200 years I'm just thrilled to be here [with a chuckle that peppers the rest of the performance, a kind of 'yak, yak, yak'] I'm so glad you took me out of Dahome [chuckle] I used to live to be a hundred and fifty. Now I dies of high blood pressure by the time I' fifty-two That thrills me to death [chuckle]. I'm just so pleased America is gonna last. They brought me over here on a boat. There was 400 of us come over here [chuckle]. I just love that . . . it just thrills me to death You white folks are just so good to us We got over here and another twenty of us died from disease . . . then they split us all up Took my momma over that way, took my wife that way, took my kids over yonder [chuckles] I'm just so happy [chuckles] I don't know what to do. I don't know what I'm gonna do if I don't get 200 more years of this Y'all probably done forgot about it. [Pause. And then, in Pryor's own voice] But I ain't never gonna forget. (2008: 76)

The surprise here occurs after the audience is already deeply ensconced in the patterns and rhythms, so much so that that the incongruity is, in a sense, inescapable. This is both a direct confrontation with the uncomfortable issue of slavery, especially since the audience is not mono-chromatic, and an indirect confrontation as well, through the use of wit that pulls in an audience in ways traditional protest or argument cannot. Imagine trying to get across all that Pryor does in that brief skit without humor; that is, picture a transliteration of the performance, perhaps in the form of a philosophical argument, or better still, a *white*-paper, wholly devoid of humor – no ambiguity, vagueness, double-entendre, irony, sarcasm, innuendo, mimicry, hyperbole, etc. All that would be left with the original is likely the last five justifiably defiant words: “I ain't never gonna forget.”¹⁸

4.3 Humor as non-violent revolt, expression of humanity, and expander of worlds

While many African-American comedians were able to succeed in their trade, it was seen as one that was “natural” to them, dating from the time of the slave ships, when due to their presumed childishness and naiveté, they were in essence

¹⁸ See also Vaidhyanathan (1998: 47) on Pryor's use of the “tall tale” and his recurring character “Mudbone” as a means of defanging negative stereotypes.

entertainers and little more.¹⁹ This role was adopted by many, but can be seen as a form of rebellion from within, rather than an obsequious acceptance of their fate. It was not an external violent protest: if such violent protest suffered defeat, the defeat might be total, and this is not the case with a failed attempt at humor – or even a successful one, as the example of the pig-stealing might show – even if there might be some negative consequences. As a form of protest, humor can be much more successful (and less dangerous) than violence, since even “successful” violence could produce a temporary, or even a pyrrhic victory.

The humor of the slaves, especially among themselves, undoubtedly played an enormous role in maintaining their sense of humanity and creative freedom.²⁰ This attitude, which is in a sense a talent or capacity that can be developed and honed, assists in cognitive and emotional shifting or oscillating between or among multiple, quite often ambiguous, frames of reference. The very successful humorist is able help facilitate this shift in others, though never going so far as to do the work for them. For example, Carpio quotes John Limon on some of Pryor’s performances:

Audience members – at the very least, blacks and whites – laugh from different perspectives and “in and out of symmetry” . . . In this and other performances . . . black folk “see themselves as whites see them,” in the tradition of double consciousness articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois, “but they like what they see,” and whites “now see themselves from the outside as well; but they are content, for the length of the occasion, to lend their mechanical bodies to the comic machinery.” Blacks and whites “laugh from different positions that go in and out of symmetry,” argues Limon, but “they all laugh”. (2008: 74)

This kind of shifting in views is essential to expose the inconsistencies that lie hidden, often in plain sight. Granted there are moments when the audience might be out of symmetry, but the point Carpio is making is that there has to be at least some level of cognitive shifting of point of view simply in order for the “punch line” to be understood, not to mention enjoyed.²¹

In the terms of Lewis Gordon, the humorist seeks out and embraces “epistemological openness”, in contrast to the serious man, who stifles inquiry and discourse through unwarranted assumptions of certainty. The latter leads to a rigidity of thought and what Gordon calls *epistemic closure*: “In the act of epistemic closure, one ends a process of inquiry. In effect, it is the judgment ‘say no more’ . . . In contrast, epistemological openness is the judgment ‘there is always more to be known’” (2000: 88). Samy Basu puts it in almost poetic terms:

¹⁹ See Carpio (2008: 77).

²⁰ See Morreall (1983: 101), Harvey (1999: 77), Cudd (2006: 202), and Carpio (2008: 20).

²¹ See Marmysz (2003: 137).

Humor acts as a lens in a skeptical and perspectival epistemology through which one witnesses what is absent from the “whole truth” At the very least, humor suggests that all knowledge – providential, prophetic and human – is laughably partial and incomplete. In the extreme, humor is a centrifugal cognitive multifariousness, a sensibility towards the surreal, the rehearsal of a disorder of categories. (1999: 388)

Finding, enjoying, and creating humor is training for the detection of incongruity and the unexpected in this world, but to nurture a humorous attitude, one must be capable of doubt, of cognitive shifting, and of seeing the world from more than a single *closed* perspective.

When one cultivates the sense of humor, then healthy skepticism, open-mindedness, and a general interest in the way the world *is* as opposed to how it ought to be is also further developed. One has to be open to the prospect of expanding one’s *life-world* (to borrow from Gordon, who channels Husserl), and this requires the ability to see other perspectives. Morreall notes that “To share humor with someone we need to share a form of life with him” (1983: 61). The goal is to expand one’s world. The more deeply entrenched and habitual the systematic oppression is, however, the cleverer the wit must be. For instance, Gordon discusses the ingrained use of presumably “neutral” or “normal” words:

The appeal of so many so-called racially neutral terms – *man, woman, person, child* – is that they often signify whites except where stated otherwise. They have a prereflective parenthetical adjective: (*white*)*man*, (*white*)*woman*, (*white*)*person*, (*white*)*child*. It is not the case that these terms *must* signify these subtextual markers; if that were so, then our position would exemplify the spirit of seriousness. It is that our life world, so to speak, is such that these are their significations. (2000: 81)

That this is so is clear; but again, it is hidden in plain sight. This is the kind of “civilized” oppression that Harvey discusses, and it is also one of the obvious incongruities that humorists recognize, while others either purposely ignore such things, or fail to see them for their sheer ubiquity.

Consider an example from Watkins about Dick Gregory in the sixties: “A black man enters a Southern restaurant and is told, ‘Sorry, we don’t serve colored folks here.’ His reply, ‘Fine, I don’t eat them, just bring me a medium rare hamburger” (1999: 52). There is a bit of playfulness on the part of the *undesirable* encroaching on the turf of the powerful, but it is evident how disarming (maybe literally so) such a quip might be, for while it is not defensive, overly self-deprecating, or aggressively offensive, it is penetrating in the way sardonic wit can be. It reveals what is already so ordinary – barefaced racism – and renders it both extraordinary and absurd, all the while beguiling an otherwise adversarial audience. It is also an excellent example of how one can point to the errors in our heuristic

mechanism, innocuously in terms of errors due to mere ambiguity, but quite significantly when deliberate amphiboly is revealed.

The language of the oppressors has to be utilized, but artistically manipulated or even reversed. If, in response to oppression, the oppressed develop their own language of humor, and only their own, they will always only be seen as “different, marked, or inferior” (Young 1990: 60). The oppressed are able to see inconsistencies and, at the very least among themselves, are able to respond with humor – a very human ability. Through such humor they are able to engage an audience, showing it their perspective of the world, if only for brief moments at a time. In doing this, they can cause us to laugh at or with them, at others, *or at ourselves*. We are forced to at least consider their perspective, even if we do not fully adopt it. They encourage us to see the world or a certain situation from another’s point of view more readily, and thus to be open to empathetically expanding our conception of the world.²²

5 Why laughter rather than tears?

Slavery, holocausts, oppression and the like are not obvious fodder for humorists, but as shown above, this does not mean that laughter has no place within such horrors. There is, of course, the worry of using laughter as a mere contrast to solemn, even horrifying subjects in an effort to escape, rather than facing up to harsh realities. The sense of humor I am portraying is not the “expedient levity” of the serious Machiavellian (De Beauvoir 1976: 50), but of the realist who is unafraid to keep her head *out* of the sand when faced with the possibility of a horrid actuality. This is akin to Ralph Ellison’s well-known comments on the “near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” of the blues (1964: 90). Without a sense of realism or authenticity, the blues become empty, superficial pop signifying nothing; likewise, with subversive humor there has to be an element of truth for it to work. Consider Morreall’s claim that

Humor is not based on false hope – it is not even necessarily optimistic. It does not deny, but affirms [I do not think he means *endorses* here] the incongruities in things . . . [including the] fundamental incongruity between the eager fret of our life and its final nothing-

²² See Kramer (2012: 295–99), Basu (1999: 388), and Gordon on her critique of the current system of rules and regulations for teacher performance driven by “No Child Left Behind” testing which assumes a single absolute universal standard: “Their aim is to break down the conditions of speech, which is, by definition, open ended, and of laughter, which spontaneously disrupts the settled by playfully emphasizing incongruities” (Gordon 2007: 172). Education should not be reduced to mere *training*. See also Wenner (2009: 24–25).

ness As Woody Allen put it comparing life to a restaurant: “Not only is the fare lousy, but you get such small portions.” And yet, as this comment shows, we can step back a bit to enjoy the incongruity. (1983: 128)

Sammy Basu addresses the efficacy of humor against subjugation: “To be weak is to be vulnerable, at risk, without weapons, not privy to the *creation* of the hegemonic discourse. To be intelligible to the *status quo* the weak must employ the prevailing vocabulary, which can be deployed, at best, against hypocritical practices. In humor, the weak gain an additional weapon of redescriptions” (1999: 393 [my emphasis]). Does this leave us with the concern that humor is only momentarily helpful, and finally achieves nothing other than fleeting and frivolous catharsis? Basu claims that this “is true of talk in general. It is activist impatience that makes attractive the alternatives of force and fraud” (1999: 394). But in what way is laughter through humor a more appropriate and/or effective response to oppression than grief, for instance?

After Frantz Fanon was continually confronted with the mystifications of European white stereotypes, he notes in *Black Skin, White Masks*

I was up against something unreasoned I would personally say that for a man whose only weapon is reason, there is nothing more neurotic than contact with unreason I had rationalized the world and the world had rejected me on the basis of color prejudice. Since no agreement was possible on the level of reason, I threw myself back toward unreason. It was up to the white man to be more irrational than I. Out of the necessities of my struggle I had chosen the method of regression (1967: 118 and 123)²³

The most rational move to make in an irrational world is to become irrational oneself. This incessant type of treatment and distortion of blacks’ “public self” (Harvey 1999: 48) and historicity precludes Fanon from doing what he wanted – to laugh. Instead, he ends up weeping.²⁴

I am not advocating that anyone in a struggle with oppression (especially if it is violent) should respond to his oppressors with a frolicsome guffaw. But this is not to say, as Gordon does, that “[h]umor stands in these communities as complex competitors of proverbs, but instead of wisdom, they offer distance” (2000: 34). While this is true, it does not capture the expediency of humor to its full extent. Laughter here can be seen as a movement toward therapeutic coping

²³ See Gordon (2011: 17) for an insightful existential analysis of Fanon’s situation.

²⁴ Interestingly, these two expressions are physiognomically similar (Provine 2000: 187). See Gordon (2000: 33) for further analysis of Fanon’s failure to laugh. But it is interesting that Fanon does use reversals, irony, and sarcasm in much the same way that Douglass did. See Fanon (1967: 132).

within a lived experience; in Fanon's case, enabling him to continue confronting oppression, even if the laughter plays a necessary though insufficient role for him. But the same can be said for the use of violence, protest marches, or logical argument as a means to confront oppression: *none* of these is sufficient alone. Furthermore, the non-violent means of rebellious humor does not merely consist of self-deprecating laughter. It is, as Gordon recognizes, laughter *at* one's situation but, I argue, in a manner that is a genuine confrontation. Subversive humor has the unique capacity to effectively engage the Other on the one hand, and buttress the confidence and humanity of the oppressed on the other: "The person with a sense of humor can never be fully dominated, even by a government which imprisons him, for his ability to laugh at what is incongruous in the political situation will put him above it to some extent, and will preserve a measure of his freedom – if not movement, at least of thought" (Morreall 1983: 101). Here I think Morreall's view of humor can be aligned with Harvey's approach to protest, if only through words: "protest in the face of mistreatment signals the victim's refusal to comply with such manipulations of their intellectual and moral judgment. They know they have a right to fairer treatment and their protests convey that they have not been intimidated or browbeaten into thinking otherwise" (1999: 77). Indeed, protest through humor is more than mere words, since it can instill a sense of freedom in the oppressed, but also act as a sign of defiance against the oppressors, signifying that the oppressors have not won.²⁵

This is not a lighthearted attitude that the oppressed *ought* to invoke in an effort to achieve distance; indeed, I make no prescriptions at all. Rather, I am describing the possible uses of what Morreall might call *comic pragmatism* (1999: 28–9), which I take to be the humorist's recognition of incongruity, fostered by a sense of playful creativity in a world that is not amenable to absolutes and utopian abstraction. As Ganter notes, this enables someone like Frederick Douglass, for example, to take "audience members from their prejudiced habits of laughing at plantation stereotypes and move them toward communal laughter at the slaveholders' hypocrisy" (2003: 537). This is laughter that results from the pleasant psychological shift in the *playful* recognition of a non-threatening incongruity. I would add to this the element of power also, as described by Basu (1999: 386). There is a sense of power here not only through the detection of the incongruity of "ruptured expectations" in the "a-ha" sense of "now I get it",²⁶ but also the power that accompanies the act of creativity – the ability to "create" one-

²⁵ See also Carpio (2008: 6–7), Cudd (2006: 202), and Gordon (1999: 103).

²⁶ See Morreall (1987: 188–207) on the differences between "Funny Ha-Ha" and "Funny Strange." Also Hurley et al. (2011: 27–34) on "Funny-ha-ha" and "Funny-huh."

self through “redescriptions” of the “dominant discourse”. It is in this sense that a spirit of creative playfulness and humor can counter oppression.

6 A conclusion: The incongruity of oppression and play

Both De Beauvoir and Gordon spend some time discussing play and its connection to creativity, and therefore freedom: De Beauvoir with children and Gordon, perhaps incongruously, with hip hop music in one case and “sadistic sexual play” in another. Gordon is concerned about mere *child’s-play* regarding the *authentic* expression of blacks through hip-hop music and culture that is predominantly adolescent. Seeking an authentic character trait of black people as a whole through (primarily) adolescent creativity precludes non-blacks from forming a conception of the black *adult*: “Hip hop, in this sense, suffers from an unfortunate circumstance of serious play. Paradoxically, it needs to have a possibility beyond adolescence in order for even mundane adolescence to emerge. Without such a possibility, hip hop would stand as another manifestation of black, brown, and beige limits” (Gordon 2005: 388). The stereotype of blacks as child-like and naïve is further perpetuated, reinforcing the absence of responsibility and thus freedom for blacks. Sadistic sexual play, however, is an instance in which “one has, in principle, taken the position that one’s role isn’t absolute, isn’t, in existential parlance, ‘serious’ . . . Sadistic sexual play is not bad faith, because in such an instance the erotic charge emerges for the sake of *playing*, which requires recognizing that one *chooses* the rules of the game” (Gordon 2000: 76).

On the other hand, De Beauvoir examines the playfulness of a child thrown into a world of ready-made values: “That does not mean the child himself is serious. On the contrary, he is allowed to play, to expend his existence freely. In this child’s circle he feels that he can passionately pursue and joyfully attain goals which he has set up for himself . . . [and yet] he feels himself happily irresponsible” (1976: 35).²⁷ The last comment is what leads me to argue that the serious man seeks the certitude and safety of childhood in which there is presumed to be a natural order that is set in stone, including the *natures* of those he oppresses, and by contrast his own, which frees him from having to take on the heavy burden of choice. But as Dostoyevsky says of all adults, they have eaten of the fruit and con-

²⁷ For an interesting distinction between *creative* play and *serious* play, see Wenner (2009: 24). See also Gordon (2007: 167–168) on Dewey’s combination of playfulness and seriousness. In a current work, I am further investigating the ambiguities of “seriousness” and “playfulness.”

tinue to do so; therefore, their feelings of irresponsibility and of the inevitability of values already set in place (which, happily for the serious, tend to privilege them), are inauthentic, and not an instance of playing, but rather bad faith, as Gordon claims.²⁸

There is playful creativity in the reversals, for example, of Frederick Douglass's writings and speeches and the performances of Richard Pryor, which utilize the tools of the humorist to take on the often crushing burden, or responsibility, of confronting oppression. This playfulness is not present in the same way, if at all, when those in positions of power attempt similar remarks at the expense of those presumed to be inferior or even sub-human. They might laugh and even get a laugh from their audience, but it is not the creative laughter resulting from humor. The laughter of the serious results from the use of blunt instruments of ridicule that rely on the removal or willful ignorance of all incongruity. Any remnant of dissonance is glossed over in an effort to retain the comfortable stereotype, as the *object* of mockery, the slave for example, is intentionally perceived *only* as a child, an animal, or a thing, and is treated as such. This is what holding the reins on the dominant discourse allows: an almost habitual inertia in support of the status quo, while those "on the bottom" are forced to become creative in order to facilitate change. This is not to argue that they have no say in the matter, as if it were a part of their very essence to be inventive, to possess an aptitude to find hidden sense beneath the superficial nonsense (a skill of the humorist): such an attitude only buttresses a spirit of seriousness. Instead, the oppressed are *forced* to survive in a world that seems to have been designed without their interests in mind. They are perennially left-handed people in a right-handed world. This is not a trivial analogy: try using left-handed scissors or desks (only available recently) if you are right-handed. Try to pass as a woman, an African American, or a member of any non-dominant group of people in a world that does not privilege you. You will likely soon find that merely following the rules maintained by those in power through their language of stereotypical clichés, keeps them where they are and you where you are.

In closing, consider Nina Scott's quotation from Rosario Castellanos:

Because men tend to reify women it is not surprising that they speak of them in clichés. The fact that many women are not trained to think or speak responsibly contributes not only to their continued cultural passivity, but also, on a linguistic plane, to their own affinity for the cliché. For those accustomed to mental passivity the cliché is a useful form of expression, for it can be appropriated without thinking. Because of the anonymity of its origin, the cliché avoids responsibility for the opinion stated, yet by dint of repetition it has acquired universal authority and acceptance. (1989: 26)

28 "We are never so *authentically* ourselves than when at play." John Ruskin

Like the anonymous cliché that is mindlessly bandied about, the oppressive stereotype can also be appropriated and perpetuated without much thought. But with the tools of the humorist such as reversals, exaggeration, mimicry, ambiguity, etc., the wit can *actively* engage in the meta-linguistic mentioning (but also use) of clichés, and in the process expose the original intent and meaning of the clichés, while previously this was hidden by being “worn off by constant use”. It is in this sense that Watkins speaks of “subtlety and irony being forced upon [African American] art” (1999: 68). But this is not to give short shrift to their imaginative powers anymore than accepting the truth of the slogan “necessity is the mother of invention” would be to deny the ingenuity of inventors in dire straits. Furthermore, as Jane Gordon rightly notes, “laughter is uniquely pedagogical precisely because it turns on a standard of accuracy. What is so enjoyable about good humor is how precisely it describes features of our world that we know to a point of sedimentation. It unsettles what have become ossified so that we can again consider the ways in which we constantly reconstitute our social worlds” (2007: 168). We are rewarded with feelings of mirth when we recognize an incongruity or error in our (or others’) quick heuristic thinking (Hurley et al., 2011: 12–13) and thus, humor encourages and fosters epistemic openness against presumed rigid absolutes and at once reveals and genuinely combats oppressive stereotypes.

Finally, if Samy Basu is correct in stating that humor “gives reason room to play . . . [and] is itself a form of contingent novelty, re-creation, [and] re-description” (1999: 388), it seems to be an invaluable, non-violent tool for those who extol freedom through the recognition and exhibition of the incongruities instantiated by the serious oppressors.

References

- Basu, Samy. 1999. Dialogic ethics and the virtue of humor. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*. 7(4). 378–403.
- Carpio, Glenda. 2008. *Laughing fit to kill: Black humor in the fictions of slavery*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cowen, William Tynes. 2001. Plantation comic modes. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*. 14(1). 1–24.
- Cudd, Ann. 2006. *Analyzing oppression*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. 1976. *The ethics of ambiguity*. New York: Citadel Press.
- Douglass, Frederick. 1994. [1845, 1855, 1881]. *Autobiographies: Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an american slave; My bondage my freedom; Life and times of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Library of America.
- Douglass, Frederick. 2003. [1845]. *Narrative of the life of frederick douglass an american slave, written by himself: With related documents*. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins.

- Douglass, Frederick. 2011. [1841]. The church and prejudice. Delivered November 4, 1841, Plymouth County, Massachusetts. <http://www.greatamericandocuments.com/speeches/douglass-church-prejudice.html> (accessed March 15 2011).
- Ellison, Ralph. 1964. *Shadow and act*. New York: Signet Books.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. [1952]. *Black skin, white masks*. Charles Markmann (trans.). New York: Grove Press.
- Frankl, Viktor. 1984. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Ganter, Granville. 2003. He made us laugh some: Frederick Douglass's humor. *African American Review* 37(4). 535–552.
- Gordon, Jane Anna. 2007. Failures of language and laughter: Anna Julia Cooper and contemporary problems of humanistic pedagogy. *Philosophical Studies in Education* 38. 163–178.
- Gordon, Lewis. 1999. *Bad faith and antiblack racism*. New York: Humanity Books.
- Gordon, Lewis. 2000. *Existencia africana: Understanding africana existential thought*. New York: Routledge.
- Gordon, Lewis. 2002. Sartrean bad faith and antiblack racism. In Julie K. Ward & Tommy L. Lott (eds.), *Philosophers on race: critical essays*. Oxford: Blackwell, 241–259.
- Gordon, Lewis. 2005. The problem of maturity in hip hop. *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 27(4). 367–389.
- Gordon, Lewis. 2011. Requiem on a life well lived: In memory of Fanon. In Nigel Gibson (ed.), *Living Fanon: Global perspectives*, 11–26. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harvey, Jean. 1999. *Civilized oppression*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Press.
- Hurley, Matthew, Daniel Dennett & Reginald Adams. 2011. *Inside jokes: Using humor to reverse-engineer the mind*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Jenkins, Ron. 1994. *Subversive laughter: The liberating power of comedy*. New York: The Free Press.
- Kramer, Chris. 2012. As if – Connecting phenomenology, mirror Neurons, empathy, and laughter. *Phaenex: Journal of Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture*. In press.
- Kruks, Sonia. 2001. *Retrieving experience: Subjectivity and recognition in feminist politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lipman, Steve. 1991. *Laughter in hell: The use of humor during the holocaust*. Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc.
- Marmysz, John. 2003. *Laughing at nothing: Humor as a response to nihilism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Morreall, John. 1983. *Taking laughter seriously*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Morreall, John (ed.). 1987. *The philosophy of laughter and humor*. New York: Suny.
- Morreall, John. 1999. *Comedy, tragedy, and religion*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Provine, Robert. 2000. *Laughter: A scientific investigation*. New York: Viking Penguin.
- Scott, Nina. 1989. Rosario Castellanos: Demythification through laughter. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 2(1). 19–30.
- Stringfellow, Thornton. 1963. A scriptural view of slavery. In Eric McKittrick (ed.), *Slavery defended: The views of the Old South*, 86–98. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Vaidhyanathan, Siva. 1998. Now's the time: The Richard Pryor phenomenon and the triumph of black culture. In David E. Sloan (ed.), *New Directions in American Humor*, 40–50. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

- Watkins, Mel. 1999. *On the real side: A history of African-American comedy from slavery to Chris Rock*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.
- Wenner, Melinda. 2009. The serious need for play. *Scientific American: Mind* (February/March). 22–29.
- Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the politics of difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bionote

Chris A. Kramer received his M.A., focusing on the philosophy of the mind and consciousness, from San Diego State University. In San Diego, he supplemented his income by playing in a rock band – he was not well paid. He then taught at Rock Valley College, in Rockford, Illinois, and is currently pursuing a PhD at Marquette University, where he is studying the intersections between humor, oppression, philosophy of mind, existentialism, and phenomenology. He also enjoys studying his two-year-old son Milo, and his response to incongruities in his environment: usually, Milo laughs.

