



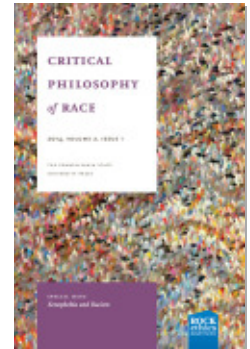
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Theories of Laughter, and the Social Contagion of the Comic
Stage**

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Critical Philosophy of Race, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2014, pp. 84-105 (Article)

Published by Penn State University Press



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**GOING TO BED WHITE
AND WAKING UP ARAB**

*On Xenophobia, Affect
Theories of Laughter,
and the Social Contagion
of the Comic Stage*

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**CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF RACE,
VOL. 2, NO. 1, 2014**

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Abstract

Like lynching and other mass hysterias, xenophobia exemplifies a contagious, collective wave of energy and hedonic quality that can point toward a troubling unpredictability at the core of political and social systems. While earlier studies of mass hysteria and popular discourse assume that cooler heads (aka rational individuals with their logic) could and should regain control over those emotions that are deemed irrational, and that boundaries are assumed healthy only when intact, affect studies pose individuals as nodes of biosocial networks larger than themselves. Thus rather than suggesting that the individual can only prevent societal harm by gaining command and patrolling the borders of an autonomous self, we embrace the notion that affects can exert a positive and transformative force on a social reality that is resistant to top-down policy intervention and any straightforward moral or logical plea.

Keywords: affect theory; xenophobia; network theory; comic laughter; solidarity; collective responsibility

Introduction

Lawyer turned comedian Dean Obeidallah recalls that he went to bed on the eve of 9/11 thinking he was white, or at least as white as his Italian neighbors. Growing up in New Jersey, he says his father was the only man on the block who did not have an Italian accent. To be sure, Dean's dad was different, but the "Jersey kids" thought of both father and son as American. As far as the Jersey kids were concerned, Palestine—Dean's father's homeland—was in the southern part of the state, and the Middle East was just a reference to Ohio. After 9/11, however, the mood changed along with Dean's race and national identity. In his words, "I go to bed September 10th white, wake up September 11th—I'm an Arab." Now casual encounters seemed to go hand in hand with remarks that range from naïve to malicious. "Oh, you're Arab," someone would say, followed with a quick mention of how much they "love hummus" or some other reference to him as a bit "exotic—like kiwi . . . sweet, tasty, a little hairy." Sometimes making even less sense, strangers might find his Arab background an uncanny coincidence because they "love Indian food." However, others would not hesitate to ask him why his people are so angry all the time; or attempt a compliment, "But you look so nice." Instead of a heritage history month, he complained, "What do we get—orange alert" and without fail are always "randomly selected for extra screenings." Tragically, he realized, "We are the new Enemy. We've replaced the Soviet Union. And we are stuck here 'til somebody replaces us" (*The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour 2007*).

Social science scholars and professional comedians, ranging from David Roediger (in his landmark 1993 book *Wages of Whiteness*) to Dave Chapelle (for example, his 2004 television skit "The Racial Draft"), have long understood the motility of racial and ethnic identity. These theorists and practitioners of social change point out in their diverse ways that whiteness or degrees of whiteness as well as other racial and ethnic identities are not sheer physical or objective properties of individuals or groups but emerge through charged social histories, politicized spaces, and the shifting demands of a capitalist economy. As historian John Tehranian observes, the events of 9/11 accelerated the "chilling reproblematicization of the Middle Eastern population from friendly foreigner to enemy alien, from enemy alien to enemy race" (Tehranian 2009, 7; see also Sarah Gualtieri 2008, esp. 188, on the complex factors conflating "Muslim/Arab/Other"). To be sure, after these events, "the category *Middle Eastern* immediately

conjures up two ethnic and religious coordinates on a Cartesian identity graph: Arab and Muslim” (Tehrani 2009, 9). Hence, race, ethnicity, and other social markers can change overnight, shifting not just positions but also positionality on the Cartesian grid. To draw metaphors from post-Newtonian science, such social categories do not map on to a static Cartesian plane of analysis where place-positions or identities are fixed and transparent to a privileged perspective. In this relativistic social world, dynamic cultural and economic forces can suspend the normal politics of social identities and facilitate shifts in boundaries through symbols, myths, institutional practices, discourses, habits, and social manners. A growing body of new scientific work points toward yet another dimension of a relativistic world that eludes any narrow focus on bound subjects exercising agency over themselves, a dimension that these theorists understand as a presubjective and transpersonal category of emotion that they term affect (see, for example, Ahmed 2010, Gregg and Seigworth 2010, Protevi 2009).

Affect studies offers insights for understanding xenophobia (an affect of fear targeting a race or ethnicity). As an affect, this fear of others readily spreads from individual to individual or across borders between social groups to define a larger social climate. Xenophobia has profoundly shaped the history of nation-states and is without question central to U.S. politics. In the post-9/11 world, from enhanced airport security and orange alerts to two land wars, beginning with the Afghan war, which is now the longest in U.S. history, we are rigidly and fearfully redefining who counts as a real American as we carve away basic human rights and civil liberties. The current wave of phobia precipitates not only decisions to go to war but also undercurrents in broad-based political and social movements like the Tea Party and may be the central impetus for short-lived presidential contender Donald Trump and the Birthers, whose mission for the 2012 election was to alert us to the terror of an alien in the White House. For these Birthers, the post 9/11 climate of fear has channeled, one suspects, the diffuse anxiety prompted by Obama’s racial identity as the first African American president, toward his imagined status as an outsider with suspicious national and religious credentials. To be sure, Toni Morrison claimed Bill Clinton as our first black president, but like political thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, she also understands that to be American implies some strong degree of whiteness (Morrison 1998, Du Bois 2005). Thus in this current topsy-turvy post 9/11 era, the Right was able to shape, at least for

a while, a politics of perception that led readily to a fear of Barack Hussein Obama as our first Muslim president, and yet another rekindling of an ongoing wave of anti-immigrant fervor.

Here we begin to see how waves of collective affect, in particular of xenophobia, draw their political force from the fact that, unlike those emotions that characterize the personal traits or tendencies of individual subjects, these collective affects can transmit across masses of people (on the distinction of the term *affect* from *emotion*, see Gregg and Seigworth 2010). Like lynching and other mass hysterias, xenophobia exemplifies a contagious, collective wave of energy (level of intensity) and hedonic quality (a tone of pleasure or pain) that can point toward a troubling unpredictability at the core of political and social systems. And while earlier studies of mass hysteria and popular discourse assume that cooler heads (aka rational individuals with their logic) could and should regain control over those emotions that are deemed irrational (for this history see Brennan 2004, 18), and that boundaries are assumed healthy only when intact, affect studies pose individuals as nodes of biosocial networks larger than themselves (Christakis and Fowler 2009). Thus rather than suggesting that the individual can only prevent societal harm by gaining command and patrolling the borders of an autonomous self, we embrace the notion that affects can exert a positive and transformative force on a social reality that is resistant to top-down policy intervention and straightforward moral or logical plea (for the related notion of social eros and postmoral ethics, see Willett 2008, 37–40).

Our contribution to the study of affect turns specifically to the comic stage for an antidote. For where condescending political strategies that are directed toward reasoning with a xenophobe fail, and even risk producing backlash, humor or wit can transform negative affects and alter the social landscape through waves of cathartic laughter. Laughter often functions as a source of emotional release and as relief from the normal unpleasant stresses and anxieties of the social world. But cathartic laughter is more than venting. It can shift perceptions and alter social reality. For example, when 9/11 law enforcement had made “Arabs . . . the new blacks,” Obeidallah ironically invites a primarily Middle Eastern–American audience to celebrate themselves in terms of the double entendre of blackness. Sure we are police targets, but “Oh my God, we’re cool.” Now “white kids in the suburbs” will “start act’n Arab with their friends. Dress’n Arab, wearing like traditional Arab headdress, tilted to the side to be cool, open shirt, gold

chain, smell'n like lamb" (*The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* 2007). The Arab who was once white is now the new black, and blackness is cool. Laughter alters the values that define perceptions.

Moreover, laughter, like fear, is a socially contagious affect. These affects can alter a social climate, functioning like waves rather than like properties of discrete individuals. In the post 9/11 political theater of fear, comedians take the center stage for political change. The border-crossing humor of such groups as the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour not only jolts perspectives but also generates solidarity across identities now revealed to be fluid (for an analysis of solidarity that builds on social freedom and comedy, see Willett 2008, 143–47). Through laughter a white suburbanite may find him or herself, having slipped through a wormhole of social space, side by side in gleeful celebration with the alleged enemy-Arab. Rather than a salute to an elite style of political discourse, which calm appeals to reason often serve, a progressive strain of mocking humor demonstrates how we might dissipate fear, soothe raw nerves, and generate the laughter that makes xenophobic postures uncool. We do not by any means intend to exclude critical genres of reason or tragic representation as effective social forces and serious parts of a multiple-pronged approach for social change. Our point is that contagious laughter too is a serious force for solidarity. While constructions of self and identity may inevitably reassert an "us vs. them" mentality, progressive humor functions to render boundaries more porous.

Recent Climate Shifts: Post 9/11 Xenophobia and the Relevance of Affect Studies

The cloud of anxiety surrounding the election of our first African American president brought forth questions on his citizenship and loyalty to such an extent that these nonissues often overshadowed and recast real issues ranging from health care to healthy school lunches as anti-business and thus anti-American plots. The Birther movement seemed only to gain momentum as Republican hopefuls began in the spring of 2011 to throw their hats into the ring for the next presidential election—that is until the dramatic Navy Seal assassination of 9/11's mastermind Osama bin Laden. A single, but as it turned out complicated, event transformed the political discourse and the national mood. For in this case a surprisingly successful covert military operation (recall by contrast Kennedy's Bay of Pigs and Carter's

failed rescue attempt of the Iran hostages) was also timed nicely with the release of Obama's long-form Hawaiian birth certificate, and the 2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner, at which Obama did his own bit of stand-up, giving a comic slap in the face to Donald Trump and the Birther movement. In hindsight, Obama's all-knowing laughter—at Seth Meyer's uncanny joke in which the *Saturday Night Live* comedian suggested bin Laden was hiding in plain sight—on the otherwise never watched C-SPAN network aired side by side for the next few days with images of celebratory crowds and the details of America's military ingenuity. These images combined to instantaneously alter the collective mood of the nation that in turn transformed the national identity of President Obama, making him one of "us." At this time instead of an aura of xenophobia defining Obama's every move, he receives the banter of any other low-polling, recession-era albeit now American president ("President Obama at the 2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner").

Amid this euphoria Michael Eric Dyson critically pondered Obama's transformation. Why did it take "killing the Muslim" to make Obama American? "Why couldn't he have been American" as Dyson points "when he was at Harvard? Why couldn't he have been American when he was the smartest guy in the room" (*Real Time with Bill Maher* 2011). One could turn cynically to the haunting words of the ironist and political icon Malcolm X who (in what we now typically think of as a Richard Pryor-style rhetorical response) suggested that "Nigger" is "what white racists call black Ph.D.'s" (Malcolm X and Alex Haley 1999, 327). But indeed in this case the killing of the Enemy may well have ignited an even more vicious mood of anti-Arab fervor except for its perfect timing and, if you like, execution. Here's where affect theory gives us more clues to addressing Dyson's query.

The theories of affect developed by such twentieth-century psychologists as Sylvan Tompkins (Sedgwick and Frank 1995) and Daniel Stern (1985) have offered a rich supplement or alternative to theories of cognitive maturity by focusing on the social attunement that characterizes behavior prior to the formation of, or without the attention of, a conscious self. Tompkins proposed that a range of basic affects motivate interest and account for central plot lines in the drama of human development while Stern has focused on affective styles of attunement in the infant-caregiver dyad. While these psychologists did not pursue the larger social or political implications of their studies, later philosophers and literary scholars Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), Teresa Brennan (2004), John Protevi (2009),

Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (2010), and Sarah Ahmed (2010), among a growing number of others, have expanded upon these insights into affect for politics and social ethics. “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere?’” Thus Brennan opens her philosophical inquiry into “how one feels the others’ affects,” emphasizing the ways in which the social transmission of affect undoes Cartesian conceptions of the bound subject (Brennan 2004, 1). “The ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual,” she observes (Brennan 2004, 1), which is to say that airborne molecules of chemical information transmit emotions from person to person (Brennan 2004, 9).

Since Brennan’s philosophical engagement with affect, ever more research has emerged from evolutionary psychologists, biologists, and even primatologists, who, like Frans de Waal, combine the insights across several scientific disciplines for understanding group behavior among social animals. De Waal draws from the more recent research hypothesizing mirror neurons as the cellular basis for emotional contagion, and thus as laying the foundation for empathy and social attunement among a number of animal species (de Waal 2009, 79). “The sight of another person’s state awakens within us hidden memories of similar states that we’ve experienced,” and other sensory modalities may also prompt this feeling of another’s affect (de Waal 2009, 78). These new insights into the social contagion of affect as well as the prevalence of in-group/out-group behavior shed light on sources of xenophobia and on techniques to transform social phobias.

This transformation turns on the liquidity of affects and their impact on fluid subjectivities. Perhaps one sign of the volatility of affects appears in how far we have come from what de Waal characterizes as the solidarity that New Yorkers experienced after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. In his study of empathy, de Waal observes that “New Yorkers of all races” pulled together in the face of an external threat: “the post-attack feeling of ‘we’re all in this together’ had fostered unity in the city” (de Waal 2009, 19). The waves of hostility over the building of a mosque on Ground Zero indicates the ease with which the prevailing winds of a social climate can alter direction, and transform into their very opposites.

In many ways our post 9/11 world has seen a collective mood shift in multiple directions from a fragile and tentative moment of global empathy, in which as French president Jacques Chirac proclaimed, “We are all Americans,” to what comedian Stephen Colbert has coined as our “fear for all,” a phrase that signals the emotional trials and tribulations

of a neoliberal free-for-all in which out-groups serve as punching bags in a right-wing victimology sweepstakes. Mass anxieties directed toward out-groups thus become impetus for emotionally closed borders (“Fear for All, Part 1” 2010).

In part this hostile climate is a reflection of right-wing ridicule that offers its own kind of logic to middle and working-class Americans. This logic of the Right evades the contradictions of late capitalism by offering a simpler kind of math that provokes anger and resentment at easily identified targets such as immigrants. Obama’s one-two punch on the spectacular April weekend of the White House correspondents’ dinner redirected the volatile mix of mockery and anger away from a focus on his citizenship back toward the xenophobe. Recall Obama’s suggestion that Donald Trump could now move on to more important issues like “did we fake the moon landing” and “where are Biggie and Tupac?” (“President Obama at the 2011 White House Correspondents’ Dinner”). Simultaneously Obama mocks the fear underlying the Birther accusation of his imagined alien origins with a short “my official birth video” that turns out to be an opening clip from Disney’s musical *The Lion King* (1994). This clip from a film that Obama describes as a “children’s cartoon” celebrates the birth of a lion cub in Africa. Getting public enemy number one of course was ultimately what elevated the mood of the country and transformed political discourse, but the jabbing remarks against the childish fears trumped up by the Birther’s self-appointed leader mediated by a modest degree of self-deprecating humor transferred the energy from the wave of xenophobia toward celebration of victory over a real enemy and a real American president. Yet such serendipitous waves of glee along with the borders between in- and out-groups can change overnight. Senator John McCain’s June 2011 suggestion that raging wildfires in Arizona of unknown origin were the fault of illegal immigrants is an example of how anxiety can shift the energy back toward negativity. Senator McCain no doubt intended to exploit the diffuse social and economic anxiety among his constituency, reminding us that a comedian’s work is never done (“John McCain” 2011).

Enter the Professional Comedian

It is in this longer history of fear mongering that *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert of *The Colbert Report*, both affiliated with cable

television's Comedy Central, had orchestrated their 2010 "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" to America. In a sly skit on *The Colbert Report*, Colbert, in the persona of a right-wing news pundit, launches his own pretend-campaign to "Keep Fear Alive." Giving his television audience a "refresher course in the five basic fear groups," and with "no blast shield between us, not even a sneeze guard" Colbert confronts a laundry list of phobias insisting on stereotypical labels. Thus Aaron Hicklin, editor in chief of *Out Magazine*; Efrén Barajas, vice president of the United Farm Workers Union; David Garshelis, the Bear Project leader from the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources; Daniel Lee, a researcher in artificial intelligence; and Imam Khalid Latif, executive director of New York University's Islamic Center become known simply as "Gay Guy," "Mexican Guy," "the Grizzly Coddler," "Could Be a Robot" and "Muslim Guy" respectively ("Fear for All, Part 1" 2010).

When Imam Khalid Latif attempts to sidestep the "Muslim guy" trope and reeducate the Colbert persona with a dose of logic, the skit reveals the limits of a straight cognitive approach to addressing our fears. "We can't kinda brand an entire community through the actions of a few," contends Latif. On the contrary, Colbert simply points out, "I think we have . . . I think actions have proven you wrong." Latif: "There's an element of flawed logic to that statement." Colbert snaps back, insisting, "But it's logic." Though Latif points out that it's flawed logic, Colbert gets another laugh when he retorts, "But it's better than no logic." Colbert, representing xenophobic normalcy, draws the conclusion that he is the "victim." Yes, Latif admits but with a twist. "You're losing out the most," Latif continues, "but I don't think you know why you're the victim" ("Fear for All, Part 1" 2010). Throughout the skit, Colbert mocks the tools of logic and reason, those preferred weapons of the educated elite. "I know that what you call equality is an attack on me. If you get more rights, I have fewer rights. That's just math" ("Fear for All, Part 2" 2010). Colbert can do the math. He understands the equation as well as any logician who, much like John McCain, sets the variables of fear to fit his own needs.

The underlying lesson is deeper yet. For while the modern American claims to distinguish him or herself from less culturally advanced others through a strong sense of individual self-responsibility, and readily projects "tribal" forms of justice unto other allegedly primitive groups, in fact this sovereign subject is caught up in migrating waves of affect of which he or she may be largely unaware. And so this all-American "fear for

all”—mocking everyone from gay activists to environmentalists—defines as it derides the logic of a national malaise, and with it the powers of reason and logic tout court for getting to the bottom of our angst, while bringing into sharp relief the relevance of comedy for precipitating alternative waves of affect for our political culture.

Our interest here is in the catalytic role of varying genres of laughter, such as ridicule and humor, for the conversion of one emotion into another, and especially of heated fear into warm solidarity. Humor, however, is not a panacea. Racist jokes and other popular sources of ridicule can amplify social climates of prejudice and fear. Meanwhile, audiences for progressive comedy are self-selecting. Those who do not share the political perspective of a comedian may find the humor offensive and fuel for their own outrage, or they may miss the irony entirely. But it is also true that humor and ridicule can convert phobia into a more hospitable climate. For these audiences the contagion of laughter may well loosen the hold of stereotypes and, as Jamil Abu-Wardeh, producer of the Axis of Evil Middle East Comedy Tour, recommends, create community through cross-border laughs: “We need to take our responsibilities seriously but not our selves.” The emergence of comedy in the Middle East has been in his words a “stand-up uprising” (“Jamil Abu-Wardeh” 2010).

Affect and Social Network Theory

As anyone who has experienced the urge to yield to uncontrollable waves of laughter might suppose, human beings are less the sovereign individuals—masters of our selves—than we often like to make out to be. It is just such waves of affect as laughter that theorists who study social networks set out to explore. “Superorganisms” as described by various social network theories can regulate the affect and physical function of nodes—aka people—through a process generally mysterious and yet also partly measurable (Christakis and Fowler 2009). Consider studies suggesting that one’s friends and even one’s friends’ friends—including people we do not know—can affect any number of dimensions of our lives, from health conditions to levels of happiness. Two researchers have found that if a person’s friend, a friend’s friend, or a friend’s friend’s friend loses weight, then that person is also likely to lose weight (Christakis and Fowler 2009, 108). A happy association of friends is more likely to make for individual human happiness than, say, lots of money,

but also more so than sad friends and sad friends of friends to what two researchers postulate as three degrees of influence (108).

But affects can also spread like a physical contagion across thousands of miles via waves of energy transmission. Whole epidemics of panic, fear, and even laughter can unfurl through these imperceptible waves. The Arab Spring has not only fanned out across North Africa but even across ethnic and continental boundaries to spur on protests in Spain and Greece and across the Atlantic to the labor protests against union bashing in Wisconsin. And as network theories of affect predict although cannot fully explain, these massive waves of influence occur without any personal acquaintance with other nodes (people) in the network and without anything like what we would ordinarily call personal agency or responsibility for the norms or behavior that people imitate and spread to others. Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler, portray these ripple effects as “a kind of synchrony in time and space . . . that resembles the flocking of birds or schooling of fish” (Christakis and Fowler 2009, 116). Psychological states, like physical diseases, emerge regardless of individual exertion simply because we inhabit a social milieu that harbors them (Christakis and Fowler 2009, 120).

Needless to say, these researchers are as perplexed as any of us would be with what becomes of the modern concept of moral responsibility. Modern moral theory (Kant’s ethics of duty and Mill’s utilitarianism) attributes responsibility to those relatively bound creatures called individuals. And indeed the metaphysics for substances with sharp borders—in contrast with the libidinally charged and ecstatic creatures that we seem to be—goes back at least as far as Aristotle. How do we blame individuals for behavior when those individuals sometimes function as nodes of networks traversed by cascades of affect? Do we re-invoke the tragic ethos of ancient Greece and so-called primitive tribes, those for whom a foul air and a symbolic scapegoat carry the toxins of damage or harm? Recall that classic Greek plays consign the source of communal malaise to a figure like Oedipus and purge the illness by exiling its symbolic source. Modern-day honor killings play on a similar logic of punishment. Another alternative response to the breakdown of modern moral theory is to exchange moral discourse for a hypermodern, therapeutic discourse of normality. This approach entails, as do our investigator-experts, that social policy “target [for treatment] the hubs of the network, namely those at the center of the network or those with the most contact” (Christakis and Fowler 2009, 133).

Foucault analyzes these normalizing techniques as horrifying for anyone thought to be deviant. Perhaps neither tragic cathartic rituals nor therapeutic models of “discipline/punish” (to borrow the Foucauldian locution) rest easily with those of us who are equally wary of the old, tribal customs and the new bureaucratic techniques of browbeating (Foucault 1977). Instead of combating massive waves of negative affect via ancient techniques of tragic scapegoating—which channels fear, anxiety, disgust, or the like onto a symbol to be exorcised—or bureaucratic procedures for normalization—which submits collective objects of anxiety to treatment and/or aversion—we turn to laughter and comedy for the promise of a more salutary medium of social change. Laughter provides a break in the stream through which the affective tides are unsettled and open to new shifts.

We do not by any means suggest that all comedy is the same. Even attempts to be progressive often turn out simply to be salutes to normality. Amid the controversy surrounding the building of a central New York Islamic Culture Center, and in an earnest attempt to confront anti-Muslim bigotry, Katie Couric suggested in December of 2010 a “Muslim version of ‘The Cosby Show.’” According to Couric, “‘The Cosby Show’ did so much to change attitudes about African-Americans in this country, and I think sometimes people are afraid of what they don’t understand.” Presumably this style of good-humored, middle-class ethnic sitcom would ease tensions and represent people as all basically just the same. While Couric rightly points toward the significant role that humor can play in shifting the political winds, her remarks serve all too well the assimilationalism (or whitening) that Bill Cosby’s brand of middle-class humor encourages, and thus a form of political transformation that doesn’t challenge and in fact may contribute to the race-and-class based hierarchies of neoliberalism (“Allah in the Family,” *The Daily Show* 2011). Cosby and Couric at best offer a holiday or temporary reprieve from social angst, and not the comic punch needed to transform social norms.

Bill Cosby didn’t cure racism, certainly not when race is mixed with the politics of class that neoliberalism so viciously fuels. Neoliberalism gives a pass to those model minorities of whatever color who attain the education and skills and cultural demeanor that are viewed as meriting the high status and income levels but that exacerbate the racial stereotypes of those who do not. Wherever older forms of biological and cultural racism might seem to wane, neoliberal racism kicks in at full steam. These race- and class-based inequities require a sharper form of comedy, not the sentimental

humor of the sitcom but the edgier tragic-inflected ridicule that targets late capitalism's social expectations (on the tragedy of neoliberalism, see Alexander 2012). Of course we don't want to dismiss entirely the Cosby concept. After all, Iranian American comedian Maz Jobrani effectively draws upon Cosby-style sentimental humor even if he does so tongue-in-cheek when he called out to his American audience, suggesting, "We're not Arab. . . . We are white so stop shooting," as he slyly and playfully shifted his identity away from the villainous Iranian to claim a more soothing Persian heritage. "I am not dangerous" he tells his American friends. "I am Persian like the cat . . ." and "colorful" and "handwoven" like the rug (*The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* 2007).

Mocking the genre and intent of the eighties mainstream family sitcom, *Daily Show* comedian Assif Mandvi's undertakes his own tongue-in-cheek version. As he ponders the question of "What would the Muslim *Cosby Show* look like?" he turns first to Dr. Alvin Poussaint, the Harvard-educated contributor to the original *Cosby Show*, who earnestly responds to Mandvi: "What you would want to do with a show with Muslims is just have them be like everybody else. We're all basically American." Thus Mandvi concocts for a test audience his own "*Qu'osby Show*," where he comes out holding a platter of food to serve to his family who sit in a typical American living room. He is wearing a typical Cosby sweater and an apron that says, "Kiss me, I'm Irish". His two kids are sitting on the couch doing their homework, and his wife is sitting in a chair reading the newspaper until Qu'osby's son tells the rest of family to "come on! It's the new Toby Keith album!" Playing with some good-old-boy talk, Mandvi's character tells his son stop "hoggin' it all to yourself. . . . Turn it up!" When the family starts line dancing to "A Little Less Talk," a white neighbor at the door mistakes their dancing for praying. But Mandvi insists, "Not us. Not unless you mean praying to the God of Oklahoma country music. Whoo-hoo!" as he high-fives the white neighbor ("*Allah in the Family*" 2011).

Mandvi's test audience, however, was unimpressed. Arabs who have been portrayed as the new enemy will not escape so easily from the prevailing phobias. A white male test-audience member wearing a USA bandana on his head suggests that perhaps Qu'osby "could have an uncle, uncle Raib or somethin' who came over and he's a, you know, a Bedouin and he lives in the basement in a sandbox or something with a goat." This audience longs for their public enemy that turns on terrorist jokes. Mandvi concludes that the "best way for a show to combat Muslim stereotypes is to confirm Muslim stereotypes." And so he offers satire in contrast with the sitcom humor that complies with assimilation to whiteness. After all, the problem is not that

Arabs need to act more white but that the xenophobic gaze needs to be turned back onto itself but with a few gentle laughs (“Allah in the Family” 2011).

While Mandvi and the Axis of Evil comedians offer an alternative to the sentimental humor of the mainstream sitcom, their self-humor gives their satire a different hedonic tone from the more abrasive and aggressive humor that Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson characterize as “the wit of retaliation and the comedy of revenge” (Boskin and Dorinson 1985, 86). Recall after the John F. Kennedy assassination Malcolm X’s jibe at white America and “the chickens coming home to roost” (Malcolm X and Alex Haley, 347). As Boskin and Dorinson explain, the use of retaliatory jokes by ethnic minorities can be an adaptive and even a triumphant response to an oppressive culture. This oppressive culture typically uses “aggressive humor and wit” for “two salient functions: conflict and control. Conflict, which is implicit in a variety of forms—satire, irony, sarcasm, parody, and burlesque—reinforces the in-group and weakens the out-group” (Boskin and Dorinson 1985, 83). Stereotypes serve to control or even scapegoat targeted groups, often by mocking their differences and forcing assimilation and cultural conformity. On the other hand, much of ethnic humor illustrates how “derisive stereotypes” can be “triumphantly adapted by the victims of stereotyping themselves as a means of revenge against their more powerful detractors” (81). Boskin and Dorinson recall the earlier work of Lawrence Mintz, who delineates stages in the development of ethnic humor, beginning with jokes from an aggressive and dominant culture, to self-deprecatory humor, stressed realism, and finally revenge on the dominant culture (Mintz 1977a, 4). Ethnic and racial groups may vary in the tone of their humor, with externally aggressive humor perceived to be “more inwardly masochistic, indeed tragic” (Boskin and Dorinson 1985, 91). Like the comedians of revenge, the Comedy Central and Axis of Evil humorists expose hypocrisy and other social vices (93). However, this earnest recent wave of ethnic humor does not fan the flames of revenge but instead uses self-humor to diffuse anxiety and generate a counter-wave of joyful solidarity as the new cool (Mintz 1977b, 1).

Assimilation, Hypocrisy, and the Comedian’s Immanent Critique of What It Means to Be an American

Derisive stereotypes and racial jokes function in a politics of domination, through either pressuring out-groups to assimilate or scapegoating

them altogether. In contrast, progressive humor combats the dominant culture through “immanent critique” of the kind Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson locate in critical theory (Fraser and Nicholson 1988). The traditional task of the critical theorist has been to expose the dialectical contradictions or tensions in hegemonic capitalism. Capitalism claims to free workers from feudal social hierarchies while in fact it re-entrenches them in unfree class-based systems of unfair labor practices. Satire and other edgy forms of humor too can reveal the contradictions that afflict a society, but comedy does not rely upon logic per se (not even critical theory’s dialectical logic, or at least not as that logic is typically conceived) to expose and untie the knots in a system and reveal our rational class interests. Instead, humor revolves around another modality of immanent critique, one that is immersed in the affects of our social identities and is better approached in terms of a social system’s hypocrisy, arrogance, ignorance, and other vices of unchecked power. Indeed such laughter has always been a favorite site of humor, revealing, as biologist de Waal surmises, strong egalitarian strains in our otherwise rather aggressive and hierarchical species (159–61).

Attacking hypocrisies of dominant groups may be the key strategy for comedians of immanent critique, given that their aim is partly characterized by the assertion of their own relevance and belonging. Ever undermining ethnic hierarchies in America, *Daily Show’s* Mandvi reminds us of the hypocrisy of our immigrant country as he quips that “it wasn’t easy for OUR European immigrant ancestors.” After all, “They had a long arduous journey just to get here and then they had to go out and kill a continents worth of squatters, while still suffering from boat lag.” In fact, he continues “I think these new immigrants have it easy. Give me a choice between wiping out a nation of indigenous peoples and busing tables, it’s no contest—better tips!” Mandvi points out the injustice of the in-group defining itself in this case as hardworking against an out-group as lazy when in fact that out-group’s hard work renders it a perfect candidate for the characteristics that define the American identity. For if hardworking defines the allegedly Anglo-Saxon protestant ethic of our nation’s cultural identity, as Samuel Huntington insists (Huntington 2004), then these comedian/critical theorists prompt us to ask once again, who are the real Americans?

Clearly hard work may be our mantra and freedom our philosophy, but Mandvi uncovers instead a neoliberal calculus of who counts as American: “I’m brown but I’m from India” and thus in his words, “I’m tech support slash cardiologist brown . . . not dishwasher slash Los Angeles parking

attendant brown” as he mockingly suggests that more points be assigned immigrants who speak English or, say, work in sciences. A perplexed Jon Stewart, playing it straight, responds by reminding us of our democratic-at-least-in-theory principles, adding, “But it is the antithesis of our founding. . . . What happened to the motto, the old motto, ‘give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free’”? Mandvi suggests that Stewart needs to get up to speed. “That was the old slogan,” but America has rebranded its immigration policy, Mandvi retorts, and echoing the current UPS tagline, he proposes as the new slogan for national policy “What can brown do for you?” Of course the notion of “what can brown do for you” is not new, but reflects a long history of global migration and industrialization in the United States that demanded cheap labor but also a collective response (“Amnesty Unintentional” 2007).

Solidarity through Laughter: Comedians and Movement Leaders

Contagious solidarity depends on bringing the malleability of race and ethnicity into sharp relief. After all the Irish, Italians, Jews, and Catholics have all been the new black in a country where the first immigration law in 1790 permitted only alien “free whites” to become citizens. In the context of discussing our current malaise over south of the border immigration, Colbert flashes up on a screen a perfect quote to uncover the long history of racism in this country. Colbert observes, it was Republican senate minority leader Mitch McConnell “who said ‘with all these unwanted Mexicans America will ‘become a colony of aliens, who will shortly be so numerous . . . [that they] will never adopt our language or customs, any more than they can acquire our complexion.’” Colbert then offers his ironic correction as the punch line. “I’m sorry,” he says, “that was not Mitch McConnell last week. That was Benjamin Franklin in 1751. And he wasn’t talking about Mexicans. He was talking about Germans” (“Citizenship Down—Akhil Amar” 2010).

There is of course a rich history of immigrants striving to become white, but we can also find episodes of solidarity based not on striving for whiteness but rather on challenging racism and social exclusion. As Vijay Prashad explains, the real issue is not assimilation, which is after all just a ploy for white supremacy now in its neoliberal stage, nor a reactive resurrection of boundaries to fortify some cultural nationalism, but an unbound solidarity against racial, ethnic, and also class-based inequality (Prashad

2002, 69). Prashad finds that “in U.S. history the Irish, Italians, Jews, and—in small steps with some hesitations on the part of white America—Asians and Latinos have all tried to barter their varied cultural worlds for the privileges of whiteness” (x). But he observes as well more hopeful signs in “the interactions of the Black Panther Party with the Red Guard and the Brown Berets in the mid-twentieth century; and finally the multiethnic working-class gathering in the new century” (x). For these ethnic groups the choice has been clear: either the vertical assimilation up a ladder that leads toward “bright whiteness” or solidarity through horizontal assimilation with those pushed back down (x).

Assimilation either vertical or horizontal depends upon the fluidity of social identities. Horizontal assimilation may be one of the most valuable achievements of that ironist who mixes the heat and the vision of egalitarian political movements with the savvy techniques of the comic stage. Scholars have unearthed a rich tradition of infrapolitics that links African American humor with radical reimagination. Historian Manning Marable powerfully complicates our understanding of Malcolm X as an agent not only of revenge but also of visionary solidarity: “What made him truly original was that he presented himself as the embodiment of the two central figures of African American folk culture, simultaneously the hustler/trickster and the preacher/minister. Janus-faced, the trickster is unpredictable, capable of outrageous transgressions; the minister saves souls, redeems shattered lives and promises a new world” (Marable 2011, 11). Malcolm X is not the only example of an ironist or satirist turned movement leader in the Civil Rights period. Historian Steven Estes mentions that Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seal got his start first doing comedy among other odd jobs (Estes 2005, 156). Given this continuity between black activism and subversive comedy, we ought not be surprised by Todd Boyd’s observation that Richard Pryor, whose comedy “spoke the unspeakable . . . about white people and their racism” was given “his private tutorial under the direction of (Panther co-founder) Huey Newton” (Boyd 2003, 28).

More recently, the humorist has also reemerged along with Latino and Mexican American–led campaigns for human rights. One powerful example dates back to 1 May 2006, when over a million protesters took to the streets in opposition to anti-immigrant fervor intent on criminalizing undocumented workers and militarizing the border. The protests centered on a playfully serious boycott inspired by a mockumentary, “A Day Without a Mexican,” and featured signs such as one that read “Jose called

today! Make your own taco” (Pulido 2007, 3; Johnson and Hing 2007). Professional comedians added sparks to the movement, and inspired reimagined communities through their own style of border-crossing laughs. Margaret Cho told her California audience to keep in mind that “if your family came over on the Mayflower, well, that makes you a wetback” (“Margaret Cho” 2008). Brilliantly and without holding back, she offers a reworking of in-groups and out-groups and a push toward antiracist thinking. Through her humor Cho neither assumes a position of moral authority nor projects condemnation that too often falls on deaf ears but instead offers a jolt of laughter to shift not just perceptions but the social landscape and its network of inextricably visceral connections.

Of course, as we have mentioned above, anti-immigrant fervor turns on an old trope of what it means to be American that prizes hard work. But if hard work is the price of the ticket in, then deindustrialization seems in the past few decades to have placed the fruits of one’s labor ever further out of reach. The mockery that aims to shed light on injustice has been misdirected toward some of the hardest workers in America, an irony that has only recently gained popular and congressional attention thanks to the comic techniques of satire.

Take for example the idea of a “super fence” along the U.S.-Mexican border, a project Carlos Mencia found improbable. As he put it, if you kick out all the immigrants, “who’s going to build it?” After all, “If the wetbacks are gone, there goes the workforce” (“Carlos Mencia Border Fence” 2006). The inability to see the vital importance of immigrant labor prompted the United Farm Workers Union to play a similar game with the master’s tools, or at least with definitions of who is lazy (an all too familiar racial slur) and who is hard working and hence what it means to be a real (deserving, entitled) American. More specifically, the United Farm Workers ushered in the “Take Our Jobs” campaign in the summer of 2010 and in so doing UFW president Arturo Rodriguez brought to the foreground the plight of Mexican agricultural workers, revealing the hypocrisy of immigration policies with a website that encourages unemployed Americans to take the job of so-called illegal immigrants. Indeed, the UFW website makes getting a job just an easy click away, but there is a catch. As Rodriguez points out the work is hard, physically demanding, and hence no one who does the work is white.

The irony is multifaceted. On one hand the job description demands working outdoors in heat often above 90 degrees, being fit enough to

lift fifty plus pounds, and mastering various tools of trade, which meant that on 8 July 2010 at the time of Rodriguez's appearance on *The Colbert Report*, only three U.S. citizens had taken on this minimum wage–piece rate opportunity (United Farm Workers; “Arturo Rodriguez” 2010). Colbert committed himself to becoming the fourth citizen to sign up for the “take our jobs” challenge, while insisting that there must be air conditioning. The irony of undermining basic human rights for a population who processes our poultry, harvests our crops, and thus feeds our nation, and is a tribute to the dignity of labor, is no laughing matter, yet to begin to alter the anti-immigrant waves of hate and fear demands some comic relief and redirection. Colbert's slapstick efforts as an agricultural laborer resulted in his fall 2011 congressional testimonies, bringing yet more attention to the ironies of what it means to be a hardworking American.

Conclusion: Solidarity and Shared Responsibility

In response to the xenophobia of the post 9/11 era, Dean Obeidallah, who went to bed white and woke up Arab, suggests, “White is not a skin color, it's status. It's the way you're treated in society.” The difference between Arab and white is that “white people never suffer as a group when a few people do something bad in their group” (*The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour* 2007). Whites contrast their Enlightenment concept of individual responsibility with what they cast as the so-called “primitive logic” of “tribal justice” that they then attribute to Arab culture, and which they view as “pre-modern.” But, as Obeidallah's jibe suggests, in fact they invoke the very logic that they aim to distance themselves from when they blame an entire group for the actions of a few.

It is remarkable how hard borders and identities are perceived to be when one is looking at people who are not considered to be sufficiently white. Ironically, perhaps, the solidarity we seek does not require that flawed logic yield to good logic, if by good logic we mean keeping our categories and identities free from confusion. For the contagious laughter of satirists breaks out of the primitive/modern dichotomy and demonstrates the power of affect to spread across borders, rendering identities fluid and primed for solidarity.

The Mideast is of course not the only region struggling for civil rights. In February 2011, Egyptians in a nod of solidarity treated protesters in

Madison, Wisconsin, to pizza from Ian's, a local student hangout on State Street that was feeding the demonstrators angered by an attack on workers' collective bargaining rights. After the election in 2010 of the governor Scott Walker, Wisconsin's public employees had found their unions under brutal attack in a state that had led the way for progressive pro-labor legislation. And so it was a bit of irony that would connect the Arab Spring to Wisconsin's winter and bring into sharp relief the topsy-turvy notion that the people of the Mideast may be able and more than willing to help those of the Midwest secure their civil rights, if not show them the way. The local pizza parlor transformed donations from over twenty countries into slices of empathy and revolutionary fervor, revealing the fluid mixing of the comic and political stage and the kind of joyous mocking that not only can shift the balance of power through wit but that can also spread like a wildfire across thousands of miles (Greenhouse 2011). Perhaps this is the kind of fire that McCain is afraid that the brown-skinned world has set.

Waves of affect serve well to remind us that responsibility too is not easily contained in individuals. For responsibility is after all often enough shared across borders with people we do not know. We might at least acknowledge in a tentative way that as individuals we are responsible for the impact of our energy and affect for some several degrees of influence in our social networks. Of course, the impact may spread further yet. Certainly the spread of affects leaves some radical contingency in our lives—for both good and bad. And even when antidemocratic energies feel overwhelming cross-border solidarities should not be dismissed as idiosyncratic. Thinking about the serendipity that may come of such uncontainable responsibility—the pizza from the Arab Spring to Wisconsin's winter—should surely also allow us to end with a collective if cautionary laugh.

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