©2008

Justin T. Lorts

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Black Laughter / Black Protest: Civil Rights, Respectability, and the Cultural Politics of African American Comedy, 1934-1968

by

Justin T. Lorts

A Dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-New Brunswick

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in History

written under the direction of

Ann Fabian

and approved by

_____

_____

_____

_____

New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2008

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Black Laughter / Black Protest: Civil Rights, Respectability, and the Cultural Politics of African American Comedy, 1934-1968

by Justin T. Lorts

Dissertation Director:

Ann Fabian

Black Laughter / Black Protest explores the relationship between comedy and the modern civil rights movement. In the early years of the civil rights movement, black leaders, intellectuals and journalists claimed that African American comedy undermined black claims to respectability and prevented policy makers and the white public from taking black concerns seriously. In an effort to eliminate these images from the mass media, the NAACP, with assistance from other organizations and members of the black press, organized a number of campaigns against Hollywood studios, Broadway producers and most notably, the *Amos 'n' Andy* television show. Though often overlooked by civil rights scholars, these actions were a central component of civil rights activism during the 1940s and 1950s and an important precursor to *Brown v. Board of Education*. In detailing these efforts, this project provides new evidence of the cultural dimensions of the civil rights struggle and contributes to the growing literature on the significance of respectability in black politics.

At the same time, *Black Laughter / Black Protest* also examines the significant role that African American comedians played in the movement. As prominent members of the black community, comedians such as Pigmeat Markham, Moms Mabley, Redd Foxx, Sammy Davis, Jr., Dick Gregory and Godfrey Cambridge had access to large, and often multi-racial, audiences. Using published interviews and recorded performances, I trace the development of African American comedy through various forms and mediums, including vaudeville, burlesque, nightclub routines, comedy albums, motion pictures and television. Over the course of this development, black comedians effectively used their privileged positions to engage their audiences in a civil rights dialogue that challenged mainstream assumptions on racial issues. Comics also directly participated in the civil rights movement by integrating entertainment venues, testifying before government officials, performing at fundraisers and rallies and providing much needed financial support to the cause. Dick Gregory went even further by actually leading marches and demonstrations, lending visibility and vitality to local protests. By highlighting these efforts, this project sheds scholarly light on the role that black artists played in shaping political consciousness and action during the civil rights era.

Acknowledgements

When I tell people the topic of my dissertation, they often jokingly reply, "That sounds like fun. While everyone else is buried in the archive, you get to listen to comedy records." I smile, not wanting to explain to them that listening to comedy records was only a small, albeit enjoyable part of my research, and that I have spent my fair share of time in the archives. The truth is that while my research did have its "fun" moments, these times were vastly outweighed by moments of frustration, fatigue, and despair. I was able to endure these difficult times and actually finish because of the support, guidance, and friendship I have received from numerous people over the years.

A note of thanks to the libraries and staffs at Alexander Library, Rutgers University; Bobst Library, New York University; Doe Library, UC Berkeley; the Cinema-Television Library, University of Southern California; Archives Center, National Museum of American History; Beinecke Library, Yale University; Firestone and Mudd Libraries, Princeton University; Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library; Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts; and the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

At Rutgers, I have benefitted from the support and insights of a number of faculty and graduate students in the Department of History. This project began almost by accident in the History of Women and Gender Seminar led by Norma Basch and Dee Garrison, whose initial support was crucial. I want to thank Matt Matsuda, Jackson Lears, Herman Bennett, Khalil Muhammad and Jim Reed for the helpful comments they provided at the early stages of this project. Paul Clemens and David Oshinsky helped me understand what it means to be a great teacher. Jim Goodman helped me understand what

it means to be a great writer and his work continues to inspire me. Colleagues Tim Alves, Scott Bruton, Brian Connolly, Lesley Doig, Kate Elias, Matt Ferguson, Joe Gabriel, Paimaan Lodhi, Carla Macdougall, Dominique Padurano, Amy Portwood, Kate Keller, Edward Taylor, Daniel Wherley, and Jonathan Wharton all provided friendship and cheer. A special thanks to Dawn Ruskai who helped me register every semester and kept the graduate program running.

I could not have asked for a more brilliant and supportive committee and I have benefitted greatly from their guidance and insight. Waldo Martin has been a mentor since my undergraduate days at Berkeley and has shaped my thinking in ways that I am only now beginning to fully understand. Keith Wailoo has served as a model of graduate mentorship and scholarly excellence, and I benefitted enormously from my year in his research seminar. Steven Lawson kept me grounded and has been a continual source of support since my first year in graduate school. Ann Fabian, my chair, has been my "Ambassador of Kwan," stepping in when I was without an adviser, challenging me to push my work in new directions, helping me stay employed and making sure that I finished.

Since 2005 I have had the pleasure of teaching and advising at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University. The school's individualized and interdisciplinary approach to learning was crucial in helping me develop as both a teacher and scholar. Angela Dillard and George Shulman took me under their wings and provided much-needed mentorship. Deans Ali Mirsepassi and Susanne Wofford provided much-need financial support and encouragement. My colleagues in the Office of Advising and at NYU – Becky Amato, Nancy Harris, Tracy Hollingsworth, John Lang,

Vanessa Manko, Patrick McCreery, Nicole Parisier, Ryan Poynter, and Kevin Spain – helped make Gallatin the best first job I could ask for. Special thanks to my brilliant friend and intellectual sparring partner Lauren Kaminsky, who kept me sane and inspired me to finish.

The Lewis family has been a constant source of support, good food, and wine, and I can't thank them enough for everything they've done for me. My own family has been behind me every step of the way and has given me a much-needed haven from the crazy worlds of graduate school and New York City. I know they've been waiting for this day for some time, and I want to thank them for everything they have given me over the years.

Abigail Lewis has believed in this project from the beginning and never lost faith in it or me, even when I had. Her unwavering love and support kept me going through good times and bad. It has been an incredible, often difficult, journey but we made it. Thank you.

Table of Contents

Abstract - ii

Acknowledgments - iv

Introduction – 1
Black Laughter / Black Protest

Chapter One – 22
Hollywood, the Apollo Theater and the Politicization of African American Comedy in the World War II Era

Chapter Two – 79
"Taking the Negro Seriously": *Amos 'n' Andy* and the Politics of African American Comedy in the Early Civil Rights Movement

Chapter Three – 135
From Double V to Double Entendre: Nightclubs, Blue Humor and the Politics of Respectability in African American Comedy, 1953-1960

Chapter Four – 197
"We don't serve colored people here – That's alright, I don't eat colored people": Integration, Stand-Up Comedy and Civil Rights Protest, 1961-1965

Conclusion – 260

Bibliography – 268

Curriculum Vita - 283

Introduction
Black Laughter / Black Protest

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, when African American comedy flourished in Northern theaters, comedian Willie "Ashcan" Jones delighted black audiences with a standup routine that blended wit with social commentary. Jones began his career as a dancer in New York City and eventually joined the vaudeville circuit, playing the straight man to such comedians as Pigmeat Markham, Rastus Murray, and William Earl. When Jones finally had the opportunity to develop his own act, he drew from experiences all too familiar to his audience. Using humor to attack segregation and Jim Crow, Jones told the following joke:

> When I was down South, I went into a restaurant. The waiter came over and said, "We don't serve coloreds." I said, "Sir, I don't eat coloreds. I would like a hamburger with onions."[1]

Two decades later in January 1961, Dick Gregory made his big-time debut at the Playboy Club in Chicago. The Playboy Club was one of the country's finest comic venues and catered to an almost exclusively white audience. After an unexpected cancellation by another comedian, Gregory was booked into the club as a last minute replacement. Until then, the Playboy Club had booked only white comics, and although Gregory had honed his skills before white patrons at lesser clubs, that evening's audience, consisting entirely of white Southern businessmen, posed a formidable challenge. Gregory, desperate for success, refused to cancel or alter his routine and proceeded to amuse his audience with the same brand of social satire popularized by white comics Mort Sahl and Lenny Bruce during the 1950s. Pricking his audience's conscience with his "commentary on affairs political," Gregory eventually got around to the topic of segregation:

---

[1] For information on Willie "Ashcan" Jones see J. Jerome Zolten, "Black Comedians: Forging an Ethnic Image," *Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 2 (1993): 70-71.

> Last time I went down South I walked into this restaurant, and the white waitress came up to me and said, "We don't serve colored people here." I said, "That's alright, I don't eat colored people. Bring me a whole fried chicken!"[2]

These two jokes, long familiar to black audiences, serve as a useful starting point for a study on the relationship between black comedy and the civil rights struggle. On the surface, the difference lies simply in the choice of food. Yet if we step back and examine these jokes in their cultural and historical contexts, important differences – in venue, audience, impact, and political context – become apparent. Part of a group of entertainers that helped pioneer the stand-up comedy form, Ashcan Jones developed his routines for the predominantly black audiences that frequented theaters like the Apollo in New York, the Regal in Chicago and the Howard in Washington, D.C. These audiences, many of whom had recently migrated North in search of wartime industrial jobs and the opportunity to live their lives free of the crushing oppression of Jim Crow, were well aware of segregation's absurdities. Comedian Godfrey Cambridge has observed that, "For years, … Negro comics only worked the Negro ghetto theaters and night clubs and told the Negro audiences what they already knew. They laughed out of recognition."[3] By identifying a shared enemy, Jones and other comedians of the era helped unite audiences that included blacks and sympathetic whites into a common group identity, at a time when the modern civil rights movement was just getting underway.[4]

---

[2] Dick Gregory, *Nigger* (New York, Pocket Books, 1964), 158-60. For a recorded version of a similar routine see Dick Gregory, *In Living Black and White*, Colpix CP 417. "Commentary on Affairs Political" is a track title on *In Living Black and White*.

[3] Godfrey Cambridge quoted in Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 363.

[4] There is a limited body of social science work dealing with the social functions of humor. H.G. Pitchford in an unpublished dissertation entitled *the Social Functions of Humor* (Emory, 1960) saw humor functioning in three ways: as a way of achieving consensus, as a technique of social control, and a device for introducing competition and social conflict. Pitchford cited in William H. Martineau, "A Model of the Social Functions of Humor" in *Psychology of Humor*, ed. Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee (New York: Academic Press, 1972), 109.

Gregory's joke occurred in a remarkably different context. By the early 1960s, stand-up comedy was well established in mainstream culture and comics routinely appeared in posh nightclubs, on television variety shows and on the *Billboard* Top 40. Yet these comics, almost without exception, were white and the field of comedy remained as segregated as the rest of American society. "Go over any list of the top comedians in the world today," an article in *Ebony* magazine observed, "not a Mau Mau in the bunch."[5] With his successful performance at the Playboy Club, Gregory opened the door for other black comedians to perform in front of mainstream white audiences. Soon veteran comics like Nipsey Russell, Redd Foxx, Slappy White, and Moms Mabley, as well as newcomers like Bill Cosby and Godfrey Cambridge could be found on stage, television, and recordings telling jokes that mocked Jim Crow and challenged American racial attitudes. In bringing racial humor to mainstream audiences at a time when the civil rights movement was sweeping across the South and dominating national media coverage, black comedians transcended their role as entertainers and became critical voices in the civil rights struggle. Comedians like Gregory went even further by actually participating in marches and rallies, becoming civil rights leaders in the process.

Black Laughter / Black Protest illuminates the relationship between comedy and the civil rights movement by telling the story of African American comedy from Ashcan Jones to Dick Gregory. By placing comedians at the center of the civil rights struggle, I elevate them to starring roles as leaders within the black community, while some of the better-known figures of the civil rights movement are relegated to the supporting cast. I take seriously the efforts of black writers and civil rights leaders to sanitize African American comedy, as concerns about the impact of negative comic stereotypes were

[5] Louie Robinson, "Why Negro Comics Don't Make it Big," *Ebony*, October 1960, 108.

along with more familiar concerns about jobs, discrimination, schools and voting – a critical component of the struggle. Though some readers will no doubt resist my efforts, my aim is to create an alternative narrative of the civil rights movement, one that recognizes the importance of cultural expression and the centrality of cultural politics to black efforts in toppling Jim Crow. As Waldo Martin has observed, "Precisely because African Americans historically have had more control over their culture than many other aspects of their world, culture has always been a critical battleground in their freedom struggle."[6] By incorporating comedy into our study of the movement it is clear that the civil rights movement occurred within legal, social *and* cultural arenas. Battles were fought not only in the streets of Birmingham but also on the stage of the Playboy Club; victories were achieved in the chambers of Congress as well as in the pages of *Billboard*; leadership and inspiration were received not only from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ella Baker but also from Dick Gregory and Moms Mabley.

Central to this study is the belief that black comedy is an important form of political expression that has profoundly impacted the modern civil rights struggle. Despite comedy's central place within African American cultural expression and the prevalence of comedy in forms of black political expression, historians have not fully explored the relationship between black comedy and black politics.[7] In his landmark study of African American folk culture, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*,

---

[6] Waldo Martin, *No Coward Soldiers: Black Cultural Politics in Postwar America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3.

[7] There are a handful of academic and popular studies that address this relationship. See Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Steven E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theater, 1895-1910* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying – the Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

Lawrence Levine offers what remains the most insightful interpretation of black humor by a historian. Locating expressions of black humor – jokes, toasts, folk tales, and the dozens – in a larger universe of black folk expression that included slave tales, religious expressions, and secular songs, Levine argued for the importance of black folk thought in understanding the ways that blacks made sense of American society from slavery up through World War II. For Levine, humor was particularly important, for "no inquiry into the consciousness and inner resources of black Americans can ignore the content and structure of Afro-American humor."[8] Humor allowed blacks to understand and exert control over their environment, develop and maintain a sense of community, mock whites and other European ethnic groups, expose the absurdities of segregation and stereotypes, and display forms of segregation and anger forbidden outside a humorous context. Humor illustrates that blacks "understood with great precision the intricacies and perversions of the system in which they lived" and that this understanding was "essential to black survival and the maintenance of group sanity and integrity."[9]

Levine provides a useful chronological and historiographical starting point for this study (as well as the inspiration for its title). Though he touches on some of the same comedians who are central to this study, Levine's focus is on black folk culture prior to the civil rights movement, and his work pays little attention to the ways in which black comedy intersected with more traditional forms of political protest or the ways in which comedy constituted a form of protest in and of itself.[10] In recent years, scholars in

---

[8] Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness,* 300.
[9] Ibid, 338.
[10] Levine (311) does suggest that comedy played an important role in laying the cultural groundwork for later political revolutions, arguing "the salient function of [jokes about segregation] was to rob the American racial system of any legitimacy long before the courts and the government began that still uncompleted task."

African American history and other disciplines have expanded our ideas about political action and have shed new light on the ways that cultural practices have constituted avenues of resistance.[11] Perhaps most influential for historians of the African American freedom struggle has been the work of Robin Kelley, who has urged scholars to expand their definitions of politics and resistance to include black working-class cultural practices that challenged segregation and white supremacy. Such an expansion would allow one to see politically and racially oriented jokes as a form of politics, and an act of resistance. In his discussion of the "moving theaters" of the Birmingham, Alabama bus system, Kelley suggests that jokes made against racist bus drivers functioned as an "overlooked discursive strategy."[12]

Black Laughter / Black Protest explores the political impact of African American comedy by focusing on the performance and representations of comedy in a national context. While Kelley is primarily interested in the hidden politics, or infrapolitcs, found in forms of vernacular comedy that exist in "moving theaters" and other contested sites, this study focuses on professional African American comics and their performances in public venues and widely distributed media formats including nightclubs, movie theaters, television, and comedy records. It was these performances that attracted the attention of black and white audiences, the media, and civil rights organizations. Very often these

---

[11] Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture: A Project By Michelle Wallace* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1992); Harry J. Elam and David Krasner, eds., *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1974); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994); Krasner, *Resistance, Parody and Double Consciousness*; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).
[12] Kelley, *Race Rebels,* 72.

performances took place in New York, Los Angeles, and, to a lesser extent Chicago, as African American comics stopped playing the 1930s and 1940s, following the collapse of the "chitlin' circuit."[13] Despite this geographic concentration, black comedians still attracted national audiences and generated national discussions with the assistance of motion pictures, television and comedy albums, which allowed black and white audiences to experience a comedian without having to travel to New York, Los Angeles or Chicago. These venues and media forms are significant, for often the political response to or impact of comedy was more dependent on where it was told (and more importantly, who might be listening) than on the actual content or delivery of the joke itself.

Focusing on professional African American comedians helps illuminate some of the keys roles that comedy played in the civil rights struggle. One of the most important is comedy's ability to create communities and foster social cohesion.[14] Comedians were prominent entertainers whose performances helped unite people from a variety of racial, regional and class backgrounds into a single audience. Their jokes articulated common hardships and concerns, identified common enemies and obstacles, and imagined political possibilities.[15] In his study of black politics following emancipation, Steven Hahn has argued persuasively that the circulation of rumors "played a significant role in defining political communities of rural blacks newly emerged from bondage."[16] The jokes of black comedians operated in much the same way, circulating – in newspapers, magazines, and

---

[13] Also known as the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA) circuit. TOBA circuit comprised over forty theaters located throughout the country until its demise in the 1930s as a result of the Great Depression.
[14] Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 81-97.
[15] Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 358-66.
[16] Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, 135.

comedy records – among blacks and whites throughout the country, helping to define a national community sympathetic to the civil rights struggle.

Because of its national circulation, African American comedy also functioned as an important form of political discourse. We are not accustomed to thinking of jokes and comedy routines as being political speech. Yet like forms of black religious expression such as spirituals and sermons, comedy during this period often moved beyond being simply a source of laughter. Jokes mocked racist politicians, criticized government policies, and challenged prevailing political assumptions. By inserting these jokes into national dialogues on race and rights, black comedians transcended their roles as entertainers and became spokespeople and leaders in the civil rights struggle, in much the same way that black preachers like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth were simultaneously religious and political figures.[17] It is no surprise then that Reverend James R. McGraw described Gregory's 1968 book *The Shadow that Scares Me* as a collection of "impious sermons," and placed the comic within "the best tradition of evangelistic preaching."[18]

Uncovering the political nature of comic performances was one of the challenges of this project. Unlike more recognized civil rights leaders and organizations, comedians did not leave behind a traditional archive. What they did leave behind however was hours of recorded performances, packaged and sold on record albums throughout the 1950s and 1960s. These albums feature live, often unedited, performances that allow the listener to

---

[17] There exists a substantial body of scholarship on the functions of comedians in American culture. See Albert Goldman, *Freak Show* (New York: Athenaeum, 1971); Stephanie Koziski, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic" *Journal of Popular Culture* 18, no. 2 (1984): 57-76; Lawrence Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1985): 71-80. While I recognize and agree with all of these interpretations to a certain extent, they do not adequately address the highly political role that African American comedians were playing during this period, nor do they take into account the political nature and impact of their routines.

[18] Dick Gregory, *The Shadow that Scares Me* (New York: Pocket Books, 1968), 11.

hear examples of entire routines (rather than just the few choice jokes that were reprinted in newspapers) and to get a sense of not only who comprised the audiences, but what these audiences found funny and how they engaged with the comic. By transcribing these albums, and supplementing these performances with published interviews, newspaper and magazine articles, and other traditional archival sources, I have constructed my own "archive." My approach in this regard is similar to that of Angela Davis, who in her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* used the transcribed recordings of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Billie Holliday to "divulge unacknowledged traditions of feminist consciousness in working-class black communities."[19]

The importance of comedians was not just limited to their role in fostering political discourse. Their prominence, within the black community and at times, mainstream American culture, also allowed comics to take an active role in traditional avenues of political protest. As Brian Ward argues, "African American art and culture did not just reflect…putatively more important developments in the formal, organized, conventionally 'political' freedom struggle; they also played an active role in creating that Movement, defining its goals and methods, and expressing them to both the black community and a wider, whiter American public."[20] Building off of Vincent Harding's call for scholarship that explores the "powerful release of creative energy that was so central to [the post-World War II black freedom movement]," Ward and other scholars have examined the ways in which African American culture and cultural figures have

---

[19] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), xi.
[20] Brian Ward, ed., *Media Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001), 2-3.

contributed to the larger civil rights struggle.[21] Utilizing their status as celebrities, black comedians played an important role in raising funds for various civil rights organizations at both the local and national level; appeared at civil rights rallies and events; and by the 1960s, became spokespeople and leaders within the movement. When a 1964 Newsweek poll asked black Americans to rate the performance of their leaders, Dick Gregory was among those leaders blacks were asked to evaluate.[22]

Yet to argue that comedy is political is not to suggest that comedy constitutes a clearly defined political ideology or has a political agenda. Comedy, almost by definition, defies political categories and resists alliances with clearly defined political movements. In his insightful analysis of comedy and Athenian democracy, political scientist Peter Euben notes that comedy, with its ability to provide political critique and education to its audience of citizens, has an "ethical and political significance rivaling that of both tragedy and philosophy." Yet while comedy is no doubt political, Euben is careful not to claim that humor constitutes a politics:

> Comedy is not philosophy or theory. It is far funnier and can do things that philosophy and theory cannot. While it can dramatize the predicament of its characters, and thus help its citizen audience recognize and live with their own hybrid identities, it offers no solutions and prescribes no cures…[23]

---

[21] Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding; Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Martin, *No Coward Soldiers*; Ingrid Monson, "Monk Meets SNCC," *Black Music Research Journal* 19, no. 2 (Autumn 1999): 187-200; Ingrid Monson, *Freedom Sounds*: *Civil Rights Call out to Jazz and Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[22] "Who Are the Leaders – How They Rate," *Newsweek*, July 29, 1963, 31.

[23] J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture and Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); J. Peter Euben, *Platonic Noise* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003). Though Euben is of course discussing the political world of the ancient Greeks, his observations seem highly applicable to modern forms of comedy as well. Euben himself argues that Aristophanes, were he alive today, would be a writer for the Simpsons and that "in many respects stand-up comics … would fit comfortably in the world of Aristophanic comedy." Euben, *Corrupting Youth*, 78.

Andy Medhurst makes a similar point, noting that while comedy provides tremendous insights into a group's beliefs and power structures, "it is simply not possible to make definite pronouncements on the ideological proclivities of comedy." "Comedy is too slippery, too wicked, too wily to ever be pinned down on the altar of ideological purity."[24] Black comedians were just as likely to make jokes about civil rights organizations as they were about segregation; to reinforce sexism as they were to attack racism; to espouse conservative ideas as they were to champion liberal ones. Comedians aimed to shock, challenge and yes, educate and inspire their audiences; but above all their goal was to entertain and to make their audiences laugh. In their pursuit of this laughter, comedians were almost certain to offend the political and cultural sensibilities of their audiences. For some comics, this was precisely the point. Jewish comedian Mort Sahl's tagline at the end his routines was "Is there anyone I haven't offended yet?"

Sahl's quote also highlights another truth about comedy. In violating taboos and transgressing social norms, comedy associates itself with the base instincts of the individual and the "low" elements of society. Black comedians did not just make politically astute observations about race relations and global affairs, a transgressive act in and of itself. They also joked about drinking, sex and bodily functions, often while in various states of undress. This posed a challenge for civil rights leaders, for whom respectability was a key aspect of their public militancy. In her study of the women's movement in the Black Baptist Church, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has emphasized the importance of what she has termed the politics of respectability to black activism. This politics of respectability "emphasized reform of individual behaviors and attitudes

---

[24] Andy Medhurst, "Introduction," in *The Colour Black: Black Images in British Television,* ed. Therese Daniels and Jane Gerson (London: BFI Publishing, 1989), 15-16.

both as a goal in and of itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations" at once emphasizing "manners and morals while simultaneously asserting traditional forms of protest."[25] By highlighting those elements in society that were unmannered or immoral, African American comedy often clashed with dominant middle-class notions of respectability. It is tempting to dismiss these jokes and yet they help illuminate black attitudes towards gender relations and sexual politics at a time when civil rights leaders struggle to control representations of both.

Black comedians' tendency to challenge elite notions of respectability suggests the broader tensions between comedy and the civil rights struggle. While comedy was a means of empowerment and a vehicle for protest, it was also a source of *embarrassment* and an obstacle to black political advancement. Throughout its long history, African American comedy, particularly in its popular forms, has been intimately tied to damaging racial stereotypes and white supremacy. In the minds of most white audiences, black comedy was synonymous with minstrelsy, a cultural practice in which white, often ethic white, performers smeared burnt cork on their face (a practice called "blacking up" or "corking up") and assumed an exaggerated "black" persona. Though the exact origins of the practice are debated, credit for minstrelsy's popularity is generally given to Thomas D. Rice, a white actor who supposedly in 1828 witnessed a dance performed by an elderly and crippled black stablemen in Louisville. Rice copied the elderly man's moves and lyrics and created the routine "Jump Jim Crow." Performing before white audiences in tattered clothing and blackened face, Rice sang "Weel about, and turn about/And do jis so;/ Eb'ry time I weel about,/ I jump Jim Crow." Rice's minstrel performance was an

---

[25] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

immediate sensation, and by the 1830s blackface performers were a fixture on the American stage. In the 1840s, led by groups such as the Virginia Minstrels and the Ethiopian Serenaders, the minstrel show had established itself as one of the most popular forms of American entertainment, a popularity that would last the remainder of the century.[26]

Its unclear how the name of a "black" character performed by an antebellum white minstrel performer came to describe the system of white supremacy and institutionalized segregation that developed after the fall of Reconstruction, yet the name is apt. For minstrelsy, in reducing African American culture to a series of grotesque stereotypes and stripping blacks of their humanity became the cultural expression of white supremacy. The minstrel image of blacks as lazy, dumb, and naturally comical, with exaggerated features and dialect became the dominant image of the race in the minds of whites, appearing on postcards, sheet music, household goods, food packaging, and advertisements. The Sambo stereotype served as an all-encompassing stand-in for the race and was used by whites to justify the debased treatment of blacks in American society.[27] So dominant was the stereotype that even when black entertainers began performing in minstrel shows in the late nineteenth century audiences still expected them to put on blackface and adopt the exaggerated stereotypes of the Sambo. Thus one of the challenges facing black comedians, from early 20th century performers like Bert Williams

---

[26] For information on blackface minstrelsy see Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999); Watkins, *On the Real Side.*

[27] George Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

and Will Hogan to the comedians of the 1960s, was how to free themselves of the limitations and expectations of minstrel stereotypes.[28]

In his important article, "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Black," Henry Louis Gates, Jr. posits that the Sambo and the New Negro "bear an antithetical relation to each other." For Gates, countering the negative image of the Sambo and reconstructing the black image as a political and cultural "presence" was one of the primary functions of New Negro writing, both during the Harlem Renaissance and in the three decades prior. Writers like Booker T. Washington intentionally crafted their publications to 'turn' the new century's image of the black away from the stereotypes scattered throughout plantation fictions, blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville, racist pseudo-science, and vulgar Social Darwinism." Far from a mere literary concern, the re-crafting of the black image was done to change black political fortunes – for reality imitated art, and to "manipulate the image of the black was, in a sense, to manipulate reality."[29]

Gates provides a useful way of conceptualizing black cultural activism and resistance to comic stereotypes during the civil rights era. One the eve of World War II, black representation within American popular culture was still dominated by comic stereotypes. One of the more popular programs on radio was the *Amos 'n' Andy* show, which featured two white men performing the voices of the all-black cast of characters. The most popular black actor in Hollywood was Stepin' Fetchit, the shuffling, droll-faced actor who had re-popularized the image of the lazy comic servant on the silver screen. As film historian Donald Bogle notes, "no other period in motion-picture history could boast of more black faces carrying mops and pails or lifting pots and pans" than the 1930s and

---

[28] For an overview of this struggle see Boskin, *Sambo*.
[29] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 24 (1988): 129-55.

these black servants, "with their incredible antics, their unbelievable dialects, and their amazing absurdities" provided the era with its "buoyancy and jocularity."[30] Faced with an image of the race at odds with black claims to equality, civil rights leaders and organizations, along with the artists, intellectuals and the black press fought to sanitize the black comic image.

Central to these efforts was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), perhaps the most powerful civil rights organization in the country during World War II and the immediate post-war period. Scholars who have examined the Association during this period have tended to focus on its monumental legal and lobbying efforts in the area of school desegregation, anti-lynching legislation, voting rights and the elimination of the poll tax.[31] Few civil rights historians have examined the NAACP's cultural activism during this period.[32] However, from its inception the NAACP has involved itself in cultural politics and has attempted to police cultural production. One of the Association's first mass efforts was a protest over D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, in which NAACP members and their allies working at the local level, attempted to lobby local film censoring boards in an effort to eliminate some

---

[30] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1973, 1989), 36.

[31] Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); Kenneth W. Goings, *The NAACP Comes of Age: The Defeat of Judge John J. Parker* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Jack Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Court: How a Dedicated Band of Lawyers Fought for a Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Kenneth Robert Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* (New York: New Press, 2003); Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America, 1909-1969* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan, *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991); Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

[32] A notable exception is Leonard C. Archer, *Black Images in the America Theater: NAACP Protest Campaigns – Stage, Screen, Radio and Television* (Brooklyn, NY: Pageant-Poseidon, 1973). Archer's perceptive study is limited by the fact that scholars did not have access to the NAACP papers at the time.

of the more offensive scenes from the movie. The NAACP would continue this cultural activism into the World War II era. Under the leadership of Executive Secretary Walter White, the Association would take on Hollywood and push for better film roles and for the NAACP to have a voice in shaping black representation on the screen. Film historian Thomas Cripps credits the NAACP for its central role in "making movies black" and bringing Hollywood into the broader struggle against racism. After World War II, the NAACP would carry this fight to television and mount a nation-wide boycott against the television version of the *Amos 'n' Andy* show.[33]

Historians have viewed these efforts as somehow separate from the NAACP's work in the more traditional areas of civil rights activism. Yet it is clear that Association leaders and members of the rank-and-file often saw little distinction between the two, and recognized that the way blacks were perceived culturally affects how they were treated politically and socially.[34] For the NAACP, stereotypical black humor was "detrimental to the over all attempt to dissuade people from thinking of the Negro in stereotype terms" and that "to the minstrel stage can be traced the difficulty with which white America finds in taking the Negro seriously."[35] "The NAACP has not hesitated to 'interfere' with lynching, disfranchisement, unequal educational opportunities and job discrimination," Walter White wrote in justifying the Association's efforts to cleanse Hollywood of harmful comic depictions of African Americans. "All of these evils are aided in part by

---

[33] For a discussion of NAACP protests against stereotyped images of blacks in popular culture Archer, *Black Images in the American Theater*; Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: a Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).
[34] This insight is echoed by Stuart Hall and other black cultural critics. See Jacqueline Bobo, "The Politics of Interpretation: Black Critics, Filmmakers, and Audiences," in *Black Popular Culture*.
[35] Madison Jones to Dilworth Lupton, January 30, 1950, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Part 15, Series B, reel 13, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Frederick, MD: University Publications of American, 1982-, Microfilm [hereafter NAACP]; Errold Collymore to Edward Lashin, January 14, 1950, NAACP 15/B/13.

Hollywood stereotypes. The struggle, therefore, to improve the treatment of Negroes in the medium which reaches more human eyes and emotions than any yet devised by man is part and parcel of that struggle for improvement of the Negro lot."[36] Though the NAACP's campaigns against comic stereotypes would decline in prominence and importance by the mid-1950s, their success was key to laying the groundwork for *Brown v. Board of Education* and the modern civil rights movement.

Thus comedy and the civil rights movement maintained a close but complicated relationship in which comedy served as both a means and a target of protest. In summarizing the relationship between politics and culture, historian George Lipstiz writes:

> politics and culture maintain a paradoxical relationship in which only effective political action can win breathing room for a new culture, but only a revolution in culture can make people capable of political action. Culture can seem like a substitute for politics, a way of posing only imaginary solutions to real problems, but under other circumstances culture can become a rehearsal for politics, trying out values and beliefs permissible in art but forbidden in social life.[37]

In the case of comedy, the efforts of the NAACP and other civil rights organizations were critical in changing audience expectations and creating the "breathing room" for black comics to break free of the limitations of minstrelsy and gain access to mainstream audiences. At the same time, comedy helped unite the black community, define a common enemy, and reveal the absurdities of Jim Crow, laying the cultural groundwork for the movement's success. This relationship was never simple and was constantly changing based on political and cultural circumstances. Very often black comics found

---

[36] Copy of Statement Regarding NAACP's Establishment of Hollywood Bureau, Papers of the NAACP, Part II, Series A, Box 277, "Films: Hollywood Bureau, 1945-49."
[37] George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 16.

themselves blamed for the problematic depictions of blacks in American culture, even as they worked with civil rights organizations to improve these depictions.

Black Laughter / Black Protest examines this relationship during the period from 1934-1968. These three decades coincide with two distinct periods in African American history. From the perspective of African American comedy, it marks the period in which black humor begins its move into the mainstream, through the early years of the Apollo theater right up through Gregory's most visible and productive years as a comedian. It also roughly coincides with the years of the modern civil rights movement. Though scholars still debate the exact chronological markers of what Jacqueline Dowd Hall dubs the "Long Civil Rights Movement,"[38] there is a growing consensus that the civil rights movement extends beyond the "Montgomery-to-Memphis" framework and has its roots in New Deal and World War II-era activism.[39] This is particularly true for the cultural aspect of the struggle as national leaders in the NAACP, in the wake of the end of what is now termed the Harlem Renaissance, began linking concerns over black comic representation to the broader civil rights struggle. As World War II approached, these concerns would be explicitly linked to the emerging "Double V" – victory abroad and victory at home – campaign.

Chapter One looks at this shift and the broader politicization of black humor during the World War II era. This politicization took place on two fronts. On one, black comedy itself took on an increasingly political tone, as comedians moved away from the

---

[38] Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-63.
[39] See Charles Payne, *I Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Sullivan, *Days of Hope*.

comedy team format and developed solo acts that served as early forms of stand up comedy. Central to this development was the Apollo Theater in Harlem. Purchased by Jewish businessman Frank Schiffman in 1934, the Apollo served as the center of the black entertainment community and a common gathering spot for Harlem blacks (as well as curious whites). With Schiffman's encouragement, black comedians performed material that explicitly addressed racism and Southern segregation and began rejecting the more odious elements of minstrelsy, including blackface. On the second front, black writers and civil rights leaders, led by the NAACP, warned that Hollywood depictions of blacks as being comical functioned as a form of propaganda that severely limited black advancement. Convinced of this argument, the NAACP, led by Walter White, lobbied Hollywood producers to improve black images in their films, a move that angered black actors and elicited charges of elitism and censorship.

These tensions would continue with the rise of television. Chapter Two looks at the controversy of the *Amos 'n' Andy* television show, a long-successful radio program that made the transition to television format in 1951 on the CBS network. For the NAACP, the presence of black comic images on the emerging medium of television threatened to undermine the civil rights gains of the 1940s. At the 1951 annual convention, Association members voted to boycott the television show and its sponsor, Blatz Beer. For over a year, the NAACP, along with other civil rights, liberal and labor organizations urged their members to join in the boycott and lobbied Blatz and CBS to drop the show. Yet despite the Association's claims that the *Amos 'n' Andy* show was damaging to the race, black audiences never fully supported the boycott. The overwhelming majority of blacks found the show enjoyable and unthreatening and were

no doubt drawn to the show's depiction of an all-black world replete with black judges, police officers, businessmen, and clubwomen. Despite only lukewarm support for the boycott, CBS nonetheless cancelled the show in 1953, though it would remain on the air in syndication until the 1960s.

Chapter Three looks at the world of black comedy in the years following the *Amos 'n' Andy* boycott. During this period, black comedians found it almost impossible to perform on television and in other mainstream venues. Faced with these limited options, black comedy went underground where it flourished in a loose network of burlesque clubs, small comedy clubs and elaborate nightclubs in black neighborhoods. In these venues, black comedians, like Redd Foxx, Nipsey Russell, and Slappy White crafted routines laced with highly sexual humor that challenged the image of black, middle-class respectability put forward by the emerging civil rights movement in the South. The popularity of these routines was further increased by the emergence of the party album, which allowed black comedians access to a nationwide, and in many cases multi-racial, audience. This access allowed comedians to bring civil rights oriented humor to black and white audiences. At the same time, entertainers like Sammy Davis, Jr. and George Kirby successfully integrated popular resorts and casinos in Miami Beach and Las Vegas, further bringing black comedy into the mainstream.

The efforts of Foxx, Russell, White, Davis and Kirby in the 1950s would lay the groundwork for Dick Gregory. Chapter Four focuses on Gregory's relationship to the civil rights movement of the early 1960s. Unlike previous generations of comedians, whose success was often based on defying the politics of respectability of the civil rights movement, Gregory was able to integrate the nightclub circuit precisely because he

adapted his image to the respectable images put forward by black students who participated in the sit-ins. His routines attacked segregation and white racism, while at the same time were free of any references to sex and of elements of minstrelsy. Gregory's success allowed other comics to break into the mainstream, and helped make black comedy an important voice in the civil rights struggle. He would build on this success by traveling to the South in 1962 to participate in movement rallies and later that year led an effort to bring food to Leflore County, Mississippi to aid poor black and white residents who had their food aid cut off in retaliation for black sharecroppers attempting to register. In 1963 he would lead voter registration marches in Greenwood, Mississippi, children's marches in Birmingham, Alabama and would participate in the March on Washington. Thanks largely to his efforts the antagonism that had often defined the relationship between black comedians and the civil rights movement had been replaced with a spirit of cooperation.

The image of Dick Gregory marching along side hundreds of thousands of demonstrators at the March on Washington in August 1963 provides a vivid example of how far civil rights and African American comedy had come in just three decades. It also offers a clear example of how intimately the development of African American comedy and the civil rights struggle were tied together. Though black comedians are often rendered invisible or relegated to footnotes and witty aside in the history of the movement, their story – and their struggle – in critical to understanding African Americans' larger struggle for civil rights in this country.

Chapter One
Hollywood, the Apollo Theater and the Politicization of African American Comedy in the World War II Era

In November 1934, Universal Pictures released *Imitation of Life*, starring black actresses Louise Beavers and Freddi Washington. Based on the best-selling novel by Fannie Hurst, *Imitation of Life* followed the lives of two widows, one black and one white, as they worked together to raise their children and survive by operating a pancake house. Their fortunes change when Miss Bea (played by Claudette Colbert) receives an offer to market the secret pancake recipe that had been in Aunt Delilah's (Beavers) family for generations. With Aunt Delilah receiving 20 percent of the profits, the two women form a personal and professional relationship that leads to success, friendship and eventually sadness when Aunt Delilah's mixed-race daughter, Peola, rejects her dark mother and leaves home to pass for white. The film ends with a moving funeral scene in which Aunt Delilah is laid to rest as Peola returns home. *Imitation of Life* marked the first important black film of the 1930s, a financial success for Universal and a breakout performance for Beavers.[1]

Six months later, a Jewish businessman from the Lower East Side named Frank Schiffman and his silent partner, Leo Brecher, an Austrian Immigrant, purchased the newly renamed Apollo Theater on 125th street in Harlem. The two men already dominated the Harlem entertainment scene, having owned not only the top theater in Harlem, the Lafayette, since 1925 but also controlling the Odeon, the Roosevelt, the Douglas, the Cotton Club (located in the upstairs lobby over the Douglas), the Harlem Opera House and the Lowe's Theater. For the previous decade the two men had based

[1] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1989), 57-60.

their success on booking black entertainment and catering to the local black community, rather than trying to compete with Broadway theaters for white talent and patrons. In purchasing the "shabby" former burlesque and vaudeville house, the two men promised that the Apollo would be the "finest theater in Harlem" and would "mark a revolutionary step in the presentation of stage shows."[2]

These two events marked an important turning point in the politicization of African American comedy, but for very different reasons. *Imitation of Life*, while garnering significant praise in both the black and white press, which applauded the studios willingness to create prominent roles for black actors and actresses and tackle the difficult subject, of racism, also received substantial criticism. As Jill Watts has shown, "the heated public debate over *Imitation of Life* fueled a shift in the African-American press."[3] After *Imitation of Life*, every major film featuring African American actors would be viewed through the lens of racial politics and the goal of racial integration. And though *Imitation of Life* was not itself a comedy - indeed it was one of the few dramas starring African Americans during the decade - it did lead to a critical examination of the black comic image that dominated Hollywood. What emerged from this examination was a growing consensus that blacks were not only frequently stereotyped as comic buffoons, but that these images were harmful to their larger political goals. This consensus led to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the country's largest civil rights organization that had previously stayed out of controversies

---

[2] "Apartment Resold in Uptown Deal," *New York Times*, June 11, 1935; Jack Schiffman, *Harlem Heyday: A Pictorial History of Modern Black Show Business and the Apollo Theater* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1984), 12-14; Ted Fox, *Showtime at the Apollo* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), 28; Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981), 237.

[3] Jill Watts, *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 109.

involving black comic representation in the mass media, to take on Hollywood. During the first part of the decade, the Association spent a significant amount of time in Hollywood, making the improvement of black images in film a cornerstone of its civil rights agenda.

The Apollo Theater on the other hand opened up a new era in the performance of African American comedy. Part of a loosely linked collection of Northern urban theaters that catered to the tastes of black audiences, the Apollo allowed comics the opportunity to develop their humor outside of the censoring eye of Southern white theater owners. This freedom allowed comics not only to discard some of the performance devices that had hampered black comedy for decades – blackface, foolish costumes and names, corny jokes reflective of white audience's understanding of black humor – but also allowed them to perform humor that reflected the political sensibilities and concerns of the black communities in which they performed. Stepping out of the role of team or sketch comedy, into the newly created role of emcee (MC) or standup comic, black comedians were able to explicitly address issues of racism and discrimination. Over the course of World War II, African American comedy would undergo a profound change that would greatly shape the development of the more political standup comedians that we are familiar with today.

These two developments–black comedy as political liability and black comedy and political expression–would lead to a radical divergence in attitudes towards black humor that would characterize black culture politics over the next two decades. The tension between African American comedy and the civil rights movement during this period in many ways had its roots in the Harlem Renaissance, which came to an official

end in 1935 when Harlem erupted in riots.[4] Since the turn of the century African American writers adopted the literary goal of "reconstructing" the image of the race, turning literary images of the race away from comic stereotypes towards a political and cultural presence. Though these efforts always had political implications, Harlem Renaissance leaders went a step further in pursuing a strategy of "Civil Rights by Copyright," by which black arts and letters would serve as evidence of the race's advancement and provide a valuable entryway into mainstream political life. However, despite considerable disagreement over exactly what image of black life should be presented, Renaissance writers and intellectuals never specifically targeted African American comedy as limiting racial advancement. Black and white audiences flocked to *Shuffle Along*, an all-black musical comedy that was embraced by black leaders and intellectuals, despite its use of blackface and vaudeville humor. (The two men behind the production, Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles even staged a midnight performance of the musical to benefit the NAACP.) Furthermore, key Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, including James Weldon Johnson, Secretary of the NAACP, were actively involved in black musical theater and comedy.[5]

---

[4] For a detailed look at the 1935 Harlem Riot see Robert Fogelson and Richard Rubenstein, eds., *The Complete Report of Mayor LaGuardia's Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969). For information on the riot as part of the general decline of the Harlem Renaissance see Cheryl Greenberg, "The Politics of Disorder: Reexamining Harlem's Riots of 1935 and 1943," *Journal of Urban History* 18, no. 4 (August 1992): 397-419; David Levering Lewis, "Introduction" in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader,* ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Viking, 1994), xv-xliii; David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 305-7; Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 242-46.

[5] A more complete discussion over the role of comedy in black thought during the first three decades of the twentieth century is beyond the scope of this chapter. For a discussion of these debates see Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 10, no. 24 (Autumn 1988): 130-136; Mark Robert Schneider, *"We Return Fighting": The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002), 390-400; Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue*, 175-197, 224-239; David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 171-182.

In examining black filmic representations during the 1930s and 1940s, scholars have played close attention to the ways in which African Americans were stereotyped. Film historian Donald Bogle, while generally sympathetic to the actors of the era, sees the 1930s as the "Age of the Negro Servant" and remarks that "with their incredible antics, their unbelievable dialects, and their amazing absurdities, the black servants provided a down-hearted age with buoyancy and jocularity."[6] Other scholars have noted the political nature of these stereotypes and expounded upon the role that the NAACP played in Hollywood during the 1940s.[7] In Thomas Cripps's scholarship on the era, the NAACP played a central role in "making movies black" and bringing Hollywood into the broader struggle against racism. These scholars however tend to overlook the extent to which discussions of film stereotypes and black cultural activism of this period focused specifically on the comic. Indeed it was the comic image that figured most prominently in the rhetoric of civil rights organizations and black film critics.

They also overlook the role of local black entertainment institutions like the Apollo Theater in creating a political and cultural environment that facilitated the politicization of these images. Black audiences could challenge depictions of the race because they were watching comedians at the Apollo who themselves challenged these

---

[6] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks*, 36. See also Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Marshall Hyatt and Cheryl Sanders, "Film as a Medium to Study the Twentieth-Century Afro-American Experience," *Journal of Negro Education* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 161-72; Daniel Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1975); John Nickel, "Disabling African American Men: Liberalism and Race Message Films," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (August 2004): 25-48; Lawrence Reddick, "Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations: Motion Pictures, Radio, the Press and Libraries," *Journal of Negro Education* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1944): 367-89; Michele Wallace, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*: Before and After the Jim Crow Era," *The Drama Review* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 137-56.

[7] See Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Michael Rogin, "'Democracy and Burnt Cork': The End of Blackface, the Beginning of Civil Rights," *Representations,* no. 46 (Spring 1994), 1-34.

images. These comedians provided their own forms of pressure to change the nature of black representation in the mass media. By focusing solely on the NAACP's role in the cultural politics of the period, they miss an important aspect in the relationship between comedy and the politics of the black community that would ultimately have profound cultural implications. It is the goal of this chapter then, to provide a more complete view of black comedy's move into the political arena at the dawn of the civil rights era.

"It was a coming together, a community of all we had there": The Apollo Theater and the Development of African American Political Humor in the World War II Era

Northern theaters like the Apollo, as well as the humor performed in them, could trace their roots to the vaudeville theater circuits that flourished in the two decades prior to the great Depression. These circuits originated in the early twentieth century, at a time when both the availability of black performers and the demands of black audiences for these performers had swelled so much as to prompt white businessmen to organize theater circuits to cater to this demand. In 1907 Memphis businessman F.A. Barraso established the most important and well-known of the circuits, the Theater Owners Booking Association (commonly known as TOBA, Toby or the "Chittlin' Circuit"). The TOBA expanded rapidly after World War I and by the 1920s would include more than forty venues throughout the country including the 81 in Atlanta, the Booker T. in St. Louis, the Palace in Memphis, the Lyric in New Orleans, the Royal in Baltimore, the Howard in Washington, D.C., the Regal in Chicago, the Lincoln and Lafayette in New York in addition to theaters in Nashville, Birmingham, Shreveport, Louisville, Richmond, Dallas and Detroit. These theaters were almost exclusively in black neighborhoods and played to almost exclusively black audiences, especially in Southern cities where Jim Crow laws

often prevented even curious whites from attending. Black performers were often expected to play a variety of roles – dancing, singing, playing instruments, acting, writing, as well as serving as stage hands – and the pace was grueling – two shows a day (plus stage work), seven days a week, often fifty two weeks a year – leading to the nickname "Tough on Black Asses." However, it did provide black performers with s steady income and an opportunity to make a name for themselves nationally. Sammy Davis, Jr., himself a graduate of the TOBA circuit, remarked that the circuit "was the greatest training ground in the world for a performer, because when you left the Toby, you could play anywhere and anytime and be a success."[8]

Comedians played a central role in TOBA shows and were crucial to the success of the circuit. Although TOBA shows featured a variety of singers, dancers and novelty acts, comics were the most visible aspect of the show, typically performing first and warming up the audience. Remarking on the comic's importance to the circuit, Redd Foxx claimed that "the show with the best comic was usually the most successful." As it was for other performers, the TOBA was a valuable training ground for comics, allowing them to develop and perfect their routines, timing and onstage personas. Most well-known comics prior to the 1960s began their careers on the TOBA circuit – Redd Foxx, Moms Mabley, Pigmeat Markham, Willie Bryant and Willie Reed (who performed as "Brains and Feet"), Lincoln Perry (better known as Stepin Fetchit, a name adopted from the team he was a part of with Ed Lee), Rastus Murray, Butterbeans and Susie, Buck and

---

[8] For information on minstrelsy during this period see Redd Foxx and Norma Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor* (Pasadena, CA: Ward Ritchie Press, 1977), 11-34; Pigmeat Markham with Bill Levinson, *Here Come the Judge!* (New York: Popular Library, 1969); Rogin, *Black Face, White Noise,* 19-44; Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying and Signifying – The Underground Tradition in African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 80-180. Davis quoted in Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 92.

Bubbles, Dusty Fletcher, Mantan Moreland and Tim Moore (Kingfish, in the *Amos 'n' Andy* television show). Comics typically performed in blackface, often in duos in which one partner was the comic while the other played the straightman, a technique pioneered by the famous black vaudeville duo (Bert) Williams and (George) Walker. Performances were skits in which comedians talked not to the audience but to each other and that featured "low style" comedy filled with dialect jokes, slapstick comedy, and "blue" humor.[9] As veteran comic Spo-Dee-O-Dee noted, "Our humor was ethnic, sexual, cruel, and, quite often, slapstick. We did just about everything to get laughs, and we usually did."[10]

Although these sketches often dealt with the everyday realities of black life, seldom did they address the topic of segregation and Jim Crow directly. During the 1920s, even in Northern venues, black comedians avoided performing this type of humor. For performers who continued to work in the South, either on the TOBA circuit or in other venues, directly addressing the problem of Southern racism in theaters often owned by the same white racists they were critiquing risked being fired, or worse. While hinting at the possibility of black comedians altering their routines for all-black audiences by including social criticism, historian Mel Watkins still maintains that "In an era when anti-Negro sentiment and lynching were at their peak, publicly discarding the mask of naïveté, revealing the aggressive aspects of their humor, and openly challenging tacit assumptions

---

[9] Sammy Davis, Jr., himself a veteran of the TOBA, observed that "Comedy at that time was done by the great dialecticians of that era. The black style of comedy was the same for the black man as for the white man. You had the Jewish comics who wore baggy pants, the Dutch comedians who had accents so strong you could cut them with a knife, and then there was the Irish comic. All of the comedy in those days was ethnic because the country was full of immigrants, and the people always enjoyed the low style comedy of their heritage. It was the same with the blackface comedian; he not only made people laugh at him and his people, he also made fun of other races and nationalities." See Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 91.

[10] Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 98.

about the nature of black comedy (indeed, about black *nature*) on a circuit that not only regularly toured the deep South but also played to theaters owned by outspoken racists would have been suicidal." As a result, most early black standup comedians publicly steered clear of the topic of racism and Jim Crow.[11]

As America plunged into Depression in the 1930s, the theatrical world in general, and the black theater world in particular suffered financial hardship. The TOBA folded, leaving behind only a smaller number of theaters, predominantly based in the urban North. In these new theaters, the role of comics expanded. The Apollo Theater introduced the modern concept of emcee (or MC), an individual who introduced acts and moved along the show, often in a humorous manner. White shows had been using MC's for years, but in a more limited manner. The emcee at the Apollo not only introduced acts to the audience, he also was a comedian, dancer and singer. Like on the TOBA, he was the first one to talk to the audience and unlike other acts, who would be booked at the Apollo for a week at a time, emcees often performed for extended periods of time allowing audiences to identify them with the theater they performed at. This more personal relationship with the audience also allowed for the development of the modern standup comedian, an individual who told jokes to the audience free of props, makeup, partners, or other elements that distanced the comedian from his audience. Leonard Reed, Ralph Cooper, Nipsey Russell and Willie Bryant were all Apollo MC's who rose to prominence.[12]

Now free from the limitations placed by racist southern theater owners, comedians began incorporating more political elements into their routines. This was often

---

[11] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 381.
[12] See Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 112.

subtle. Take for example, Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham, a veteran of the TOBA circuit and a mainstay in northern theaters. Born in Durham, North Carolina, Markham began his stage career at the age of fourteen working first as a comedian with a carnival and a minstrel troupe in Florida, before moving to the TOBA circuit. In 1927, Markham moved to New York to work as the house comic at the Alhambra Theater, where he developed a distinct "Negro-born and Negro-popular" style of comedy that was filthy, frantic and very funny. It was at the Alhambra that Markham first developed the "Here Come the Judge!" routine that would make him famous and that would become a mainstay of the Apollo Theater throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Entering to a comic announcement, "Hear ye, hear ye, court is in session and here come de judge," Pigmeat would preside over a mock court in full judge regalia. In his book on the Apollo theater, former MC Ralph Cooper describes a typical case that came before judge Pigmeat:

> The first case would be a gorgeous girl the cop picked up on 114th Street at three o'clock in the morning. Pig would say, 'What you doin' out a three o'clock in the mornin', honey?'
>
> 'I'm a beautician,' she would say, fluttering her lashes and swinging her hips. 'One of my clients was leaving town early in the morning, and I had to do her hair.'
>
> Then Pig would turn on the cop. 'What's the matter with you, pickin' up somebody like this? this child is a workin' child. Case dismissed!' Then he'd lean over the bench, his eyebrows dancing and his tongue wagging, and he'd say to the girl, 'Have I got your name and phone number, honey?'
>
> Then there would be a drum shot - BAM! - and the last defendant would enter - me, in drag. I would have two big helium balloons for breasts, and I'd be pulling at my sweater and they'd bounce up in the judge's face. The critics would wince, but the audience would fall out over that every time. Pigmeat would pound his gavel for order in the court and he'd look me over and say, 'What are you doing in my courtroom? What is your crime?'
>
> 'Oh, Judge,' I'd say,'I was streetwalkin', Your Honor!'
>
> ...
>
> 'You make your livin' that way?'
>
> 'I could, Your Honor, if it weren't for those damn beauticians!'"[13]

---

[13] Ralph Cooper with Steve Dougherty, *Amateur Night at the Apollo: Ralph Cooper Presents Five Decades of Great Entertainment* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), 115.

As Cooper notes, the judge routine, while not directly critical of racism, was nonetheless "all a satire on the police and the courts." Markham noted that blacks in the audience loved it, "probably because the judge, the pompous oppressor of the Negro in so many Southern towns, was taken down a peg by a Negro comedian."[14]

Comedians such as Willie "Ashcan" Jones, Moms Mabley, Butterbeans and Susie, and Patterson and Jackson went even further than Markham and infused their comedic performances with humor that overtly addressed racism and reflected the growing dissatisfaction of Black America. Southern racism, Jim Crow and racial violence became prominent themes in addition to the "usual focus on food, sex or money." Husband and wife comedy duo Butterbeans and Susie joked about the harsh realities of black life in the South:

> S: I'm ready to go down South.
> B: I ain't going with you, Sue.
> S: Why ain't you going with me, Butter?
> B: 'Cause there's too many ups down South.
> S: What you mean ups, Butter?
> B: Well, early in the mornin' you got to wake up. Then you got to get up. Then you go out to the farm, and if you didn't do the work like the boss said, the boss would beat you up![15]

Dance-comedy duo Patterson and Jackson addressed the topic of black attitudes towards Southern racism:

> Got on the train in Tampa, Florida, on the way to New York. Conductor came around, said, "Give me your ticket, boy." Gave him my ticket, he punched it and gave it back. Came around again in Richmond, Virginia, said, "Give me your ticket, boy." Gave him my ticket; punched it and gave it back. In the Lincoln Tunnel on the way into New York City, conductor came around and said, "Give

---

[14] Markham quoted in Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 370.
[15] Fox, *Showtime at the Apollo*, 92.

> me your ticket, boy." Turned around to him and said, "Who the hell you callin' boy?"[16]

Other comics would talk about the prevalence of racial violence in the South, with the danger of lynching being a popular target. "Ashcan" Jones joked that the busses in Georgia didn't have the Greyhound logo on the side because, "nobody that ain't white ride outside in Georgia!" Another comedienne attacked lynching through her humor. In one joke, two bank robbers, one black one white, who killed three bank tellers and two policemen. After being sentenced to die, the white man becomes hysterical. "I don't want to be hung. I don't want to be hung." The black man then said, "Oh man, we done killed up all them people and you talk about you don't want to be hung… they gonna hang you so why don't you face it like a man?" The white man replied, "That's easy for you to say, you're used to it." Despite the grim reality behind this joke, the audience would be laughing in the aisles.[17]

It is tempting to dismiss these comedy routines as inside jokes that simply "preach to the converted." After all, racism was an unpleasant fact that all African Americans, even in the North, acknowledged. Audience members did not need these comedians to educate them on racism, especially when the topics covered in these routines (segregation, lynching, white attitude towards blacks) were evident to even the most sheltered observers. Godfrey Cambridge has observed that, "For years, … Negro comics only worked the Negro ghetto theaters and night clubs and told the Negro audiences what

---

[16] *Ibid,* 225.
[17] J. Jerome Zolten, "Black Comedians: Forging an Ethnic Image," *Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 2 (1993): 70-71. Lynching joke quoted in Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 392.

they already knew. They laughed out of recognition." It is in this mutual understanding between audience and performer that a significant social function is occurring.[18]

One of the most significant functions that stand-up comedy played during this period was in uniting the audience into a common group identity. Even more so than in the TOBA days, when the unifying effects were plagued by class divisions in the black community, comedy during the 1930s and 1940s united blacks across class and color lines. By making whites the butt of the joke or portraying them as the enemy, black comedians united their audiences in a comedic "us-versus-them" battle. Social scientists who have tackled the subject of racial humor have discovered that African American humor that disparages whites functions to both "increase morale and solidify the in-group." Blacks are united by the simple fact that they are not white and thus are not the butt of the joke.[19]

Comedians achieved the unifying effects of humor in other ways as well. In addition to creating an us-versus-them dichotomy, comedians also united their audience in the way that they related to them. Moms Mabley provides an excellent example. Although she did not achieve mainstream popularity until after her 1960 release of *Moms Mabley at the UN*, Moms had an active and successful career in black theaters for four decades prior. Mabley appeared before her audience dressed as a granny in frumpy dresses, an ugly hat, argyle knee-length socks and slippers. The Moms persona allowed

---

[18] Godfrey Cambridge quoted in Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 363. There is a limited body of social science work dealing with the social functions of humor. H.G. Pitchford in an unpublished dissertation entitled *the Social Functions of Humor* (Emory, 1960) saw humor functioning in three ways: as a way of achieving consensus, as a technique of social control, and a device for introducing competition and social conflict. Pitchford cited in William H. Martineau, "A Model of the Social Functions of Humor" in *Psychology of Humor,* ed. Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee (New York: Academic Press, 1972), 109. Martineau maintains, "Humor is intended to initiate social interaction and to keep the machinery of interaction operating freely and smoothly." Martineau, 103.

[19] Martineau, "A Model of the Social Functions of Humor," 118.

Mabley to assume the role as "everybody's mom" in order to unify her audience and speak to them about serious issues. In the Moms persona, Mabley considered the audience her children and addressed them as such. She also claimed an extended family that included the entire population of Washington, D.C. – "nearly everybody in Washington is kin to me. . .my old man musta got around," – as well as individuals that she would talk about in her comedy. Mabley would draw her audience in with the line, "I got somethin' to tell you!" and would further strengthen the familial bonds by assuring her audience "I'm glad to be at home." In the same way grandchildren would gather around their grandmother to listen to stories, Mabley's audience gathered around Moms to listen to her humor. A temporary familial bond would be formed that not only created unity within the audience, it also created an authority that allowed Moms to "hip" her children to the problems of American society.[20]

The ability of comedians to foster a sense of group identity was aided by the important position that these theaters played in African American urban life. Like the black church, the theater served a number of functions that made it a central meeting place for local blacks from all walks of life, a place where they could socialize and be entertained, free from the racism of the outside world.[21] Bettye Gardner and Bettye Thomas, in assessing the important of the Howard Theater in Washington, DC, note that the Howard "has had a profound influence on the black community" and that during its history "few black Washingtonians, regardless of age or class, have failed to attend or

---

[20] Trudier Harris, "Moms Mabley: A Study in Humor, Role Playing and the Violation of Taboo," *Southern Review* 24, no. 4 (1988): 765-76. For information on Mabley's technique in fostering unity and familiarity see Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 362-66. For more information on Mabley see Elsie Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995).

[21] For more on the black church's central role in community activism see Aldon D. Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).

hear of the theater."[22] This importance is especially true of the Apollo Theater, which not only served this role for local blacks (its location on 125th Street, the main commercial strip in Harlem greatly aided in this role) but served as the center of the African American entertainment community throughout the country. The Schiffman family was conscious to hire not only black entertainers but also black house managers, doormen, ushers and backstage workers, making the Apollo one of the few white owned theaters to employ an exclusively black staff. For many performers and others involved in the entertainment industry, the Apollo served as their home where they could network, learn the ropes, catch up with friends and sleep. Sammy Davis, Jr., who performed at the Apollo frequently in his early career, described it as "the mecca [sic] for so many black performers after the Toby Circuit closed down during the Depression. Without this work of the circuit, they came to Harlem and continued to perform. It was here in Harlem when the black comics gathered that black humor began to blossom and grow." Comedian Scoey Mitchell agreed: "It was a coming together, a community of all we had there."[23]

Because of the Apollo's central role in the entertainment world, many whites often attended its shows, making the community there an interracial one. Young whites who flocked uptown to see popular black entertainers constituted a large part of the Apollo audience. House manager Audery Neal estimated that 40 percent of the audience was white during the 1930s and 1940s. Doorman Frank Tilley put the percentage even higher especially for the midnight show. Many in the audience at these shows were white entertainers, who would go to the Apollo after their downtown sets ended. "We used to

---

[22] Bettye Gardner and Bettye Thomas, "The Cultural Impact of the Howard Theatre on the Black Community," *The Journal of Negro History* 55, no. 4 (October 1970): 253-65.
[23] Davis quoted in Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 94; Mitchell quoted in Fox, *Showtime at the Apollo*, 7-8.

have a midnight show every Saturday night," Markham recalled, "and you couldn't get it there for the white comedians – Milton Berle, Joey Adam –all the guys came to Harlem. They'd have a girl with a pencil and shorthand paper, and steal comedy from all of us boys."[24]

The Apollo's position as a multi-racial gathering place for both the entertainment world and the Harlem community allowed it to become an important site for political activism. Reflecting the personality of Schiffman, who as owner had a reputation as both a ruthless businessman and a concerned, progressive member of the Harlem community, the Apollo frequently hosted fundraisers and political rallies for local organizations. When the Negro Actors Guild of America held its first benefit, the Apollo staff and management fully cooperated in the effort. In 1937, on one of their many publicity tours, four of the Scottsboro boys appeared on the Apollo stage along with an all-girl review featuring Jackie Mabley (prior to her assuming the Moms persona). "We are glad to welcome the Four Scottsboro Boys to our stage," the advertising flyer read. "We are glad to give our patrons to opportunity of greeting them. We are glad to open up to the boys and to their mothers the doors of opportunity." In response to a column praising the Apollo theater's community effort, Schiffman wrote the columnist Ed Sullivan:

> I was thrilled by your reference to the reaction of our audience as a 'community effort.' Because the community spirit at the Apollo and the place of the Apollo in the Community is a source of deep happiness to me and to everybody associated in the administration of the Theater. We have tried to make ourselves a part of the community. We help raise funds for many of the desperate needs which exist here. We help promote employment among Negro's [sic]. I have found real joy myself in being the chairman of the Harlem Children's Camp Fund, a Director of the Urban League, an Honorary Member of St. Martin's Church, a member of the Interracial Committee, Cochairman of Fund Raising for Sydenham Hospital, the Y.M.C.A. and other organizations.

---

[24] "[untitled clipping]," *New York Sunday News*, July 22, 1973, PAL Clipping File, Apollo Theater Collection, Gordon 'Doc' Anderson Collection: Programs, Souvenir Booklets, Clippings, etc.

Indeed, throughout the 1930s and 1940s, there were few causes for which the Schiffman family was not willing to devote the financial and cultural resources of the Apollo Theater to aiding.[25]

Yet despite the central role that the Apollo played in the political and cultural life of the Harlem community, the two most significant political organizations in black America at the time – the NAACP and the Communist Party USA – virtually ignored the goings-on within the Theater. The bulk of these organizations' efforts in the theater would be directed at more dramatic, and community-based theater projects, such at the New Deal's Federal Theater Project, which not only explicitly shared some of the desegregationist goals of the civil rights establishment, but also focused almost exclusively on dramatic portrayals, a longtime goal of the Association. It would not be until the 1950s that the National NAACP, whose offices were based in New York and whose leadership overwhelmingly resided within Harlem, would host a fundraiser at the Apollo Theater. The Communist Party, despite its close association with black artists and its efforts to cultivate the black working class that formed the backbone of the Apollo's audience, likewise avoided the theater in favor of focusing its efforts on the creation of more radical community-based theaters. As Mark Nasion notes in his study of black Communists in Harlem during the Great Depression, "Party cultural policies were far more attuned to the artistic tastes…of Harlem's middle class, that they were to those of its working class and poor. Communists spoke repeatedly of the need to incorporate black

[25] Fredi Washington to F. Schiffman, December 16, 1938; Edward S. Lewis to F. Schiffman, June 16, 1947; A. Philip Randolph to F. Schiffman, January 8, 1949, Frank Schiffman Apollo Theater Collection, 1935-195, Series 1 – Correspondence to Frank Schiffman, Archives Center, National Museum of American History; "Apollo Newsletter," n.d. [1937], Schiffman Collection, Series 3 – Publicity – Newspaper – Print Media; F. Schiffman to Ed Sullivan, September 2, 1948, Schiffman Collection, Series 1 – Correspondence from Frank Schiffman.

'folk themes' into art, but the theatrical forms they endorsed moved educated and sophisticated blacks far more than they did 'the folk'… To bring out those people, a theater would have to provide the bawdy, funky, and humorous entertainment they were accustomed to, but doing so might have threatened the artistic respectability of the enterprise and reinforced racial stereotypes."[26]

As Naison's comment suggests, the unwillingness of the NAACP and CPUSA to engage with the Apollo largely stemmed from their belief that the humor of the Apollo theater was disreputable and reinforced comic stereotypes. Though comics had begun to incorporate overtly political themes into their humor, their routines were still ribald and relied heavily on vaudeville props and forms. Almost all comics performed these routines in blackface. The practice of blacking up "no longer functioned as a crucial embellishment of a loathsome stereotype," but rather served as a theatrical prop, worn out of habit, that comforted the performers by distancing them from the audience.[27] Though it may not have had the racist connotations that it had in the past, blackface humor was nonetheless problematic for many within the black community. "I am told that there should be a racial flavor preserved in our comedy so as to make it definitely recognizable as belonging to the Negro race," one newspaper noted. "But when that comedy remains absolutely in the sewer and seldom ever rises to the level of the gutter, I wonder how many of what kind of people will be content to have it reflect their lives, thoughts and actions to the outside world?" Revealing the class tensions inherent within the debate,

---

[26] Ronald Ross, "The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theater, 1935-1939," *Journal of Negro History* 59, no. 1 (January 1974): 38-50; Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), 207-08.

[27] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 380-81; Paterson and Jackson, as well as Moms Mabley were among the few comics who went without cork during their entire careers, see Jack Schiffman, *Harlem Heyday,* 225; Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 394-95.

New York Age theater critic Vere E. Johns asserted that blackface appealed only to "yokels, morons and nincompoops" and was a practice popular only among "antiquated baboons of a bygone era and ignorant ape [who] should be cremated." Her urged comics like Pigmeat to "wash their faces and rely on their natural talent – minus the filth."[28]

Though blackface humor obviously engendered embarrassment and resentment from men like Johns and other members of the black middle class, there is little evidence of any organized effort to end the practice. Redd Foxx does credit the NAACP for finally putting an end to blackface, by "insist[ing] that the comedians get it together and stop acting the nigger."[29] Certainly local NAACP officials, acting independently of the national organization, did occasionally press comics to abandon the practice. Comedian Johnny Hudgins received a visit from the local NAACP after a performance in Washington, DC and the following week performed at the Apollo Theater without cork for the first time. ("I feel so nekid out there," he later remarked.)[30] Most of the push to end the practice though came from within the entertainment community itself. Frank Schiffman was opposed to the practice and worked to convince black comics that they didn't need blackface to be funny. Comics themselves, particularly younger comics who had not spent decades performing in blackface on the TOBA circuit, also grew disenchanted with the practice. "In 1939 I decided to do my comedy routines without the blackface," recalled Spo-Dee-O-Dee. "I was one of the first comedians that discarded the blackface, mainly because I just disliked it. When you went out after the show without it

---

[28] Fox, *Showtime at the Apollo,* 91; Johns quoted in Cooper, *Amateur Night at the Apollo*, 114; Johns quoted in Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 239.
[29] Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 112.
[30] Schiffman, *Uptown*, 124.

on, no one would recognize you."[31] When Timmie Rogers first started doing comedy he fought to convince older comedians to end the practice:

> 'It's time to get the black off your face. You don't need it.' They gave me hell. 'Who in the hell do you think you are? You just started your comedy act last year. We were doin' this for forty years, son. We know comedy. You have to learn comedy.' I said, ' I've learned one thing; that you don't need blackin' [sic] your face.' I only had one valid point that stuck in the guys' minds. That was, 'Suppose you were on radio? Would you wear black on your face?' Stopped them cold. Because that was it. But it was tradition. A mask to hide behind. About two years later they all took the black off their faces and they were just as funny without blackface, because the makeup, the clothes don't make you. What you say makes you.

As Rogers story makes clear, ending blackface was less about a belief in the inherent racism of the practice – indeed, many veteran comics would defend the practice from these charges well into the 1960s – and more of a sense that African American comedy no needed to rely on the use of the blackface mask.

This is clearly evident in Pigmeat Markham's eventual decision to perform without blackface. For his entire career, Markham had almost exclusively performed in blackface despite his dark complexion that made him "the same color, cork or no cork," when younger comedians like Rogers began pressuring him to abandon the practice.[32] "At first, I disagreed with them," Markham later recalled in his autobiography, "not because I didn't like their way of thinking but because, to tell you the truth, I'd been working in blackface for so many years that I was scared to go on without it!" For Markham the mask was both a familiar prop and a way to provide a barrier between the comic and the audience that let him "think he's sort of hidden behind it." For a comic like Markham, whose personality was the opposite of "that noisy ol' Judge and other characters" he performed on stage, the blackface mask allowed him to "says things and

---

[31] Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 98.
[32] Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 127.

do things he wouldn't do if that was *him* out there." Prior to a performance at the Lincoln Theater in 1943, a group of younger comics approached Markham in his dressing room. "We had a real friendly talk and it turned out they wanted me to stop this blackface make-up thing," the comic recalled. "They said things was beginnin' to change with us, and me comin' out there in blackface cause a lot of unhappy memories, and it would be more dignified if I was to just go out there the way I was, in my own skin, instead of coverin' it up like I was ashamed of it." Markham countered that it wasn't the blackface that people were laughing at – so he "wasn't holding the Negro people up to no ridicule" – but that blackface was merely part of the way he built up his jokes that people laughed at. "You're just answering your own argument," the young comics finally said. "If it isn't the blackface that's getting the laughs, why can't you go on without it?" Markham relented and went on that night without blackface. When he didn't flop (and indeed many in the audience didn't even notice), he decided to abandon the practice entirely, becoming one of the last remaining African American comics to do so. "Those kids did more for my self-confidence than anybody in my life since old Bob Russell."[33]

"It's time we took up arms on the Hollywood front": Hollywood, Propaganda, and the Case for Cultural Activism

Unlike the NAACP's involvement with the Apollo Theater, which can only be described as limited if not disinterested, the Association took an active interest in black Hollywood beginning in the mid-1930s. For most black comedians, Hollywood was the pinnacle of professional achievement and many comics tried their hand at the medium during the decade. Pigmeat Markham would take a break from the stage in 1937 to pursue a

[33] Markham, *Here Come the Judge!;* Cooper, *Amateur Night at the Apollo*, 114; Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 127.

Hollywood career, and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, despite a prominent role in the *Jack Benny Show* on radio and frequent personal appearances on the Apollo stage, would also try to break into films. "The 1930s," according to film historian Donald Bogle, "was for individual black actors a Golden Age."[34] Despite only a handful of Hollywood films in which black characters played a central role (*Imitation of Life, Green Pastures, Gone with the Wind*), black actors and actresses found steady work at Hollywood studios and helped establish a thriving black entertainment community centered around Los Angeles's Central Avenue.[35] During the decade several talented performers – including Clarence Muse, Louise Beavers, Hattie McDaniel, Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson, Mantan Moreland, and Willie Best – also became bonafide stars in the own right, complete with lucrative studio contracts and prominent coverage in both the black and the mainstream entertainment press.

However, regardless of whether one was a celebrity or an anonymous extra, black actors during this period were confined almost exclusively to roles that portrayed them as maids, servants or janitors. The archetypal role for black Hollywood had been established by Lincoln Perry, better known to audiences as Stepin Fethcit. Fetchit got his start on the TOBA circuit, where he was a part of a comedy team with Ed Lee. He rose to stardom though in 1929 with appearances in two all-black pictures, *Hearts in Dixie* and *Hallelujah!* Though both pictures received mixed, but generally positive reviews, critics were nearly unanimous in their praise of Fetchit's performances. With his exaggerated dialect, shuffling gait, and controlled physical comedy, Fetchit was a perfect fit for the new medium of talking pictures, and from 1929-1935 he appeared in twenty-six films,

---

[34] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks,* 36.
[35] For information on black Hollywood in the 1930s, see Donald Bogle, *Bright Boulevard, Bold Dreams: The Story of Black Hollywood* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), 102-83.

often playing the same slow-witted comic servant. Though controversial in the black community and notoriously difficult to work with on the set, Fetchit was the top black actor in Hollywood during this period and his Sambo characters provided the template for black roles in film. Even when Fetchit's prominence began to slip after his flamboyant and contentious behavior led to increased friction with Fox studios, those actors that took his place found themselves playing the same servant roles. Significantly, these servant roles – whether performed by women or men, in bit parts or marquee performances- were almost exclusively comic.[36]

Though there were isolated criticisms of these early developments in radical black publications like the *Harlem Liberator*, the black entertainment press was overwhelmingly sympathetic to black Hollywood stars and direct criticism was rare.[37] Black actors and actresses received generally positive, if gossipy, coverage and some actors, like Stepin Fetchit, had their own columns effectively making them an arm of the black press.[38] Indeed, as film historian Anna Everett has shown, throughout the 1930s the black press functioned as a "shadow auxiliary of Hollywood's promotional machine," reproducing apologist stories that highlighted black celebrity and repeated praise culled from Hollywood press releases.[39] Even while they occasionally printed exposes on discrimination and lack of opportunities in Hollywood, black periodicals rarely criticized the actors themselves. *Opportunity,* the magazine of the National Urban League, greeted

---

[36] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks,* 38-44; Mel Watkins, *Stepin Fetchit: the Life and Times of Lincoln* Perry (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), 69-93.
[37] For an example of radical black criticism see Cyril Briggs, "Art is a Weapon," and J.C.L. "The Role Assigned the Negro in American Films," *Harlem Liberator*, September 9, 1933; Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 233-61.
[38] Charlene Regester, "Stepin Fetchit: The Man, the Image, and the African American Press," *Film History* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 504-06, 518
[39] Everett, *Returning the Gaze*, 193-205.

the arrival of Stepin Fetchit to Hollywood stardom with effusive praise. Commenting on Fetchit's performance in the early talking picture *Hearts in Dixie,* Robert Benchley lavished praise on the droll comic and credited him with making talking pictures believable. "I see no reason for even hesitating in saying that he is the best actor that the talking movies have produced," Benchley gushed. "His voice, his manner, his timing, everything that he does, is as near to perfection as one could hope to get in an essentially phony medium such as this."[40] Other articles in the 1930s similarly avoided the problematic nature of the newly acquired visibility of Fetchit and other black comics, in favor of rags-to-riches stories that highlighted black actors' financial success and off-screen involvement in the black community.[41]

Even articles for the *Crisis*, the official organ of the NAACP, occasionally succumbed to such boosterism. In an article titled "Out of the Kitchen," Chauncey Townsend praised Louise Beavers for her role as Aunt Delilah in *Imitation of Life*. The role was one of many servant roles that Beavers had played to perfection over the years. To Townsend, Beavers's transition from an actual maid in Hollywood to her "triumph" in *Imitation of Life*, demonstrated that "a level head, a firm belief in one's own possibilities, and a willingness to accept small, inconsequential parts and enact them well are necessary to climb from the level of mediocrity to a place of more than ephemeral distinction in motion pictures." Downplaying the stereotyped roles upon which her

---

[40] Robert Benchley, "The First Real Talking Picture (Hearts in Dixie)," *Opportunity*, April 1929, 122-23. For similar praise of the highly controversial comic see "When Stepin Fetchit Stepped Into Fame," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 6, 1929.

[41] See for example "When Stepin Fetchit Stepped Into Fame," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 6, 1929; "A Lawyer Turns Vitaphone Artist," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 20, 1929; "Branded as Lazy and Shiftless; Untrue of Step in Real Life," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 20, 1932.

success was founded, the article instead presented Beavers as an active race woman who was "intently race conscious and public spirited."[42]

As Townsend's article demonstrates, black opinion on the role of comic stereotypes in Hollywood films – even within the pages of the *Crisis* – was far from monolithic. Beginning in the mid-1930s however, the NAACP began laying the intellectual foundation for its assault on comic stereotypes in popular media through official pronouncements and articles in the *Crisis*. As the decade wore on and Americans mobilized for war, black opinion gradually coalesced around the NAACP's belief that the image of blacks as comic stereotypes in film was detrimental to the overall goals of the civil rights struggle.[43] This would dramatically alter the way that African Americans and their institutions related to and engaged with the Hollywood film industry. As Thomas Cripps has noted, film executives were largely insulated from black Americans, relying heavily on the opinions of a handful of black stars, the Production Code Administration, and Southern white councilors employed by the studios for advice on Southern culture and etiquette. These forces conspired to provide a conservative voice in the filmmaking process, limiting portrayals of African Americans to ones that would not offend the racial sensibilities of Southern audiences. "The effect of this institutional system," Cripps concludes, "was to impose on whites an imagery that was ever more irrelevant to the actual changing status of African Americans."[44]

---

[42] Chauncey Townsend, "Out of the Kitchen," *Crisis*, January 1935, 15, 29.
[43] Viewing black images in Hollywood film through the lens of stereotype and/or caricature remains the dominant approach of most scholarship on the subject. See Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*; Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*; Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Hyatt and Sanders, "Film as a Medium to Study the Twentieth-Century Afro-American Experience"; Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*; Edward Mapp, *Blacks in American Films: Today and Yesterday* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1972); Nickel, "Disabling African American Men"; Wallace, "*Uncle Tom's Cabin.*"
[44] Cripps, *Making Movies Black*, 10.

One of the earliest and most influential articles to appear on this topic was a 1934 *Crisis* article entitled "Uncle Tom in Hollywood." Written by Loren Miller, a lawyer and former city editor of the *California Eagle*, "Uncle Tom in Hollywood" argued that black audiences were effectively giving their stamp of approval to movies that depicted them in "servant parts in which they are either buffoons or ubiquitious Uncle Toms." For Miller, the danger in this "rabid anti-Negro propaganda" was twofold. Not only did black audiences "fortify their inferiority complex by seeing themselves always cast as the underdog to be laughed at or despised," but audiences in the United States and around the world came to think of blacks in these terms, "making the breakdown of racial chauvinism more difficult."

To eliminate these dangers, Miller offered a number of proposals. First, Miller encouraged blacks to produce their own films. A black film movement had been attempted before, most notably by Oscar Michaeux, and Miller recognized the limitations of this approach artistically, technically, and financially. Even if black producers created artistically successful films that did not "simply ape the white movies," theater owners would still be under considerable pressure from the Hollywood studios to take the pictures they offered. The best Miller could hope for was for a "'little movie' movement comparable to the 'little theater'" that relied on low-budget films shown in small halls. Miller's second proposal, mass protest, was more far-reaching. He charged black leaders and organs of opinion with "establish[ing] an adequate critique" to "inculcate" a protest spirit in black audiences. For Miller, black audiences:

> must be taught to recognize and resent anti-Negro sentiment in such a manner that their feelings can reach the box office. They must let Hollywood know that they object vigorously to being shown as buffoons, clowns, or butts for jest. They must stop applauding for such imperialistic jingoism as Trader Horn.

"So long as we sit acquiescent and give either passive or active support to the Hollywood bildge of the present we are guilty of teaching ourselves, our own children, and millions of white, yellow and brown movie-goers the world over that the Negro is an inferior," Miller concluded. "It's time we took up arms on the Hollywood front."[45]

Over the next decade, the arguments in Miller's article would gain widespread currency among black and liberal white journalists, critics, academics and civil rights leaders and would define the NAACP's stance on Hollywood. Central to this stance was the contention that black images in film were limited and grossly stereotyped. Blacks, when they were portrayed at all, were cast in primarily servant roles that kept alive many of the most damaging stereotypes relating to black intellectual and social inferiority, marking "the Negro [as] a clown, a buffon[sic], a trespasser in the world of 'make-believe.'"[46] "Most thoughtful people realize that there is a definite liability to the Negro in the treatment he receives at the hands of the movies," Cecil Halliburton wrote in a 1935 article for *Opportunity*. "The portrayal of stereotyped conceptions of black people is an established part of the move pattern," Halliburton argued, "and all movie fans recognize instantly certain of these characterizations, - the lazy, happy-go-lucky rustic; the servant terrified by ghosts, burglars, corpses; the faithful old retainer of the romantic South; the condemned Negro who sings spirituals on Death Row in prison pictures."[47] Celebrities like Stepin Fetchit, Mantan Moreland and Hattie McDaniel may have, through

---

[45] Loren Miller, "Uncle Tom in Hollywood," *Crisis,* November 1934, 329, 336.
[46] Earl J. Morris, "Hollywood Takes All, Gives Nothing, Earl Morris Claims," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 24, 1938.
[47] Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 35-38; Cecil B. Halliburton, "Hollywood Presents Us: The Movies and Racial Attitudes," *Opportunity*, October 1935, 296-97.

the sheer force of their own talent, humanized the comic servant, but they also legitimize roles that "discredit[ed] them and the race."[48]

To many in the black press and civil rights community, these stereotypes, when shown on the film screen functioned as a form of "anti-Negro" propaganda. Black leaders were well aware of the effects that film could have on national perceptions of the race. The portrayal of blacks as sexually charged brutes in D.W. Griffith's blockbuster *Birth of a Nation* had served to justify Jim Crow and Southern racial violence and helped to further brutal attacks on African Americans following World War I. The images presented in films of the 1930s were less blatant but equally problematic; their effects more subtle yet even more insidious. Referring to *Imitation of Life*, a *Crisis* reader noted that "the effect of such a picture is much more baneful than one which doesn't pretend to be [anything] other than anti-Negro…The impression given…is that the attitudes and viewpoints of the characters are typical."[49] Pointing to a growing body of social science research that linked motion pictures to racial attitudes, particularly among children, black writers argued that Hollywood was a "powerful medium for attitude formation" that directly hindered civil rights gains.[50] In his column, *Pittsburg Courier* Hollywood Editor Earl Morris accused the motion picture industry of "keeping alive racial hatred in America" and "hinder[ing] the progress towards nationalism."[51] An editorial in the leftist periodical *Film Survey* was even more damning:

> The rope that lynches Negroes in America is woven by many strands. One of the toughest of these is the American motion picture, which year after year continues

---

[48] Earl J. Morris, "Hollywood Takes All." See also, Joseph Joel Keith, "Propaganda and the Negro," *Opportunity*, June 1942, 168-69.
[49] Pauline Flora Byrd, letter to the editor, *Crisis*, March 1935, 91-92.
[50] Halliburton, "Hollywood Presents Us."
[51] Earl J. Morris, "American White, Negroes Being Shoved Into Background in Movies by Jewish Film Owners," *Pittsburg Courier,* August 27, 1938; Earl J. Morris, "Demands Negro be Recognized in Hollywood," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 2, 1938.

> to regard the Negro as a stereotype for submissiveness, irresponsibility, gaiety, and sex perversion. Hollywood did not initiate the stereotype, but over the years it has contributed mightily to reinforcing and embellishing it in the public mind. Thus, it has contributed to new feeling against the Negro people, as well as vindicating the old…But the stereotype goes on in the everyday film. The lie is so constantly impressed that many of us have ceased to pay it conscious notice, but it reinforces already existing prejudices, seriously influences inter-racial relations.[52]

In framing black representation in Hollywood films in this manner, these publications effectively made the case for motion pictures being, along with lynching itself, a civil rights concern.

Roy Wilkins incorporated many of these arguments into a November 1937 article in *Film Survey* titled "The Treatment of the Negro in Film." Recently appointed editor of *The Crisis* and Assistant Secretary of the NAACP, Wilkins words carried significant weight and his article for *Film Survey* represents the Association's early official position on blacks in Hollywood. Beginning with the premise that "of all races that go to makeup America, the Negro suffers most, perhaps, from the stereotyped characterizations on the screen," Wilkins lists the comical and servile types to which black performers were limited. "Of course, all Negroes are not happy-go-lucky, all of them cannot do a buck-and-wing, surprisingly few can tap dance," Wilkins continued. Rather, most blacks lived fairly typical lives and worked in typical middle-class professions. Yet Hollywood has "leaned over backwards in throwing Negro stereotypes on the screen," in an effort to present an image that "pleases the ego of most whites" and avoids alienating the market in the South. Because the movies "have distorted practically every phase of American life," Wilkins was not surprised that they "have contented themselves with borrowing wholesale the ante-bellum Negro and the fiercely insistent propaganda of the post-war South." "Needless to say," Wilkins concluded, "Negro film-goers are increasingly

[52] "12 Million Forsaken," *Film Survey* II, no. 3 (August 1939): 2-3.

resentful of these characterizations and are not confining themselves to mere vocal objections…With indignation and organized opposition spreading, it may be that Hollywood will curb the use of black stereotypes."[53]

Significantly, when Wilkins condemned the use of black stereotypes, he the meant stereotypical roles played by black performers. Absent in this critique was any mention of whites assuming these roles by donning blackface. As Michael Rogin has shown, the Hollywood films of the New Deal era frequently displayed whites in blackface, either literal or aural. While the introduction of talking motion pictures with the *Jazz Singer* ended the use of blackface as a means of impersonating African Americans, it introduced the practice of donning burnt cork "in self-reflexive celebration of American entertainment itself." Will Rogers, Shirley Temple and Al Jolson, three of the leading Hollywood stars of the 1930s, based their box office success, at least in part, on the use of the practice. Yet despite this visibility, there was little opposition to the practice. White liberals viewed blackface as "another instance of cross-racial sympathy." Jolson was never a target of black protest and the black press typically had nothing but kind words to say about his films.[54] Reddick's piece, itself written at a time when blackface had fallen out of fashion, had nothing but kind words to say for Jolson. This ambivalence was also evident in the NAACP, which did not publish any sustained critique of white actors' use of the practice either in the pages of the *Crisis* or in its own public relations efforts. Indeed, Wilkens had been an early fan and vocal supporter of the *Amos 'n' Andy* radio show (which featured white men performing black roles in both aural and literal blackface), and even after assuming his position within the NAACP he

---

[53] Roy Wilkins, "The Treatment of the Negro in Film," *Film Survey* I, no. 5 (November 1937): 1-2.
[54] Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise,* 162-71, 195-98.

would continue to see the practice of blackface minstrelsy as established part of American entertainment:

> The N.A.A.C.P. has never taken any official position on the mater of minstrel shows. Personally, I do not believe this association would consider this question of major importance unless it involved, to use your words, 'undesirable script or action.' We would, of course, be opposed to any theatrical performance, minstrel or otherwise, which we consider a direct reflection upon the Negro race as to dialogue and philosophy. The minstrel show is a well established and traditional form of entertainment and we can see no objection to it as such.[55]

Indeed, it would not be until the 1950s, long after minstrel shows and the practice of blackface minstrelsy had declined from the forefront of American entertainment, did the NAACP formally oppose white actors corking up.

With white actors in blackface avoiding any real criticism during this era, black actors were forced to bear a significant degree of responsibility for the prevalence of destructive comic stereotypes in Hollywood. Though the black press would routinely print examples of behind-the-scenes racism in Hollywood, the challenges the black actors faced, and actors involvement in the black community, it was difficult to gloss over black actors' complicity in perpetuating these images. Stardom was a double-edged sword, and along with their newfound celebrity and handsome paychecks, black actors received increased scrutiny and were charged with the responsibility to ensure accurate portrayals of the race. In declaring himself "Minister of Negro Propaganda" *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist Porter Roberts took aim at black actors who "stoop to ridicule" the race for "the underpay they receive as so-called 'stars'"; black artists who make guest appearances on white radio programs and use dialect language that "insult[s] the colored radio audience"; black actors who "raise the color-line within the color-line"; and, "Jack Leg" preachers who appear on the screen and make a "mockery of the way some ignorant

[55] R. Wilkins to Jack Nadel, February 11, 1938, NAACP 11/A/31.

colored people worship."[56] When asked by representatives of the Motion Picture Actors Guild as to why they constantly challenged black actors about their roles in motion pictures, the *Afro-American* replied, "great responsibility rests on the shoulders of the colored performer to see to it that his race is portrayed to the world in the best possible light." The black actor is the "only ambassador who transcends the lines of race" and is therefore a role model to black audiences who are "hero starved" and "anxious for somebody to look up to and admire."[57]

As the *Afro-American*'s response suggests, black actors received the bulk of the criticism because the roles that they played on the screen were often imagined by white audiences as representative of black life as a whole. The participation of black actors in the reproduction of these images lent them a certain authenticity and realness that was lacking in the white performance of blackface. Audience members would not equate Al Jolson with blacks in general as they would, many argued, see Stepin Fetchit, Clarence Muse, Louise Beavers as representative of the race. "[T]housands of people who go to the movies *don't* know anything…about Negroes," noted Cecil Haliburton, "and there is where the damage is done: in setting up erroneous and inevitably to some degree, prejudicial attitudes towards the Negro."[58] The effect was even more dramatic when viewed in a global context. NAACP Secretary Walter White noted that

> Sixty million Americans go every week to the movies. Other millions see American films from Tasmania to Tibet. In picture after picture with but rare exceptions the Negro is portrayed as scared of ghosts, addicted to tap dancing, banjo plucking and the purloining of Massa's gin…Almost no moviegoer today can learn through the film medium that there are Negro businessmen, housewives,

---

[56] Porter Robert, "Praise and Criticism," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 24, 1937.
[57] "Why Are Colored Movie Artists Challenged?" *New Jersey Afro-American*, January 9, 1943.
[58] Halliburton, "Hollywood Presents Us."

> educators, or just plain John Does. Thus a stereotype is not only being perpetuated but spread around the globe. [59]

Writing less than a month prior to America's formal entry into World War II, White was aware of the increasingly international scope of Hollywood films, and their importance for impressions of African Americans worldwide.

To repair the image of the race, many in the black press and the black entertainment community pushed for an increase in independent black film production. By the mid-1930s, there was again calls for films to be produced by blacks, for blacks. These films could function as a sort of counter-propaganda, showing images of African Americans that challenged mainstream Hollywood depictions. The *Chicago Defender* wrote admirably of Clarence Muse's attempts to produce a sweeping epic, *Son of Thunder*, which would show" the Negro "as he really is" – "gallant, heroic, courageous, ambitious, fiery, a leader."[60] "Our movies…continue to libel the Negro," Muse noted. "They push him into a menial and subservient position. There is a crying need, he affirmed, for…Negro motion picture producing units."[61] Despite Muse's vision and the enthusiastic support of the *Defender,* however, *Son of Thunder* was never made.

Muse's failure is indicative of the challenges that black film production companies faced. As Hollywood expanded into a global entertainment power and motion pictures became more technologically complex, independently produced black films had a hard time competing in terms of star power, production value, and aesthetics. Proposals for independent black film companies continued to circulate, and black newspapers

---

[59] Walter White, "The Negro and Hollywood: Racial Types in Films Must Please the South," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 19, 1941, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 27, "Movies and Television, 1942-1958," Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
[60] Bob Richards, "Writer Says Clarence Muse Creates Miracle in Hollywood," *Chicago Defender,* February 10, 1940.
[61] Richards, "Writer Says Clarence Muse Creates Miracle in Hollywood."

continued to urge the black community to support "every Negro picture on the market" so as to support the infant industry and help open up jobs for blacks "from all walks of life." [62] Reviews of those black-produced films that did emerge during the late 1930s, were generally positive, even if they did emerge out of a sense that their primary benefit was seeing the fellow members of the race on screen in something other than the typical servant role. But as Miller's "Uncle Tom in Hollywood" suggests, black films were often awkward imitations of white Hollywood films that did little to challenge distorted depictions of African Americans on screen. In a 1938 *Crisis* review of pictures produced by the nascent black film industry, Miller criticized the movies as being "distinctly mediocre from an artistic standpoint," offering little but "old fashioned, pot boiler melodramas." Conscious that these films were made "in response to widespread criticism of Hollywood's habit of casting the Negro actor as a clown, a fool or an underling," Miller was nonetheless critical of their assumption that "the problem is solved by merely casting the Negro actor as the hero of a hackneyed gangster, success or love story." "Gangster melodramas or goo-goo success stories, using Negro actors, distort reality just as surely as did *Imitation of Life*," Miller concluded.[63]

For Miller and other writers, the goal was not "heavy-footed problem or propaganda films," but rather pictures that "tell the truth." This emphasis on the truth would be a defining feature of the rhetoric on blacks in films during this period and beyond. To convince black audiences that obtaining truthful depictions was the ultimate goal, rather than an increase in black actors in films, even in servant roles or the casting of black actors in "positive" roles, Miller felt that black film critics and producers needed

---

[62] H.H. Hart to W. White, June 10, 1937, NAACP 11/A/31; Morris, "Hollywood Takes All."
[63] Loren Miller, "Hollywood's New Negro Films," *Crisis,* January 1938, 8-9.

to move beyond merely publicizing black films to educating their audiences in evaluating films for their social content. In a similar vein, the *Pittsburgh Courier* advocated the creation of a producer's association similar to that of the major studios which could "acquaint Negroes with the value of supporting all-colored pictures." [64] Once properly educated, the black film-going public could then assume the responsibility for policing the image of the race in Hollywood. Pointing to the responsibility of the colored fan, the *Afro-American* argued that "when a colored performer turns in a creditable performance the colored public should give spontaneous and mass response because public approval or disapproval is the only barometer by which the producers gauge public opinion. Therefore, if colored people find themselves portrayed contrary to their wishes, they have themselves, not the actor, to blame." [65]

What Miller and other writers ultimately concluded was that some sort of organized protest or boycott of Hollywood was necessary. Using language that would become prevalent in the early years of the civil rights movements, writers and civil rights leaders pointed to the growing purchasing power of black consumers and argued for this power to be leveraged against the film industry. Writing in *Opportunity,* Miller noted that the "the so-called Negro market is far from negligible," and that with an annual purchasing power of two billion dollars, it was a significant component of the American consumer market. [66] Earl Morris emphasized the economic strength of African American film audiences in a series of articles aimed at reforming the film industry. "There isn't a single group or race in America that spends as much proportionally to see motion pictures as the Negro," Morris noted, citing the fifty-million dollars a year that Black Americans

---

[64] Morris, "Hollywood Takes All."
[65] "Why Are Colored Movie Artists Challenged?"
[66] Loren Miller, "The Negro Market," *Opportunity,* February 1938, 38.

contributed to Hollywood's bottom line. The "vast buying power" of the Black market – comprising a population that would "swallow" that of Canada and Australia - was critical to Hollywood's success, yet the major studios virtually ignored its concerns. "This great race of ours which spends nearly $50,000,000 annually to support elaborate Hollywood studios , is kicked in the face" by those same studio. "YOUR DOLLARS helped to build Hollywood," Morris insisted, and they "certainly should entitle you to recognition by the major studios." While Morris stopped short of recommending that blacks used their economic power to mount an industry-wide boycott, he did urge his readers to send letters of protest (along with clippings of his articles) to Will Hayes and the heads of the major Hollywood studios objecting to the "subtle propaganda" and "demand[ing] something else than 'Uncle Tom' roles for your stars."[67]

America's entry into World War II not only infused a sense of militancy into African American communities, it also led to a convergence of goals among the NAACP, Hollywood and the US Government. Under the banner of the Pittsburgh Courier-led "Double V" campaign – victory abroad and victory at home – blacks saw significant gains in the desegregation of the labor industry, local activism, and influence and participation in national politics.[68] Furthermore, NAACP membership grew exponentially during this period, from 18,000 in the late 1930s to nearly 156,000 by the end of the War, making the Association a more powerful voice in airing black concerns.[69]

---

[67] Earl J. Morris, "'Hollywood Ignores Black America' – Morris," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 28,1938; Morris, "Hollywood Overlooking Sepia Goldmine," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 25, 1938; Morris, "Demands Negro be Recognized in Hollywood," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 2, 1928; Morris, "Major Film Companies Must Recognize the Negro," July 16, 1938; Morris, "American Whites, Negroes Being Shoved into Background in movies by Jewish Film Owners," August 27 1938; Morris, "Hollywood Takes All."
[68] See Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 133-168; Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*: *The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).
[69] Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 141.

Black images on film became part of the larger goals of black World War II activism. Canada Lee, in criticizing the treatment of colored actors on the legitimate stage and screen, made the connection between wartime activism and changes in black images. "The war is giving colored people the chance to fight for their rights when the peace comes and should pave the way to a truer conception of them in the theater," the actor and activist asserted.[70]

"The NAACP will not be deterred by the attacks of those who have a vested interest in the status quo": The NAACP's Hollywood Campaigns, 1942-1950

Walter White, the politically savvy Executive Secretary of the NAACP, hoped to harness this indignation and opposition into an effective Association presence in Hollywood that would lead to concrete changes in the portrayals of, and opportunities offered to, black Americans on the silver screen.[71] In 1942, White made two extensive trips to Hollywood where, with the help of Wendell Wilkie, the 1940 Republican presidential nominee, he was able to press the Association's case (White had made a brief appearance in 1940 and would make another trip in 1943). The trip came on the heels of a highly successful period in which the Association participated in two key victories – Marian Anderson's 1939 concert at the Lincoln Memorial and the passage of Executive Order 8802, which outlawed discrimination in the defense industries, by President Roosevelt in the response to a threatened March on Washington – after which membership grew dramatically (71 new branches were created in 1941 alone). Given this increased clout and influence,

---

[70] "Canada Lee Talks Out Loud in Criticizing Legitimate Theater," *New Jersey Afro-American*, April 10, 1943.

[71] Cripps is critical of the NAACP's relatively late arrival onto the Hollywood scene, and their "ineffectual and irrelevant" responses to the "real needs of blacks in Hollywood." It seems though that he somewhat underestimates the extent to which, even though the Association seems to have arrived at a consensus on how Hollywood films were harmful to the black cause, White and other NAACP leaders did not agree on what to do about it or what the goals should be. Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 375.

White hoped to change Hollywood not by organized protest, as some in the *Crisis* had urged, but through investigation, education, and lobbying: tactics that the Association had utilized with considerable success over the previous decade. The first trip in February netted very little – it was only on the last day that White was able to lobby anyone with the power to change the situation, when he met with Twentieth Century Fox chairman Darryl Zanuck and Walter Wagner. On the second trip, in July, White spoke before seventy producers and industry executives at a luncheon hosted by Zanuck and Wagner, pressing for better roles while assuring the audience "that he did not expect Negroes to be treated always as heroes but simply as human beings, or as any other persons would be treated under the same circumstances."[72]

White had hoped that a direct appeal to the conscience of the Hollywood elite, many of whom were Jews whose sensitivity to issues of racism and discrimination had been heightened by wartime Nazi atrocities in Europe, would result in immediate action and improvement. He also hoped that with wartime unity a high priority, the federal government, through the Office of War Information (OWI), would take a more active role in ensuring the positive portrayal of blacks. However, the quality of the offerings in 1943 was disappointing. The bulk of black roles may have shifted from servants to entertainers, yet the comic stereotypes still remained. The *New Jersey Afro-American* accused the film industry of "sidestepping" their pledge for better roles by continuing to "exploit colored talent either in jim crow films or as menials or clowns in white films." As the *Afro-American* suggests, Hollywood's attempts to respond to black concerns by producing all-black films produced results that were, to some, just as offensive. "I am

---

[72] For information on the NAACP's victories and White's trip to Hollywood see Kenneth Robert Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* (New York: The New Press, 1943), 246-73. White quoted in Janken, *White*, 269.

disheartened and unhappy over 'Cabin in the Sky,'" White wrote regarding the news of remake of the successful Broadway production, featuring a who's-who of black comic talent (including Ethel Waters, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, Buck and Bubbles, Moke and Poke, Mantan Moreland, Willie Best, Rex Ingram and Lena Horne) that along with another 1943 revue, *Stormy Weather,* presented blacks in typically comedic roles. White also expressed concern over an MGM film biography of Andrew Johnson, which White believed to be a "whitewash" of Johnson, and a "blackwash" of Thaddeus Stevens and the Abolitionists. The OWI had approved the movie over White's objections. Perhaps most insulting was a "black" version of the Disney classic *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, entitled *Coal Black and de Sebben Dwarfs.* In just ten minutes, *Coal Black* featured "every established stereotype ever concocted to depict the Negro," and threatened national unity by turning the seven dwarves into miniature black soldiers.[73]

If Hollywood executives were evasive or defensive, black actors and actresses often proved downright hostile to the Association's efforts. Black actors and actresses took a considerable interest in the welfare of the race and themselves often maneuvered behind the scenes to improve black roles in film: deleting certain words from the script, insisting on not using dialect unless the role called for it, lobbying producers for better roles. They felt that the NAACP trivialized these efforts and unfairly blamed them for the position of blacks in American society. "When I played theaters the better part of our race

---

[73] Pointing out the parallel's between the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany and the treatment of blacks in America and by Hollywood was a consistent theme of the NAACP argument. See Walter White, "Untitled Syndicated Column," November 7, 1946 in Wilkins Papers, Box 34, "White, Walter Syndicated Column, 1946." See also Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*. "Hollywood Sidestepping Pledge of Better Casting for Colored," *New Jersey Afro-American,* 6 March 1943; "Hollywood's Answer to Our Appeal for Better Roles in Pictures for Colored Actors," *New Jersey Afro-American*, March 20, 1943; W. White to Marc Connelly, November 21, 1942; "Movie Cartoon Pokes Fun at Negro Soldiers," April 30, 1943; Julia Baxter to Odette Harper, memorandum, April 16, 1943, NAACP 18/B/15; Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 128-32.

looked down on us, but now that a few of us have, through hard work and sacrifice, made a little progress they expect us to suddenly become champions of all the ill of the race and refuse to play parts which our profession demands," Mantan Moreland noted before asking, "Who is going to feed us if we do this?" As Moreland notes, by refusing to perform the only roles available to them, black actors not only risked their careers, they limited their chances to improve the situation from the inside. To many actors, such an inside effort was the most effective way to insure better Hollywood roles and they viewed the efforts of White – who did not live in Los Angeles and who had no experience in the film industry – as the misguided efforts of an outsider. Because it dealt directly with producers and left black actors and actresses out of the loop, "the whole approach of the NAACP to the Hollywood question was wrong and ill-advised," argued Clarence Muse. "Walter White, as a committee of one, in company with Mr. Willkie, interviewed producers and wined and dined in Hollywood fashion."[74]

Despite these criticisms, the NAACP forged ahead with its efforts and in 1945 proposed the establishment of a Hollywood Bureau, an advisory board that would allow the NAACP a more permanent presence in the film industry. No longer able to rely on the support and connections of Wilkie, who passed away the previous October, White laid out preliminary plans for the Hollywood Bureau in a letter to a "selected list of 500 friends of the Association." The purpose of the Bureau would be to serve as a "source of information, criticism and suggestions not only on what should be deleted from films, but what could constructively be added to pictures in order to give a truer representation of the Negro." Despite earlier support from the film industry momentum for the project had

[74] "The Truth About Hollywood and the Race Issue From the Actor's Viewpoint," *New Jersey Afro-American,* January 9, 1943.

been halted. Although the studios had offered to finance the Bureau, White and Wilkie, fearing that "he who pays the piper call the tune," held out for an independent Bureau. Such a Bureau would cost approximately $15,000 annually – money that the NAACP did not have in its budget. White's letter concluded by asking the NAACP's leading members if they thought "such a Bureau should be established" and if so, should they be "sufficiently interested to contribute" to its financing. "We would be most grateful if you would let us know…how you feel about this."[75]

Reaction to White's proposal revealed the challenges that the NAACP's cultural undertaking faced. With pledges of support from such prominent donors as Frank Schiffman (owner of the Apollo Theater), Charles Houston, Rayford Logan, Benjamin Mays (President of Morehouse University), Duke Ellington and writer Sterling Brown, the NAACP selected a committee to help establish the Bureau. The committee consisted of a wide array of industry insiders and prominent liberals, including: Marshall Field, Edwin Embree, William Hastie, Arthur Springarn, Major Matty Fox (Vice President of Universal), Langston Hughes and Lena Horne. "Meritorious and laudable…are the aims of this new NAACP bureau," wrote the editors of the sympathetic *Chicago Defender*. "Perhaps Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers would no longer cavort in servants' uniforms and Clarence Muse himself might not be called upon to put on a grass skirt and prance about as a jungle savage, ostensibly portraying an African."[76]

Despite the prominence of the committee, a genuine sense of support from NAACP donors, and support within the black press, the Bureau encountered significant

---

[75] Walter White, Draft of letter to go to a selected list of 500 friends of the Association, August 1945, NAACP II A 277, "Films: Hollywood Bureau."
[76] "Hollywood and Walter White," *Chicago Defender*, February 23, 1946.

resistance on two main fronts.[77] The first, was that many Hollywood producers and executives saw the Hollywood Bureau as a censorship arm and, already regulated by the government, resisted further encroachment. "We are naturally opposed to any groups that serve, even indirectly, to push us around and the danger of becoming further best becomes greater all the time," replied Howard Dietz, Vice President of Advertising of MGM and one of White's allies. Others voiced similar concerns, noting that "there is a big difference between general criticism after a film is portrayed and specific criticism and direction beforehand, which in a sense does constitute a threat."[78]

The Hollywood Bureau also faced continued resistance from many actors within the black entertainment community. In January 1946, White traveled to California to gather support for his idea. After achieving "modest success in building a sound basis for the Bureau," White presented his plan at a dinner party hosted by Los Angeles branch, to which all the "Negro movie folks" were invited. Black actors came out in force, "with hatchets" and most of these actors – including Clarence Muse, Louise Beavers, Jesse Graves, and Ben Carter – gave White "the works" and voiced familiar concerns about the NAACP blaming actors rather than Hollywood executives, refusing to cooperate with black actors and interfering in affairs it didn't understand at the expense of their livelihood. Beavers noted that "in her 18 years of show life she had always attempted to devote her other efforts to the progress and advancement of the race." Beavers, who had worked behind the scenes to clean up scripts in a similar manner as the NAACP was now trying to do with a bureau, was particularly annoyed that the NAACP could try to

---

[77] "That Hollywood Bureau," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 31, 1946; T. Young [of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*] to W. White, September 3, 1945, NAACP II A 277, "Films: Hollywood Bureau, 1945-49."
[78] H. Dietz to W. White, September 5, 1945, NAACP II A 277; Arthur Garfield Hays to W. White, November 5, 1945.

establish a Bureau without even consulting her or other actors. Only Lena Horne and Carlton Moss, whom White referred to as "the new type out here" came to the defense of the organization. Given previous run-ins, this opposition was not unexpected and White hoped that "some good will come from letting them fire [at] the target the most wanted to shoot at."[79]

One actress who was not there was Hattie McDaniel, perhaps the most prominent actress in Hollywood at the time. Since her appearance in *Judge Priest* (she was also in *Imitation of Life* but was left on the cutting room floor),[80] McDaniel had scored a number of important roles – including that of Mammy in David O Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* (1939). McDaniel's Mammy garnered enthusiastic praise in the white press and an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress, the first award won by an African American. Though the black press took pride in McDaniel's accomplishment – even the *Crisis* featured her prominently on its cover following her Oscar victory – they also voiced considerable concern over the Mammy role that McDaniel consistently performed. As Deborah Gray White has show, the Mammy image was a burden that fell squarely on the shoulders of black women.[81] Like the comic Sambo, the Mammy spoke to white fantasies of black women as servile, loyal and non-threatening. In its filmic incarnations, the Mammy figure was a "big, fat and cantankerous" servant who served as both a confidant to her employers (masters) and as comic relief in the film. Though other women would take on

---

[79] W. White to Roy [Wilkins] and the Office, January 25, 194[6], NAACP II A 277; H. McDaniel to T. L. Griffin, January 20, 1946, NAACP II A 502, "Publicity Protests – Hattie McDaniels [sic], Television"; "Walter White Tells Plans for Hollywood Bureau," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, January 24, 1946, 16; Copy of Statement Regarding NAACP's Establishment of Hollywood Bureau, NAACP II A 277, "Films: Hollywood Bureau, 1945-49."
[80] Watts, *Hattie McDaniel*, 105.
[81] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 17-21, 27-61.

the Mammy role, most notably Louise Beavers, McDaniel's version, largely because of her success in *Gone with the Wind*, would receive the most prominence.

Though White was at loggerheads with many in the black Hollywood community, his disagreement with McDaniel was particularly bitter, personal and often public. Like other black actors, McDaniel accused White of meddling in affairs he didn't understand. In refusing the invitation to "break bread with Walter White," McDaniel accused White of prejudice towards darker-skinned blacks, accusing him of saying she was too dark skinned to entertain the troops overseas, and framed his opposition to her in terms of class snobbery. "What is the difference [in] playing a maid's part on the screen than playing it in the actual home," McDaniel wondered. "Does Walter White's maid…become an Uncle Tom just because she works in his home?" McDaniel also bristled at White's grating sense of superiority and complained that during the Secretary's first trip to California referred to her as "Hattie" (rather than Ms. McDaniel) and spoke to her "with the tone of voice and manner that a Southern Colonel would use to his favorite slave." In defending her roles and her position in Hollywood, McDaniel advanced similar claims as other black actors. "When I won the Academy Award, I did not take pride for myself," McDaniel asserted. "I thought it would open the avenue of progress and opportunity for [the] Negro boy and girl that would be wanting a chance in Hollywood." Contrasting her involvement with that of White, who she claimed keep doors closed in Hollywood, McDaniel noted her own contribution to the advancement of blacks in Hollywood. "Although Walter White tried to imply that I would accept any role just to be

working this is not true. I am trying each day to list the position of my people and to create a deeper respect from the other side for us."[82]

Privately the NAACP leadership had little patience for McDaniel, and White in particular seems to have held the actress in contempt. In a confidential memo, an NAACP staffer suggested to White, that although the secretary may "have been a little wrong about her career," McDaniel was "MEAN and vicious and resentful" and by attacking White through his daughter, "she should be shut up if for the sake of her own kind."[83] The Secretary held a similar attitude towards other actors who disagreed with his approach. He refused to meet individually with his opponents in Hollywood, dismissed even their most constructive criticisms, ignored advice to work toward building an effective working relationship with actors' groups such as the Fair Play Committee and questioned the "mental processes" of those who doubted his effectiveness. After the dinner party, White wrote Roy Wilkins that the actors "overplayed their hand and revealed to everybody that they were interested in jobs only for themselves and to Hell with everything else." Publicly, the NAACP effectively positioned their opponents as operating out of their own narrow self-interest at the expense of the entire race. For the Association, what was at stake was greater than jobs for a few individuals, for by eliminating negative comic stereotypes from the screen, the NAACP hoped to materially and politically improve the lot of all black Americans. Black actors may know more about acting, Wilkins granted, "but is that any guarantee that they know about the effects of the Hollywood stereotype on the aspirations of 14 million black Americans?" The debate could thus be framed as a question of what was more important – "jobs for a

---

[82] H. McDaniel to T.L. Griffin, January 20, 1946; [unsigned] to W. White, February 12, 1946, NAACP II A 502, "Publicity Protests: Hattie McDaniels [sic] 1945-1949."
[83] [unsigned] to W. White, February 12, 1946.

handful of Negroes playing so-called 'Uncle Tom' roles or the welfare of Negroes as a whole?" For White, it was clear what side of the debate the NAACP should come down on:

> The NAACP has not hesitated to 'interfere' with lynching, disfranchisement, unequal educational opportunities and job discrimination. All of these evils are aided in part by Hollywood stereotypes. The struggle, therefore, to improve the treatment of Negroes in the medium which reaches more human eyes and emotions than any yet devised by man is part and parcel of that struggle for improvement of the Negro lot. And the NAACP will not be deterred by the attacks of those who have a vested interest in the status quo.[84]

Though White would later argue that black actors were "more to be pitied than attacked," by framing the matter in this way – jobs for black actors versus the progress of the race (as determined by himself and the NAACP) – White further exposed a critical fault line that would hamper the Associations cultural efforts for the remainder of the decade.[85]

These fault lines, and the inherent limitations of the NAACP's Hollywood strategy, had become evident the prior fall - at almost the exact time White proposed the Hollywood Bureau – with the controversy over *St. Louis Woman*. Based on the novel *God Sends Sunday* by Arna Bontemps, *St. Louis Woman* was the creation of Bontemps and fellow Harlem Renaissance luminary Countee Cullen.[86] Bontemps and Cullen had sought financing to turn the novel into a musical and perhaps film for nearly a decade before it was picked up by Arthur Freed, a producer at MGM. Freed's involvement

---

[84] Janken, *White*, 271; W. White to Alamena Davis, April 28, 1942, NAACP 18/B/20; W. White to R. Wilkins, January 25, 1945; Roy Wilkins, "The Watchtower," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, February 28, 1946; Copy of Statement Regarding NAACP's Establishment of Hollywood Bureau, NAACP II A 277, "Films: Hollywood Bureau, 1945-49." This statement was published in whole or in part by several black newspapers throughout the country.

[85] Walter White, "People, Politics and Places," *Chicago Defender*, March 9, 1946.

[86] *God Sends Sunday* was first published in 1931 before being produced as a play in 1933 by the Charles Giplin Players at Karamu Theater in Cleveland under the direction of Mrs. Rowena Jelliffe. See Thelma Boozer, "Script Proves Lena's 'St. Louis Woman' No Reflection on Race," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 22, 1945.

signaled that the musical would make the transition to film as well, following the formula pioneered by *Hallelujah* and *Cabin in the Sky*.

Almost as soon as the production was announced though a chorus of objections ensued. Among early objections, the strongest and most widely publicized came from the International Film and Radio Guild and its Executive Secretary, Leon Hardwick. After reviewing an early copy of the script, the IFRG went on record in condemning the production as "another of those subtle but vicious instruments through which the entire Negro race is stereotyped." Though Freed's intentions may have been "of the highest," the Guild criticized the script for its "atrocious dialect" and "the usual killing, vice, trash and passion, with absolutely no counterbalance injected into the plot which would tend to show that not all Negroes are of the low type." Of particular concern was the prospect of Lena Horne, "one of the race's finest and most glamorous artists," being cast in the principle role of Della. A "good looking but loose woman of the sporting variety," Della was an "insult to Negro womanhood," the IFRG contended and for Horne to be "forced" to play such a role "would cause her reputation as a progressive artist of [the] race to be besmirched irreparably."[87]

At the same time the IFRG was preparing to publicly protest *St. Louis Woman* the NAACP's leadership was working behind the scenes to halt production of the play. Like the IFRG, Walter White and the NAACP seemed primarily concerned for Horne's career and the symbolic importance of the race's leading actresses appearing in a potentially disreputable role. Having brought Horne to the attention of MGM in the first place, the Secretary had a special, often paternal, affection for the young star who could be counted

---

[87] "St. Louis Woman' Script Condemned," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 8, 1945; L. Hardwick to R Wilkins, August 29, 1945, NAACP II A 280, "Films, St. Louis Woman, 1945-1947."

upon for her unwavering support of the NAACP. Upon hearing the news of Horne's potential involvement, White immediately conferred with the young actress and contacted Freed. Horne "has won a place in the hearts of millions of Americans, colored and white, as the first lady of the screen," White wrote to Freed. To allow her to play the role of Delah would "tear down" her career and "destroy all the hopes her people had that so charming and beautiful and talented a performer would be given a dignified and rewarding opportunity in the entertainment world." White also contacted MGM chairman Louis Mayer, with whom White enjoyed a productive relationship, in order to receive Mayer's assurances that the studio would not punish the star for taking a role she did not want.[88]

By placing Horne at the center of the controversy, White and others further revealed the important place of black womanhood in debates about African American comedy. The character of Della – a woman of "loose morals" – was a clear embodiment of what Deborah Gray White calls the Jezebel. "[G]overned almost entirely by her libido," Jezebel was the exact opposite of proper womanhood.[89] Though White uses the term in discussing antebellum slave women, like the Mammy the term is useful in understanding the limitations placed on black female performers in the American cultural imagination. Horne had already played the seductress "Sweet" Georgia Brown in the film *Cabin in the Sky*; playing a similar role in the theatrical (and likely cinematic) production of *St. Louis Woman* risked identifying her with the stereotype. That Horne, who had become a prominent spokesperson for the race, could become associated with the Jezebel stereotype in the same way that Beavers and McDaniel became associated with Mammy

---

[88] W. White to A. Freed, draft of letter, n.d.; L. Mayer to W. White, telegram, October 6, 1945; R. Wilkins to L. Hardwick, September 12, 1945, NAACP II A 280, "Films, St. Louis Woman, 1945-1947."
[89] White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 26.

threatened to undermine white impressions of black women. Playing a "loose woman" risks "treading a path already overdrawn," observed *Amsterdam News* columnist Abe Hill. "Therefore [s]he is following a pattern which says in effect – ''tis a pity, but Negro women are loose or prostitutes.'"[90]

The idea that the debate over *St. Louis Woman* was more about representations of black womanhood than about anything specific to the actual musical is further evidenced by the fact that when the controversy first surfaced, only a handful of people – apparently including Hardwick - had seen a copy of the script. Delayed by his father's illness, Cullen was still typing a draft of the script in late August and was unable to provide a draft to those who requested to see it. Initially, Walter White could only point to vague "reports" in voicing his concerns about the production. Once the controversy spilled over into the press, those associated with the musical, including the producer Arthur Freed, confessed that they had not seen a script either. Freed assured White and others that he would not do anything that would harm Horne's career, but was unable to refute any of the charges being made. When asked for comment, Rex Ingram could only reply, "I have never yet been connected with any unsavory theatrical venture and you can bet if there is anything in 'St. Louis Woman' which does not meet with my approval it will not be there when the curtain goes up."[91] Even Lena Horne, who was repeatedly asked to state publicly her intentions regarding the show, was forced to respond that she had not seen the final script.[92]

---

[90] Abe Hill, "Broadway Stews Over Current Negro Roles," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 29, 1945.
[91] Herman Hill, "Controversy Rages Over MGM's 'St. Louis Woman'," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 8, 1945.
[92] Lawrence LaMar, "Hollywood Blasts IFRG Attack on Lena Horne's Play, 'St. Louis Woman'," *Chicago Defender,* September 22, 1945. The claims by those associated with the musical that they had not seen a

In mid-September, after unsuccessful attempts at getting a copy of the script, White arranged for Cullen to read the play at his home in Harlem. White invited a "small and select group" of NAACP leaders and allies, including Thurgood Marshall, Roy Wilkins, Henry Moon, William Hastie and Earl Brown. Cullen and Bontempts invited Mabel Roane, the Secretary of the Negro Actors Guild, Thelma Boozer, entertainment critic for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, as well as black literary luminaries Aaron Douglass and Alain Locke. Despite Cullen's full cooperation, White and Wilkins were not at all moved by the meeting. Seeing the play (and potential film) as being in the same tradition as *Cabin in the Sky*, Wilkins maintained that there was "nothing good" in the script, and that it would be "very unfortunate" if it were made into a musical, or worse, a movie. In a highly antagonistic letter to Cullen, White noted the irony in two black authors writing a musical "which portrays every cliché and every hoary myth about the Negro which our enemies have attempted to perpetuate." Seeing nothing redeeming in any of the characters, White was particularly appalled by the "disparagement of dark Negroes" and the indecent female characters. In listening to the play, White "wondered if all the work which the late Wendell Willkie [sic] and others have been doing in Hollywood…has not been almost wholly in vain." "I beg of you and Arna for your own sakes as well as that of the cause for which we are fighting," White concluded," to turn your talents towards writing which will not do harm."[93]

Privately the controversy continued to grow even more divisive, particularly among White, Cullen and Bontemps, as honest disagreement morphed into petty

---

final script were not entirely a dodge. The script went through several revisions up through rehearsals and most drafts, now housed at the Beinecke Library at Yale, are practically illegible.

[92] C. Cullen to W. White, August 24, and September 9, 10, 1945; W. White to Jane Bolin, September 10, 1945; R. Wilkins to W. White, memorandum, September 17, 1945; W. White to C. Cullen, September 19, 1945, NAACP II A 280, "Films - St. Louis Woman."

squabbles among the literary luminaries. White, in a particularly petty move, chided Cullen and Bontemps for inviting their own guests to the White home for the script reading. Such an "extraordinary" move was not only rude, it also failed to disguise the writers' attempts "to insure the presence of those who had quite obviously been won over to favoring the play before hearing it in our home." (White, of course, failed to note that most of the guests he had invited had already been won over to disfavoring the play prior to hearing it in the White home.) While sufficiently apologetic in correspondence with the Secretary, privately the two men seethed. Bontemps disparagingly referred to White and Wilkins as "dictator[s] of Negro participation in drama (and perhaps the other arts)" and as the "gentlemen who have undertaken to protect Broadway from Della Green." He was particularly upset by the news that White daughter had accepted a role in *Porgy,* which some saw a political move on the producers part designed to prevent further criticism of the play.[94] Apparently "a poor yellow girl can't take an occasional present from a gentleman, but a Spellman girl can be a Nonnie," Bontemps complained to Langtston Hughes in an effort to label White's actions both nepotistic and classist. For Bontemps, White's actions were not only hypocritical and misguided; they were traitorous to the race. "Not only does Walter's opposition to St. Louis Woman seem strange in view of the Nonnie role for Jane, but the claque which you describe would seem to suggest that he and Roy seem to have wearied of the fight against Negro's enemies and turned their guns on their comrades."[95]

---

[94] Abe Hill, "Walter White Looms as New Theater Czar," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 22, 1945.

[95] W. White to C. Cullen, September 19, 1945, NAACP II A 280; A. Bontemps to L. Hughes, n.d. [ca. November 1945], October 13, September 14, 18, 1945, Langston Hughes Papers, Series I, Box 18, Folder 396, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Petty snipping aside, the public and private infighting between the three men reveals the degree to which artists and civil rights leaders were divided not only on the NAACP's tactics but on exactly what constituted harmful stereotypes. Certainly by the end of World War II, most black Americans agreed that black filmic portrayals limited blacks to comic roles at the expense of more realistic portrayals. And even many black entertainers would agree, at least in principle, that these portrayals complicated the social and political advancement of African Americans. Yet there was little agreement on exactly what types of roles were problematic. Were all comic roles off limits, or only those that relied on exaggerated dialect and physical movement? What constituted a realistic portrayal, especially in the context of a heavily censored film industry? And who was the appropriate arbiter of such questions? As Thomas Cripps has argued, the NAACP and its allies in the black press provided little critical guidance on how to evaluate films and black performances on their artistic and aesthetic qualities, resulting in confusing criticisms that tried to evaluate films on whether they were "better" or "realistic." Furthermore, there was little agreement on what role the NAACP should play in policing Hollywood. The reading that White hosted in his home in many ways reflected his vision of the Hollywood Bureau – a coterie of elite blacks whose cultural tastes mirrored the Secretary's evaluating the scripts brought before it. But the reaction to the Hollywood Bureau demonstrates that while actors might have supported the broader goals of the Association, they did not believe that White and other leaders were the best arbiters of these matters. Furthermore, that White and company dismissed the *St. Louis Woman* script out of hand without providing any suggestions as to how it could be improved so that it would meet with NAACP approval suggested that the Bureau's

criticism would be far from constructive. Comic images may have had implications for civil rights, but it was unclear whether a civil rights organization was an appropriate choice to lead the fight against them.

Horne ultimately declined the role of Della in late September, and although there were immediate reports, fed by *New York Mirror* columnist Walter Winchell, that Lena would be disciplined by MGM for refusing the role, the black press met the decision with little fanfare. Production continued through the end of the year, with Ruby Hill taking over the role intended for Horne.[96] Cullen died in January of 1946, just before St. Louis Woman entered into rehearsal. The show premiered in New Haven to lukewarm reviews. Critics praised the music and lyrics, but were critical of the cast. (The one exception was Pearl Bailey.)[97] *St. Louis Woman* then moved to the Martin Beck Theater on Broadway where it had a successful if brief run, despite being plagued by snipping on the cast and criticism from the press. Unsure of its financial prospects, and perhaps wary of generating more controversy, MGM decided against turning the musical into a motion picture.

The NAACP's efforts in Hollywood, as well as other forms of mass culture, continued throughout the 1940s. Beginning in 1947 (and continuing into the 1950s), the NAACP had passed resolutions at each of its annual conventions denouncing "derogatory terminology and racial, religious or national stereotypes," in "movies, radio stations, newspapers and other publications." Thanks largely to its efforts, as well as those of producers and black actors, actresses and audiences, the Association had achieved some

---

[96] "Lena Horne Refuses Lead Role in MGM's 'St. Louis Woman,'" *Chicago Defender,* September 29, 1945. See also "Mayer Differs with Winchell in 'Disciplining' Lena Horne," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 13, 1945.

[97] "Complete Change Can Fit 'St. Louis Woman' for Broadway, Critic Says," *Chicago Defender*, March 2, 1946.

degree of success in Hollywood. Walter White could look approvingly on a number of films released during that period, including *Home of the Brave, Intruders in the Dust, Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky* and black audiences could realistically hope that American entertainment in the 1950s would be free from images of shuffling Sambos, lawless hustlers, and lazy, inept workers. While the NAACP efforts were far from perfect, they did succeed in making the depictions of African Americans on screen an important component of liberal politics.[98]

Conclusion: Timmie Rogers and Missed Opportunities

In late 1943, dancer/entertainer Timmie Rogers left the dance team of Gordon and Rogers to make his way as an individual comedian. The vaudeville and theatrical environment in which he developed heavily influenced Rogers as a dancer. His dance routines combined physical comedy (exaggerated movements and facial expressions) with virtuoso dance movements, all performed in an elaborate and brightly colored zoot suit. In embracing a career as a standup comedian, Rogers hoped to move African American comedy in a new direction. He chose not to perform in blackface and a zoot suit - the de facto costume for black comedians of the era – and instead became the first black comedian to appear on stage without blackface in a tuxedo, which had become the standard costume for white comedians. He also aimed to become the first black standup comedian to perform in white venues for white audiences. "I knew the time had come when a black comedian could be accepted by an audience other than the black one," Rogers recalled. "There was

[98] Walter White, "An Honest and Courageous Picture," May 12, 1949 and "Recent Movies on Racial Themes Indicate Maturity," November 10, 1949, Wilkins Papers, Box 34, "White, Walter, Syndicated Column 1949."

no reason why they couldn't be as successful as white comedians who were on the scene at the time."[99]

As an individual performer, Rogers developed a routine that combined humorous songs with "mugging, dancing, and burlesque take-off on topics and personalities of the day." Critics described his "cleancut comedy" as a "happy combination of Milton Berle and Bob Hope" (two of the most prominent white comics of the era), and drew favorable comparisons to famed African American comedian/singer, Bert Williams. Rogers traveled throughout the country, opening for Stan Kenton and Count Basie, in nightclubs, cafes and theaters that catered to both black and white audiences. Within the year, newspapers were already referring to the new comic as "American's No. 1 comedian" and his catch phrase "Oh, Yeah!" and hit songs had developed a national following.[100]

In spring of 1944, Rogers became the first African American comedian, and the only black entertainer other than Ethel Waters and Maurice Rocco, to perform at the Clover Club. The Clover Club was one of Hollywood's "favorite café society spots" that catered to a sophisticated, and almost exclusively white clientele that included film stars, entertainers, studio executives and other members of the Hollywood elite. Two years later, Rogers became the first comedian to perform at the legendary Café Society in New York. During what has been described as a "Golden Age" for nightclubs, Café Society was perhaps the most sought after engagement in the country, and had garnered a very

---

[99] Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 116.
[100] "Timme Rogers Scores in Omaha," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 1, 1944; "Timmie Rogers With Russell," *Chicago Defender*, August 4, 1945; "Three Lessons in Mugging," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 30, 1944; "Timmie Rogers Sensational in Filmland's Clover Club," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 18, 1944; "Timmie Rogers Rated Top Comic," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 6, 1945.

public reputation for racial tolerance and resistance to segregation.[101] Rogers's act was a hit with the sophisticated Manhattan audience and elicited effusive praise in both the black and white press. In a review of his performance the *New York Amsterdam News* noted:

> Rogers easily stands out as the biggest funmaking hit in 20 years insofar as Negro comedy is concerned. Well-stocked with timely gags, smart songs, and a delivery that is startling in its terrific impact, Timmie Rogers is in his element in the intimate surroundings of the famed Greenwich Village night club…Rogers moves into a new sphere for Negro comedians in that he is one of the very few who has gone about getting new material, rehearsing it and developing his own ideas with it.[102]

Rogers's Café Society appearance further solidified his reputation and opened up even more career opportunities. During his Café Sociey run he appeared on radio on WABC's "Night Life." Now in demand, other clubs opened their doors to the comics and Rogers was soon invited back to Café Society in early 1948. By 1950 Rogers had established himself as a topic comic in a variety of entertainment fields. He was the most sought-after black comedian on the nightclub circuit and had two runs at Café Society in 1950. Working with his lyric and music team he had developed a musical revue that ran at the Paramount Theater on Broadway. He signed a recording contract with Decca records. And he had an appearance on the Kate Smith show in the still new medium of television.[103]

In assessing the impact of his friend and fellow comic, Redd Foxx asserted that Rogers's move into standup comedy "marked a new day for black comedy in America. It

---

[101] "Timmie Rogers to Join Basie's Hot Aggregation Soon," *Chicago Defender*, April 22, 1944; "Timmie Rogers Sensational in Filmland's Clover Club"; David W. Stowe, "The Politics of Café Society," *Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (March 1998): 1384-1406.
[102] "Timme Rogers Café Society's New Sensation," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 13, 1946.
[103] "Timmie Rogers WABC Guestar," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 31, 1946; "1950 is Really a Big Year for Comedian Timmie Rogers," *Chicago Defender*, October 7, 1950; "Timmie and Kate," *Chicago Defender*, October 28, 1950.

was the end of the comedian wearing a mask. At long last, the comic could be himself."[104] Such a moment could not have been possible without the confluence of events that had occurred over the previous decade. Rogers benefitted greatly from a performing environment that allowed him to develop his routines outside of the South, was open to new ways of performance (tuxedos, etc.), had veteran performers that could provide mentorship and support to a young performer, and was connected to the political and social needs of the African American community. At the same time Rogers probably could not have made the move into white clubs without the efforts of the NAACP and other civil rights organizations, which helped create a political environment that was supportive of integration and conscious of the damaging ways in which African Americans had been represented in the mass media. Yet while both sides could claim a hand in Rogers's success, he did little to ease the tension between the groups or change the cultural politics of African American comedy. In many ways, by the time Rogers took the stage as a comedian the fault lines had been set. Comedians and civil rights leaders would continue to argue over the proper direction and role of African American comedy on stage and screen throughout the 1940s. At the end of the decade a new medium, television, would emerge that would further escalate these tensions.

[104] Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 118.

Chapter Two
"Taking the Negro Seriously": *Amos 'n' Andy* and the Politics of African American Comedy in the Early Civil Rights Movement

In June of 1951, the enduring radio program *Amos 'n' Andy* made the long-awaited transition to television format under the sponsorship of Blatz Beer. The move had been in the works since 1948, when the fledgling television network paid a then-record sum of two-and-a-half million dollars for the rights to the show. Shortly after the purchase, CBS embarked on a well-publicized nationwide talent search for black actors to fill the lead roles. Since its debut in 1929, the show's two white creators, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, had been the voices behind America's most popular "black" radio comedy, performing the roles of Amos, Andy, George "Kingfish" Stevens, Lightening and numerous others. The show tracked the daily adventures and wacky antics of a pair of black Southern migrants, Amos Jones and Andrew Brown, as they struggled to make their way in Harlem as the proprietors of the Fresh Air Taxi Company. Over the years, the two characters experienced a variety of ups-and-downs: marriage, parenthood, the Great Depression, as well as a laundry list of failed business ventures and get-rich-quick schemes. At the height of its popularity, in the early years of the Great Depression, the show was nothing short of a national phenomenon. While their popularity had declined significantly over the years, the characters in *Amos 'n' Andy* remained perhaps the most popular and recognized characters in American popular entertainment. Amid a flurry of press coverage, millions of Americans, both black and white, eagerly awaited the day

when *Amos 'n' Andy,* now in the hands of an all-star black cast, would be reintroduced to the country.[1]

Yet as anticipation built, so did resentment, particularly within the civil rights community. Over the previous decade, black leaders, led by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had not only achieved significant gains in traditional civil rights areas (voting, fair employment, desegregation) they had also achieved some success in their quest to eliminate the comic stereotype from Hollywood.[2] *Amos 'n' Andy's* arrival to television format threatened to undo the both the cultural and legal work of the Association by bringing the Sambo stereotype to America's newest (and potentially farthest-reaching) form of mass culture. On the evening the show premiered, the NAACP delegates were gathered in Atlanta for the Association's annual convention. After watching the show, the convention delegates passed a resolution that condemned the show and called for a nationwide protest of the show and a boycott of the show's sponsor, Blatz Beer. Over the next several months, the NAACP, along with a broad collation of labor, liberal and civil rights organizations would work to force Blatz to end its sponsorship and CBS to stop airing the program.[3]

The *Amos 'n' Andy* protest was the dramatic culmination of the NAACP's campaign against African American comedy and laid bare the tensions within the black community over the purpose and meaning of African American comedy in relation to the civil rights struggle. Updating their rhetoric to reflect the changing dynamics of post-

---

[1] For the most thorough history of the *Amos 'n' Andy* show and its impact on American culture see Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: a Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).
[2] For more information on the NAACP's campaigns against Hollywood, see Chapter One.
[3] In addition to Ely, the most useful history of the *Amos 'n' Andy* protest is Thomas Cripps, "*Amos 'n' Andy* and the Debate Over American Racial Integration," in *American History / American Television: Interpreting the Video Past,* ed. John E. O'Connor (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1983), 33-54.

war American culture and African American life, NAACP leaders argued that the *Amos 'n' Andy* show presented an image of black life that undermined black claims to respectability and their position within American society. Connecting the danger of these images to the logic of segregation in American society, the NAACP linked the elimination *Amos 'n' Andy* to the broader struggle for civil rights and fought against the show with a zeal not seen since its fight against *Birth of a Nation*.

This zeal reflected a larger shift within the Association and the civil rights struggle in general, as black organizations and the rank and file became more militant in their demands and more direct in their tactics. At their 1951 Annual Convention, the NAACP launched an aggressive assault on segregation that would "wipe out jim crow on Dixie street cars, buses, theaters, restaurants, public parks and even separate drinking fountains."[4] In the keynote speech that opened the convention, NAACP Assistant Secretary Roy Wilkins announced that the Association's goal was "full and complete equality, without any shocking and humiliating discrimination and segregation. We don't want equality next year, or in the next generation, we want it now."[5] The previous summer the Association had scored landmark victories in two cases involving graduate education (*Sweatt v. Painter, McLaurin v. Oklahoma*).[6] As the NAACP waged its battle against *Amos 'n' Andy,* the Association's brilliant legal team was preparing its appeal in the five cases that would eventually form the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that would topple the constitutional support for segregation.

---

[4] John LeFlore, "NAACP Launches War on Jim Crow," *Chicago Defender*, July 7, 1951
[5] "NAACP Plans All Out Battle," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 30, 1951.
[6] For the legal background on the graduate school cases see Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

That the *Amos 'n' Andy* protest occurred at the same time that the NAACP initiated its broad assault on racial discrimination is no mere coincidence. Civil rights historians have virtually ignored the *Amos 'n' Andy* protest in favor of focusing on the NAACP's legal campaign and the early beginnings of the civil rights movement in the South.[7] Without dismissing the importance of these developments, this chapter argues that the *Amos 'n' Andy* protests were a central component of the early civil rights movement that would ultimately define the role that television and black representation would play in the struggle. By combining the traditional tactics of education and lobbying with the more militant tactics of grassroots direct action, the NAACP protests against *Amos 'n' Andy* illustrate the ways in which black comedy shaped the eventual strategies of the civil rights movement and functioned as a viable site of political action

Yet the *Amos 'n' Andy* protests also show how black representation in general, and black comedy in particular, functions as an ambiguous arena for politics. Unlike issues such as education, equal housing, fair employment and racial violence, comedy did not (and does not) exit in a clearly defined political vein. Individuals and organizations that would support the NAACP's attempts to connect stereotypes to segregation in the context of education would reject this logic when the Association tried to apply it to entertainment. Liberal organizations that had strongly supported the NAACP on other civil rights matters, fearing the broader anti-Communist assault on civil liberties, would

---

[7] See Clayborne Carson et al., eds., *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1991); Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty? The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Longman, 1990); Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America Since 1941* (New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, 1997); Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, rev. ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993); Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Plume, 1990). Only Weisbrot mentions *Amos 'n' Andy*, and even then he does so only in the context of the Black Power movement and racial politics after the 1960s, well after the NAACP-led protest ended.

question the Association's aggressive tactics and threats of a boycott. Black entertainers, recognizing the importance of the *Amos 'n' Andy* show to their own careers and economic well being, resented the NAACP's encroachment on their profession. Most importantly, an overwhelming majority of black audiences rejected the NAACP's reading of the show. These audiences found the show pleasurable, affirmative and even politically subversive. Not only would these disagreements shape the fate of the *Amos 'n' Andy* show and accompanying protest, they would have profound consequences on the debates over black representation and the broader cultural politics of the civil rights movement.

"The Most Effective Propaganda Medium Yet Devised": Civil Rights and Early Network Television

The Amos 'n' Andy Show was introduced to American audiences at an important moment in both the civil rights struggle and in the history of American mass entertainment. In the summer of 1951, television was just emerging from its early stages and the nature and extent of black participation in the new medium was still evolving. While the technology for television had been in development since the late 1920s, implementation had been delayed, first by the economic paralysis of the Great Depression, then by wartime mobilization's demands for materials and manpower during World War II. Following the war, production and implementation of network television began in earnest as assembly lines transitioned to peace-time production, Americans and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) adopted universal standards and began allocating frequencies and issuing broadcast licenses to local stations. Fueled by a

dramatic increase in the disposable income of American workers, by the beginning of the 1950s, television had become an affordable and widely available utility. Six million television sets were sold in 1950 and nearly sixteen million were sold in 1951. By the beginning of the 1950s, despite an FCC imposed freeze on new station licenses that lasted from 1948-52, 98 stations were broadcasting in 58 market areas and 24 percent of all US households owned televisions. This rapid expansion of the television market undercut the popularity of movies, sporting events, restaurants, nightclubs, jukeboxes and libraries. The United States Supreme Court's decision against the eight major Hollywood studios in *United States v. Paramount* (1948) signaled a further decline of the motion picture industry's control over American popular entertainment. The court found the Hollywood studio systems in violation of anti-trust laws and ordered the studios to divest themselves of their theaters (prior to *US v. Paramount,* the major studios also owned the movie theaters, giving them complete control over what was shown). Faced with this forced reorganization of the motion picture industry, the studios began to shed their creative personnel (writers, directors, actors), many of whom immediately flocked to television. The rapid expansion of television, combined with the equally rapid decline of Hollywood and other entertainment industries, signaled that by the early 1950s television would soon become the dominant form of American entertainment.[8]

At the same time, the civil rights struggle was undergoing a transformation of its own. At the national level, the issue of civil rights, long characterized as a local or African American concern, was entering the national debate. Instrumental in this shift

---

[8] Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 99-116; J. Fred MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network TV* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), 43; Gerald Jones, *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992); James Von Schilling, *The Magic Window, American Television, 1939-1953* (New York: Hawthorne Press, 2003), 125.

was President Harry Truman. Faced with eroding support for his administration, and keenly aware of the electoral power of African Americans, particularly in key northern states, Truman began aggressively courting the African American vote in the post-war years. Early in his administration he had invited Walter White, Secretary of the NAACP, to the White House where White pushed the administration for a more aggressive stance on civil rights and the establishment of a permanent Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC). In December 1946, Truman, using the power of Executive Order, established the multiracial Civil Rights Committee whose report, released a year later as *To Secure These Rights*, recommended a broad expansion of the government's role in civil rights reform. According to historian Steven Lawson, "*To Secure These Rights* loudly proclaimed the opening salvo of the federal government's campaign for civil rights."[9] Later that year, Truman became the first president to address the NAACP when, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he committed the federal government to civil rights, a pledged he followed up on in 1948 by presenting the Committee's recommendations to Congress and including them in the Democratic Party convention platform. Truman's victory in the 1948 election (a victory partially attributed to his strong civil rights stand) allowed the federal government to continue to press for civil rights legislation, often framing their demands in the rhetoric of the emerging Cold War. By 1951, the issue of civil rights had become a prominent fixture in American politics.[10]

---

[9] Steven F. Lawson, "Introduction: Setting the Agenda for the Civil Rights Movement," in *To Secure These Rights: The Report of President Harry S. Truman's Committee on Civil Rights*, ed. Steven F. Lawson (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004), 1.

[10] Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002); Sean J. Savage, *Truman and the Democratic Party* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997).

Blacks were instrumental in this shift, forcing the federal government to follow through on their rhetoric while challenging segregation at both the national and local level.[11] World War II energized the black freedom struggle, injecting it with a greater sense of strength and militancy. Under the banner of "Double V," black leaders, workers and soldiers united behind the war effort, while using the democratic rhetoric of the war and their newly discovered political and economic strength to press for civil rights gains at home. Following the war, amidst a wave of increased racial violence, blacks continued in their efforts. The newly formed Congress of Racial Equality staged a series of non-violent boycotts of schools and lunch counters in the North, and in April 1947 sent a small interracial contingent down South to test desegregation laws on interstate busses. Over one million black veterans returned to the United States, many of them emboldened by their experience overseas and willing to directly challenge Jim Crow. In Birmingham, one hundred veterans marched to the courthouse in 1946 to demand the right to vote. In Mississippi, black veterans assisted the NAACP in their attempts to force the Senate to refuse to seat recently re-elected Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo on the grounds that he used violence to keep blacks from voting. No longer willing to accept gradual change and non-confrontational tactics, blacks in the North and South increasingly demanded a more immediate end to Jim Crow and became more willing to back up these demands with more direct and aggressive protests.[12]

---

[11] The debate over the relative importance of the national and local movements are outlined in Steven Lawson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).

[12] See William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle For Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion,* 13-39; Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 21-28; Jeanne Theoharis

This shift in the civil rights struggle and the entertainment industry generated both hope and concern among African American leaders and their liberal white allies over the impact television would have on the movement. Previous forms of popular entertainment, including minstrelsy, film and radio had all established their popularity by incorporating caricatured portrayals of African American culture and humor. During the decade of the 1940s, through a combination of NAACP pressure and a general softening of American racial attitudes, not only had many of the more egregious portrayals of black Americans been eliminated from popular entertainment, but popular entertainment had become an important instrument of the civil rights struggle. In Hollywood, where portrayals of blacks as comics and menials had dominated at the beginning of the 1940s, black actors were being cast in more realistic and dignified roles.[13] By 1949, NAACP secretary Walter White could comment approvingly on a number of movies, including *Home of the Brave, Intruders in the Dust, Lost Boundaries* and *Pinky,* that presented positive images of black Americans.[14] In the words of one historian of African American stereotypes, "Sambo was being toned down."[15]

Radio experienced an equally dramatic change. During the War, the NAACP and other civil rights organizations utilized the government's wartime need for national unity to create a number of programs that celebrated the contributions of black Americans to

---

and Komozi Woodward, eds. *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South* (New York: Palgrave, 2003).

[13] For a broader discussion of the changes of black portrayals in Hollywood see Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film* (New York: Continuum, 1992), 117-158; Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 209-250

[14] Walter White, "An Honest and Courageous Picture," May 12, 1949 and "Recent Movies on Racial Themes Indicate Maturity," November 10,1949, Roy Wilkins, Box 34.

[15] Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of the American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 201.

the war efforts and to American society. This progress continued after the war. In 1948 *Destination Freedom,* began broadcasting to black listeners in Chicago a social message that was "essentially the struggle for civil rights," and that directly challenged portrayals of blacks in popular entertainment. The creator of the series, former *Chicago Defender* and *Ebony* writer and editor Richard Durham, hoped that the weekly half-hour Sunday feature that focused on the achievements of prominent blacks would expose "the camouflage of crackpots and hypocrites -, false liberals and false leaders -, of radio's Beulah's and Amos and Andy's [sic], and Hollywood's Stepin Fetchit's [sic] and its masturbation with self-flattering dreams of 'passing for white.'" Black audiences could realistically hope that American entertainment in the 1950s would be free from images of shuffling Sambos, lawless hustlers, and lazy, inept workers.[16]

As television began replacing these older entertainment mediums, many hoped that television would continue the progress of the previous decade and not repeat the sins of their predecessors. Early trends were encouraging and suggested that, in the words of one television historian, "on the surface, early television seemed to be almost colorblind." By 1950, there were as many as ten all-black shows being broadcast throughout the country, including one in the South. Black celebrities made frequent appearances on the three major variety shows hosted by Milton Berle, Arthur Godfrey, and Ed Sullivan, while Bob Howard, Willie Bryant, Hadda Brooks, and Amanda Randolph even hosted or starred in their own shows. Veteran actor Canada Lee played the lead role in an otherwise all-white cast in Chevrolet Tele-Theater's drama, *The Final Bell*. Entertainment magazine *Variety* wrote that "Television, with its insatiable demand for talent, is being watched

---

[16] For changes in the radio industry see J. Fred MacDonald, "Radio's Black Heritage: Destination Freedom, 1948-1950," *Phylon* 39, no. 1 (1st Qtr. 1978): 66-73; Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*: *Radio, War, and the Politics of Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

with enthusiasm by Negro performers, who…[think] that by being accepted as artists in their own rights during these early days of video, the colored entertainers can escape the stereotyping which they feel handicapped them" on radio and in movies. Black lifestyle magazine *Ebony* agreed, pointing to the sheer number of blacks on television (as well as the impending *Amos 'n' Andy* and *Beulah* shows) as a "sure sign that television is free of racial barriers." What's more, rarely did black television actors have to "stoop to the Uncle Tom pattern which is usually the Negro thespians lot on radio shows and in Hollywood movies."[17]

With black actors, entertainers and guests appearing on TV in unprecedented numbers, observers expressed hope that television could make a positive contribution to the post-War civil rights struggle. Of course, television would later prove invaluable in the civil rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s, through the broadcasting images of Southern violence and oppression into American homes and generating sympathy and support for the civil rights cause.[18] Even as early as the late 1930s, some already viewed television as an important ally in the struggle. A confident Julius Adams of the *New York Amsterdam* News called television "our new hope" back in 1939. Writing in *Ebony* just prior to the debut of *Amos 'n' Andy,* Ed Sullivan argued that "television was justifying its use of American air and American living rooms" by providing visible proof that "man's heart, rather than his skin, was ever the determining

---

[17] J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: Afro-Americans in Television Since 1948* (Chicago: Nelson Hall Publishers, 1983), 3-4; "Negro Talent Coming Into Own on TV, Without Use of Stereotypes," *Variety,* May 3, 1950; "Television," *Ebony*, June 1950, 22-23; "Hadda Brooks," *Ebony*, April 1951, 101-104.
[18] For the important role that television played in the civil rights movement after *Brown* see Julian Bond, "The Media and the Movement: Looking Back from the Southern Front," in *Media, Culture and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, ed. Brian Ward (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001); Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race During the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and In Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

factor in American life." Sullivan, as host of *Toast of the Town*, was ahead of public trends with regard to race and booked black entertainers and guests to appear on his show on an almost weekly basis and frequently pointed out prominent blacks in his integrated audience. Rather than provoking outrage in the South, the frequent appearances by black guests and performers on *Toast of the Town* only prompted demands for Sullivan to book more black guests. For Sullivan, this acceptance demonstrated that

> television is not only just what the doctor ordered for Negro performers, television subtly has supplied ten league boots to the Negro in his fight to win what the Constitution of this country guarantees as his birthright. It has taken his long crusade to the living rooms of American homes where public opinion is formed and the Negro is winning. He has become a welcome visitor, not only for the white adult, but to the white children, who finally will put Jim Crow to rest.

For Sullivan, and others in the entertainment communities, television represented hope for the civil rights struggle, and a valuable weapon to "crack America's color line."[19]

The members of the NAACP and other black leaders who supported the *Amos 'n Andy* boycott, while recognizing these possibilities, were less confident than Sullivan. Speaking at the Conference for the Negro in the Arts, Canada Lee "declared that the broadcasters' attitude was typified by a request from a TV producer for Negro actors to play the role of cannibals, in which they would 'eat a white dummy.'"[20] If shows like *Amos 'n' Andy* – which even Julius Adams thought "would be suicide to put…on television" - were to populate the airwaves, the stereotypes that the NAACP had worked so hard to eliminate would be revived and would not only hinder, but also reverse, the concrete civil rights gains of the previous decades. Such a development, black leaders argued, would have a distinctly negative impact on the political fortunes of African

---

[19] Ed Sullivan, "Can TV Crack America's Color Line?" *Ebony,* June 1951, 58-65; Von Schilling, *The Magic Window,* 109.
[20] "Negro Stereotypes on Air, Lack of Jobs Scored by Canada Lee," *Variety,* July 13, 1949.

Americans and racial attitudes of all Americans, particularly children. Much of the concern centered on the visual nature of the medium. As a visual medium, television had the potential to make the stereotypes associated with the radio show more than "a story with words over a loudspeaker," but rather "a picture, a living, talking, moving picture of Negroes."[21] "In an important way, [television] is the most effective propaganda medium yet devised," wrote Earl Brown of *New York Amsterdam News,* connecting the current crisis in television to the previous decade of cultural struggle. "It reaches not thousands but millions of people and most significant it not only carries the voices of the actors into people's parlors but also their faces."[22] In May 1951, the Board of Directors of the NAACP passed a resolution acknowledging that the "rapid expansion of the new medium of television" required "vigilance" on the part of the NAACP and "other believers in human equality" to avoid the proliferation of the misrepresentations that had plagued blacks in previous entertainment mediums. "Already there is abundant evidence that the sponsors and producers of radio shows [are transferring old radio stereotypes to the new medium of television]," the Board maintained. "Such misrepresentations on television may be even more damaging than similar distortions in radio, film and stage. Accordingly, it is necessary to act before this pattern has been completely set in this new medium." Failure to act decisively could have profound and immediate effects. As one NAACP supporter wrote, "Twenty years of progressive work can be destroyed in one day…To permit this matter to go unnoticed is a blow at Democracy."[23]

---

[21] CL Moat to CBS, September 4, 1951, NAACP II A 498, "Publicity Protests – 'Amos 'n' Andy' Branch Action, 1950-54."
[22] Earl Brown, "Truth Vs. Entertainment," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 4, 1951.
[23] Resolution adopted by the NAACP Board of Directors, May 14, 1951 quoted in Edna Freeman to Jean Bach, December 4, 1952, NAACP 15/B/14; Nathan Klein to NAACP, March 1, 1949, NAACP 15/B/14.

By the summer of 1951, NAACP concern over television had reached a critical stage. The Hollywood campaigns, along with resolutions passed at the previous four conventions, had demonstrated the willingness of the NAACP's leadership to act on matters of black representation. Each of those resolutions had condemned stereotyped images of African Americans and urged the entertainment industry to take an active role in promoting more realistic portrayals. In June 1951, what actions, if any, the convention would recommend and how these actions would fit into the Association's larger civil rights program would depend on how NAACP leaders, delegates, members and allies read and reacted to *Amos 'n' Andy.*

Amos 'n' Andy as "vicious propaganda": visual representation and black postwar success

"Out of the library of American folklore, those treasured stories of Huck Finn, Paul Bunyan and Rip Van Winkle…come the warm and loveable tales of Amos and Andy" intoned the CBS announcer at 8:30 PM on June 28th 1951. The premiere episode, titled "Kingfish Gets Drafted," featured the farcical brand of humor that characterized the latter years of the radio show and would largely define the television version. The audience is greeted by Amos, a voice that is both familiar and new, who after reintroducing himself lays out the premise of the episode. Kingfish, who is clearly well past middle age, receives a military draft notice intended for a "young, hard-working, ambitious" Harlem resident by the same name. The episode continues as Kingfish tries to figure out ways to get out of service. He tries to notify the Selective Service Office of its mistake but is ordered to report for his physical. Not surprisingly, Kingfish fails his physical in a series

of gags that highlight the absurdity of an old man serving in the military. Relieved, Kingfish returns home and is greeted by a surprise party where, where he realizes that his friends and family are proud of him (a sentiment that would rarely be directed at the Kingfish) and have all given him gifts. Flattered by all of the attention (and unwilling to return the gifts) Kingfish then pretends to enlist by packing and spending the next several weeks living in the basement of the lodge house of the Mystic Knights of the Sea. His ruse is revealed when he takes a "furlough" to visit his wife Sapphire and during dinner a reporter calls her asking for a statement regarding her husband's deployment to Europe. Realizing she has been duped, Sapphire calls Kingfish into the bedroom where she and her mother beat on him with a lamp. The episode ends with the Kingfish lying in a hospital bed, bruised but not defeated, and scheming for a way to collect money from the Veteran's Administration.[24]

Among the millions of Americans who tuned in for the historic first episode were those NAACP members who had gathered in Atlanta that week to attend the Association's annual convention. Most of the delegates had no doubt arrived in Atlanta fully aware of the show's impending premiere, as the torrent of press coverage that had been growing in intensity for the past year was difficult to avoid. Many had also likely read some of the advance reviews in the black press, the overwhelming majority of which were negative. And a few, including the delegation from New York, had already lodged official complaints against the show. Yet for the delegation as a whole, whose stance on the show up to that point was based entirely on press accounts, second hand information

[24] *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*, "Kingfish Gets Drafted," originally aired June 28, 1951. Though it was the first to air publicly, "Kingfish Gets Drafted" was not the pilot episode. "The Rare Coin" was the pilot episode and the episode most likely shown during early screenings. This perhaps partially explains Amos's familiar greeting, "Hello again, folks, this is Amos."

and conjecture based on the radio program, the mid-convention premiere allowed the delegates to watch the program as a group and formulate the Association's interpretation and response accordingly. What they saw was not encouraging and for many, confirmed their worst fears. In a unanimous resolution consistent with the group's previous cultural announcements (and with the interpretation of the program offered in the previous section), the convention decreed that the *Amos 'n' Andy* show[25], by portraying blacks in "a stereotyped and derogatory manner," strengthened "the conclusion among un-informed or prejudiced people that Negroes…are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest." Connecting these images to the larger struggle for civil rights, the resolution argued that the show "seriously hamper[ed] and retard[ed] the development of the work of [the NAACP] and other interested groups and associations to promote intelligent appraisal of all human beings as individuals." The *Amos 'n' Andy* fight was on.[26]

The 1951 Resolution marked the national leadership's first salvo in a public relations campaign against *Amos 'n' Andy* that would exceed any of the Association's previous efforts.[27] Of course, *Amos 'n' Andy* had been on the *radio* for more than two

---

[25] The resolution actually condemned the *Amos 'n' Andy* radio program as well as the television and radio version of *Beulah*. The lion's share of Association's attention, however, would be focused on the *Amos 'n' Andy* television show.

[26] Resolution passed at the 42nd Annual Convention, Atlanta, GA, June 1951, NAACP 15/B/9.

[27] Given the force with which the 1951 Convention condemned *Amos 'n' Andy*, it is somewhat puzzling that this was the first action the NAACP would take in response to the show. Plans to transfer the show to television format had been in the works and had been covered by the press (both black and white) for several years. The coverage only intensified in the weeks and days leading up to the premiere, as black weeklies covered every aspect of preproduction, with features detailing the casting search and individual biographies of each of the main actors. As early as the previous December, NAACP members and local leaders had urged the Association to take action. In a letter to Walter White, C.L. Dellums, president of the Alameda County (CA) branch argued that "no stone should be left unturned to keep black-faced comedians, minstrels, bad english and dialect" off of television. "I think we ought to make a national fight on the Amos and Andy [sic] show and try to drive it off television," Dellums urged. Others lobbied for the NAACP to take action on both the television and radio show. Yet with the exception of hints of a meeting with representatives of the television industry, no record exists of the Association's national leadership taking any action against the show prior to the convention. Perhaps White and company held out hope that the final product would not be as bad as they feared. Yet even Association rank-and-file wondered why the NAACP had played no role in assisting with or approving the script, considering the Association was

decades with little objection from the NAACP, a fact that the president of the Albuquerque branch pointed to when he complained in a letter to Roy Wilkins, "I don't like Amos and Andy…on radio or television, but I'm afraid I can't argue very effectively against the TV show when I'm posed with the question of why single out the TV show[.]"[28] Wilkins's response at least partially sheds some light on the NAACP's apparent shift in position. For one, although some leaders in the black community – most notably Bishop W.A. Walls and Robert Vann, owner of the *Pittsburgh Courier* – objected to the radio version,[29] many black leaders found the show to contain "some very human elements." Wilkins, as editor of the *Kansas City Call* (his position prior to moving to NAACP national leadership) argued in 1930 that the show was "clean fun from

---

"considered the organization most necessary to have in one's corner." See CL Dellums to W. White, December 6, 1950; Frederick Kornberg to NAACP, February 28, 1951; Eleanor MacMannis to W. White, May 7, 1951, NAACP II A 498, "Publicity Protests – 'Amos 'n' Andy,' Branch Action, 1950-54"; Anna Hedgeman to W. White, November 8, 1951, NAACP II A 498, "Publicity Protests – Amos 'n' Andy, General, 1951 Sept-Dec."

[28] Hobart Lagrone to R. Wilkins, July 21, 1951, NAACP II A 498, "Publicity Protests – Amos 'n' Andy, Branch Action, 1950-54."

[29] A complete discussion of the *Amos 'n' Andy* radio show and the 1931 *Pittsburgh Courier* campaign against the program is outside the scope of this chapter. For our purposes here it is useful to note one important distinction: the main focus of the *Courier* protests was directed at the *white* creators behind the show and their claims to "authenticity," while the NAACP's protest focused on the stereotypes themselves, as performed by *black* actors. Thus while *Courier* protested mightily about whites "reaping the financial gain from [negative] characterizations," the newspaper said little about black actors like Stepin Fetchit employing these same characterizations. On the other hand, while the NAACP as an organization had objected to blacks performing in stereotypical roles for the previous decade, they voiced few objections to whites performing in blackface, even going so far as to praise Al Jolson. If we understand these two debates as being about two distinct, though often related issues (black comic stereotypes vs. white appropriation of black cultural forms), the NAACP's change in position is not that much of a change at all. For more information on the development of the NAACP's policy against stereotypes and blackface, see Chapter One. For more information on the *Courier*-led protest against the radio show see Andrew Buni, *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier*: *Politics and Black Journalism* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 227-30; Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy*; Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom*. For specific information on Gosden and Correll's claims to authenticity see A.M. Lawrence, "Find New Worlds," *Radio Digest,* n.d., Gosden-Correll Collection, "Scrapbook (1926-30) Loose Clippings," Cinema-Television Library and Archive of Performing Arts, Doheny Library, University of Southern California; Maris Anne Lane, "Five Years of Harlem," *Radio Mirror*, December 1933, Gosden-Correll Collection, "Amos 'n' Andy 1930-35, Folder 4 (1933-35), 1933 subfolder"; Julian Sibley to the editor, *Chicago Tribune*, February 5, 1929, Gosden-Correll Collection, "Chicago Tribune 1929-1930 Scrapbook"; Elizabeth Scott Hunt, "As Women See Radio," *Milwaukee Journal,* July 3, 1926, Gosden-Correll Collection, "Sam and Henry (1926-27)."

beginning to end," contained "no offensive words or titles," and had "all the pathos, humor, vanity, glory, problems and solutions that best ordinary mortals."[30] Second, in the two decades following the debut of the *Amos 'n' Andy* show on radio, opposition to negative comic stereotypes had moved to a central position in the broader struggle for civil rights. Thus the NAACP's response to the television show should be viewed in the context of the previous decade of cultural activism (a period in which blacks and whites had "'grown up' considerably") and the emerging civil rights movement. Finally, the switch to a visual format played on the Association's worst fears about the impact of television on the movement. Any objectionable content on television would be "infinitely worse than the radio version." Stereotyped characters would come to life. No longer "merely voices," they would "say to millions of white Americans who know nothing about Negroes, and to millions of white children who are learning about life, that this is the way Negroes are."[31] For Wilkins and the NAACP's leadership, having white Americans *see* Amos and Andy – along with the Kingfish, Sapphire and Lawyer Calhoun – as middle-class black America's first television ambassadors would set the movement back considerably.

This concern over the visual impact of the *Amos 'n' Andy* show on television is evident in the initial responses drafted by the NAACP leaders and their allies and sent to television stations, local newspapers and the show's sponsor, Blatz Brewing Company. Walter White, a veteran of the Association's fight with Hollywood, argued that the images on television were "a *picture*, a living, talking, moving *picture* of Negroes, not merely a story in words over a radio loudspeaker." This "picturization" perpetuated a

---

[30] Wilkins quoted in Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy*, 171.
[31] R. Wilkins to H. LaGrone, July 25, 1951, NAACP II A 498, "Publicity Protests – Amos 'n' Andy, Branch Action, 1950-54."

"harmful stereotype" which would cause many white views to "accept the *Amos 'n' Andy* picture as the true one" and "think the entire race is the same." The *Chicago Defender*, a staunch supporter of the radio show, found the television show a step backward. Unlike the radio version, in which any stereotypes had little lasting impact, the "video version…threaten[ed] with the idea that here is a story true to certain Americans."[32]

Of particular concern was that the images being shown were not those of menials, country bumpkins, or working class clowns (the previously dominant comic stereotypes), but were of the black middle class itself. This represented a significant departure from the radio version, which reflected the realities of Depression-era Harlem by portraying Amos and Andy as a pair of ragged and naïve southern migrants struggling to navigate the perils of the modern world in the urban North. Though such a portrayal was effective in the early 1930s, such a working class migrant world would have seemed outdated in the early 1950s. American audiences enjoyed a level of affluence unimaginable during the 1930s, as wartime prosperity boosted averaged wages and per capita income nearly doubled, from $1,231 to $2,390. Forced to save during the war, Americans had built up nearly $30 billion in savings that they used after the war ended to purchase suburban homes, automobiles and a variety of consumer goods and household products. Though black families would largely be restricted from moving into the federally subsidized suburbs that blurred class lines and allowed working class families to lead middle-class lifestyles, blacks also witnessed a dramatic increase in their economic fortunes that blurred earlier class boundaries: employment rates rose, income for black families tripled, college attendance doubled and black Americans spent an estimated $15 billion a year on

---

[32] W. White to Blatz Brewing Company, telegram, July 6, 1951, NAACP 15/B/9; W. White, "Why the *Amos 'n' Andy* TV Show should be taken off the air," NAACP 15/B/19; "Amos 'N Andy Television Show Arrives in 'Horse and Buggy,'" *Chicago Defender*, June 16, 1951.

consumers purchases. This post-war success meant that black and white would no longer closely identify with the pair's economic and social struggles.[33]

The *Amos 'n' Andy* show is thus given a face lift to present the appearance of post-War middle-class success.[34] Harlem (which the viewer is led to believe looks like Central Park West) is now clean and the streets are thriving with economic activity. With the exception of Lightening, "the molasses-tempered janitor" who Variety called "a throwback to the Stepin Fetchit era," most of the characters appear to be middle class.[35] Like the Kingfish, the characters almost always appear neatly and properly dressed: Andy and Lawyer Calhoun in suit, tie and bowler, Amos in a new, professional looking uniform, and Sapphire and Mama in dresses and hats. The main characters, while still living in Harlem apartments (rather than in the suburban homes available to white families that would later dominate the television landscape), nonetheless live in apartments that are clean, spacious and stocked with consumer goods. Like characters on other television shows, Kingfish and the rest of the cast are transformed into consumers, and the pursuit of middle-class consumer goods becomes a primary focus of the show.[36] When a young couple (the Fosters) moves into the apartment across the hall from Kingfish and Sapphire, Kingfish comments approvingly on their nice furniture, new appliances and television as they unload them from the car. In another episode, the Stevens purchase a car at Sapphire's insistence because she is tired of walking and feels

---

[33] William L. O'Neill, *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 1; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xviii, 147-48; MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 3,7; "Selling The Negro Market," *Tide,* July 20, 1951, 37-44, NAACP 15/B/10.
[34] See Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy*, 212.
[35] Quoted in Cripps, "Amos 'n' Andy and the Debate Over Racial Integration," 41.
[36] George Lipstiz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 47; Darrell Hammamoto, *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 43.

they are entitled to the convenience that a car provides. No longer a show about the struggles of the (black) working class to cope with urban life, *Amos 'n' Andy* became a show about the struggles of the emerging black middle class to adapt to the consumer culture of the post-War. [37]

For the NAACP (an organization that represented the same middle class that the characters purported to belong to), this shift was a cause for concern, as the characters' failings would necessarily reflect the black middle class's own precarious position in American society. The Association's leaders were especially concerned about Kingfish, who, over the previous decade, had become the central character in the *Amos 'n' Andy* story. Unlike the hardworking family man Amos, who was forced to the periphery in most of the episodes, the Kingfish – despite appearances to the contrary – rejects most of the middle-class values that viewers (black and white) held dear. Many episodes show him sleeping through important engagements, taking long afternoon naps, and sleeping in, arguing that "8 AM is just a half-way mark to a good night's sleep." He enjoys leisure activities without performing the necessary work to justify this activity. His laziness confirmed white middle class fears of leisure culture being a threat to public order and reinforced the persistent stereotype of African American laziness.[38]

In addition, it becomes immediately clear that Kingfish's middle-class appearance and lifestyle is attained illegitimately. He is never shown working a traditional job, and brags that "when unemployment insurance first come[s] in," he "was the first one in line

---

[37] *The Amos 'n' Andy Show,* "The New Neighbors" and "The Eyeglass."
[38] Karal Ann Marling has suggested that leisure activities had become a "classless" phenomenon in postwar American society that "had expanded to include almost everyone." This growth evoked fears that the working class would use leisure culture as a means to avoid work and become a threat to public order. Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Cultures of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 51-52.

in the whole country, and that includes Hawaii."[39] Though Sapphire is constantly setting him up with employment opportunities, he often turns these legitimate opportunities into get-rich-schemes. After working only one day at Baker (Columbia) University, Kingfish tricks Andy into doing his work for him as a way to pay his tuition for a new Baker University home study course that Kingfish has started. In another episode, Kingfish is hired as a brush salesman but tricks Andy into selling the brushes for him while the Kingfish sleeps in bed. Though it is typically Andy who falls prey to Kingfish's financial manipulations, Kingfish is in fact a parasite to the entire Harlem community. He ignores bills from black owned business, withholds rent from his black landlord, steals from his wife and friends, and cons black residents out of their own hard earned money. In an episode titled "The Engagement Ring," Kingfish tricks a woman who mistakenly comes to the Lodge looking for a matrimonial agency into giving him her money and then tries to get Andy to marry her!

In the world of *Amos 'n' Andy,* these shortcomings often transition effortlessly from the Kingfish to the larger black community, particularly black professionals. Kingfish is a master at assuming more respectable/professional identities and at various points in the show he pretends to be an insurance salesman, matrimonial agent, language instructor, Army officer and a doctor, often in an attempt to con Andy or another member of the Harlem community out of their money. In each of these identities the Kingfish's performance is ludicrously laughable, causing many to view it as an insult to those blacks who did hold these professional positions. Writing in support of the *Amos 'n' Andy* boycott, twenty five black soldiers from the Ninth Infantry Regiment expressed their disgust with the premiere episode which had the cowardly Kingfish pretending to be a

[39] *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*, "Kingfish Goes to Work."

war hero at a time when black soldiers were serving heroically (for the first time in integrated units) in Korea. "This typical thing brought our morale down," the letter read. "This type of occurrence should be stopped immediately… This little letter is just to let you know how we guys fighting in Korea feel about such derogatory trash." Another Association member worried that the Kingfish's many get rich quick schemes, as well as Andy's willingness to fall for them "firmly planted [the idea] that Negroes are poor financial risks and generally unable to establish good credit ratings for business purposes" and white owned business could use the show as "proof of the soundness of the present attitude of banks and other lending institutions who do not encourage Negro patronage." As both these letters suggest, many blacks perceived the show's use of black professionals as a comedic device as an insult to their own professional and racial pride.[40]

This perceived insult was especially true for the character of Algonquin J. "Lawyer" Calhoun. As Kingfish's legal council, Calhoun is intimately involved in many of Kingfish's schemes and his performance as an attorney was often portrayed as stupid, ineffective, even criminal. He offers ludicrous legal advice, commits perjury and is frequently seen running from the authorities. When Kingfish seeks Calhoun's help in removing a loud boarder from his apartment, Calhoun responds by moving in to the man's room himself, along with Andy and a circus seal. In another episode, Calhoun robs Andy's girlfriend of her fur coat (which was originally Sapphire's before Andy purchased it from the Kingfish) as the couple are sitting in the park.[41]

It is no surprise then that some of the most pointed criticism of the show was directed at Lawyer Calhoun. Critics found him "unprofessional," "not too bright and

---

[40] Miss Black to W. White, December 5, 1951, NAACP II A 498; Cpl. H. Merriwether to NAACP, August 19, 1951, NAACP 15/B/10.
[41] *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*, "The Boarder."

running out on his clients," "moronic and amoral," and, because he frequently went in and out of offices without removing his hat, "impolite."[42] Walter White complained about Calhoun "talking [an] absurd and improbable dialect as an illiterate Mississippi sharecropper."[43] In his analysis of the show for *Printer's Ink,* Professor Arnold Rose (who was also a collaborator on Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma)* singled out the portrayal of Lawyer Calhoun as a comic stereotype as revealing "the uniform conception of the Negro as a fool."[44] An editorial in the *Youngstown Reviewer* also singled out Lawyer Calhoun, demanding that "the caricatures of Negro lawyers cease at once," before concluding:

> Lawyer Calhoun is a clown and will serve television audiences as a prototype of Negro lawyers. Negro members of the legal profession will suffer from the antics of the buffon [sic] Lawyer Calhoun. Despite our economic weakness Negro lawyers should not delay in using all possible legal means to get Lawyer Calhoun off the program.[45]

Like the Kingfish's portrayals of black soldiers in battle, Calhoun's portrayal of black lawyers undermined the black legal profession at a time when they were entrenched in a battle of their own. With the direct legal assault on segregation in full-swing, *Amos 'n' Andy*'s portrayal of black attorneys threatened to impact negatively the esteem and reputation that the NAACP legal team had been accumulating since the challenge to the white primary (*Smith v. Alwright*) in the early 1940s. For the NAACP then, Lawyer

---

[42] Barbee Durham to B.E. Slaughter [President of Columbus, OH NAACP], July 7, 1951; Emily Tinsley to Blatz Beer, July 23, 1951; John Parker [President of Philadelphia Youth Council] to stations WCAU and ACAU-TC, August 3, 1951; Miss Black to W. White, December 5, 1951, NAACP II A 498.
[43] Walter White "Syndicated Column," July 12, 1951, in Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 34, "White, Walter, Syndicated Column 1949."
[44] Arnold Rose, "TV Bumps Into the Negro Problem," *Printer's Ink*, July 20, 1951, 78, NAACP 15/B/10.
[45] Maynard Dickerson, "Amos 'n' Andy," *Reviewer* (Youngstown), [n.d.], NAACP II A 499, "Press Releases, 1951-54."

Calhoun had direct and immediate consequences to the overall thrust of its civil rights strategy.[46]

Understanding the NAACP's concern over the potential impact that the images put forth by *Amos 'n' Andy* could have on civil rights is key to understanding the Associations response, which would take on the tactics and rhetoric of a full-fledged civil rights protest. Initially, the NAACP pursued a strategy of behind-the-scenes lobbying similar to the one they employed with some success against Hollywood during the previous decade. Less than two weeks after the premiere, White met with Sig Mickelson, vice president of CBS, to discuss the Association's complaints. In the meeting the Secretary highlighted the distinction between *The Goldbergs* and *I Remember Mama,* two shows that featured ethnic characters that were "warm, friendly and admirable," and *Amos 'n' Andy*, where "not one of the characters…was pictured as being anything other than lazy, amoral, dishonest and stupid." In White's mind, his points were well taken and the meeting left open the definite possibility for progress. At the end of the meeting, the two men arranged for a private screening of two or three episodes of the show among prominent liberals and NAACP members the following week in Mickelson's office. In his invitation to the meeting, White praised Mickelson for his cooperation and CBS as being "the most liberal of the radio and television networks in treatment of the Negro." He also noted that given the vast sums of money CBS had already invested in the show,

[46] For the importance of *Smith v. Alwright* in building experience and esteem for young black attorneys see Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 251.

the meeting would focus on recommendations for the show's improvement rather than on lobbying for outright cancellation.[47]

These public displays of cooperation and understanding quickly gave way in private to a more defiant and combative attitude among the Association's leadership. Following the meeting, NAACP leaders and their allies wrestled with a question that had been brewing beneath the surface for decades – "How does one make African American comedy compatible with a civil rights agenda?" Though some of the leaders of white liberal organizations were inclined to work towards a solution to improve the program and keep it on the air, the NAACP leaders increasingly insisted that such an acceptable solution did not exist. "I do not see how the AMOS 'N' ANDY program cam be 'improved,'" Roy Wilkins said. "[It] is a caricature of the whole Negro race and there does not seem to be any way in which that can be corrected except to withdraw the whole program, in its present form from the air." Henry Lee Moon agreed: "The root of the trouble…lies in the established 'Amos 'n' Andy' pattern which in my mind can no more be cleaned up and made acceptable than, say, the word 'darky.'" "Give them a script based on the Sermon on the Mount," wrote another NAACP supporter, "yet what would be projected on the television screen, because of the stereotypes used, would be some ape-like males and other characters who…convey only a caricature of the race."[48]

---

[47] Memorandum to the Files: From the Secretary, July 11, 1951; Walter White, memorandum, July 11, 1951, NAACP II A 499, "Conference with Sig Mickelson." For further information on the ethnic dimensions of *The Goldbergs* and *I Remember Mama* see George Lipsitz, *Time Passages,* 39-96. Those invited to the meeting include Algernon Black, Ralph Bunche, Norman Cousins, Grace Fenderson, Lewis Gannett, William Hastie, Alfred Baker Lewis, Thurgood Marshall, Henry Lee Moon, C.B. Powell, James Powers, Arthur Springarn, Mabel Staupers, Channing Tobias, Lindsay White, Roy Wilkins, Samuel Williams, and Louis Wright.

[48] R. Wilkins to W. White, memorandum, August 13, 1951; Henry Lee Moon to W. White, memorandum, August 1, 1951, NAACP 15/B/10; Roy Norr to W. White, July 27, 1951, NAACP II A 498, "Publicity Protests, 'Amos 'n' Andy' General, 1943, 1950-51 Aug."

Even as national leaders worked with CBS behind the scenes, the NAACP actively encouraged its local branches to take up a second, more militant front, against the show. Gloster Current, the NAACP's Director of Branches, instructed local leaders to organize city-wide protests against the show, and to contact local churches, labor unions and civic organizations and urge them to adopt their own resolutions and forward these on to local stations, CBS headquarters in New York, Blatz Brewing Company (and its parent, Schenley Industries) and the National NAACP. Consistent with the 1951 Resolution, which allowed for a "boycott of the goods, products or services of the sponsors and promoters, including the radio and television stations and networks," Current also urged local branches to boycott Blatz and Schenley products and contact the owners of taverns using these products and encourage them to do the same.[49] That the national NAACP, which had remained "cautious, if not ambivalent" to previous boycott efforts (such as the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns), was now urging its members to initiate a nationwide boycott against the *Amos 'n' Andy* show, its network, sponsors and distributors, signals the significance the Association attached to comedy during the early civil rights era.[50]

The NAACP's adoption of these tactics shows the Association's awareness of the exploding post-War economic clout of black Americans, and an understanding of how

---

[49] C.L. Dellums had actually suggested a national boycott from the very beginning, although more narrow in scope than the one eventually adopted by the Association. CL Dellums to W. White; Resolution Passed at the 42 Annual Convention, Atlanta, GA, June 1951; Gloster Current to branch leaders, July 16, 1951, NAACP II A 498, "Publicity Protests – 'Amos 'n' Andy, Branch Action, 1950-54."

[50] For information on the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaigns see Beth Tompkins Bates, "A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-41," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (April 1997): 347-50; August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, "The Origins of Non-Violent Direct Action in Afro-American Protest: A Note on Historical Discontinuities," in *Along the Color Line: Explorations in the Black Experience,* eds. Meier and Rudwick (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 315-53. For a larger overview of black consumer activism prior to Montgomery see Robert E. Weems, Jr. *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 56-60.

this economic clout could be used in the cause of racial advancement. Following World War II, rapid economic expansion turned the United States into a society where mass consumption promised both a better life, both materially and in terms of abstract qualities such as freedom, equality and democracy, what historian Lizabeth Cohen calls a "Consumer's Republic."[51] Advertising was critical to spreading mass consumption and African American consumers, numbering 15 million with annual expenditures estimated at $15 billion, represented a potential goldmine for advertisers and corporations. Trade publications were filled with articles proclaiming the untapped potential of the black market ("The Forgotten 15,000,000"; "The Negro Market: $15,000,000,000 to Spend") and suggesting specific ways to target that market. The editor of *Variety* grandly declared that blacks were "the most important, financially potent, and sales-and-advertising serenaded 'minority' in the land." The advertising publication *Tide* dedicated its July 1951 cover story to advertising to black Americans, a market that the magazine deemed "rich, ripe and ready." *Tide* cautioned white-owned companies against rushing into this market, however, without "maintain[ing] careful diplomatic relations." Failure by white-owned business to accept the black market as "proud and sensitive American citizen[s]," regardless of the amount of advertisements placed in black newspapers or black salesmen hired, risked alienating that market. "Through no fault of its own," the article concluded, "Blatz had learned, as the *Pittsburgh Courier's* eminent Negro journalist, George Schuler, wrote: 'There is no such thing as a Negro problem – there is only a Caucasian problem.'"[52]

---

[51] Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 7.
[52] Weems, *Desegregating the Dollar*, 31-55; Kathy M. Newman, "The Forgotten Fifteen Million: Black Radio, Radicalism, and the Construction of the 'Negro Market,'" in *Communities of the Air: Radio*

The NAACP hoped to use this buying power in the *Amos 'n' Andy* against those corporations who hoped to court black consumers. Blatz Beer's sponsorship of the show was the largest promotion campaign "ever undertaken in the brewing industry," and reportedly cost the company several million dollars annually. A good deal of the company's promotional efforts focused on the black community, in the form of advertisements in black newspapers and magazines and promotional campaigns in local retailers and bars patronized by black consumers. It' is clear that NAACP leaders were well aware of the importance that black consumers played in Blatz's success, and hoped to use the boycotts as a form of counter-marketing. In a memo to Walter White, Roy Wilkins wrote that "they [Schenley] are vulnerable on a boycott on Blatz because of the very tight fight among a dozen beers for the national leadership… even a fair effort on the part of the colored people could drop them down in the sales picture." National leaders enthusiastically circulated the *Tide* article amongst themselves, confident that it justified both the Association's outrage and its threatened boycott. In his syndicated columns, White chided Blatz Beer and Schenley products for sponsoring a product that alienated the consumer audience it was trying to reach and for its belief that the employment gained by the *Amos 'n' Andy* actors and Schenley salesmen was "considered adequate compensation for perpetuation of harmful stereotypes." White compared the awakening of advertisers to the Negro market to Hollywood's awakening to the problems blacks faced in the movie industry. To those sponsors, like Blatz, whose unenlightened approach perpetuated the "inaccurate and resented traditions stemming from the minstrel shows of a century ago," rather than "pioneering in creation of such new concepts,"

Century, Radio Culture, ed. Susan Merrill Squire (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 109-133; MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV*, 3,7; "Selling The Negro Market," *Tide,* July 20, 1951, 37-44, NAACP 15/B/10.

White warned that "an incalculable amount of good will and patronage seems certain to be the price which the sponsors may be forced to pay for their lack of intelligence."[53]

The boycott itself came right in the middle of the NAACP's more widely recognized legal assault on segregation. Association lawyers had already scored impressive victories in the two graduate school cases (*McLaurin v. Oklahoma, Sweatt v. Painter*) the previous year, and the five cases that would later comprise the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision were already winding their way up to the Supreme Court. Given the potential costs of the boycott in terms of money, time, manpower, and political capital, the Association could have responded to *Amos 'n' Andy* the way it had previously responded to Hollywood. Such an action would have conserved precious resources for the full-frontal assault on Jim Crow and avoided picking a fight with key constituencies and allies. Instead, the NAACP chose a much broader course that recognized that the Association's protests against *Amos 'n' Andy*, rather than being a distracting sideshow to the *Brown* cases, was in fact a key component in the fight against segregation. Significantly, the families who brought the original challenge to segregation in South Carolina (*Briggs v. Elliot)* were among those that passed the unanimous resolution at the 1951 conference. Their attorney, Thurgood Marshall, who would later argue the *Brown* case before the Supreme Court, was among the invited guests to the conference with Sig Mickelson. Although Marshall declined the invitation in order to prepare the Association's appeal to the Supreme Court, he nonetheless took the time to write a detailed critique of the *Amos 'n' Andy* show and offer possible improvements.

---

[53] W. Richard Bruner, "Amos 'n' Andy Hassle Won't Stop TV Show," *Printer's Ink,* Aug 24, 1951, 30; R. Wilkins to W. White, July 19, 1951, NAACP II A 498, "Publicity Protests – 'Amos 'n' Andy' General, 1943, 1950-51 Aug"; Walter White, "Syndicated Column," July 12, 1951 and Aug 2, 1951, Roy Wilkins Papers.

The connections between *Amos 'n' Andy* and the Association's assault on legal segregation were more than coincidental; for the NAACP's leaders, the efforts to remove stereotypes was a prerequisite to realizing the promise of *Brown*. For the NAACP, stereotypical black humor was "detrimental to the over all attempt to dissuade people from thinking of the Negro in stereotype terms" and that "to the minstrel stage can be traced the difficulty with which white American finds in taking the Negro seriously." Not only could past gains made by blacks be "thrown for a loss" if the "vicious propaganda" of *Amos 'n' Andy* continued "to flood the homes of the nation," but the ultimate future promise of racial equality that the legal challenge to *Plessy* embodied would be unattainable if blacks continued to be portrayed as inferior on television and in American culture. "So long as we tolerate such shows as Amos 'n' Andy, just so long will we be face with segregation, discrimination and race prejudice," read a petition signed by prominent Chicago blacks. In her editorial to the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*, Cleveland NAACP president Pearl Mitchell noted that "there has…been an awakening in the North and even more in the courageous South" that "calls for freedom now, for acceptance in every field, for no patronizing or special consideration, but acceptance because of merit." "To attain this goal," Mitchell argued, "the people feel it is most important to have a true picture of the colored people." Earl Brown of the *Amsterdam News* put it more bluntly: "How in the world are we going to win civil rights or equality as long as we are portrayed to those who must grant them to us as clowns or fools?" If the Association were to hope to truly defeat *Plessy* and Jim Crow, it would first have to defeat Amos and Andy.[54]

---

[54] Madison Jones to Dilworth Lupton, January 30, 1950, NAACP 15/B/13; Errold Collymore to Edward Lashin, January 14, 1950, NAACP 15/B/13; "Amos 'n Andy Bow (Even Lower) on Video So Your Scribe

The NAACP's ability to frame *Amos 'n' Andy* as a civil rights effort compelled other organizations to join the protest. Contrary to recent claims that only "a few liberal, labor and leftists groups issued statements supporting the NAACP's *Amos 'n' Andy* fight," over 100 civil rights, labor, cultural, professional and religious groups expressed support for the campaign, passing resolutions condemning *Amos 'n' Andy,* initiating letter writing campaigns, educating their membership and even direct protest (as CORE had done when it picketed stores and stations shortly after joining the boycott in early 1952).[55] The most active and enthusiastic support in the campaign came from organized labor, particularly the UAW-CIO. William Oliver, a black foundryman from Ford's Highland Park factory and co-director of the Fair Practices and Anti-Discrimination Department of the UAW-CIO, urged members of local unions to protest the show and consistently kept the boycott as a priority. It was Oliver who, when sensing that the campaign was losing steam, wrote the NAACP urging it to organize a national conference on *Amos 'n' Andy* in either Chicago or Milwaukee (home to Blatz Brewing Company). "I feel that unless we institute some action in this direction, we face the possibility of being defeated on the important issue of Negroes in the new field of

---

Spends a Dull Half Hour," *Chicago Defender,* July 7, 1951; "Why Take Amos 'n' Andy Show Off Television," NAACP 15/B/10; "Launch Drive to Ban 'Amos 'n' Andy' Television Show," *Chicago Defender,* August 25, 1951; L. Pearl Mitchell to Editors of Cleveland Plain Dealer, July 12 1951, NAACP 15/B/9; Earl Brown, "Truth Vs. Entertainment," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 4, 1951.

[55] Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy*, 237; "Launch Drive to Ban 'Amos 'n' Andy' Television Show," *Chicago Defender,* August 25, 1951. See generally, NAACP II A 498, "Publicity Protests – Amos 'n' Andy." Participating organizations include: Students for Democratic Action (SDA), The New York Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions (NYCASP), the American Federation of Labor (AFL), United Auto Workers – Congress of Industrial Organizations (UAW-CIO), Communist Party USA (CPUSA), Transportation Workers Union of America, American Civil Liberties Union, American Jewish Committee, Michigan Federation of Teachers, Chicago Urban League, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, the National Beauty Culturist League, Hotel & Restaurant Employees and Bartenders International Union, the United Church Women, the Mount Olivet Baptist Church and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).

television," Oliver wrote. "We should revitalize this campaign and attempt to interpret more forcibly the basic reasons for our objections to the AMOS 'N' ANDY TV show."[56]

In expressing their solidarity with the NAACP, these organizations also recognized the importance of eliminating stereotypes to the civil rights struggle. Negative comic stereotypes, the NAACP allies argued, shaped white perceptions of black America as well as perceptions of American democracy in the larger Cold War world. *Amos 'n' Andy* "provide[d] fodder for the Soviet propaganda mill" that made it harder to "convince the people of India, China and the eastern world that the US practices the democratic principles which it preaches." In a letter expressing the support of the SDA, Albert Ettinger, the SDA's Executive Secretary wrote, "The implications inherent in this program, viz, that all Negroes are either stupid, lazy, dishonest, or 'amusing,' are not only contrary to the fact, but highly dangerous to a healthy democratic society in which members of all ethnic groups should be evaluated as individuals." Because this threat to America's democratic ideals had violent repercussions for black Americans, the efforts of the civil rights community to curb it were not only justified, they were necessary. In a letter to Blatz Brewing company, NYCASP linked the dangers of the *Amos 'n' Andy* show to the rising tide of racial violence, specifically an attack on a black man for trying to integrate the all-white neighborhood of Cicero, Illinois. "As the Negro people face a new tide of lynchings and terror," the letter said, "your show spreads bigotry in its most shocking form as it invades our homes, poisons the minds of our children. Radio and TV have long neglected Negro themes…therefore the vicious distortion of the Amos 'n'

---

[56] "Labor, Liberals Join NAACP Protest Against Amos 'n' Andy," *The Auto Worker,* August 1951, NAACP 15/B/10; Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History* 75, no. 3 (December 1998): 794.

Andy show is doubly degrading." Perhaps the most dramatic link between widely understood forms of racial oppression and the *Amos 'n' Andy* show was offered in the pages of the CPUSA's *Daily Worker*. In one article, the *Daily Worker* connected the *Amos 'n' Andy* show to the Scottsboro trials of the 1930s:

> Remember that there was once a time when there was no nation-wide protest movement against court frame-ups of Negroes. That time stopped in 1931 when the state of Alabama tried to electrocute nine Negroes. And it has been going on ever since. The 'storm' that Alabama couldn't 'sit out' is the same storm that rising against Amos 'n' Andy. The Negro people are maturing. They can understand much clearer now the connection between the portrayal of Negroes as buffoons on stage, screen, radio and television, and the lynch tree and the frame-up court.

In another article, the paper argued that "a race or group can be lynched by ideas and propaganda just as surely as by physical means." This connection between comic stereotypes and the most violent and morally objectionable form of Southern oppression dramatically underscored the importance of the *Amos 'n' Andy* boycott to its participants.[57]

For the Association and its allies then, the *Amos 'n' Andy* boycott served as a bridge connecting earlier forms of activism to the emerging civil rights movement. Their concerns over the power of the entertainment media to define and shape black Americans' social and economic position in the United States had not only crystallized

---

[57] "Ministry Speaks Out On Typed Roles Featured on Video, Radio," *Chicago Defender,* September 29, 1951; Albert Ettinger to HL Moon, July 18, 1951; Len Zinberg [NYCASP] to Blatz Brewing Company, August 24, 1951, NAACP II A 498; "'Amos 'n' Andy' Protest Gains New Momentum," *Daily Worker*, September 9, 1951; "The Amos 'n' Andy Show and 'Free Enterprise,'" *Daily Worker*, July 26, 1951, Schomburg Clipping File: Amos 'n' Andy. In July of 1951, Harvey Clark, a Mississippi-born veteran attempted to move into Cicero, an all-white ethnic enclave outside of the city of Chicago. According to the *Chicago Defender*, this triggered "one of the wildest displays of violence…since the infamous Chicago race riot of 1919," involving over 6,000 protestors (almost entirely white) and 500 National Guardsmen. After five days of violence, 157 rioters had been arrested, 23 had been injured and the 20-unit apartment building that Clark attempted to integrate was left in ruins. "Clark Still Vows to Move in Home," *Chicago Defender*, July 21, 1951; Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*, 55.

but had taken on an even greater importance in the face of television's ability to present an immediate, widely available and visual portrait of black life. The debate over African American comedy and representation had moved from the periphery to a more central place in the civil rights agenda. At the same time, the tactics used to eliminate comic images that the NAACP leadership deemed degrading became more militant, more direct and more localized. When an NAACP-led coalition of civil rights, liberal and business groups (with support from the local newspaper) in Milwaukee succeeded in temporarily removing the program from the air, national leaders enthusiastically circulated the coalition's strategies to local NAACP chapters throughout the country. The defeat of *Amos 'n' Andy* on Blatz Beer's home turf justified the Association's use of the boycott and fueled hope that other localities would soon follow. "The feeling was expressed that if we could get Blatz['s] home city station to discontinue the show, it would help branches throughout the country as well as individuals and other organizations," Halyad expressed in a letter to the NAACP's national leaders.[58] The experience of Milwaukee also suggested the possibilities for comedy and black representation serving as a goal and an organizing principle in community led movements, in much the same way that discrimination and segregation on bus lines would serve the same function four years later in the Montgomery Bus Boycott.[59]

---

[58] Ardie Halyard to Gloster Current, July 27, 1951, NAACP II A 498, "Branch Action, 1950-54."

[59] Historians of the movement may hesitate to compare *Amos 'n' Andy* to segregated busses, but the movements that coalesced around the two share some remarkable similarities. Both operated on both the local and national level, with coalitions of blacks and business groups (with support from the local print media) protesting on the local level while national leaders and organizations lobbied in New York and Washington, D.C. Both protests made effective use of black purchasing power to secure change through the use of boycott. Both the Milwaukee protests again *Amos 'n' Andy* and the first bus boycott led by Rev. T.J. Jemison in Baton Rouge, LA established a blueprint that circulated among other local leaders. Although the bus boycotts are largely associated with the Southern black church, local NAACP leaders (including Rosa Parks) played a critical role in both protests. The primary difference of course is that whereas Baton Rouge and Montgomery inspired a wave of bus boycotts that spread throughout the South and culminated in the

"Titling at the windmills of farce comedy": African American humor and the limits to NAACP cultural activism

History would prove, however, that Milwaukee would not be Montgomery. The problem was more than just the difficulty in local and national civil rights organizations overcoming the powerful financial resources of the television and advertising industries. Unlike the other goals embraced by the civil rights coalition in the years prior to (and post) *Brown* - access to quality education, protection and expansion of voting rights, protection from extralegal violence and the injustices of the legal system, and fair labor practices – the *Amos 'n' Andy* protest and the cultural program it represented fueled stark disagreement within coalition ranks. Despite the NAACP's attempts to speak for all fifteen million black Americans and their countless liberal white supporters, both blacks and white liberals challenged the NAACP on their tactics, rhetoric, and goals. Many of these challenges echoed those expressed during the Hollywood campaign. Detractors of the NAACP rejected the attempts to connect comedy to the more recognizable goals of the movement and accused the Association of abandoning its traditional mission in favor of a misguided attempt to control black representation. Liberal allies questioned the prudence of a boycott and chafed at the idea of censoring the show, regardless of the potential damage to race relations. Blacks in the entertainment industry resented the

---

formation of the SCLC and a new chapter in the civil rights movement, the local protest against *Amos 'n' Andy* mostly began and ended in Milwaukee. For more information on the role of discrimination and segregation on bus lines in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the bus boycott movement in general see David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage Press, 1986); Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984); Jo Ann Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

Association meddling in their affairs and jeopardizing their professional well-being. Most importantly, black and liberal white audiences disagreed with the Association's reading of the show. Where the NAACP saw stereotype, slander, and threats to racial advancement, the audiences who enjoyed the show saw talent, entertainment and even possibilities to race advancement. Ultimately all of these factors would combine to short circuit not only the *Amos 'n' Andy* boycotts but also the NAACP's attempt to inject black representation into the larger civil rights struggle. Understanding these objections is therefore crucial to understanding the role that comedy would play in the movement in the two decades following *Amos 'n' Andy*.

These objections surfaced among liberal organizations almost immediately after the NAACP announced their protest, as organizations like the American Jewish Committee (AJC) expressed their hesitation in joining such a broad-based cultural action. Over the previous decade, the AJC had worked closely with the Association on a number of issues of concern for both blacks and Jews, including fair labor laws, housing discrimination and the recent rash of racial violence in Cicero. *Commentary*, the AJC's official publication, had taken an active role in the NAACP's Hollywood campaign, publishing a series of articles – written by both black and Jewish authors – on the subject of race and the movies. Still, as an organization, the AJC maintained a relatively conservative approach to civil rights, preferring a more pragmatic lobbying and legislative approach to direct confrontation.[60] "[W]e, and of course other Jewish agencies, have been plagued with problems not unlike the one that faces you now," Edwin Lukas, the AJC's director wrote to Walter White after meeting with him to discuss

[60] For the AJC's approach to civil rights and its relationship with the NAACP see Naomi W. Cohen, *Not Free to Desist: The American Jewish Committee, 1906-1966* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972), 383-89.

the AJC's participation in the *Amos 'n' Andy* protest. Lukas had pointed out that Jews were disturbed by the television program *The Goldbergs,* which they felt presented an outdated image of Jewish life. "Pressures, consultations and negotiations by influential Jews" had resulted in marked improvements for that program and now Lukas was urging the same approach to *Amos 'n' Andy*. Lukas suggested enlisting the help of three social scientists, including Dr. Kenneth Clark (whose work would play a key role in the *Brown v. Board* decision), to suggest possible changes to the script. After viewing the show himself, Lukas also offered his own suggestions to Mickelson at CBS, including minimizing the role of the Kingfish, having the actors appear briefly at the end of each episode out of character (to underline the point that the show was a deliberate caricature) and having the show air "clever, one-minute jingles" to promote good intergroup relations.[61]

Though Lukas's tepid support for the NAACP's protest was partly a reflection of the AJC's financial concerns (Lewis Rosenstiel, head of Schenley Industries, was a "generous supporter" of the AJC and other causes and organizations, including the National Urban League, perhaps explaining the reluctance of Lester Granger, head of the NUL, to criticize his "mighty good friend in a mighty good cause" and actively support the boycott[62]) it also revealed a deep spilt within the civil rights coalition over the issue of censorship. The NAACP was careful to avoid characterizing its actions as censorship, instead choosing to characterize them as an attempt to educate the networks and the sponsors about the dangers of stereotypes and the importance of the black consumer

---

[61] E. Lukas to W. White, July 19, 1951; Memorandum re: Conference with Mr. Edwin Lukas of the American Jewish Committee, July 10, 1951; E. Lukas to W. White, Aug 7, 1951, NAACP 15/B/10.
[62] Memorandum re: Conference with Lukas, July 10, 1951, NAACP 15/B/10; L. Granger to L. Rosenstiel, May 24, 1951, Papers of the National Urban League, Series VII, Box 1, "'Amos 'n' Andy' (1951)," Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

market. Yet by abandoning its attempts at improving the show's script and instead demanding the immediate removal of the show and backing up these demands with the implicit threat of a boycott (publicly the Association had backed away from leading a boycott out of anti-trust concerns, though it still suggested that audiences were free to boycott on their own) the Association was, in fact, doing just that. While such action was consistent with the NAACP's previous approaches to the elimination of stereotypes in both the *Birth of a Nation* protests and the Hollywood campaigns, it took on a special significance in the context of the cultural politics of the Cold War. In 1947, the appearance of 19 Hollywood writers and directors, known as the "Hollywood Ten," before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) marked the resurgence of HUAC and the dramatic entry of the anti-Communist crusade into popular entertainment. Over the next several years, as the crusades spread throughout the entertainment industry, artists who were even suspected of harboring Communist ties or sympathies found themselves blacklisted and unable to work. In late 1947, in the wake of the HUAC hearings, three former FBI agents, under the name American Business Consultants, began sending *Counterattack: The Newsletter of Facts on Communism* to broadcast executives, warning of Communist infiltration of the television industry. *Counterattack* was followed by *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television,* which accused 151 people within the industry of subversive activity. Following the outbreak of the Korean War, *Red Channels* became widely adopted by television executives hoping to avoid trouble.[63]

For the AJC, as well as the American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP's action against *Amos 'n' Andy* stepped dangerously close to the tactics of the anti-Communists.

[63] Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, 109-10, 123-25.

Both organizations had responded on behalf of actress Jean Muir when, after being named in *Red Channels*, NBC dropped her from the popular television show *The Alrdich Family* in 1950. Following that incident, the AJC formulated a "Statement on Censorship" that maintained that "attempts to interfere with free expression through the arts are likely to encourage an ever heightening control over men's minds," a state more characteristic of a "totalitarian society" than of a free democracy.[64] In a letter to Walter White, the ACLU's Executive Director Patrick Malin, referring to the Union's own policy on pressure group censorship, pledged to "actively join the NAACP in expressing to all concerned our disapproval of the program, and in urging that everyone refrain from listening to it." Malin was reluctant to carry the Union's support further, threatening to actively oppose an NAACP boycott of all Schenley products, and lecturing White to "remember how much Negroes have suffered from the lack of free expression, and how much they and members of other minority groups…will suffer if opponents of civil liberties are given the opportunity to say that the Negroes are not interested in <u>all</u> civil liberties for <u>everybody</u>, as the fundamental necessity of democracy, but are interested only in <u>some</u> civil liberties for <u>themselves</u>."[65]

Even this limited endorsement touched off a controversy within the Union's membership. Members decried the Union's "concerted move toward suppression" and, citing the ACLU's defense of Jean Muir, argued that the Union should be defending *Amos 'n' Andy*. "It's all a question of civil rights," wrote one member, "and the fact that

---

[64] The American Jewish Committee: Statement on Censorship, [n.d.], NAACP 15/B/10.
[65] Patrick Malin to W. White, July 27, 1951; Pressure Group Censorship: The Policy of the American Civil Liberties Union, April 16, 1951, American Civil Liberties Union Records, Box 764, Folder 6, Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Copies of Malin's letter were distributed to media outlets, sponsors and in a general press release as the ACLU's official position on the matter. For the relationship between the NAACP and the ACLU see Samuel Walker, *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 162-166, 237-239.

these two boys are colored should not keep you as being as ardent in their cause as you were for Jean."[66] Faced with these concerns, the ACLU's Board of Directors reexamined its policy at its September and November meetings and ultimately decided to withdraw its support. Malin belatedly conveyed the bad news to Walter White in a letter in March 1952. "The policy set forth in this statement makes it necessary to withdraw support of the NAACP in expressing disapproval of the programs since…we must restrain from opposing the content of a medium of expression unless…extraordinary circumstances necessitate such expression," Malin wrote. "The Board [also] feels that while primary boycott is legally permissible, we could not defend it because of its objective – prohibition of expression."[67]

The boycott also encountered resistance, as well as apathy, from black journalists, who questioned both the NAACP's tactics and its attempts to move black representation into the realm of civil rights. Even those papers that disliked *Amos 'n' Andy* and were supportive of the boycott provided only minimal coverage, often only a single article announcing the boycott. Even these articles tended to be in the entertainment section, far removed from the more "serious" matters of the civil rights movement that dominated the front page (along with tabloid coverage of local scandals). Other publications were more direct in their challenge. "The Amos 'n' Andy show, if we swallow an idiotic propaganda

---

[66] James Fly to the Board of Directors re: Pressure Group Censorship, memorandum, August 9, 1951; Alfred Kohlberg to P. Malin, August 30, 1951, ACLU 764 / 6.

[67] P. Malin to W. White, March 5, 1952, ACLU 764 / 6. The tensions between stereotypes and censorship which characterized the exchanges between the NAACP and the ACLU during the *Amos 'n' Andy* protests are part of ad broader tension between civil liberties (freedom of speech) and civil rights (freedom from harmful speech) that would exist well beyond the *Amos 'n' Andy* boycott, particularly in the campus hate speech debates of the 1980s and 1990s. For a summary of this tension see Richard Delgado, "About Your Masthead: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Compatibility of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties," *Harvard Civil Rights – Civil Liberties Law Review* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 1-15. See also Henry Louis Gates, Jr. et al, *Speaking of Race, Speaking of Sex: Hate Speech, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties* (New York: New York University Press, 1994).

line, has taken on all the implications of a national crisis," wrote the editors of the *Los Angeles Sentinel*. "The NAACP, who often 'swallows a camel and gags on a gnat,' by some unclassified schizophrenia feels that to continue the Amos 'n' Andy program [would do] the Race's prestige irreparable harm," the article said. "It would seem advisable for our 'leading' Race organization to devote its energies to help solve the nation's real ills – housing, employment, adequate education, for example."[68] Entertainment columnist Billy Rowe, while acknowledging the potential pitfalls of the show, argued that the NAACP was ultimately "fighting a losing battle."[69]

The most thorough critique of the NAACP's action came from the *Pittsburgh Courier,* the same publication that had led the fight against the radio show. In a series of four articles analyzing the strategy, S. Randolph Edmonds, playwright and Professor of Humanities at Florida A&M, took the NAACP to task for its "new and broader system" of protest against stereotype in both television and theater. Citing a general feeling, particularly among black performers, that the NAACP campaign was not "carefully planned," Edmonds questioned whether the organization had the financial resources and theatrical know-how to work effectively in the entertainment field. Edmonds found the NAACP's broader concept of black theater "much nearer to that of Soviet Russia than that of America," and accused the NAACP of trying to censor shows that failed to meet its "narrow and exacting standard of depicting what the NAACP thinks is good about Negroes." Edmonds failed to see *Amos 'n' Andy* as a threat to civil rights. "The shows violate no laws and never would have passed the censors if they were indecent or violated the moral consciousness of the people." The Association's misguided attempts at

---

[68] "Amos 'n Andy Forever," *Los Angeles Sentinel,* August 23, 1951.
[69] Billy Rowe, "Billy Rowe's Notebook," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 7, 1951.

fighting the show represented a regrettable abandonment of the NAACP's traditional program:

> The organization as a true civil rights organization has by no means outlived its usefulness nor its destiny. However, the 'Amos 'n' Andy'…show fight cannot help but be considered as a grave program blunder and as absolutely unnecessary for the association whatever the outcome…It would appear that the officials of the NAACP have more important work to do than to expend their energy and limited resources essaying the mocking heroic role of Don Quixote and tilting at the windmills of farce comedy.

Rather than such a misguided mission, Edmonds concluded the series by recommending a "positive, creative approach" that created opportunities as well as limited them.[70]

Many of these criticisms were shared by the black entertainment community, who recognized the *Amos 'n' Andy* show as an unprecedented opportunity and resented what they perceived as the NAACP's misguided attempts to dictate their profession. Thanks in part to the expansion of the television industry, black actors, writers and backstage workers were part of a distinct, growing middle class anchored in the entertainment industry. For these blacks, *Amos 'n' Andy* represented upward mobility and the reinforcement of their class status. The significance of the program to black entertainers is evident in the casting process itself. For over twenty years, the most popular "black" program had starred two white men, who had earned themselves a fortune, while black actors and actresses were relegated to minor (and lower paying) roles on the radio program. For the television version, Gosden and Correll - whether out of an awareness of the unfeasibility of a minstrel show on television or out of a sense of responsibility to both their creation and to black entertainers – had made the decision to fill the roles with an all-black cast. To fill the supporting roles, the two men turned to Johnny Lee,

---

[70] S. Randolph Edmonds, "Who's Wrong: The NAACP? Negro Artists?" *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 3, 10, and 17, 1951.

Ernestine Wade, Lillian Randolph and Amanda Randolph to play the roles of Lawyer Calhoun, Sapphire, Madame Queen and Momma, as they had done on the radio show. To find the ideal Kingfish, Amos and Andy, CBS hired James Fonda and Flournoy Miller to conduct a nationwide search. Miller was the comic genius behind the 1921 musical hit *Shuffle Along* (which he later accused Gosden and Correll of copying) and, since the early 1940s, had been involved with the radio show as a writer. With his extensive theatrical experience and connections to the black entertainment community, Miller, with help from the Negro Actors Guild, Fonda and the rest of CBS's production team, traveled 25,000 miles, interviewed 800 actors and conducted 50 screen tests.[71]

A virtual who's who of the black theatrical world auditioned for the show, including such luminaries as Cab Calloway, Pigmeat Markham, Sidney Poitier and Ossie Davis. The first actor hired was Alvin Childress, a veteran of the Broadway stage who was performing in an all-black version of *Anna Lucasta* when he auditioned early in the talent search. Childress was later brought to Hollywood and cast in the role of Amos. Childress was joined by Spencer Williams, a retired director, writer and actor who had been living in Tulsa, OK before Miller tracked him down to play Andy. Childress and Williams then joined Fonda and Miller, along with Gosden and Correll, in a widely publicized search for the perfect Kingfish, in which even President Truman and General Dwight Eisenhower offered suggestions. The production team finally decided on Tim Moore, an accomplished vaudeville performer – whose credits included Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds* – who was brought out of retirement to play the Kingfish.[72] The combined

---

[71] "An Inside Story: It Took 4 Years to Find Actors to Play Amos, Andy, Kingfish," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 23, 1951. See also Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy*, 203-204.
[72] A copy of Miller's New York interview list reveals 59 actors that had been interviewed in New York alone. See "People Interviewed – Audition for Amos + Andy," Flournoy E. Miller Papers, Box 2, Folder 1,

talent of the three men, along with their supporting cast, prompted many to hail it as "one of the most brilliant casts in the history of show business." "The four-year long search for talent to cast the show was worth every dollar, every interview, every mile traveled," wrote *Pittsburgh Courier* entertainment columnist Billy Rowe. "Not only is this a cast of Negro actors and actresses – it is a cast of top notch performers who can hold their own anywhere."[73]

For black artists then, the NAACP attempts to stop the show threatened the best opportunity to come their way in years. Without a concrete plan to replace *Amos 'n' Andy* with another, equally lucrative opportunity, the NAACP's crusade threatened to put a lot of actors out of work. Ruby Dandrige maintained that the actors were not "a disgrace to any race or country" and urged the NAACP to not "take money from anyone's pocket unless you can put more in." Actress Eva Taylor warned that "the movement such as the NAACP advocates would close the door to the Negro in the theater, and, in addition, bring back the blackface comedian." Taylor questioned whether the NAACP truly understood the problems of black actors and worried that "the resolution of the NAACP can only do us more harm than good." Author Jessie Fauset Harris, whose Harlem Renaissance-era work "The Gift of Laughter" praised black humor as "our emotional salvation," defended *Amos 'n' Andy* as farce, adding:

> We cannot afford to close of or permit the closing off of any decent openings. We cannot afford to listen to the short-sighted advice of those urging us to pass by the

---

Helen Armstead-Johnson Theater Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. Calloway, who is not on the New York list, read for the role of Kingfish. "An Inside Story: It Took 4 Years to Find Actors to Play Amos, Andy, Kingfish," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 23, 1951; "It's Out Now! 'Shuffle Along' Miller Dug Up Video's 'Andy,'" *Chicago Defender,* August 11, 1951; "TV's Kingfish, Tim Moore, Started in Show Biz at 12," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 14, 1951.

[73] "Amos 'n' Andy on TV: Loaded with Race Talent," *Pittsburgh Courier,* June 23, 1951; "Billy Rowe's Notebook," *Pittsburgh Courier,* April 22, 1950; "Billy Rowe's Notebook," *Pittsburgh Courier,* July 7, 1951.

> avenues where our precious natural talents can be displayed and utilized, and, instead, bury those talents to the detriment of our welfare.

Arna Bontemps, whose own musical *St. Louis Woman* was a target of NAACP protests five years earlier, agreed: "This new departure by the NAACP is a step toward the kind of controls usually attempted by censors."[74] Some entertainers threatened protest action of their own to keep the show on the air, telling the *Chicago Defender,* "If the show is dropped from the air because of this fight several hundred actors will picket the national NAACP offices in New York."[75]

The criticisms of these entertainers were driven by more than purely economic concerns. Despite claims by the NAACP that black actors were only interested in their own economic advancement at the expense of the race, black entertainers were incredibly active and supportive of race advancement (as actor Clarence Muse put it, "Even actors are interested in civil rights.") They were also aware of the obstacles their own performances created in civil rights advancement. Like the NAACP, entertainers were concerned about the tendency to cast blacks in stereotyped roles and to dumb them down in an attempt to appeal to Southern audiences. What black entertainers wanted, however, was the opportunity to pursue civil rights in entertainment without the interference of outsiders from the national NAACP. They actively participated in the fundraising and civil rights activities of the Hollywood NAACP on the west coast and established the Coordinating Council for Negro Performers (which drew heavily on the already established membership of the Negro Actors Guild) on the east coast. Chaired by film critic Lester Walton and based in Manhattan, the council worked for increased

---

[74] "Many Say NAACP Stand Endangers Artists' Future," *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 10, 1951.
[75] "Actors Enter Amos 'N' Andy Television Controversy," *Chicago Defender,* August 18, 1951; Jessie Fauset, "The Gift of Laughter," in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 166.

employment for black talent, while at the same time working to "promote a better understanding" on issues of black representation. Preferring "constructive criticism and mediation" to "negative" protest, the Council supported *Amos 'n' Andy* hoping that it would result in an increase in more realistic roles for blacks in television.[76]

Underlying much of the criticism of the NAACP was the belief by most blacks (and indeed most Americans) that *Amos 'n' Andy* did not perpetuate negative stereotypes. The minstrel humor and inaccurate characterizations so feared by the NAACP were dismissed as "entertainment," "farce," or as somehow being intrinsic to situation comedy, regardless of race. "Far from picturing the Negro race as degraded and lazy, it shows them to be very human and charming," wrote one NAACP member. "If they are shown in situations where they are always trying to get 'something for nothing,' or to avoid hard work, is that not a common weakness of us all?"[77] According to an Advertest poll, New York and New Jersey blacks overwhelmingly approved of the show and considered it a *good* thing to see. Only 8.6 percent of respondents thought the show degraded and made fun of blacks, while a whopping 86.5 percent wanted to keep it on the air.[78] Black support for the show would continue throughout *Amos 'n' Andy's* primetime run, as suggested by a *Pittsburgh Courier* poll that ranked *Amos 'n' Andy* the fourth most popular television show in 1952-53.[79]

---

[76] "'Beulah,' Amos 'N Andy Questionable Answer to Plea For Television Work," *Chicago Defender,* June 23, 1951; "Form Group to Fight Stereotypes," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 4, 1951. The Amsterdam News quotes the Organization's mission statement. See also the approving editorial "Negro Entertainers are Getting Wise," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, August 2, 1951.
[77] Bessie Donchian to W. White, July 23, 1951, NAACP II A 498, "Publicity Protests 'Amos 'n' Andy General, 1943, 1950-51 Aug."
[78] "Advertest Shows Most Negroes OK Blatz 'Amos' Show," *Advertising Age,* August 13, 1951.
[79] See *Pittsburgh Courier,* April 23, 1953. The *Courier* was careful to note that "Many cities do not have television stations and many have only one station, so these votes came from area[s] with heavy populations." Large segments of the black population, particularly in the South, thus still remained without access to television. How these populations would have responded to the show is unknown.

The black actors who comprised the cast came out of a rich tradition of African American humor and some of them, notably Tim Moore, had even shared the stage with such comedic giants as Moms Mabley. The *Amos 'n' Andy* show allowed these actors to bring black humor – in an admittedly altered form – into the view of the American mainstream. Critics of the show had pointed to its use of minstrel humor as one of its chief flaws, both politically and artistically. In declaring the television version inferior to the one on radio, *Cue* magazine oberserved that "because the show is on camera there is a tendency toward flagrant mugging and deliberately visual gags that don't come off nearly as well as the non-visual humor." The stereotypes that radio audiences could reinterpret or accept "without really believing them," were now visible, overplayed and often unfunny.[80]

In defending the show, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues, "the performance of the great black actors transformed racist stereotypes into authentic black humor."[81] Like the comedians that went before them, the cast of *Amos 'n' Andy* manipulated stereotypes to produce humor that was not only funny – in a purely aesthetic sense – but that also subversively challenged racial oppression.[82] Furthermore, in spite of the internal and external attempts – by the characters and by the NAACP – to force Kingfish and the other characters to conform to a middle-class standard, the last laugh is always had by the Kingfish. The structure of the episodes, in which each is a contained situation with little

---

[80] Philip Mino, "Notes on TV: Video's 'Amos 'n' Andy' Inferior to Radio Version," *Cue,* July 14, 1951, 22.

[81] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "TV's Black World Turns – But Stays Unreal," *New York Times,* November 12, 1989.

[82] I am aware of Robin Kelley's criticism of writers on black culture to "reduce expressive culture to a political text to be read like a less sophisticated version of *The Nation* or *Radical America*." Nonetheless, teasing out the political nature of the humor found in *Amos 'n' Andy* not only helps explain why so many blacks found the show funny, in spite of the NAACP's objection, it also illustrates the unfortunate limits of trying to control black representation in the mass media. Robin D.G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's DisFUNKtional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 37.

continuity between episodes, never allows the cumulative effect of the characters deeds to materialize. At the end of each episode, despite attempts by the characters to put Kingfish, Andy and Calhoun in their place, the characters survive intact into the next episode. Kingfish never has to get a job, nor is he ever truly punished for his social and legal transgressions. Andy, too never fully suffers from his ignorance and gullibility, as each episode begins with him in a financial position to fall for the Kingfish's tricks again. In subverting these dominant ideologies, Kingfish, and to a lesser extent Andy, take on the role of trickster. At the end of "The Rare Coin," after being set free by the judge, Andy pretends to put the rare coin into the phone after Kingfish tries to convince him to give him half of the proceeds. Thinking Andy has repeated the Kingfish's mistake, Kingfish yells at him and storms off. In the end though, we realize Andy put the coin in the machine and intentionally dialed the wrong number in order to get Kingfish off of his back. Andy thus uses the appearance of ignorance in order to resist other's claims of control over his money. Though in this case Andy is resisting the Kingfish, often the character's appearance of ignorance and laziness becomes a device for them to resist control by both the values and judgment of white society, as well as the values and judgment of the black elite. This resistance could have an unseen and unintended effect on black audiences. In his autobiography, Julius Lester recalled how the character of the Kingfish instilled a certain racial pride:

> In the character of the Kingfish, the creators of Amos 'n' Andy may have thought they were ridiculing blacks as lazy, shiftless, scheming and conniving, but to us Kingfish was a paradigm of virtue, an alternative to the work ethic. Kingfish lived: Amos made a living. It did not matter that my parents lived by and indoctrinated me with the Puritan work ethic. Kingfish had a joie de vivre no white person could poison, and we knew that whites ridiculed us because they

> were incapable of such élan. I was proud to belong to the same race as the Kingfish.[83]

As Lester's comment suggests, the Kingfish was flaunting the values of the middle-class elite, but in doing so he was putting forward an alternate set of values, one that inspired hope and possibility just as it suggested danger and loss of control.

The show borrowed heavily from vaudeville-era black humor, both in form and function. Take language for instance. The main characters in *Amos 'n' Andy* consistently misuse and mangle the English language: "retroactive" becomes "retroattic" or "radioactive," "John Hancock" becomes "John Ham Hock," "legitimate" becomes "legiterit," and "disgusted" becomes "regusted" in the hands of the Kingfish, Amos and Andy. After taking a job at the local university, Kingfish brags that he is going to hang out with the "intelligerencia" during the new "siesta" and convinces Andy to "tricalate" and give him his "intuition" money.[84] NAACP members pointed to this as evidence of the show's willingness to elicit laughter at the expense of black claims to intelligence, respectability and middle-class status.[85] Black audiences who had been exposed to the comedy of the Apollo Theater would have seen it as another example of inversion. The terms, ideas and names of important figures that Kingfish, Andy and Amos mispronounced were frequently those that the dominant society held dear: John Hancock, William Tell, Albert Einstein, legal, medical and economic terminology, etc. By mispronouncing these words, Kingfish strips them of their social importance and de-legitimizes their social power at the same time he elevates his own social standing. Black

---

[83] Julius Lester, *All is Well* (New York: Morrow, 1976), 14.
[84] *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*, "Kingfish Goes to Work."
[85] Lipsitz, *Time Passages*, 64-65.

audiences, of course, recognized that Kingfish was mispronouncing these words – that's what made them funny and potentially subversive. [86]

Like African American political humor from the vaudeville era, references to politics and race relations were subtle. Although controversial topics like civil rights are rarely addressed directly, references to contemporary black politics were frequent. The Brotherhood of the Mystic Knight of the Sea, which critics charged was an affront to black lodges everywhere, occasionally appears as an instrument of black community activism. In the same episode that Kingfish is swindled out of all his money at the lodge's annual convention, Sapphire, who attends monthly meetings of the women's auxiliary, is elected to national office, making her a national figure in the women's club movement. Additionally, a language of law and rights is prevalent throughout many episodes of *Amos 'n' Andy*. Kingfish often refers to his legal "juicyprudence" [jurisprudence] and his "Constitutional rights" in order to get his way. When Sapphire tries to force him into a job, he complains that her meddling is "unconstitutional" and a violation of his rights under the Atlantic Charter, the Constitution, the Monroe Doctrine and the Four Freedoms.[87] Although Kingfish misuses them in absurd ways, black claims to civil rights were also occasionally used in more subtle ways that must have resonated with black audiences. In one episode, Kingfish is laying a trap for someone who he mistakenly assumes is Sapphire suitor. While Kingfish waits, a young kid (who the audience knows is the mistaken "suitor") comes in to use the phone:

> Kingfish: Say, kid, don't use that phone. We're expecting somebody to make an important phone call.

---

[86] Fore more on the process of inversion see Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press), 300-320.
[87] See *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*, "Superfine Brush," "The Boarder," and "Hospitalization."

Kid: This is a public phone. My dime is as good as the next fellows.

Kingfish: Look kid, I don't want no trouble from you. Don't use that phone.

Kid: A phone is a public utility, and I'm one of the public.

Kingfish: Oh yeah?

Kid: Yeah! And I have my rights.

Kingfish: Okay. But make it snappy!

The injection of claims to economic equality ("my dime is as good as the next fellow's"), citizenship ("I'm one of the public") and civil rights ("I have my rights") into a rather generic mistaken identity joke illustrates the subtly with which political humor in the *Amos 'n' Andy* show operated. An overly aggressive demand or blatantly obvious political reference risked alienating CBS and Blatz's Southern market. Yet by using a style of slapstick humor that was not objectionable to white audiences (though it was to the NAACP), *Amos 'n' Andy* not only put forward black claims to political, economic and social equality it also accepted these claims as valid.[88]

An important continuity between *Amos 'n' Andy* and previous forms of African American humor is the prevalence of jokes revolving around law enforcement in general, and the courtroom in particular. As noted in the previous chapter, comedians like Pigmeat Markahm used courtroom situations to poke fun at an institution that was notoriously unjust to black citizens. In *Amos 'n' Andy*, the courtroom is re-imagined as an all-black institution in which the transgressions of Kingfish, Andy and Calhoun are put on trial not only in front of the judge, but in front of black audiences as well. In an episode titled "The Rare Coin," Andy and Kingfish are caught red-handed by a black clothes detective

[88] *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*, "Girl Upstairs."

as they are trying to break into a pay phone to retrieve a rare coin that Kingfish has mistakenly used to make a call. The officer arrests the pair and brings them to court to stand trial before a judge. While the main characters drive the humor by behaving in court in their stereotypical fashion - particularly Calhoun, who arrives late, mistakenly addresses the bailiff rather than the judges and enters "a plea of not guilty for these two crooks" on the grounds that "they had learned their lesson; they'll never break open nothing in front of a cop no more" – the moral and professional judge (who, like the rest of the court officers, is black) provides a stark contrast to their behavior. He has little patience for Kingfish and Andy's antics and forces Calhoun out of his courtroom by reminding him that he was disbarred three years ago. Yet while the judge is understandably harsh in his moral condemnation of the three men, he is just in his legal punishment. Towards the end of the scene, Amos enters the courtroom accompanied by the arresting officer, who is his friend, and presents a logical and persuasive explanation for the illegal behavior of Andy and Kingfish. Sufficiently persuaded the judge dismisses the case, remarking that "I believe that there was more stupidity here than criminal intent." *Amos 'n' Andy's* presentation of an all-black court that was both authoritative and just in its treatment of black defendant stood in stark contrast to the white controlled court system with which many blacks were familiar.[89]

More than continuing with the traditions of African American humor however, *Amos 'n' Andy* also put forward an image of black life rarely seen in mass entertainment. While Kingfish, Andy and Calhoun may have presented black middle-class professionals as incompetent and lacking respectability, the images of the supporting cast challenged

---

[89] *The Amos 'n' Andy*, "The Rare Coin." For more on the ways that popular culture can re-imagine a political ceremony see Lipsitz, *Time Passages*.

this representation. The television world of *Amos 'n' Andy* presented blacks as doctors, judges, police officers, hoteliers, scholars, government official, and small business owners. Unlike the main characters (Kingfish, Andy and Calhoun), these characters lack any trace of minstrel stereotypes and their speech is completely free of dialect. Appearing even more respectable and polished than the main characters, they perform their duties without any hint of buffoonery or stupidity. For example, in "Kingfish Gets Drafted," the entire staff of the draft board is African American, and not only do they perform their task effectively – thoroughly pursuing the missing George Stevens before catching their mistake – they do so in a manner that, in Billy Rowe's opinion, is "decidedly professional."[90] Even Amos is presented as an honest and "prized citizen," who, though usually left out of the main story line, frequently appears as the moral voice of the show.[91] In questioning his absence, the *Chicago Defender* praised Amos as an "ambitious hardworking father" who was "sensible, sober and sane."[92] For black audiences unaccustomed to seeing any representations of black professionals on televisions, *Amos 'n' Andy* was thus a revolutionary step forward – even if one had to look past the Kingfish.

Black family life also receives similar positive treatment. Although rarely seen, Amos's family is the epitome of a respectable middle-class black family. This description is perhaps most evident in the episode titled "The Christmas Story," one of the few episodes that allowed Amos and his family a prominent role and the episode most frequently cited by defenders of the show (both then and now) as an example of the

---

[90] *The Amos 'n' Andy Show,* "Kingfish Gets Drafted"; "Billy Rowe's Notebook," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 7, 1951.
[91] *The Amos 'n' Andy Show*, "The Light Blue Car."
[92] "Amos 'n Andy Bow (Even Lower) on Video So Your Scribe Spends a Dull Half Hour," *Chicago Defender,* July 7, 1951.

positive qualities of *Amos 'n' Andy*.[93] An "almost classic bit" adapted from the radio show, "The Christmas Story" begins with the birth of Amos's first daughter Arbadella and the joyful reaction of her godfather, Andy. Nine years later, viewers are treated to the sensitive side of Andy, as he works last minute as Santa Claus at a department store in order to earn enough money to buy Arbadella a talking, black doll for Christmas (rather than the crayons he has been forced by his lack of job to give her). After Andy drops off the gifts on Christmas Eve, Amos says to his wife Ruby, "Those kids that met Santa Claus this afternoon at…the department store came as close to meeting the real Santa Claus as they'll ever come." Amos then goes into Arabella's room and reads the Lord's Prayer from the child's bedside Bible, offering his own interpretation as the child settles into bed. The scene, and the entire episode, is poignant in its portrayal of the characters' humanity and allows for an image of black family life rarely seen on television. *Variety* noted the "great value of showing a Negro family living normal lives in normal surroundings, sharing in the emotional and religious experiences of all people at Christmas time."[94] For black viewers, the image of Amos reading the Bible to his daughter as he explains the meaning of Christmas offer a positive view of black life that challenged the NAACP's rhetoric.

Conclusion: A Bittersweet Victory

Ultimately, the *Amos 'n' Andy* protest failed to generate any enthusiasm outside of a core group of NAACP and civil rights leaders. The show continued to air on primetime

---

[93] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "An 'Amos 'n' Andy' Christmas," *New York Times,* December 23, 1994.
[94] *Variety,* December 31, 1952, quoted in Cripps, "Amos 'n' Andy and the Debate Over American Racial Integration," 47-48.

television until 1953, when, faced with declining ratings and Blatz Beer's decision to end its sponsorship, CBS filmed thirteen more episodes and placed the show into syndication. If it was a victory for the NAACP, it was a bittersweet victory, for the move to syndication meant that control over these images was now placed into the hands of over 100 local affiliates. Even a united effort on the part of the civil rights community would have been unable to eliminate the show from television, especially once the Southern television market began to open and Southern audiences began to embrace *Amos 'n' Andy*. The show would remain on the air in syndication until 1966, when the victories of the civil rights and Black Power movements rendered the show unacceptable, even in reruns.

Yet while the NAACP may have failed in its attempts to drive *Amos 'n' Andy* from television, it would ultimately succeed in its attempts to control black representation over the next decade. The early 1950s represented a short window of possibility for black comedy to play a vital role in the shaping of both early television and the early civil rights movement. By throwing its weight against the show, the NAACP would define the limits of black comedy and black representation on television quite narrowly. In the NAACP's view, there was little role for black humor in the emerging civil rights struggle. Black comedians, and their politically subversive humor, were largely forced underground for the remainder of the decade. The implications of this shift are the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Three
From Double V to Double Entendre: Nightclubs, Blue Humor and the Politics of Respectability in African American Comedy, 1953-1960

While the controversy over *Amos 'n' Andy* continued to play out in the civil rights community, comedian Lincoln Perry, better know to audiences as Stepin' Fetchit, quietly and somewhat unexpectedly announced his Hollywood comeback. Beginning in 1929, when he became the first black actor to be contracted by a major studio for feature films, and lasting throughout the 1930s, Fetchit had been the leading black comedian on the silver screen. Playing the role of the slow-witted, shuffling Sambo to perfection, Fetchit appeared in over 30 movies, earning as much as $160,000 a year. At the height of his popularity Fetchit owned six houses staffed by sixteen "Oriental servants," a stable of flashy cars that included twelve limousines and a pink Cadillac with neon lights, a closet full of luxurious hand-tailored clothing and was host to some of Hollywood's most lavish parties.

However, the 1940s had not been kind to him. The political and cultural developments of the decade had reduced his steady stream of starring roles to a mere handful of bit parts in obscure shorts. The lack of work combined with the "biggest bankruptcy on record," left the comedian in a small, modestly decorated apartment in Los Angeles. Without any bitterness and hoping to turn his personal fortunes around, Fetchit accepted a supporting role alongside Jimmy Stewart in *Bend of the River* (1952). Though small, the role offered real opportunities. During filming, the movie's director pulled Fetchit aside and told him, "You have a great thing to do in your role in this picture…You have to prove that comedy can be funny without offense to your people." Fetchit hoped that the film would allow him to "bring the right recognition to the average

Negro – the porter, shoe shine boy or steel mill hand," so that one day he could star in biographies of prominent blacks such as Satchel Paige and Bert Williams.[1]

By the end of the decade it became clear that this hope would never materialize. Fetchit received only one additional movie role, appearing in the 1953 John Ford film *The Sun Shines Bright* – a performance the *New York Amsterdam News* described as "putrid and revolting." Having failed to resuscitate his movie career, Fetchit premiered an "emancipated typed lazy bone characterization" in Canada, and eventually resorted to reviving his old Sambo role in front of Southern white audiences. The lack of bitterness that the comedian expressed in 1952 had given way to anger, resentment and frustration. In 1959, Fetchit lashed out to a group of reporters in Jackson, Mississippi. "I don't think I ever belittled the Negro race," the comedian asserted. "[A]s the first Negro to become famous in the movies, I think I helped to lift the Negro a little higher than he was." Fetchit reserved his harshest words for the NAACP, the organization he now blamed for ruining his career. He accused the Association of succumbing to Communist influences and pursuing a misguided program in the South. "You can't force integration," said Fetchit. "If it came as a natural order, that would be right."[2]

Response to Fetchit's diatribe was swift. In his entertainment column for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, George Pitts chastised Step for his denunciation of the NAACP and for his role in perpetuating negative stereotypes:

> These are modern times and your old head scratchin' role is outdated, offensive, not only to your race, but to mankind in general… Don't you know that most Southerners love you for being typical of the shiftless characters they picture the Negro to be?...Don't you know that's why they have suckered you into believing

---

[1] "Stepin Fetchit Comes Back," *Ebony*, February 1952, 64-67.
[2] Alvin 'Chick' Webb, "'Sun Shines Bright' But For Whites Only," *New York Amsterdam* News, June 13, 1953; Jesse Walker, "Theatricals," *New York Amsterdam* News, July 20, 1957; George E. Pitts, "Stepin Fetchit Says NAACP Has 'Red' Influence," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 23, 1959.

> that you are one of their chosen 'Nigras?'… Please, Stepin, use your head. You're an old man now, but it's not too late. If you'd act the least bit intelligent, the Southerners would put you in the class with the rest of us. They'd call you an uppity 'Nigra' who doesn't know his place.[3]

As Pitts's comments make clear, by the end of the 1950s the hope, admiration and even measured respect that a minstrel comic like Fetchit once received from the black community had all but vanished.

Fetchit's transition – from admired entertainer to the very symbol of the racist images holding back African American advancement – reflected a fundamental shift in black attitudes regarding the role and effects of African American humor that occurred over the decade of the 1950s. At the beginning of the decade black audiences and entertainment critics largely enjoyed or dismissed as harmless fun stereotyped comics and vaudeville antics; by the end of the decade they would greet these images with near-universal condemnation (at least in public). Though there would be no campaign during the remainder of the decade that could rival the one against *Amos 'n' Andy* in terms of scope or rhetoric, black leaders continued to challenge the Sambo stereotype as it appeared. When Mantan Moreland appeared with Flournoy Miller at the Apollo, *New York Amsterdam New*s critic Clyde Reid dryly noted that while the performance was "amusing enough to keep the audience alive," "there are others who credit Moreland, Fethcit and others like them with creating a lot of false and dangerous stereotypes about Negroes."[4]

As the *Amos 'n' Andy* campaign faded away, the NAACP's attention turned towards the civil rights movement in the South. On May 17, 1954, less than a year after *Amos 'n' Andy* left prime-time, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education*

---

[3] George E. Pitts, "Stepin Fetchit, It's Time You Wake Up!" *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 2, 1957.
[4] Clyde Reid, "Backstage with Clyde Reid," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 19, 1956.

that segregation in education was unconstitutional.[5] On behalf of a unanimous court, Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote:

> Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system.[6]

In shifting the focus from the rights of citizens to equal access to public facilities to the psychological harm done to children as a consequence of segregation, the Supreme Court not only vindicated the Association's legal strategy (which had relied heavily on social science research) , but its cultural strategy as well. At the core of the court's opinion was the finding that segregation in schools, like racist images on television, created a stereotype of inferiority that prevented blacks from attaining full equality in American society. In many ways, the NAACP convinced the nine judges on the Supreme Court of that which they could not convince black Americans during the controversy over *Amos 'n' Andy*.[7]

---

[5] Although it would remain in syndication until the 1960s, the last new episode of *Amos 'n' Andy* aired on June 11, 1953. See http://www.tv.com/amos-n-andy/show/16245/summary.html, accessed July 26, 2007.
[6] *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
[7] For the shift in focus from citizens to children see Peggy Cooper Davis, "Performing Interpretation: A Legacy of Civil Rights Lawyering in Brown v. Board of Education," in *Race, Law, and Culture: Reflections on* Brown v. Board of Education, ed. Austin Sarat (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27-32. For the NAACP reliance on sociological arguments in the school desegregation cases see Mark V. Tushnet, "Thurgood Marshall as a Lawyer: The Campaign Against School Segregation, 1945-1950," *Maryland Law Review* 40 (1981): 425-31. Numerous legal scholars have argued that by linking cultural stereotypes to social and economic harm, the Brown decision effectively outlawed the use of stereotypes in crating public policy. As Victor Romero argues:

> The Equal Protection Clause [of the Fourteenth Amendment] should have as its primary goal antisubordination - the elimination of unfair distinctions brought about by an illegitimate classification method. That, after all, is the message of *Brown v. Board of Education* - that 'separate but equal' is inherently unequal, not because there are no differences between the dominant and minority cultures, but because perpetuating stereotypes for the benefit of the

The ultimate success of the NAACP's cultural and legal strategies meant that its vision of middle-class respectability dominated representations of African Americans in the media throughout the 1950s. As black citizens and activists took to the streets throughout the South, newspaper reporters and television cameras were there to record them. Within this television-dominated media environment, *how* African Americans represented themselves during movement demonstrations – rhetorically and visually – was as important as the specific goals of the movement. Black protestors needed to appear dignified, restrained and patriotic, so that white viewers would feel comfortable with the movement and take movement demands seriously. Middle-class respectability became a key component of the civil rights movement media strategy and its ultimate success in eliciting sympathy and support from American viewers. "For the early Movement," notes historian and civil rights leader Julian Bond, "newspaper, radio, and television coverage brought the legitimate but previously unheard demands of southern blacks into the homes of Americans far removed from the petty indignities and large cruelties of southern segregation. These racial structures were indefensible; once challenged and exposed, they finally crumbled."[8]

> majority to the exclusion of the subordinated furthers oppression...Put differently, laws separating the races promote the privileges enjoyed by the favored race.

See Victor C. Romero, "Are Filipinas Asians or Latinas: Reclaiming the Anti-Subordination Objective of Equal Protection After *Grutter* and *Gratz*," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law* 7 (2004-2005): 781-82. For furthers examples see Leigh Caroline Case, "Hawaiian Eth(n)ics: Race and Religion in Kamehameha Schools," *William and Mary Bill of Rights Journal* 1 (1992-1993): 138; Mary Anne Case, "'The Very Stereotype the Law Condemns': Constitutional Sex Discrimination as a Quest for Perfect Proxies," *Cornell Law Review* 85, 1447-91; George Kateb, "*Brown* and the Harm of Legal Segregation," in *Race, Law and Culture*, 93-94; Kristen Holmquist, "Cultural Defense or False Stereotype: What Happens When Latina Defendants Collide with the Federal Sentencing Guidelines," *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 12 (1997): 46; Louis Lusky, "The Stereotype: Hard Core of Racism," *Buffalo Law Review* 13 (1963-64): 450-61; Jon Allyn Soderberg, "The Virginia Military Institute and the Equal Protection Clause: a Factual and Legal Introduction," *Washington and Lee Law Review* 50 (1993): 21.

[8] Julian Bond, "The Media and the Movement: Looking Back on the Southern Front," in *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, ed. Brian Ward (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001), 16-17.

Black comics struggled to adapt to this new emphasis on respectability. Caught between increasingly militant black audiences, who rejected any form of humor that even suggested minstrel stereotypes, and white audiences and entertainment executives who were not yet comfortable in embracing black comedians in anything but stereotypical roles, black comics found their opportunities to perform on television and in film virtually non-existent. Opportunities on stage were not much better – especially for a new generation of young, intellectual stand-up comedians. The newly fashionable comedy clubs that catered to sophisticated, urban white audiences largely avoided booking black comedians whose material was considered too racial or political, while large theaters like the Apollo switched formats to take advantage of the R&B and Rock n' Roll craze.

Largely forced out of the mainstream, black humor continued to develop during this period, as comedians sought new and different ways to reach audiences and break free from comic stereotypes. Somewhat ironically, much of their humor directly challenged ideas about black middle-class respectability, as standup comics / entertainers like Redd Foxx, Slappy White, Moms Mabley and Pearl Bailey used highly sexual humor – or "blue" humor - to gain access to black and white audiences in nightclubs and theaters and through the emerging medium of Long Play (LP) party albums. Sophisticated, fast and cutting, their routines often exchanged one set of stereotypes (blacks as lazy, dumb and comical) for another (blacks as aggressive, emotional and sexual) and threatened to undermine the image of respectability that civil rights leaders had so effectively cultivated. Yet by the end of the decade, it would be clear that challenging respectability was an effective strategy, as comics were successful in their efforts to integrate top entertainment venues, exclusive resort towns, bringing humor that addressed civil rights

issues in front of sophisticated northern and, through the power of the LP, national audiences.

"The old Negro stereotypes have all but vanished": Respectability, Civil Rights and Black Representation in the 1950s

Following *Brown,* black citizens throughout the South, and indeed the entire country, took the matter of implementing *Brown* and toppling Jim Crow into their own hands in dramatic fashion, through individual acts of courage as well as mass demonstrations, rallies, and boycotts. In December 1955, the citizens of Montgomery, Alabama, initiated a boycott of the city's bus system that would last over a year and prompt citizens of numerous other cities to mount their own bus boycotts.[9] The Montgomery Bus Boycott introduced Americans to a young preacher by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr., and led to the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In early 1956, white students at the University of Alabama rioted when Autherine Lucy attempted to become the first African American to enroll in classes. The following year, more violence broke out when Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus mobilized the National Guard to prevent nine black students from integrating Little Rock's Central High School. Order was restored only after President Dwight Eisenhower sent the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne division into Little Rock to protect the black students and enforce the law of the land. These events, and other like them, were closely followed by the news media and were broadcast via print *and* television throughout the world.

---

[9] Of course the Montgomery Bus Boycott was itself modeled after the bus boycott that took place in Baton Rouge, LA in 1953. See Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).

Conscious of the media attention that these protests attracted, leaders of the early civil rights movement, with assistance from the black press, adopted a media strategy that effectively emphasized the movement's adherence to dominant notions of middle-class respectability, as well as to American values of democracy and freedom.[10] Because the early movement was firmly rooted in the African American church and church pastors were among the Movement's most influential and visible leaders this strategy was in many ways a continuation of previous African American strategies of cultural representation, in which bourgeois morality and patriarchal authority justified African American claims to equality.[11] Masculine themes and appeals to patriarchy were central to the rhetoric of movement leaders. At the first planning meeting for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, E.D. Nixon challenged those ministers who had hoped to remain anonymous by calling them "little boys." "We've worn aprons all our lives," Nixon said. "It's time to take the aprons off…If we're gonna be mens, now's the time to be mens."[12] However, it was problematic for civil rights leaders, or any black man for that matter, to adopt conventional masculine roles in public. This was especially true following *Brown*,

---

[10] For the most thorough explanation of the movement's use of respectability in their media strategy see Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, "'Dress modestly, neatly…as if you were going to church': Respectability, Class, and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement," in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 69-100. See also Bond, "The Media and the Movement: Looking Back from the Southern Front," 16-17. For an example of the black press' role in reflecting this new emphasis on respectability see Jason Chambers, "Equal in Every Way: African Americans, Consumption and Materialism from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement," *Advertising & Society Review* 7, no. 1 (2006), http://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu:2115/journals/asr/archives/archives.html, accessed July 14, 2007. Chambers sites as an example *Ebony* magazine, which toned down its sensational, sexually suggestive headlines in an effort to expand its subscriber base into church groups and middle class homes while still celebrating the achievements of middle- and upper-class African Americans.

[11] For previous cultural strategies see Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations* 10, no. 24 (1988): 129-55; Karen Sotiropoulos, "Staging Race: Black Cultural Politics Before the Harlem Renaissance" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 1999).

[12] Nixon quoted in Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 136.

as segregationist White Citizen's Councils had used fears of miscegenation to demonize black masculinity and raise opposition to racial integration. The 1955 murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who allegedly wolf-whistled at a white, female store owner while visiting family in Mississippi, brought white fears of black masculinity into sharp focus. In making non-violence seem manly ("a weapon of protest"), King and other movement leaders had to avoid raising fears about black male sexuality.[13] To accomplish this, Movement leaders emphasized the Christian, as well as the "passive" and nonviolent nature of their protests. In crafting his own public image, King was careful to emphasize his own adherence to middle-class norms as newspapers focused on his position as pastor and patriarchal head of his household, his Boston education, his neat appearance and his Christian and democratic messages. Those behaviors – particularly those that spoke to King's sexuality, such as his penchant for dirty jokes and his numerous extramarital affairs – that ran contrary to this image were assiduously kept from public view.[14]

Such an emphasis on respectability was equally true for black women who participated in the movement. Although stories detailing black women's participation in political, civic and corporate life never disappeared,[15] articles on black women that appeared in the black press often emphasized their adherence to dominant notions of gender roles, domesticity, chastity, family responsibility and piety. Active engagement in

---

[13] Steve Estes, *I am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 7, 40-45; Peter J. Ling, "Gender and Generation: Manhood at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Peter J. Ling and Sharon Montheith, 109-14; "Negroes Pledge to Keep Boycott," *New York Times*, February 24, 1956.
[14] See David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 373-76.
[15] See Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1960," *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

civil rights demonstrations threatened to shatter this illusion of domesticity and undermine black women's claims to middle-class respectability.[16] Thus when black women participated in the movement they were careful to appear well-dressed, dignified and modest, so as to retain the moral high ground and thus the sympathies of national observers. As one group of historians has noted, "by diligently observing and publicly exhibiting many of the accepted ideas of respectable female behavior – even in the midst of their bold insurgency – black women frequently managed to appear rather more 'lady-like' than many of their white segregationist opponents."[17]

This strategy is perhaps most evident in the transformation of Rosa Parks into one of the symbols of the early rights movement. It was Parks's arrest in December 1955 that had served as the catalyst for the Montgomery Bus Boycott. At the time, Parks was an experienced activist who had been a member of the local NAACP for 10 years, had founded and lead the local NAACP youth chapter and had spent the summer receiving interracial training at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. More importantly for the purposes of the boycott however, Parks was a respectable, church-going, seamstress who could elicit sympathy from much of the Montgomery population. This was not the case for another woman, fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin, who had been arrested on Montgomery's busses earlier that year. Police and press reports had described Colvin as behaving violently during her arrest and rumors persisted that the teen was pregnant, forcing Montgomery's black leaders to abandon plans to stage a boycott around her arrest. Parks had no such baggage and black leaders consciously worked to make her the

---

[16] For concerns about black women's involvement in civil rights protests undermining claims to middle class respectability see Beverly W. Jones, "Before Montgomery and Greensboro: The Desegregation Movement in the District of Columbia, 1950-1953," *Phylon* 43, no. 2 (1982): 148.
[17] See Chappell, Hutchinson and Ward, "'Dress modestly, neatly,'" 70.

symbol of the boycott. In presenting Parks to the Montgomery black community at the first mass meeting of the boycott, King praised Parks as "one of the finest citizens in Montgomery…for nobody can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity…nobody can doubt the height of her character…nobody can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment and devotion to the teachings of Jesus." Following King's lead, editorials and articles described Parks as a "respectable," "unassuming, genteel", "quiet, refined" and "matronly" seamstress. Her long history of activism, a history that would have complicated her symbolic importance, was either downplayed or ignored entirely.[18]

The early civil rights movement's emphasis on respectability would ultimately work well in conjunction with the television networks' efforts to create a national audience. Eager to form a consensus around racial issues, these networks not only televised key moments of the movement to national audiences, but they also aired a number of specials (both under the guise of news and, in cases like the *Playhouse 90* reenactment of the Till murder, entertainment) that explored the race situation in more depth. Reporters and producers, many of whom were sympathetic to black demands and considered the South backward, highlighted this contrast and portrayed the movement as a struggle between good and evil, civilization and savagery, pitting dignified, middle-class southern blacks against backward and violent Southern whites. Television brought these struggles into the living rooms of American families who had little experience with the cruel realities of southern segregation.[19] Just as civil rights leaders and entertainers

---

[18] King quoted in Chappell, Hutchinson, and Ward, "'Dress modestly, neatly," 88; For descriptions of Parks in the press see, Inez J. Baskin, "The Montgomery Bus Strike," *Crisis* (March 1956), 136-38; "Editorial," *Crisis* (March 1956), 162; "'Bama: Rights Battleground," *Chicago Defender*, February 18, 1956; "Bus Boycott Continues in Alabama Race Issue," *Hartford Courant*, June 1, 1956.

[19] Chappell, Hutchinson and Ward, "'Dress modestly, neatly," 69-70; Sasha Torres, *Black, White and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 6, 17. Bond, "The Media and the Movement," 16-17.

had suggested at the beginning of the decade, television had become a powerful propaganda device and an invaluable ally to the civil rights cause.

Yet much of the success of the civil rights movement's emphasis on using television to project an image of middle-class respectability can be attributed to the fact that there were very few images of African Americans on television with which the civil rights movement had to compete. Furthermore, black comedians, whom the NAACP had judged as most threatening to the image of middle-class respectability and dignified protest, had disappeared almost entirely. By 1953, when *Amos 'n' Andy* went into syndication, the forms of black comedy acceptable for mass consumption had become very limited. Unflattering portrayals of the black middle class, traditional vaudeville techniques and props (exaggerated dialect and facial expressions, funny costumes and the use of blackface), and black comics in roles as servants or menials were largely off-limits (though servant roles would appear in a few notable exceptions). Even if it was unclear whether the NAACP was responsible for driving *Amos 'n' Andy* from the air, the Association was at the height of its power and the mere threat of black protest could often be enough to force the television industry to react. When [network] picked bug-eyed comic Mantan Moreland to star in the "11:30" revue, black audience members and journalists complained to the stations and the advertisers. The network fired Moreland immediately.[20]

The primary response of television executives to the threat of black protest was simply to not hire African American comedians. For the remainder of the 1950s and into the 1960s, black situation comedies were non-existent and black characters in otherwise all-white situation television shows were rare, leading one historian to describe this

[20] Alvin 'Chick' Webb, "Footlights and Sidelights," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 27, 1953.

period as "The Nonrecognition Era."[21] One study estimated that only one character in two hundred was black. These characters, like Jack Benny's longtime valet Rochester and Danny Thomas's maid (played by Ernestine Wade of *Amos 'n' Andy*'s Sapphire fame), tended to reflect a continuation of the servant role. Black professionals and businessmen, even in minor roles, were virtually invisible. Films could boast of little better. As an editorial in the Hollywood Review put it, "the old Negro stereotypes [may] have all but vanished…but Negro characters have tended to vanish along with the stereotypes."[22]

It would be incorrect, however, to place the blame (or credit) for the dire employment situation facing black comedians entirely at the feet of the NAACP. In the case of television, changes in the industry and in American culture in general played an equally important role in defining and limiting black comedians' opportunities in network television. When the federal government first opened the airwaves to network television, most of the stations were established in cities in the Northeast (and to a lesser extent, California) where most of the audience was and where the networks themselves were located. The FCC-imposed freeze on new station licensing from 1948-1952 prevented television from expanding beyond these regions. Having to cater only to the relatively liberal tastes of urban Northeasterners, the networks could afford to experiment in their use of ethnic performers and ethnic-themed programs. Once the FCC freeze was lifted, networks were able to move into the Southern market, which became the prime area for growth (since the Northern market was already saturated). As the number of Southern

---

[21] Robin R. Means Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 88.
[22] Robert S. Lichter, Linda S. Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Daniel Amundson, "Prime-Time Prejudice: TV's Images of Blacks and Hispanics," *Public Opinion* 10, no. 2 (Jul/Aug 1987): 13. Hollywood Review quoted in Alvin 'Chick' Webb, "Footlights and Sidelights," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 27, 1954.

affiliates increased, and as these affiliates were brought into the national market, the networks were able to command more affiliate airtime (option time) and could therefore raise the rates that they charged advertisers (clearance rates). By the mid-1950s then, both television and the television advertising industry had become national.

Television's development into a national industry resulted in an increased reliance on Southern audiences, which resulted in the networks no longer being able to afford to experiment with black programming. Southern audiences resisted even slightly dignified portrayals of blacks in any genre, and this resistance threatened to decrease clearance rates and drive off sponsors, as affiliates often refused to show programs they deemed racially unacceptable. Furthermore, southerners were aware of their power as consumers and, like the NAACP, threatened to use this power to influence black representation. An advertising executive at Pillsbury explained to one black actor that the company could not become too closely associated with black Americans, as their sales would greatly suffer if their product was perceived as "nigger flour."[23] When *Playhouse 90* planned to show a reenactment of the Emmitt Till murder, white Mississippians flooded the network with thousands of angry letters.[24] Even black entertainers, while still in demand as guests, were limited in their opportunities to star in their own programs.[25] ABC spent $20,000 on a pilot starring Sammy Davis, Jr. with the Will Mastin Trio, but had to cancel the show for lack of a sponsor. Explaining the cancellation of his highly regarded (and generally uncontroversial) variety show, Nat King Cole remarked, "Madison Avenue said

---

[23] J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: Afro-Americans in Television Since 1948* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1983), 42.
[24] Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles Over Mississippi TV, 1955-1969* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 33-38.
[25] Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise & Demise of an American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 202-03; "Can Sammy Davis, Jr. Crash Network TV?" *Ebony*, October 1954, 33.

I couldn't be sold, that no national advertisers would take a chance on offending Southerners."[26]

The decline in black television programs was part of a general trend in network television away from urban/ethnic themed shows toward programming that was more homogenized, suburban, white and non-political. In addition to *Amos 'n' Andy*, a number of comedies on early network television featured ethnic themes and characters, among them *The Goldbergs* (Jews), *Mama* (Norwegians), *Life with Luigi* (Italians), and *The Honeymooners* and *Hey, Jeannie* (Irish). These shows were set in urban contexts and presented themes and material situations that were either decidedly working class, or at odds with those of the white (suburban) middle class. Such a setting allowed for occasional critiques of the workplace as well as displays of collective political actions, such as rent strikes and community protests against a utility company.[27] Such an image of domestic life, however, became increasingly at odds with reality as millions of Americans each year moved out of the cities into newly built suburban homes. This suburban environment not only allowed for the blurring of class distinctions (as low prices and favorable mortgage terms allowed for blue collar and white collar workers to not only live next door to one another, but to maintain similar standards of living) but also for the blurring of ethnic distinctions as well. The suburbs allowed the ethnic families who took part in this exodus from the city to abandon their ethnic and class

---

[26] "Why I Quit My TV Show," *Ebony*, February 1958, 30.
[27] For the ethnic, working class characteristics of early network television see George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 57-63.

identities in favor of a homogenized white, suburban identity.[28] The suburbs also served as a protective haven against political, racial and labor unrest.[29]

The result of these changes was that dignified images of blacks marching or standing up to white oppression became the dominant, and often unchallenged, image of the race on American television.[30] This dominant image left little room for images of blacks as Sambo comics or Uncle Tom servants, but it also excluded those comedians who had challenged these depictions in their humor, public performances, and private lives. For the remainder of the decade, the efforts of black leaders would focus on the creation of opportunities for black actors and entertainers and the *integration* of the

---

[28] That Jews and other ethnic groups were even allowed to buy into these suburban developments, which utilized housing covenants to keep out non-white buyers, suggests that these groups were already considered white by the time of this suburban shift. The process by which Jews and other immigrant ethnic group became white had been occurring in American culture and society for several decades leading up to the 1950s, and had been accelerated by World War II and the emerging civil rights movement, which conceived of American race relations along black/white lines. For a more complete explanation of this process see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 91-138, 246-73.

[29] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 151-54. This shift was paralleled in the content of network television shows. For instance, when *The Goldbergs* first aired in 1949, the show centered on the life of a working-class Jewish family living in a crowded Bronx apartment. The show featured situations of particular interest to urban Jews (rent strikes, Yom Kippur, Passover) that involved interaction with the surrounding community. Neighbors passed in and out of the apartment and conversed through open windows and air shafts. Conflicts, though typically resolved through accommodation rather than confrontation, were portrayed as a community issue and their working class political undertones were evident. In 1956, the family moved out to the Long Island suburbs and dropped any trace of their ethnic identity. The show – renamed *Molly* to reflect the shift – now centered on the realities of the suburban home (isolation, alienation and consumer purchases). *The Goldbergs*, like the rest of America, had become suburbanized. This reality was reflected throughout network television, as programming increasingly featured white, middle-class suburban families (*Father Knows* Best, *Leave it to* Beaver) and eliminated any trace of ethnic, class or racial politics.[29] Darrell Hamamoto notes that by the late 1950s "the institution of commercial network television helped to consolidate a vision of American society that claimed to have overcome the political controversies of the past," and entertainment television would no longer "be a vehicle for direct [or indirect] critique."[29] Any black-themed show that addressed the issue of race, even if only by featuring a black cast, threatened to undermine this vision. See Lipsitz, *Time Passages,* 39-40; Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 144-45; Lichter, et al, "Prime-Time Prejudice," 13; Darrell Y. Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 43-44.

[30] Torres, *Black, White and in Color*, 13.

entertainment industry as "an important part of the movement to desegregate America."[31] Although it would continue its campaigns against comic stereotypes on the local level, the NAACP would be largely absent from these efforts, choosing instead to focus on the enforcement of *Brown*.[32] The Association had largely won its cultural battle, as its vision of respectability characterized media depictions of African Americans. In the area of television at least, Martin, Thurgood and Rosa had replaced Kingfish, Pigmeat and Beulah.

"A Pretty Lively Corpse": Burlesque, Satire and the Comedy Scene in the 1950s

These developments forced African American comedians to seek new opportunities in a rapidly changing comedy scene in which even previously supportive venues, like the Apollo Theater, no longer served as reliable showcases for black comedy. For nearly two decades, large northern theaters had served as the primary arena for black comic talent and one of the few venues where black comedians could make a living and hone their

---

[31] Editorial in *Hollywood Review* quoted in Webb, "Footlights and Sidelights," *New York Amsterdam News,* November 27, 1954. Just as the elimination of comic stereotypes was viewed as a necessary prerequisite to full integration, so too would the integration of the entertainment industry come to be viewed as a necessary step in the integration of American society. See Webb, "Footlights and Sidelights," *New York Amsterdam News,* May 9, 1953; Negroes in Show Business," *New York Amsterdam News*, November 21, 1953; Alvin 'Chick' Webb, "Militant Action Urged in TV-Theater Fight," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 8, 1953; "Powell Asks Radio, TV Boycott," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 2, 1952; "Out of Hearts of Stars Came TV and Radio Bids to Sepia Artists," *Chicago Defender*, January 2, 1954; "Do Negroes Have a Future in Hollywood?" *Ebony,* December 1955, 24-29.

[32] One example of the NAACP's continued campaigns against comic stereotypes was the Association's efforts at eliminating the minstrel show. This was a relatively new crusade, as it was not until the late 1940s that the Association's national leadership moved against blackface minstrel shows. Since the minstrel show had disappeared from television and radio, most of these efforts took place on the local level as it was still relatively common for schools and community groups to stage minstrel shows. For the most dramatic shift in this policy see Roy Wilkins, Memorandum on Minstrel Shows and Other Forms of Black Face Comedy, June 1, 1955, NAACP 15/B/13. Wilkins had long considered the minstrel show a "distinct American form of entertainment" that was not racist *per se*. R. Wilkins to Charles Doyle, October 25, 1947, NAACP II A 502, "Publicity Protests, Minstrel Shows, 1946-49."

craft relatively free from pressures by white owners, booking agents and producers. By the mid-1950s however, the relationship between these theaters and black comic performers had changed and comics, who were once the stars of the show, were becoming increasingly marginalized in the rapidly evolving black entertainment scene. In the decade following the end of World War II, white and middle-class black families left the inner city in large numbers and relied on television and other suburban pleasures for entertainment. Black families who remained in the inner city suffered from higher unemployment and a lower median income, making it difficult to support the extensive nightlife scene that had developed during the flush wartime years.[33] Furthermore, popular new music forms such as rhythm & blues, rock and roll, Calypso, and doo-wop replaced vaudeville variety acts as the entertainment of choice for those audiences who either remained or who were still adventurous enough to frequent the once-booming black entertainment districts in major cities. "Time was when theater goers packed theaters on the promise that the original So-and-So, a comic of appreciable ability, was heading the show," one black newspaper noted. "Now patrons rush theaters that feature music they have heard over the radio, television or on juke boxes. They give little thought to the comic on the bill." The once booming black nightlife and theater scene, and with it the central role of the comedian within the black entertainment world, thus began a steady decline. Or as entertainment writer Joe Bostic put it: "There seems to be no

---

[33] For the general decline of black entertainment districts see Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981); Mina Yang, "A Thin Blue Line Down Central Avenue: The LAPD and the Demise of a Musical Hub," *Black Music Research Journal* 22, no. 2 (Autumn 2002): 217-39; Ralph Eastman, "'Pitching Up a Boogie': African-American Musicians, Nightlife, and Music Venues in Los Angeles, 1930-1945 in *California Soul: Music of African Americans in the West,* ed. Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje and Eddie S. Meadows (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 95-97.

disputing the fact that show business, so far as Negroes are concerned, is dead or dying fast." [34]

This transition and decline was especially evident in Harlem. White abandonment of the Harlem entertainment scene in general – and the Apollo Theater in particular - had begun with the Harlem riots of 1943 and continued throughout the 1950s when suburbanization led many whites out of the city. Many of the black professionals and intellectuals that formed the core of Harlem's middle class also moved to new suburban communities in neighborhoods like St. Albans in Queens. The loss of these audiences had a devastating impact on the night life scene in Harlem. Even before the fifties began, established clubs like the Zanzibar started shutting their doors, as entertainment writers lamented the demise of Harlem nightlife. The heyday of Negro entertainment is long gone," one newspaper columnist complained in 1949. "Nobody comes to Harlem anymore. Nobody seems to care."[35]

Faced with dwindling audiences and declining revenues, Harlem nightclub and theater owners had no choice but to close up shop, continue on as "murky cellarplaces," or dramatically alter their entertainment offering to cater to shifting audience demands.[36] Apollo owner Frank Schiffman, in an effort to lure teen-age black audiences who were more interested in top-40 hits than comedians and variety shows, dropped the Apollo's variety format in favor of musical revues that featured a series of acts performing their

---

[34] "Comedy No Longer Rules Rialto; Singing and Dancing Big Thing," *Chicago Defender,* August 30, 1952; Joe Bostic, "Is Show Business Influence Lost?" *New York Amsterdam News*, August 14, 1954.
[35] Bill Chase, "What's Wrong with Our Show Business," *Age*, August 1949, quoted in Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 349. For the general decline of Harlem nightlife see Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 347-50; *New York Sunday News*, July 22, 1973, PAL Clipping File: Apollo Theater, "Gordon "Doc" Anderson Collection, "Programs, Souvenir Booklets, Clippings, etc."; "Harlem Has Come a Long Way From Its Flaming Youth Days," *Daily News,* April 13, 1954, PAL: Clipping File, "Clubs: Night: U.S.: N.Y.: Various, 1950-1959." Joe Bostic, "Performers Now At Mercy of Juke Box, Disk Jocks," *New York Amsterdam News,* August 7, 1954.
[36] "Harlem Has Come a Long Way From Its Flaming Youth Days."

latest hits. Veterans of the theater naturally resented the changed in format. Dancer Harold Cromer lamented:

> In the fifties when the rock came in…the regular variety acts were on the wane. They wanted one group after the other, and the kids were not interested in what you'd call experienced talent. They just wanted to listen to the music and holler and scream. The Apollo became a different place. The generation changed. The kids coming up knew nothing about the other guys who began the theater.

These "kids" may not have known much about the "other guys" who began the theater, but Harlem audiences did not seem to care as they lined up around the block to catch one of the seven daily performances. "The rhythm-and-blues revues turned the theater around financially," remarked Schiffman's son Bobby. "It was much more expensive to produce than the variety shows, but the proceeds were much greater…During that era the theater was operating at capacity more than anytime else."[37] Comics did not figure into this change in fortune, as they were no longer enough of a draw to warrant top billing or consistent employment. They still appeared on the bill, but only once every three or four weeks, typically on the fourth spot (of six) that featured a big name jazz or R&B performer.[38]

The changes that took place in black venues throughout the country were part of a much larger shift in American entertainment in the postwar period. The posh nightclubs and large venues that sprang up in cities throughout the country in the wake of the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 and reached their "zenith as a central bourgeois institution" for dating and marketing success during World War II, fell on collective hard times during

---

[37] Ted Fox, *Showtime at the Apollo* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston), 176-77.
[38] The only comic to headline was Timmie Rodgers, who brought his comedy revue "No Time for Squares" to the Apollo in April 1957. See *New York Amsterdam News*, 1953-1959, generally. See also "Butterbeans and Susie," *Ebony*, March 1952, 59-60, 63; "Vanguard News Press Release," March 5, 1956, in PAL Clipping File: Apollo Theater, "1950-59 folder"; Fox, *Showtime at the Apollo,* 180-81.

the 1950s, beginning with the closing of the legendary Café Society in 1949.[39] Like their counterparts in black neighborhoods, these venues also had to compete against television and other suburban amusements in their efforts to attract audiences. Large venues were further hit by the rapid rise of resort spots such as Las Vegas and Miami, which pushed salaries for top acts increasingly higher, forcing venues to choose between raising prices in order to book top acts or risk losing their status as top-flight venues. By the late 1950s, many of these venues had closed their doors (Ciro's in Hollywood, the jazz clubs along 52nd Street in Manhattan), dispensed with stage shows entirely (Paramount Theaters), moved to the suburbs (Latin Quarter in Philadelphia), or had raised their prices to the point that while they were still able to attract top talent they were no longer able to attract young urban audiences and instead had to rely on tourists and convention-goers. Black comedians, who already were largely excluded from these clubs, now found their opportunities to reach mainstream white audiences even further limited.[40]

These changes no doubt made it more difficult not only for established black performers to attain name recognition and star salaries, but also for non-star performers to make a living. As one entertainment writer noted, "It is a well-known fact that many performers have become discouraged and have entered other avenues of employment, for fear of literally starving to death."[41] Yet in the long run, these changes likely had an overall positive impact on the development of African American political and civil rights-oriented humor. After all, black comics were rarely able to perform racial material in

---

[39] For World War II as the zenith of Manhattan nightlife see David W. Stowe, "The Politics of Café Society," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (1998): 1384-406; Lewis Erenberg, "From New York to Middletown: Repeal and the Legitimization of Nightlife in the Great Depression," *American Quarterly* 38, no. 5 (Winter 1986): 761-78.
[40] Joe Cohen, "Intimeries Cue Changing Styles," *Variety,* November 5, 1958; "Those Vegas Salaries Held to Be Killing Off Names for Other Cafes," *Variety,* October 1, 1958, PAL Clipping File: Clubs: Night: U.S.: 1950-1959.
[41] Alvin 'Chick' Webb, "Footlights and Sidelights," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 6, 1954.

front of mainstream white audiences anyway, as television producers and nightclub owners refused to risk alienating white audiences. And large theaters like the Apollo, while offering the opportunity for receptive audiences and steady employment, were not the most ideal venues for the type of socially relevant stand-up routines that comedians like Slappy White had moved toward in the 1940s. The venues that emerged in place of the more elaborate nightclubs and grand theaters, however, would ultimately prove more accommodating to this type of humor. A loose collection of risqué burlesque/ striptease clubs, small urban comedy clubs/cafes, and more elaborate black-owned nightclubs, these venues allowed comedians to continue to ply their trade without resorting to familiar comic stereotypes or attracting moral condemnation from the NAACP.

Having been on the decline since the late 1930s, when public officials and moral crusaders forced most of the cities' prominent burlesque theaters and nightclubs to clubs, burlesque performance in general, and the striptease in particular, enjoyed a stunning surge in popularity during the post-war years.[42] A descendent of the burlesque shows of the 1920s and 1930s, 1950s striptease was performed in swank nightclubs, where working-class men and middle-class couples rubbed shoulders with prominent entertainers, business leaders, and politicians. By the middle of the decade, nightclubs featuring burlesque entertainment and stripteasers could be found in every major city in the United States, with New York City alone home to fifty clubs, in spite of the continued

---

[42] For the decline and eventual resurgence of burlesque and the striptease in the United States in general and New York City in particular see Jane Briggeman, *Burlesque: Legendary Stars of the Stage* (Portland, OR: Collectors Press, 2004), 20-24; Andrea Friedman, "'The Habitats of Sex-Crazed Perverts': Campaigns against Burlesque in Depression-Era New York City," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7, no. 2 (1996): 203-38; Jessica Glasscock, *Striptease: From Gaslight to Spotlight* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 2003), 123-57; Becki Ross and Kim Greenwell, "Spectacular Striptease: Performing the Sexual and Racial Other in Vancouver, B.C., 1945-1975," *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 137-54; Eric Schaefer, "The Obscene Seen: Spectacle and Transgression in Postwar Burlesque Films," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 2 (1997): 43-45; Rachel Shtier, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 247-95.

threat of crackdowns. "In a few parts of the country…the burlesque theater is a pretty lively corpse," *Newsweek* observed in 1954, "and one mushrooming by-product of burlesque seems well-set to stay in the entertainment field. This hardy element is what the 1954 billboards call the exotic dancer – a girl once known as an ecdysiast or even, among the lower orders, a stripteaser."[43] Estimates placed the number of stripteasers employed nationwide between 1000 and 2,500 or more. The vast majority of these women struggled in relative obscurity for a paltry $100 a week. A handful, however, such as veterans Gyspy Rose Lee and Ann Corio (both of whom achieved fame in the 1930s) and newcomers Blaze Starr, Tempest Storm (who was known for her huge breasts and her affairs with prominent entertainers), and Lili St. Cyr, became stars in their own right with lucrative contracts and favorable coverage in girlie magazines like *Playboy* and *Modern Man*, as well as mainstream publications such as *Newsweek, Life* and the *New York Times*.

Liberal by nature, burlesque clubs were not as concerned with taboos against racial mixing and were typically accepting of African American performers, audiences and club owners. In most northern cities downtown clubs often opened their doors to black audiences and featured black musicians, comedians and dancers. Likewise, the black-owned clubs that existed in nearly every black neighborhood in the country – clubs such as the Riviera in St. Louis, the Flame Show Bar in Detroit and Joe's Deluxe Night Club in Chicago – hired both black and white performers that entertained a mixed race clientele. In both sets of clubs, it was common for white female strippers to perform on

[43] "Minsky's Hideaway," *Newsweek*, November 8, 1954, 96.

stage wearing nothing but a G-string and nipple tassels alongside black male jazz musicians – a profoundly transgressive act, even in the North.[44]

The transgressive nature of burlesque clubs would be particularly accommodating to comedians, as the clubs offered a relatively safe space to challenge both professional as well as societal expectations regarding humor. Comedy had historically played an important role in burlesque, as comedians (both male and female) served as master of ceremonies and the comic foil to the women on stage.[45] While comedians lost much of their prominence when burlesque moved from theater to nightclub and the striptease became the focal point of the show, many nightclubs continued to employ comedians of both races as part of the bill. Often these comedians retained the same slapstick elements of early burlesque comedy. For certain comedians though, burlesque clubs offered the opportunity to incorporate satirical or political material into their routines. Lenny Bruce, one of the most celebrated satirists of the 1950s and 1960s, began his career working as a comic in Los Angeles with his stripper wife, Honey. Forced to compete with the strippers for the audience's attention, Bruce began to develop routines that satirized not only the burlesque world, but also some of the more sacrosanct American institutions such as religion and politics.[46]

Bruce would soon leave the world of stripclubs behind and move up to San Francisco where he would become part of a vanguard group of writers, satirists and comedians that publicly examined and critiqued the realities of post-war American life. McCarthyism, race and gender relations, nuclear proliferation, Cold War politics and post-war mass culture were satirized in such diverse forums as the cartoons of *Mad*

---

[44] For general black involvement in stripclubs see Shtier, *Striptease*, 294.
[45] See Mort Minsky, *Minsky's Burlesque* (New York: Arbor House, 1986).
[46] Shtier, *Striptease*, 263.

Magazine, the songs of Tom Lehrer and Stan Freberg, the satirical writings of Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller, the literature of the Beats, and the improvisational stage performances of The Second City.[47] Having come of age during the Great Depression and World War II, these satirical humorists primarily appealed to a rapidly growing group of young, middle-class, college-educated whites, who felt increasingly alienated by the culture of their parents. Jules Feiffer, a cartoonist for the *Village Voice* remarked, "If you were in your twenties back in the mid-fifties and living in an urban center, you felt generally unspoken for." For this audience, satire served as an accurate expression of their own social anxieties and their participation in this movement as a sign of their own cultural sophistication.[48]

The most visible and influential participants in this cultural movement were a group of white stand up comedians led by a young Jewish comic named Mort Sahl. Sahl was a Berkeley graduate student and struggling comic living out of a 1936 Buick station wagon when, in December 1953, he made his breakthrough performance at the hungry i, a small club located in the bohemian San Francisco neighborhood of North Beach. Sahl did not look the part of a typical comic – he performed in a sweater (rather than the standard tuxedo) with a rolled-up newspaper in his hands – but his wandering, intellectual style was well received by young urban audiences. Throughout the remainder of the decade, Sahl would be joined by other comics, including Bruce, Shelly Berman, Jonathan Winters and Bob Newhart, who collectively came to be known as "sick" comics. The success of these comics signaled what writer Gerald Nachman describes as a "revolt, if

---

[47] For a complete discussion of Satire during the 1950s and early 1960s see Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Tony Hendra, *Going Too Far* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 1-145; Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 4-45.
[48] Feiffer quoted in Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 7.

not a takeover" of American humor. Unlike more established comics like Bob Hope, Milton Berle and Jack Benny, whose routines relied on a series of rehearsed jokes and one-liners that avoided controversial topics, sick comics were more spontaneous and individual, and frequently inserted political and social commentary into their routines that highlighted the absurdity of a whole host of American institutions and practices – including race relations.[49]

These comics performed at a growing network of small clubs located in major cities throughout the country: Mister Kelley's and the Gate of Horn in Chicago, the Interlude and the Troubadour in Los Angeles and the Bitter End, the Village Gate, the Gaslight Club and the Café Wha? in New York. Like burlesque clubs, these new clubs positioned themselves in opposition to mainstream entertainment and attracted audiences who were in search of entertainment that challenged dominant notions of conformity and respectability. Such non-conformity only went so far though. Most clubs steered clear of the striptease, preferring instead to offer intellectual entertainment that was "rarely smutty and almost always witty." "All I do," remarked Max Gordon, owner of the Blue Angel in New York City, "is try to put on something you can't turn on with a button."[50]

Furthermore, the open attitude that these clubs and their audiences displayed toward satire and sick comics was not extended to African American comics. To be a successful sick comic, not only did one have to effectively criticize America's prejudices, but one also had to attack the audience that held these prejudices. While offending the audience had become a standard part of the routine – Mort Sahl's tagline in the late 1950s

---

[49] Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 6; Epstein, *The Haunted Smile,* 166-69; Phil Berger, *The Last Laugh: The World of the Stand-Up Comics* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1975), 50; Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 480-86.
[50] "New Little Clubs Light Up U.S. Night Life," *Life*, February 3, 1958, PAL Clipping File: Clubs: Night: U.S.: 1950-1959.

and early 1960s was "Are there any groups here that I haven't offended?" – white audiences were not willing to allow black comedians that freedom. "White comics can insult their audience freely," said Timmie Rogers, "but Negroes can't insult white people. The Negro comic works with wraps on, always behind the cultural ghetto." Steve Allen noted that, "comedy of this sort usually involves a certain amount of critical observation and our society is probably not civilized enough yet to permit or encourage the Negro comedian to make satirical comedy about Eisenhower's golf game, our bungled international relations, the Un-American Activities Committee or other things of that sort. Just imagine a Negro comic getting up on stage and saying some of the things that Lenny Bruce and Mort Sahl are getting away with." Sahl agreed: "The audience would be afraid that if a Negro said it, he would mean it."[51] It would not be until the 1960s that a black comedian would perform in a prominent comedy club in a major city.[52]

While black comics did not have access to these clubs, they were able to find work in some of the smaller, less fashionable white comedy clubs as well as a growing number of nightclubs in black neighborhoods that catered primarily to black audiences. Most northern cities with sizable black populations had at least one of these clubs, but among the most well known were the Baby Grand, Palm Café and Small's Paradise in New York; the Ritz Lounge, Roberts Show Club and Club DeLisa in Chicago; and the Cotton Club and Oasis in Los Angeles. These clubs varied in their décor and entertainment offerings. Some were elaborate supper clubs that featured comedians along with the top black performers of the day. Others were small, dingy nightclubs that

---

[51] Louie Robinson, "Why Negro Comics Don't Make it Big," *Ebony*, October 1960, 108-14; Nachman, *Seriously Funny,* 78.

[52] Dick Gregory would become the first African American comedian to perform at a major urban comedy club when he performed at the Chicago Playboy Club in February 1961. Gregory's integration of the standup circuit is discussed in Chapter Four.

showcased local talent. Still others blurred the line between strip club and traditional nightclub. While unable to provide the prestige, publicity or income that more established nightclubs could offer, these clubs could feature black comics on a semi-regular basis and served as a crucial training ground for aspiring black comics. Because club owners were far less likely to impose limits on the material that comedians could perform, comics could perform material, including racial material, that spoke directly to the tastes of their audiences. And unlike the burlesque clubs, where flesh was the star, these clubs often featured their comic emcees as the main attraction, allowing them to achieve a certain degree of local fame and prominence within the black community.[53]

This fame could be further enhanced by the growing popularity of party albums, albums that contained entire comedy routines or compilations of various comedy routines that were often recorded in front of live audiences in local clubs. Party albums came out of the hi-fidelity, or hi-fi, movement of the early 1950s that introduced high-end stereo equipment and advanced recording technology like the Long Playing (LP) record, which allowed for twenty minutes of recording per side, into the American home. Previously the domain of well-heeled classical and opera aficionados – music listeners most likely to be concerned about exact sound reproduction and the ability to listen to an extended recording – hi-fi had entered the mainstream and had become a central component of sophisticated urban, male culture by the mid-1950s.[54] Dootsie Williams was among the first to see the benefits that this trend could have for comedy, and is largely credited for the party album craze of the 1950s. The idea came to Williams during a performance by

---

[53] See Watkins, *On the Real* Side, 487-89; "Baron Wilson, Club 125 Funnyman, Is Top Comic," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 18, 1956.
[54] For information on the hi-fi movement see David Morton, *Off the Record: The Technology and Culture of Sound Recording in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 38-39.

comic singer Billy Mitchell in a nightclub in the late 1940s. "Mitchell literally had the audience in hysterics," Williams later recalled. "I said to myself, 'If people will pay good money to hear a comedian tell jokes in a club, why won't they pay to hear him on records in their own living rooms?" Williams promptly signed Mitchell to Blue Records and released "Song of the Woodpecker" in early 1949. In the early 1950s, as owner of Dootone/Dotoo records, Williams would release party albums that contained entire routines.[55]

Party albums would have a profound affect on the way that comedians related to their audiences. While television was still the surest way to gain national exposure, party albums allowed comics to build a national audience without having to travel around the country for year, or even decades. This is especially true once deejay's started playing clips of these albums in between songs. As one comic observed, "A Deejay could play a cut from [an] album and suddenly maybe 100,000 people in the city had heard it all at once. It would take years for such a number of people to have actually been exposed to a comedian in person. The record cut through all that…"[56] Furthermore, thanks to the increasing availability of hi-fi, audiences who did not live in a major city, or who otherwise did not frequent nightclubs, could still experience a comic by buying an album at the local record store and recreate the club atmosphere in the privacy of their own home. (The liner notes for one party album even instructed listeners to "pour your friends a drink, turn up the volume on your Hi-Fi and you will suddenly be right in the midst of a true 'Guzzling and Giggling' Party.")[57] Because audiences could enjoy these routines

---

[55] Billy Mitchell, "Song of the Woodpecker," Blue Records 101, Duotone 101. See entry for "Billy Mitchell" on The Blue Pages, www.hensteeth.com, accessed October 10, 2004.
[56] Jeff Sorenson, *Bob Newhart* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 37.
[57] Nipsey Russell, *Guzzling and Giggling Party,* Humorsonic Records 704.

over and over again in the privacy of their home (rather than the very public setting of a nightclub), black comedians did not have to worry as much about Jim Crow working conditions, whites audiences' unwillingness to frequent burlesque clubs or black nightclubs, or censorship by black leaders concerned with a comedian's impact on the respectability of the race.[58]

The man who would benefit most from the emergence of party albums and black nightclubs was Redd Foxx. Foxx was born in St. Louis in 1922, and had come up through the ranks like other stage veterans, by singing, dancing and doing whatever it took to get on stage. In 1948 he teamed up with veteran comedian Slappy White for four years before heading to Los Angeles to make it on his own as a standup comic. Despite initial success (Foxx appeared at the Club Alabam right before the club closed), Foxx had struggled to establish himself as a comic and had even quit the business entirely for a year-and-a-half in order to open a restaurant. The restaurant's quick failure forced Foxx back into show business, and he started a long term gig as a comedian at the Brass Rail, a small black nightclub in Los Angeles. Foxx had performing at the Brass Rail for a year when he was discovered by Dootsie Williams who offered him a record deal. After some initial hesitation, Foxx recorded *Laff of the Party* in 1955 before a hand-picked audience at the Club Oasis in Los Angeles. The album sold far better than anyone, including Foxx expected, moving more than a million copies. Soon the comedian was getting offers to perform from around the country, opening for the Count Basie band at the Crescendo Club in Hollywood and headlining at Roberts Show Lounge and the Apollo Theater. [59]

---

[58] Nat Hentoff, "Goodbye Mistah Bones," *Show Business Illustrated,* October 17, 1961.
[59] Redd Foxx and Norma Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor* (Pasadena, CA: Ward Ritchie Press, 1977), 234; "Redd Foxx Spoofs the World," *Sepia,* January 1963, 27-31; "The Funniest Man in the World," *Sepia*, March 1961, 50-53.

Another comic who benefited from these emerging nightclubs was Nipsey Russell. Born in Atlanta in 1918, Russell began his career as a dancer, working with a children's dance chorus before his father, who was in charge of the shows, moved him into the role of emcee, where he learned to intersperse jokes with announcing upcoming acts. After graduating from high school, Russell enrolled at the University of Cincinnati before leaving to join the Army, where he served throughout World War II, eventually earning the rank of captain before being discharged. Deciding not to return to Georgia and to pursue comedy full-time, Russell accepted various gigs in the United States and Canada before becoming the emcee at the Baby Grand in Harlem in 1951. Over the next decade, Russell would work the "dingy" and "garish" main room nearly every week, introducing variety acts, and lecturing his integrated audience "on a series of diverse and sundry subjects." Although Russell only occasionally performed outside of the Baby Grand, by the end of the decade a multi-record deal with Humorsonic Records and the star-status afforded him as the club's emcee had earned national acclaim as a "brilliant" and "droll" emcee and "the fastest gab and material man" on the comedy scene, as well as the nickname "Harlem's Son of Fun."[60]

"Sure it's sex, but it's progressive": The Sexual Politics of Blue Humor

Nipsey Russell and Redd Foxx were part of a new generation of black male standup comedians who had largely abandoned the performance styles and techniques – as well as

[60] "Jokers in the Cards," *Show Business Illustrated*, February 1962, 25; Arthur Gelb, "Harlem Night Club Flourishing," *New York Times*, May 15, 1961 in Schomburg Clipping Files: Comedians; Nipsey Russell, *Ya Gotta Be Fast*, Humorsonic Records 707; Alvin 'Chick' Webb, "Footlight and Sidelights," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 17, 1955; "Show Business No Longer Has Star Makers," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 7, 1954.

many of the stereotypes – that had defined the Apollo era. Like their white counterparts, these comics relied on humor that was quick, irreverent, and occasionally political. "The comedian of the time," notes Redd Foxx, "was an intellectual, a philosopher, a raconteur…a dude who could rap along any lines, from politics to the bedroom." Yet while African American comedy "was beginning to take on a social conscious," its politics tended to focus not so much on race relations, as on gender relations and sex – or the *politics of the bedroom*, to paraphrase Foxx. This highly sexual humor, commonly referred to at the time as blue humor, resembled not only traditional black cultural expressions – like the blues and folk humor, both of which always had a sexualized component – but also the risqué humor found in burlesque houses and strip clubs.[61] Rarely discussed in the mainstream media, even in those magazines and newspapers that provided approving coverage to strip clubs and sick comedy, blue humor was largely absent from the cultural debates of the 1950s and has been ignored or glossed over by historians of the period.

The phenomenal success of blue humor represents perhaps the biggest challenge to the image of respectability championed by the black elite during this period. By placing sexuality at the core of their humor, black standup comedians indirectly challenged the representational strategy that was key to the Movement's success. In doing so they also brought issues relating to gender relations and sexual politics, topics rendered invisible by this representational strategy, to the forefront of cultural discussion.

Though they share the same name and many of the same themes, blue humor of the 1950s generally lacked the graphic sexuality of burlesque or the violent misogyny

---

[61] Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia*, 148; Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 274-83. Note how Foxx defines the comedian of the time in strictly masculine terms.

found in the blues tradition. In the blues tradition, gender relations were often the site of conflict, despair and violence and the music of male blues musicians, while frequently humorous, were also violent, misogynist and graphically sexual. In one such song, Jelly Roll Morton sings: "Come here you sweet bitch, give me that pussy, let me get in your drawers/I'm gonna make you think you fuckin' with Santa Claus." Blues music of the 1950s was rarely this sexually graphic or violent, yet even in the mid-1950s, when much of R&B and doo-wop had taken on a sweeter, more innocent tone, the blues remained a highly sexualized music form. As one music writer noted, the blues "has become the biggest seller of sex since the advent of Freudian psychology. For a nickel, the juke box listener can have his choice of sex, seduction or sodomy."[62] Comedians avoided the smutty label attached to dirty blues and the striptease by eliminating four-letter words or direct references to sex acts from their routines, preferring instead to couch their humor in suggestive phrases or "heavy-handed" double entendres.[63] A good example of this humor is found in a popular Redd Foxx joke, in which the comic performs play-by-play for a horse race, using both the names of the horses (Cold Towel, Pussy Willow and My Dick) and the jockeys (Crab, Atkinson and Strap) in a series of sexually suggestive double entendres. After an intense race, in which Pussy Willow was "nervous and twitchy" and Jockey Strap left the race so that A. Crab could "ride My Dick," Foxx

---

[62] Morton quoted in Robin Kelley, *Race Rebels*: *Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 187; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 274-83. Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 71-80; Chollie Herndon, "Sex and Blue Notes," *New York Amsterdam News,* January 29, 1955.

[63] Freud refers to these jokes as double meaning with ambiguity or allusion. Sigmund Freud, *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 46-7. For the use of this humor in African American stand-up comedy, see Bob Lardine, "Redd Foxx: like a bolt from the blue," *New York Daily News*, October 7, 1973, PAL Clipping File: Foxx, Redd (1962-1989), 1962-1974 folder; Watkins, *On the Real Side,* 488.

declared My Dick "the winner by half an inch."[64] In another joke, Russell professed his love for chicken in the morning, telling his audience, "Any morning you'll find me in the bed – a breast in my mouth and two legs in my hands."[65]

As these jokes suggest, sex was not just joked about in abstract terms, but was personalized as the comedian himself became the focus of sexual discussion. Comedians rarely performed in costume or character (except for the occasional drag routine), and typically chose to feature their own image on their record covers. In their routines, comedians bragged about their own sexual prowess ("*my* dick") and entertained their audience with humorous jokes about their own supposed conquests (a breast in "*my* mouth"). Audience members often became the focus of the joke as well, as comics poked fun at audience members' sexual behavior by calling out audience members suspected of cheating or sleeping around, or by propositioning them for sexual favors. In one exchange, Foxx asked a woman in the audience, "Where you from?" When she told him he replied, "Well bend over and I'll drive you home."[66] While blue humor had been common at theaters like the Apollo for decades, such direct, sexualized involvement with the audience would have been rare in these settings, where the line dividing comedian and audience was far clearer. It would be unimaginable in sick comedy clubs, where audience members would not respond well to a sexually aggressive black comic propositioning the women in his audience.

Yet in the context of small comedy clubs and party albums, this humor was incredibly successful. Comedians with little other opportunities in more "respectable" venues were able to make a living off of blue humor. Some, like Foxx and Russell

---

[64] Redd Foxx, *Laff of the Party*, Dooto DTL 214
[65] Nipsey Russell, *Confucius Told Me…*, Humorsonic Records 701.
[66] Redd Foxx, *The Sidesplitter, Volume I*, Dooto DTL 253.

attained near-celebrity status. Furthermore, evidence suggests that this humor was successful with audiences across a broad spectrum of the population. Both white and black audiences flocked to see Russell at the Baby Grand or bought Foxx's albums at record stores. "It's funny," Foxx noted, "that most of the people who buy my records have never seen me. We do big business in the South…but if those people knew who I am – most of the [album] covers are drawings, not photos – they'd probably break my records."[67]

The overt sexuality put forward by these comedians was in direct contrast to black elite notions of middle-class respectability and its popularity among both black and white audiences threatened the representational strategy of the civil rights movement. Compared to the image of the constrained masculinity that the movement exalted, these comics were loud, irreverent, inebriated and sexually promiscuous. Though they had largely abandoned many of the characteristics of the Sambo stereotype, by introducing such overt sexual themes these comedians threatened to fuel longstanding fears about black male sexuality. Since the early days of the NAACP and the protests against *Birth of a Nation*, black leaders had guarded against any public display of black male sexuality in the mass media, as fears of miscegenation were often used to justify segregation and violence against black men.[68] Black leaders continued to police black sexual behavior and cultural production for fear of its ability to erode notions of respectability within the household. When black deejays began playing "dirty blues" records over the air, the

---

[67] Hentoff, "Goodbye Mistah Bones."

[68] These fears greatly influenced the NAACP strategy to end segregation in schools as the Association first attacked graduate school programs where the threat of miscegenation was not as prevalent, before going after elementary schools where the children were generally too young to be threatening. As the violence surrounding the integration of Little Rock High School and universities across the south demonstrate, opposition was far greater in instances where teenagers and young adults were involved.

Pittsburgh Courier launched a campaign to prevent this "off-color material" from entering black homes and "sticking in the ears of their children."[69]

Like the "dirty blues" craze, blue humor brought black male sexuality out into the open and in doing so, threatened to undermine the illusion of respectability that movement leaders had carefully constructed. The fact that these comedians, along with the bulk of their audience, were typically well-dressed, 'respectable' members of the black middle-class meant that this humor could not be solely attributed to black working class culture. Furthermore, because this humor attracted interracial audiences, the same white audiences that black civil rights leaders targeted with their media strategy were now confronted with black images that ran counter to the respectable images of blacks that they saw on television.

Black comics spoke to white fears directly as they often confronted the topic of miscegenation in their humor. Though the message of these jokes was often one that discouraged the practice, there was little effort to expose the absurdity of the taboo itself.[70] Slappy White, mocking the value placed on white female sexuality, joked about a man who rushed in and paid seven-thousand dollars for a car after seeing a sign that read "With Every Car You Buy, You Receive a Blond":

> …sure enough in the front seat there's a blond. After driving around for about two hours he leans over and whispers [his request] in her ear, 'psst, psst, psst.' She said, 'You got that [screwed] when you bought the car.'"[71]

---

[69] "Campaign Against Smutty Wax Gains Support," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 6, 1953; "Sponsors Leery of Smutty Disc Jocks," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 23, 1953.
[70] In contrast, Lenny Bruce asked members of his (white) audience to choose between marrying a "white, white woman" and a "black, black woman," before telling them that the white woman was Kate Smith and the black woman was Lena Horne. For black humor's tendency to discourage miscegenation see Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 341.
[71] Slappy White, *Just for Laughs, Volume II,* Bull Records B-11.

Russell was even more upfront on the jacket cover to one of his albums, which shows him standing at a table covered with a table cloth and party decoration, with a pair of white women's legs underneath the table directly below him.[72]

Yet while they challenged the image of black respectability, African American blue comedians spoke to the broad anxiety regarding masculinity that permeated much of American political and popular culture. Various magazines, academics, and politicians argued that American men (i.e. white men) were experiencing a "Crisis of American Masculinity" as a result of a culture that destroyed his self-autonomy, placed the control over the home into the hands of women and doomed him to a life of conformity. In short, the American man had grown "soft" – and not just in the workplace (the "softminded" ethos of groupthink) and the political arena (the fear of being "soft" on Communism), but in the bedroom as well. Men, the pundits warned, were no longer willing or able to perform their sexual duties in the bedroom and were in danger of becoming impotent, "effeminate" or "perverted." (Comedians made this connection as well. In one joke a man vows to reform some of his habits. "The first month he cut out smoking. The second month he cut out drinking. The third month he cut out women. Four weeks after he cut out women he was cutting out paper dolls."[73]) Magazines like *Playboy* encouraged young men to forgo patriarchal responsibility in favor of indulging heterosexual desire. Advice manuals counseled women to remain shy and submissive during courtship and to forgo their own sexual pleasure in marriage so they may tend to the needs of their husband's fragile sexual ego.[74]

---

[72] Russell, *Guzzling and Giggling Party.*
[73] Foxx, *The Sidesplitter, Volume I.*
[74] See Kenon Breazeale, "In Spite of Women: 'Esquire' Magazine and the Construction of the Male Consumer," *Signs* 20, no. 1 (1994):1-22; K.A. Cuordileone, " Politics in an Age of Anxiety': Cold War

On the surface, the masculine virility suggested by the comics of this era offered an attractive counterweight to male impotency. Constantly erect, the man of blue humor fantasies had enough stamina in the bedroom to satisfy his partner *and* have enough energy left over to please other women. "I just read the Kinsey Report and I made two observations," joked Russell. "Number one, women talk to damn much. And number two, if they're telling the truth, I'm not getting my share."[75] Furthermore, his technique could serve as an example to those (often white) men who had difficulty satisfying their women. In one joke:

> A rich white man asks one of his black workers the best way to have intercourse. The black man says, "Baby, lemme tell you about whiteys. You don't know how to do it, you put it in and rush rush rush. That ain't the way to do it. You put it in, take a few strokes, ya take it out, ya put it back in, you rest a little more, you go back again...that's the way to do it, not that old bang bang bang." The man does home; he 'put it in, took it out, stroke it around a little bit, put it in, took it out, stroked it around a little bit. She looked up and said, "Why are you fuckin' like a nigger?"[76]

Jokes like these played with longstanding stereotypes about the sexual proficiency of black men.[77] By holding up black male sexuality as potent, these jokes could at the same time reinforce the manhood of black men (one of the broader goals of the movement) while at the same time portray this manhood as something that whites, while certainly admiring, should also want to fear.

Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960," *Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (2000): 515-45; Patricia McDaniel, "Shrinking Violets and Caspar Milquetoasts: Shyness and Heterosexuality from the Roles of the Fifties to 'The Rules' of the Nineties," *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 3 (2001): 547-68; Jessamyn Neuhaus, "The Importance of Being Orgasmic: Sexuality, Gender and Marital Sex Manuals in the United States, 1920-1963," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 4 (2000): 447-73.

[75] Russell, *Guzzling and Giggling Party.*

[76] Ronald L. Smith, *Comedy on Record: The Complete Critical Discography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), 676-77.

[77] See Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*.

The tendency to reinforce black manhood *and* reinforcing potentially damaging stereotypes could be seen in other ways as well, as this highly sexualized humor often relied on ridiculing the sexuality and behavior of those who fell outside of this image of masculinity. For instance, comics of this period continued the burlesque practice of cross dressing and drag (a number of party albums picture the comedian on the front cover dressed in women's clothes) and included a number of "queer" jokes in their routines. Some of these jokes relied on double entendres ("fairy" tales) and familiar stereotypes (gay men as ballet dancers and interior decorators). Other jokes, however, portrayed homosexuality as deviant or perverse, such as the joke about a man who goes to a doctor and confesses his love for a horse. When the doctor asks the man if the horse was a female or male the man responds defensively, "Female! What do you think I am, queer?"[78] Jokes such as these had a long history in African American humor. However, in the 1950s, while they served to reaffirm black masculinity as a defense against effeminacy and perversion, the jokes also tapped into America's growing unease with homosexuality. Despite, or perhaps partly because of, the findings of the Kinsey report, which found that the number of men who had experienced intimacy with other men was far greater than most Americans imagined, persecution of homosexuals reached a fever pitch during the 1950s. Politicians, community leaders and "moral" crusaders, connected homosexuality with perversion, deviance, immorality and Communism in order to defend political witch-hunts and police crackdowns on individuals suspected of being gay. Jokes

[78] See Russell, *Guzzling and Giggling*; White, *Just for Laughs, Volume II*.

of this period - such as Russell's question "if Russia attacks United States from the rear, will Greece help?" – helped strengthen this connection in the popular imagination.[79]

Black male comics also threatened to reinforce black manhood at the expense of black women. Comics portrayed black women in their jokes as promiscuous, philandering, gold-digging, and deserving of the sexual and physical violence inflicted on them. In one joke, a white woman fires her outspoken black maid, who responds, "your husband considers me a better cook than you are, and a better housekeeper than you are, and he says I'm better in bed than you are." "He said that?" the wife asked. "Yeah and the chauffer too and the janitor" the housekeeper replied.[80] In another joke, a black woman sees a rapist outside her house calls the police and tells them to send a squad car "first thing in the morning."[81] "I give my wife something for spending money every week," Redd Foxx told his audience, "last week I gave her a punch in the eye."[82] Even when comedians acknowledged women's political action it was often to hold this action up to ridicule. One comic used a woman's convention as the premise for a joke filled with a series of double entendres and another urged the women in his audience to go to the polls and "organize, UNITE! Because as long as you split like you are the men will always be on top."[83] At a time when black female respectability and political action was central to the success of the movement and physical and sexual violence against black

---

[79] For more on the persecution of gays and lesbians in the 1950s, see Fred Fejes, "Murder, Perversion, and Moral Panic: The 1954 Media Campaign against Miami's Homosexuals and the Discourse of Civic Betterment," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 3 (July 2000): 305-47. Comedians tendency to play into anti-gay prejudice by linking homosexuality to moral corruption and Communist infiltration was particularly threatening as one of the strategic and intellectual leaders of the movement, Bayard Rustin, had joined the young Communist League in New York in 1938 and had been convicted of gross indecency for an encounter with two other men in a parked car in 1953. Thus, as Peter Ling notes, King's leading adviser was at risk of being labeled both "red" and "queer." See Peter J. Ling, "Gender and Generation: Manhood at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference," in *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement*, 102.
[80] Redd Foxx, *This is Foxx*, Dootoo DTL 809.
[81] Nipsey Russell, *Ya Gotta Be Fast*, Humorsonice Records 707.
[82] Foxx, *The Sidesplitter, Volume I.*
[83] Russell , *Confucius Told Me…*; Foxx, *Laff of the Party*.

women served as a catalyst, these jokes threatened to undermine the efforts of movement leaders.[84]

Yet black male comics were not the only ones to challenge middle-class notions of black female respectability. The emerging emphasis on blue humor created opportunities for black women to enter the world of nightclub comedy, and in doing so to challenge the depictions of black women in the humor of black men, the civil rights movement and the larger culture. Like their male counterparts, black female comics traditionally labored under the burden of stereotype. However, the terms used to describe the stereotypes evident in African American comedy – Stepin' Fetchit, Amos 'n' Andy, Sambo – were typically applied to male comics. As historian Deborah Gray Whites notes, "inasmuch as Sambosim involves 'feminine' traits, it is the men of the race characterized as such who bear the burden of the insult." The female equivalent of the Sambo was the Mammy. "Big, fat and cantankerous," the Mammy was asexual, non-threatening and comfortable among whites.[85] While not necessarily comical, the Mammy stereotype often took on a comic tone in films like *Judge Priest* and television shows like *Beulah*. The mammy was also the focus of protests from the NAACP and other black leaders. *Pittsburgh Courier* writer James Bibbed "flayed" Beulah when it transitioned to television in 1951, accusing the show of "stamp[ing], defil[ing] and desecrat[ing] colored people" and the show's star, Ethel Waters, of "establishing a most disgraceful

---

[84] This is especially true when one considers that at the time these jokes were told – the mid- to late- 1950s – black women were perhaps the most prominent members of the movement with Rosa Parks, Autherine Lucy, Elizabeth Eckford, and Daisy Bates all playing a very important, and very public, role in the fight against Jim Crow.

[85] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985), 17-21, 27-61; Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1992), 9.

precedent."[86] The NAACP also included Beulah in its campaign against *Amos 'n' Andy* (although it failed to attract widespread attention).[87]

By the early 1950s, however, the Mammy stereotype, like the Sambo character, had become unpalatable to black audiences and comediennes alike. Ethel Waters, rejecting the "white folks kitchen comedy role," left the *Beulah* show after the second season, and her eventual replacement (Hattie McDaniel was cast in the role, but cancer forced her out after only six episodes), Louise Beavers, would do the same at the end of the third, effectively ending the show.[88] Following *Beulah's* demise, a number of black comediennes worked to replace the Mammy stereotype with a more sexual, and often more sophisticated image and performing style. While some female comedians, such as Anita Echols (a "cavern-mouthed" mimic), had performing styles similar to their male counterparts, for the most part their performing styles were distinct from the style of male standup comics of this era. Some comediennes, like Moms Mabley and Pinkie Lee, delivered most of their humor in a standup format, yet held on to the vaudeville-era convention of performing in costume or character.[89] Most comediennes however, were vocalists who combined humorous, sexual songs and comic banter with "exotic" body movements, revealing costumes and even the occasional striptease.

This reliance on song and/or costume allowed these women to discuss issues of sex more openly and more prominently than male comedians. Moms Mabley continued

---

[86] Joseph Bibb, "'Beulah' Flayed," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 19, 1951. See also John Crosby, "Beulah," *New York Herald Tribune,* March 14, 1947; "Ethel Waters as Beulah," *New York Times*, October 4, 1950, PAL Clipping File: Beulah (Radio); "'Beulah,' Amos 'N Andy Questionable Answer to Plea for Television Work," *Chicago Defender*, June 23, 1951. For more information on Beulah see Donald Bogle, *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 19-26.
[87] Resolution passed at the 42nd Annual Convention, Atlanta, GA, June 1951, NAACP 15/B/9.
[88] Bogle, *Prime Time Blues*, 26-27. Although Beavers would abandon the role of Beulah, she did not abandon the Mammy role entirely, as her act with Mae West in Vegas found her performing as West's maid.
[89] "Anita Echols," *Ebony,* January 1953, 54-58; "New York's Hottest Club," *Ebony*, June 1954, 34.

to earn top billing at the Apollo and other large theaters. Louise Beavers performed a racy comedy act with Mae West in Las Vegas. Singers were featured prominently in the pages of both the black and white press and performed relatively frequently on television and at the same posh downtown nightclubs and exclusive resorts that male comics struggled to break into. In these venues, these women openly discussed topics like pre-marital sex, infidelity, promiscuity, using sex to gain money or favors, as well as their own sexual desires. Like male comics, these sexual references were often personalized. One singer bragged that as her "lovin' grew more versatile/…no man could fill the bill" and "confessed" that she "never kissed a man before / before [she] knew his name" and that she "always go[es] to bed at ten/ but [goes] home at four."[90] And while these songs were never vulgar (although their albums were clearly labeled "For Adults Only"), when compared to the routines of male comedians they referred more openly to sex and relied far less on innuendo and double-entendre than the stand-up routines of male comics.[91]

By openly addressing issues of sexuality, black comediennes were following in the tradition of black female blues performers who used music to play with mainstream assumptions about black female sexuality. Music historians and feminist scholars have noted how black popular music has served as a forum for the discussion of gender relations and sexual politics, allowing female performers the opportunities to voice the concerns and experiences of those black women whose voices are typically relegated to the margins of public discourse.[92] This is especially true in the case of the blues, the

---

[90] Pearl Bailey, *More Songs for Adults Only*, Roulette R 25101.
[91] "New York's Hottest Club," 34; "Sexiest Night Club Act," *Ebony,* November 1954, 103.
[92] See Hazel V. Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 469-82; Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1998); Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and*

music form perhaps most closely related to the sexy, comedy songs popular among female comics in the 1950s. As Daphne Duval Harrison notes, by addressing topics relating to gender discrimination and exploitation, early blues women demonstrated "an emerging model for the working woman – one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, assertive, and trend-setting." [93] Even in the highly sexual –and highly sexist - R&B of the early 1950s, black female blues singers responded with their own songs that highlighted the sexual inadequacies of black men and asserted their own control over their sexuality.[94]

This is perhaps most evident in the humor of Jackie "Moms" Mabley. Mabley was a veteran comic from the Apollo days who appeared on stage in the guise of a frumpy, yet hip, granny. Yet while her gravely voice and her dowdy clothing, complete with hat and knee high socks stood in marked contrast to the appearance of the sexy comediennes of the era and suggested a lack of sexuality, her jokes were actually quite the opposite. In effect, Mabley used the Moms character to turn the Mammy stereotype on its head. Female sexual desire, particularly her own sexual desire, was a central theme in Mabley's humor, and she frequently bragged of her sexual exploits with younger men.[95] As part of her act, Mabley would frequently sit on the laps of young male audience members or would flirt with the emcee or members of the band, particularly Cab Calloway, whom she joked was her ex-boyfriend. "Now I'm old," Mabley joked, "and they're accusing me of liking young men. And I'm guilty…and I'm going to get

---

Black Culture in Contemporary America, (Hanover, VT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 146-82; White, *Aren't I a Woman.*

[93] Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 10.

[94] Ward, *Just My Soul Responding*, 79-80.

[95] Because Mabley did not record her own comedy album until 1960, little record of her humor during the 1950s exists. However, by this time Mabley's routine had become firmly in place and the jokes she told in the 1960s – especially jokes dealing with men – were by all accounts identical to the ones that she told during the 1950s.

guilty-er."[96] In another joke, Mabley tells a story about asking her grandmother how old women get before they don't want any more boyfriends. "I don't know, Honey," her grandmother replied. "You have to ask someone older than me…A woman is a woman as long as she lives; there's a certain time in a man's life when he as to go to a place called 'Over the Hill.'"[97]

As this joke suggests, Mabley used her humor not only to assert her own sexuality and the sexuality of other black women, but also to challenge the sexuality and authority of black men. She frequently portrayed men in her jokes as sexually impotent and ineffective and was particularly harsh on older men, joking that she would "rather pay a young man's way from here to California than tell an old man the distance."[98] Because Mabley's audience was almost exclusively black, these jokes were implicitly directed at black men. Mabley's costume and persona allowed her the freedom to make these jokes; because she herself wasn't "sexy", she could challenge the sexuality of the black men in her audience.

Mabley's use of sex and sexuality was different than the sexy singer-comedienne's whose success as comics and entertainers depended on their visible sexuality and good-looks. Unlike Mabley, these women were desired by the men in their audience, and often these men happened to be white. Perhaps the best example of this sexy singer-comedienne is Pearl Bailey. Described by *Ebony* as "one of the foremost comediennes of our times," Bailey's career began in 1933 at the age of fifteen when she won an amateur night contest at the Pearl Theater in Philadelphia. After nearly a decade of performing in Pennsylvania coal mining towns, Bailey's career took off in the early

---

[96] Moms Mabley, *The Funniest Woman in the World*, Chess LP 1447.
[97] Moms Mabley, *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley,* Chess LP 1482.
[98] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at Geneva Conference*, Chess LPS-1463.

1940s, when she performed at the Flamingo in Las Vegas (before segregation kicked in), the Village Vanguard, Zanzibar and the Blue Angel in Manhattan, and recorded a song with Frank Sinatra. In 1946, Bailey performed in *St. Louis Woman* on Broadway, where she became a star with two numbers – "Legalize my Name" and "a Woman's Prerogative" – that eclipsed the rest of the show. Following her success in *St. Louis Woman*, Bailey became a fixture on the lucrative nightclub circuit, starring in the Broadway production *Arms and the Girl*, and appearing in two films, *Variety Girl* (1947) and *Isn't it Romantic* (1948). By the mid-1950s, when she began releasing a number of "adults only" albums, Bailey was a successful Broadway and film performer and one of the most popular nightclub entertainers in the country, performing her "relaxed," "funny," and "expressive" routines at such exclusive clubs as the Empire Room at the Waldorf=Astoria and the Persian Room at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan.[99]

As her career trajectory, from the controversial *St. Louis Blues* to "adult's only" albums, suggests, Bailey's performances often addressed sexual themes. What set her apart from other blues singers was her ability to successfully translate the sexually assertive, women-centered themes of the blues into entertainment palatable to well-heeled urban and resort town audiences. While blues women often addressed concerns that were decidedly working-class – unemployment, migration, illness and disease – Bailey's songs contained themes that tended to reflect the concerns of the emerging middle- and upper-middle class (her primary audience): corporate life, consumer goods, and suburban living. In "Westport," Bailey sings of a game "indigenous to suburban life,"

---

[99] "Pearl Bailey," *Ebony*, May 1950, 105; Pearl Bailey, *The Raw Pearl* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1968); Glenda E. Gill, *No Surrender! No Retreat! African American Pioneer Performers of the Twentieth-Century American Theater* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 137-49; "Pearl Bailey," *Current Biography*, October 1969, Schomburg Clipping Files: Pearl Bailey; Martin Burden, "Going Out Tonight," *New York Post*, May 8, 1956, Schomburg Clipping Files: Pearl Bailey.

where a man "grabs a wife of whom [he's] not the husband/and someone else's husband grabs [his] wife." In another song she complains that while she "spends [her] hard-earned bucks on what the ad suggests," nobody makes a pass at her:

> I use Coca-Cola and mamola,
> Crisco, Lesco, and Mazola,
> Exlax and Vaypax,
> So honey, how come I ain't got sex?

Furthermore, Bailey rarely addressed race, a central subject throughout much of the blues, in her music. To do so would risk alienating her white audiences, who were more comfortable with the issue of sex than they were with race.[100]

Yet while Bailey was able to attract respectable middle-class audiences, her performances – like the performances of most other black comediennes - directly challenged middle-class notions of respectability, gender roles and acceptable female behavior. During the 1950s, female sexuality, while essential in the formation of the family, was something to be contained within the rigid structures of marriage and the home. Outside of marriage, it raised fears of sexual chaos, the breakdown of the family, and even Communist infiltration.[101] Black comediennes on the other hand, portrayed themselves as independent and liberated women, whose sexually was not contained by either their husbands or by social conventions. Far from being submissive wives or virginal brides in waiting, the women in their songs directly challenged ideas of female respectability and used sex not only as a means of personal fulfillment but also as a bargaining chip in their negotiations with potential partners and cheating husbands.[102] In

---

[100] Pearl Bailey, *More Songs for Adults Only*, Roulette R 25101; Pearl Bailey, "*Naughty but Nice*," Roulette SR 25125.
[101] May, *Homeward Bound*.
[102] See "Pearl Bailey Becomes a Mother," *Ebony,* January 1957, 63-68.

"Since I Became a Hussy for my Husband," Bailey depicts her willingness to utilize her sexuality as the key to her successful marriage:

> Since I became a hussy for my husband
> I'm leading such a very simple life
> I'm getting so much more of his attention
> Than I ever did when I was just his wife
> …
>
> Since I discovered what will make him happy
> He just caters to my every little whim
> Since I became a hussy for my husband
> No other hussy [is good enough for him]
>
> I've learned to use the language
> I've used language no lady ever should.
> Now we've got so much to talk about together
> And he can't complain that he's misunderstood.[103]

In other songs, Bailey advises her female audience members to "never give anything away / that you can sell," as sex is an effective way to attain material gains. In "From Mouton to Muskrat to Mink," having the good life:

> It's not as hard as you think
> Just work and save your money if you want the best in life
> Then find yourself a millionaire
> Who's tired of his wife.
>
> From Brooklyn to East 63rd
> It's not as far as you've heard
> The shortest distance isn't always in the straightest line
> Sometime you've got to detour up to room 1809.[104]

Furthermore, implicit in this song, as well as Bailey's entire stage persona, was the idea of miscegenation. Bailey's stated willingness to sleep with wealthy, married (and white) men enhanced her desirability to the men in her audience.

---

[103] Bailey, *"Naughty, But Nice."*
[104] *Ibid.*

On the surface, Bailey's continued success and the success of sexy singer-comediennes signaled a shift from a comic stereotype, the Mammy, to a sexual stereotype, the Jezebel. The female equivalent of the Buck, the image of the jezebel suggested a primitive, uncontrolled and threatening sexuality, and by adopting these themes in their performances, comediennes like Bailey risked reinforcing not only many of the stereotypes about black women prevalent in comedy, but many stereotypes about black women found in American society in general.[105] It ran counter to the image of black women as submissive, respectable, church-going women that black civil rights leaders hoped to maintain. It even ran counter to the public image that these women tried to construct of their private lives. While the onstage persona of Bailey and other comediennes often directly challenged middle-class notions of sexuality and gender roles, their personal lives were often far more conventional. Even as newspapers and magazines carried details of their dating lives, in interviews these women voiced their desires to be married. Once married, these women often settled into roles very similar to ones that they challenged onstage. After Bailey and her white husband, drummer Louis Bellson, adopted a child in 1955, Bailey cut her work schedule down to two months a year so that she could "really be a mother to Tony." *Ebony* was there to photograph Pearl playing her domestic role.

Outside of the carefully monitored medium of television and print however, the idealized image of respectability and contained sexuality that these comediennes threatened was, for most Americans, nonexistent. Most Americans in the 1950s were quite familiar with pre-marital sex, multiple sexual partners, sexual enjoyment and

---

[105] Alice Sheppard, "Social Cognition, Gender Roles, and Women's Humor," in *Women's Comic Visions,* ed. June Sochen (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 33-56.

extramarital affairs. Respectable middle-class men and women of both races could publicly enjoy these comediennes, because their image of female sexuality – and not that of movement leaders – most closely resembled their own. The civil rights leadership's image of black respectability may have been an effective media strategy, but it was woefully out of touch with the realities of most black Americans lives. Thus when reporters questioned the emphasis on sex in her nightclub act, Rose Hardaway defended herself, saying "Sure it's sex, but it's progressive."[106]

"And there was no race riot": Racial humor and the integration of the comedy scene

More immediately, by using blue humor to comment on issues of sex, black comedians were in a position to then comment on issues of race, and by the end of the decade, racial humor increasingly became acceptable to white audiences. Black comics inserted jokes about Jim Crow and the civil rights movement into their routines and onto their albums. Redd Foxx joked about how he "spent twelve years in the South one night" and Nipsey Russell chided his audience for not laughing at his jokes, quipping, "I've had better success explaining integration to a lynch mob."[107] At the end of the bawdy party album *The Lion's Tale (or How to Make the Party Roar)*, Russell launches into a routine directly making fun of the South (which he refers to as "behind the Cotton Curtain"), reminiscing about the "marvelous time" he had "barbequing ribs over the burning crosses" and his well received tour:

---

[106] "The New Rose Hardaway," *Ebony*, December 1955, 44.
[107] Redd Foxx, *Laff of the Party, Volume 8*, DooToo, DTL-265; Russell, *Guzzling and Giggling Party*.

> I had a sensational run in Alabama, quite a following in Tennessee. I opened in Montgomery, they had a little club there called the swinging noose. They wanted to hold me over but I didn't want to hang around there…[108]

Variations on these jokes had been told in front of black audiences for at least a decade. By the latter half of the 1950s however, the party album made it possible for these jokes to gain an audience beyond the confines of the black theater and club circuit.

In addition to incorporating general racial material, party albums and standup routines increasingly featured topical material that reflected America's growing awareness and support of the civil rights movement. Russell chided audience members who arrived late to his show at the Baby Grand with the line "c'mon, sit down front, this isn't a Montgomery bus."[109] With both the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act as well as the national crisis over the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, the year 1957 was a turning point, both in awareness of the civil rights movement itself, as well as comedy's increasing role in tapping into this awareness. Just as these events found their way into American living rooms through television, so too did they find their way into American living rooms through Party Albums. "The man asked Ike what he thought ought to be done about the Civil Rights Bill," joked Russell, "and Ike said, 'I think [the Negroes] ought to pay it."[110] By the end of the 1950s, Redd Foxx introduced himself to his audiences with the following joke: "My name is Redd Foxx, R-E- Double D, F-O-double Cross… In Spanish that's Zorro Rojo, In French it's Rouge Renault…In Russian it's Runabitch you Sonabitch. In Little Rock, it's mud."[111] Russell told his audience that though he was told to "keep down the discussion of the racial tensions" in

---

[108] Nipsey Russell, *The Lion's Tale (Or How to Make the Party Roar)*, Humorsonic Records 708.
[109] "Jokers in the Cards," *Show Business Illustrated*, February 1962, 25
[110] Jesse Walker, "Theatricals," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 21, 1957.
[111] Foxx, *Laff of the Party, Volume 8*.

Little Rock, he – like most Americans – was unable to, since the "newspaper headlines [were] shouting" them:

> In the South they have squared off now into two cheering sections, the kids are not throwing stones any more, they're just talking…The little white kids in the South are shouting, '2,4,6,8, we ain't gonna integrate.' An on the other side, the little colored kids are shouting, '8,6,4,2 I bet you damnit, the hell you do.' [112]

Although black comedians did not adhere to the same notions of respectability as the civil rights protestors, the acceptability of their racial humor helped form an uneasy alliance between the two groups.

The increasing prominence and acceptance of black comedians and civil rights-themed humor was part of a larger trend of increased opportunities and more desirable roles for African Americans in the entertainment industry that on the whole suggested a gradual softening in attitudes towards the integration of the entertainment industry. Following the lead of artists like Harry Belafonte, Nat King Cole, Sidney Poitier, Miles Davis and others, black entertainers achieved dignified film roles, lucrative recording and performing contracts, and non-comedic television roles. In Hollywood, the critical success of Ethel Waters, Dorothy Dandridge and Sidney Poitier – all of whom were nominated for Academy Awards – transformed black roles in films from stock racial characters to distinct personalities. "Hollywood is changing its attitude toward Negro actors and actresses," noted *Ebony* magazine. "Movie people who only a decade ago would not dream of giving a Negro performer the 'big build up' are doing an about face that holds real promise for the Negro stars of the future." It is these changes that prompted George Pitts, entertainment writer for the *Pittsburgh* Courier, to

---

[112] Russell, *Guzzling and Giggling Party*.

enthusiastically note that blacks in show business had emerged into "positions of dignity and respect in every phase of the entertainment world."[113]

There was also the gradual softening of racial restrictions in the prominent resort cities of Las Vegas and Miami. Miami, despite the city's growing status as a "Magic City" and a retirement and resort destination for Northerners, was still southern in its attitude towards race relations, leading Moms Mabley to jokingly dub the city "They-ami." The city was solidly segregated and since the 1940s had the highest degree of residential segregation of any major city in the country. During the late 1950s, Miami would experience its own bus boycott, "wade-ins," and efforts to desegregate its local schools during the late 1950s and early 1960s, though whites in Miami did not resist integration with the same level of racial terror and violence as in other southern cities.[114] Included in the city's ban on racial integration were Miami Beach's local resorts and hotels, and in the early 1950s black entertainers were prohibited from even performing. Comics were among the first to open Miami Beach resorts to African American entertainers. In 1951, despite vociferous opposition from local residents and politicians and a "tense" atmosphere among the audiences, George Kirby, Timmie Rogers and the comedy duo of Butterbeans and Susie all performed at previously segregated venues on

---

[113] Waters was nominated for best supporting actress in 1949 for her role as Dicey Johnson in *Pinky*; Dandridge for best actress in 1954 for the title role in *Carmen Jones;* and Poitier for Best Actor in 1958 for his role as a fugitive opposite Tony Curtis in *The Defiant* Ones. Edward Mapp, *African Americans and the Oscar: Seven Decades of Struggle and* Achievement (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2003). Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks,* 160; "Do Negroes Have a Future in Hollywood?" *Ebony*, December 1955, 24, 29; George E. Pitts, "Negro is Coming Into Own in Hollywood Films," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 19, 1958; George E. Pitts, "Respect, Dignity Mark Negro's Status in Show World of '60," *Pittsburgh Courier,* September 17, 1960; Thomas Cripps, "The Death of Rastus: Negroes in American Films since 1945," *Phylon* 28, no. 3 (3rd Qtr. 1967): 267-75.

[114] Sheila L. Croucher, *Imagining Miami: Ethnic Politics in a Postmodern World* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 28-30; Marvin Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 160-238; Raymond A. Mohl, *South of the South: Jewish Activists and the Civil Rights Movement in Miami, 1945-1960* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), ix, 49; "Call Boycott Vote in Miami," *Chicago Defender*, June 13, 1956; "Florida Bus Bias Outlawed by U.S.," *Chicago Defender*, January 12, 1957.

Miami Beach. By the middle of the decade, following the lead of Harry Belafonte, who opened the fashionable Café Pompei at the Eden Roc casino and integrated the facilities, comics would become an important part of the effort to integrate Miami Beach. When curvy singer Joyce Bryant integrated the five-million dollar Algiers casino, her performance went over so well that that she received offers to perform for two other Miami clubs.[115]

Such efforts at integration were not always easy. After *Brown* and the early civil rights movement, racist attitudes and opposition among Miami's segregationists grew more entrenched and vocal. In 1956 the Cotton Club Revue, featuring Cab Calloway, "sultry singer" Sally Blair and mimic comedian George Kirby, became the first all-black revue to perform on Miami Beach when it opened at the Beachcomber. During final rehearsals, however, the *Miami Sun* ran the incendiary headline 'We Don't Want Niggers on the Beach!" on the front page. The night of the show's opening, according to Redd Foxx, a mob gathered outside of the club threatening to "get dem niggers!" "Pandemonium broke out" among the performers, before Kirby calmed the situation down "doing his voice thing." "He was more than an impressionist that night," Foxx recalled, and the cast was able to perform that night to rave reviews. Kirby "stopped the show cold every performance" and made Miami audiences laugh for an impressive sixteen week run. [116]

Las Vegas went through a similar change, though white resistance there was more subtle. Las Vegas, despite its location outside of the South and the city's reliance upon black workers and entertainers to fill and run its casinos, catered to the racial attitudes of

---

[115] "Entertainers Hammer Away at Resort Bias," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 20, 1951; "Racial Bigotry and Intolerance Take a Holiday in Miami, Fla.," *Chicago Defender*, March 31, 1951.
[116] Foxx and Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor*, 159-60.

its southern customers and by the mid-1950s developed a reputation as one of the least hospitable cities for African Americans.[117] "It's worse than any place in Mississippi," said a black celebrity. "[It's] downright prejudiced and really rough on colored people." While the glitzy hotels frequently hired black entertainers, newly enacted segregation laws and local practices prevented these entertainers from staying at the hotels where they performed. Instead, black entertainers were forced to rent rooms at exorbitant rates ($15 a night, compared to $4 for a first class room in the Strip) in boarding houses in the growing segregated neighborhood of Westside ghetto. A common saying among black residents and visitors was that blacks "can entertain on the Strip but cannot be entertained there."[118] When Pearl Bailey was asked to visit Sophie Tucker table's after Bailey's performance she had to wait until the room cleared out so as to avoid violating segregation policies. "I had to smile," Bailey recalled, "for the town was so funny about the racial situation and who was allowed in the room…It was such a laugh, because…though you had worked the club, you were not allowed as a guest in the main room."[119]

Beginning in the mid-1950s however, treatment of black performers and guests in Las Vegas began to improve. In 1955, the first integrated hotel, the three-and-a-half-million-dollar Moulin Rouge, opened on the city's Westside. Designed to attract the black gambling crowd, the Moulin Rouge featured luxurious amenities and first-class

---

[117] Prior to World War II, the black population was quite small and segregation was unnecessary. During and after the war, as the black population grew dramatically and the Mafia took a prominent role in the operation of Strip casinos, racial segregation expanded. By 1947 black entertainers, who previously ate slept, and gambled at the hotel where they performed, were no longer allowed on the Strip except when performing. Segregation in Las Vegas would continue into the 1960s. As late as 1960 the NAACP considered Las Vegas "the fifth worst Jim Crow area in the nation." See Eugene P. Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas, 1930-1970* (Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1989), 173-84; "Postpone 'Sit-In' Plan at Las Vegas," *Chicago Defender*, March 29, 1960.
[118] "Negroes Can't Win in Las Vegas," *Ebony*, March 1954, 45-53.
[119] Bailey, *The Raw Pearl*, 93.

entertainment. A turning point in the city's race relations, for the first time black celebrities could mingle with black and white patrons, leading the *Chicago Defender* to proclaim, "Old man Jim Crow is felled and actually trampled. A good prediction is that he'll soon evacuate the other places here."[120] While the Rouge itself closed unceremoniously after a mere seven months,[121] the *Defender's* prediction did, in part, come to pass. By the end of the year, a number of casinos, including the Sands (in which singer and civil rights supporter Frank Sinatra had a 2 percent stake) and the New Frontier, were providing black entertainers with suites at the hotel. Later that year, barriers on hotel pools and casino floors began to topple as well, as hotel managers realized that having black celebrities patronize their establishments could actually help business.[122]

At the center not only of these efforts to desegregate Las Vegas, but also all of these changes, was Sammy Davis, Jr. A talented mimic, dancer, singer, actor and comedian, the versatile Davis began his career at the age of one-and-a-half. At the age of three he joined his uncle and father in the Will Mastin Trio. For two decades the Will

---

[120] For information on the Moulin Rouge see Moehring, *Resort City in the* Sunbelt, 183; Claytee D. White, "The Roles of African American Women in the Las Vegas Gaming Industry, 1940-1980" (master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1997), 64; "Are Producers Omitting Essentials in Producing All-Sepia Shows? Roy Asks," *Chicago Defender*, July 16, 1955; "Messers Big, Cash 'See' Moulin Rouge Opening," *Chicago Defender*, June 4, 1955.

[121] Sources point to different reasons why the Moulin Rouge closed. Moehring cites casino losses and the mismanagement of the hotel's investors, who failed to secure enough funding to pay off the contractors, as the chief culprits. Sally Denton and Roger Morris claim that the Rouge threatened the profits of Strip hotels and cite an unidentified casino manager in their claim that the Syndicate put the hotel out of business. Many black residents at the time and even up until this day, largely blame the hotel's closing on a racist conspiracy. See Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, 183; Sally Denton and Roger Morris, *The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and its Hold on America, 1947-2000* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001)*;* A. Washington, "This…is Hollywood," *Chicago Defender*, December 3, 1956.

[122] For the changes in Las Vegas see Sam Kasner and Jennifer McNair, *The Bad & the Beautiful: Hollywood in the Fifties* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 204; Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, 182; Arnold Shaw, *Belafonte: an Unauthorized Biography* (Philadelphia: Chilton Co. 1960), 184-85; "Sinatra's Arrival in Las Vegas May Mean Departure of Jim Crow," *Chicago Defender*, November 14, 1953.

Mastin Trio would become a fixture of the black vaudeville circuit, opening for such acts as Duke Ellington, Billy Holiday, and Count Basie, during which time Davis acquired a reputation for being a master mimic and the star of the trio. By the mid-1950s, Davis had emerged as one of the biggest entertainers in show business, with a recording contract at Capitol Records, and performances at popular nightclubs throughout the country.[123]

Davis's position as one of the most prominent and popular entertainers of any race allowed him opportunities that few black entertainers enjoyed. Yet Davis had to fight every step of the way to ensure that he was not only afforded the same opportunities as white performers, but that other blacks could benefit from his success. When the Will Mastin Trio first played at Miami Beach they were forced to stay in the black part of town and were greeted with newspaper headlines that screamed "NIGGER ON THE BEACH" and "Stamp Out Sammy Davis, Jr." When, after a three-encore show, the hotel tried to book the Will Mastin Trio for the next season Davis refused. "The next time *I'm* playing Miami Beach is never!" he insisted. "Not till they let colored people come in as customers. I don't care how much the money is." Davis likewise turned down offers from Las Vegas hotels that refused to allow him and his partners to stay in the hotel. His strategy worked, and Davis became one of the first entertainers to stay in a Strip hotel when the Old Frontier hotel offered the Will Mastin trio the impressive sum of $7,500 plus lodging in their best suite. Although Davis would still not be able to enter casinos where he was not performing, the integration of the Old Frontier was a turning point: "If

[123] "Sammy Davis, Jr." *Ebony*, December 1950, 45-49.

Vegas could open up to us like that, then it was just a matter of time until the whole country would open up."[124]

Following up on his success in integrating resorts in Miami and Las Vegas, Davis turned his attention toward television. In 1954, Davis, along with the rest of the Will Mastin Trio, produced a thirty-minute pilot for ABC, in hopes of becoming "the first bigtime Negro television personality." The show, titled "Three's Company" was to be a half-hour long situation comedy that revolved around the entertaining Lightfoot family (played by the Will Mastin Trio), and would have been the first black comedy on television following the demise of *Amos 'n'* Andy. However, the pilot, which cost over $20,000 to make, failed to attract sponsors and the show was cancelled.[125] After his initial failure to break into television, Davis turned to Broadway, where he starred in *Mr. Wonderful*. Written specifically to showcase Davis's talents, *Mr. Wonderful* opened on Broadway in 1956 as an extension of his Las Vegas act.

The success of *Mr. Wonderful* established Davis as "the very tops in musical comedy type of performance for the television or stage" and television producers hoped to showcase Sammy "the nation over, in the small towns as well as the large cities." Throughout the late 1950s, Davis not only starred in several television entertainment spectaculars but in a dramatic role as well. In 1958, Sammy played Private Spider Johnson in GE Theater's production of *Auf Wiedersehen*. The show opened the 1958-59 GE theater season, and though it went up against a highly anticipated appearance of Rock

---

[124] Sammy Davis, Jr. and Jane and Burt Boyar, *Why Me? The Sammy Davis, Jr. Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 50-55.
[125] "Can Sammy Davis, Jr. Crash Network TV?" *Ebony*, October 1954, 33.

Hudson on the *Dinah Shore Show*, Davis's star power drew solid ratings and garnered the entertainer an Emmy nomination.[126]

Perhaps most significantly Davis, whose variety act had always included a number of impressions and jokes, began adding racial humor to his routines beginning in the late-1950s. During a show at the newly integrated Eden Roc in Miami, Davis, after just doing a Louis Armstrong impression took the oversized white handkerchief that he was still holding and, placing it on his head so that it resembled a hood, said, "And they'll be *another* meeting tomorrow night!" The audience laughed, at first tentatively and then finally uproariously. Davis's manager and former partner Will Mastin questioned Davis's wisdom in telling Klan jokes in front of white audiences, "You tryin' to get yourself lynched? In all my years around show business I never heard a colored man stand in front of a white audience and do those kind of jokes. Never!" Davis replied:

> I never thought about it at all. But they screamed. You heard them. And there was no race riot. On the contrary. Maybe it's because Little Rock is on the front pages everyday and the racial thing is all anybody talks about, but the fact is that by bringing it out in the open it was like I'd bridged a gap that had been between us like it *always* is between *any* colored guy and a white guy until one of them acknowledges that there's something standing between them.[127]

This moment illustrates the extent to which the acceptability of racial humor had changed. While Davis was more of an entertainer rather than a standup comedian, he was, in the words of Gerald Early, "an anti-establishment rebel with establishment material and an establishment audience." His ability to perform racial material in front of mainstream white (establishment) audiences, many of whom were from the South offered proof that the old taboos were gradually being eliminated and racial humor was slowly

---

[126] "Sepia Stars in TV Plans for 1959," *Chicago Defender*, December 20, 1958; Davis and Boyer, *Why Me?*, 78-92.
[127] Sammy Davis, Jr. and Burt and Jane Boyer, *Sammy: an Autobiography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 333-34.

becoming acceptable. Throughout the remainder of the decade, Davis would continue to add more racial humor to his act, and racial jokes would become a staple, albeit a controversial one, of the Sinatra-led Rat Pack which Davis would be a part of in the early 1960s.[128]

As racial humor became more a part of African American comedy, the relationship between comedians and the civil rights movement began to thaw. Whereas in the early 1950s, comedians had been the target of civil rights protests by the end of the decade they had become important to the fundraising apparatus that supported these protests. Both Redd Foxx and Nipsey Russell would serve as emcees at movement fundraisers in the late 1950s. Again though, it would be Sammy Davis who would lead the way on this front. Davis would go on to become a tireless fundraiser for the movement, and SCLC in particular, bringing in more money than everyone except King. As Will Haygood notes in his biography of Davis, "when [the SCLC] needed a quick infusion of cash, needed someone with star power to appear at a fundraiser, King would often turn to [Harry] Belafonte and utter just two words: 'Get Sammy.'"[129] Davis, along with other entertainers, may have threatened the media strategy of civil rights leaders when it came to the image of respectability, but their celebrity status also brought increased media attention and the ability to fundraise that the movement desperately needed. Most often, when forced to choose, movement leaders would opt for more money and media attention, even if it involved "blue" comedians.

---

[128] Gerald L. Early, *This Is Where I Came In: Black America in the 1960s* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 60; Max Rudin, "Fly Me to the Moon," *American Heritage* 49, no. 8 (December 1998), http://www.americanheritage.com/articles/magazine/ah/1998/8/1998_8_52.shtml, accessed July 17, 2007.
[129] Will Haygood, *In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 252.

Conclusion: Requiem for the Kingfish

In July, 1959, Tim Moore, the veteran comic who became famous as television's Kingfish on *Amos 'n' Andy*, passed away at the age of 71. Thousands lined the streets of Harlem to pay their last respects, as Moore's casket, covered in flowers from around the world and escorted by a dozen white Cadillacs and a dozen white Lincolns, made its way through the streets. As the casket passed, "worldly men…furtively dusted away tears" and the crowds of onlookers watched with a mix of outrage and sadness, "tears of sympathy were mixed with tears of self recrimination." Out of work since the cancellation of *Amos 'n' Andy*, Moore died in tragic obscurity despite nearly sixty years in show business. Many of the thousands who had gathered were not there to mourn Moore, but rather to mourn the character with which he would forever be associated. "In a way," *Ebony* magazine observed, "the entire nation shed a tear for whether they were conscious of their membership or not, this was a day of sadness in the realms of the legendary Mystic Knights of the Sea. The Kingfish was dead." Like those at the funeral, *Ebony* struggled to make sense of the Kingfish's death, praising the "laughter and happiness" he brought to millions, while acknowledging that laughing about race publicly was controversial. For *Ebony*, Moore's "best epitaph" reflected this complexity. Significantly it was the same epitaph that Booker T. Washington gave for the great black comedian Bert Williams: "[he] has done more for the race than I have. He has smiled his way into people's hearts. I've been obliged to fight my way."[130]

The Kingfish's death served as a fitting end to the decade, a symbolic reminder that the Sambo stereotype was no longer a welcome presence. The clowning antics, colorful nicknames and costumes, exaggerated dialect and bug-eyed facial expressions

[130] "Requiem for the Kingfish," *Ebony,* July 1959, 57,64.

that had entertained African American audiences for decades were now met with indifference and scorn, when they were not ignored altogether. Whatever their comedic merits, Kingfish, Mantan Moreland, Stepin' Fetchit and other "Sambo" comics were being swept away by history. Such happy-go-lucky humor could not compete with the thousands of African Americans marching in the streets, dignifiedly demanding an equal share in American society and an end to Jim Crow. In the face of this rising protest, that which was funny and acceptable in 1950 was no longer so by 1959. It was time, in Ralph Ellison's words, to "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." [131]

The next generation of comics that rose to prominence at the end of the decade carried with them little of the cultural baggage of their predecessors and thus were in a position to work with, not against, the civil rights movement. After nearly a decade out of the spot light, African American humor was poised to come full circle. Yet despite the changes of the 1950s, several barriers remained. One should not make too much of the success of Sammy Davis, Jr. Davis was in many ways a unique case, and though he performed comic routines, few observers considered him a standup comedian. Black stand-up comedians still did not have a continual presence on television, and even when they did find themselves with a rare television appearance they were often restricted from talking about racial politics. Stand-up comedians like Mabley, Foxx and Russell also did not have access to top comedy clubs and the salaries, prestige and cultural platform that these clubs provided. To move past these final barriers, African American comedy would need a new face and a new strategy.

---

[131] Coleman, *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy,* 88; Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act*, ed. Ralph Ellison (New York: Vintage, 1995), 45-59.

Chapter Four
"We don't serve colored people here – That's alright, I don't eat colored people": Integration, Stand-Up Comedy and Civil Rights Protest, 1961-1965

On April 1st, 1963, comedy sensation Dick Gregory arrived in Greenwood, Mississippi to join in the mass demonstrations already underway. Gregory's active participation in the civil rights movement had begun the previous year when Medgar Evers, the Mississippi field secretary for the NAACP invited the comic to come to Jackson to speak at a voter registration rally. As the first African American standup comedian to break into the posh nightclub circuit and as one of the highest paid comedians of any race, Gregory was a celebrity. More important, Gregory's celebrity was built upon a brand of humor that attacked American racism and broke free of the stereotypes that had been associated with African American comedy for decades. Gregory's willingness to use his celebrity to support the efforts in Jackson, prompted leaders of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to invite the comic to take the next step and participate in the newly launched voter registration campaigns in Greenwood. Preparations for the Greenwood campaign had picked up throughout the winter, with SNCC moving all forty of its field secretaries to the town earlier in the year. SNCC leaders hoped that Gregory's participation would lend the fledgling movement visibility and national support. Though Gregory was supportive of SNCC, he anguished over the invitation, knowing that by participating in demonstrations he risked not only his career but also his life.

Representatives of the national news media greeted the comic when his car arrived from the Memphis airport. That evening, Gregory spoke before a crowd of 1,000 people at a local church. Chiding the back clergy and teachers for not doing more to aid in the struggle, "Mr. Gregory" earned the respect of local blacks. "Looking at those

beautiful faces ready to die for freedom," Gregory told the crowd that he would be "proud to lead them in demonstrations the next day."[1]

The following day, Gregory led forty demonstrators from the county courthouse. Though an obvious target of their hatred and brutality, Greenwood police officers were under orders not to arrest the comic, fearing the negative publicity such an action would create. Gregory, not having to worry about being thrown in jail, hurled comic insults at the Greenwood police with reckless abandon. When a Greenwood police officer grabbed his arm and dragged him across the street, Gregory thanked him "Up North police don't escort me across the street against a red light" or "I don't know my way, I'm new in this town." When called a nigger, Gregory shot back "Your momma's a nigger. Probably got more blood in her than I could ever hope to have in me." When called a monkey, Gregory asked "Who you calling a monkey? Monkey's got thin lips, monkey's got blue eyes and straight hair." When arrested and taken back to registration headquarters, Gregory gave the cop two dollars. "What's this for?" the cop asked. "I always tip chauffeurs," Gregory replied. "Hell, if you don't take me to jail, you're my chauffeur." For historian Charles Payne, these biting insults, combined with Gregory's ability to remain non-violent, made the comic "a model of defiance on the street."[2] Gregory left Greenwood on April 6th having established his willingness and effectiveness to the civil rights community.

Gregory's meteoric rise to both comic stardom and civil rights leadership marked an important moment in the relationship between African American comedy and the civil

---

[1] Dick Gregory, *Nigger: An Autobiography* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1964); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Charles Payne, *I Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
[2] Gregory, *Nigger*; Payne, *I Got the Light of Freedom*.

rights movement. The comic's 1961 legendary performance at the Chicago Playboy Club is generally credited as being the first instance of a black standup comedian successfully integrating the nightclub circuit. In the wake of the Playboy Club performance, Gregory attracted national media attention as well as recording contracts, booking at the nations top clubs and offers to appear on television talk shows. Gregory's success opened the door for a whole host of African American comedians, many of whom had toiled in the relative obscurity of black nightclubs and party albums for decades. Veteran comics like Nipsey Russell, Redd Foxx, Slappy White, and Moms Mabley, as well as newcomers like Bill Cosby and Godfrey Cambridge, were then able to perform at top clubs, appear on television talk shows, and sign lucrative recording contracts. No longer forced to self-censor their routines of any racially charged political commentary in order to gain access to mainstream audiences, these comedians were allowed, even encouraged, to comment on American race relations. Moreover, they could do so in a way that largely avoided perpetuating the Sambo stereotype that had plagued black comedians for decades. Gregory, as well as other comics that came in his wake, was finally able to put forward a model of black comedy that entertained white audiences without violating black notions of respectability or racial pride.

Gregory's participation in the Greenwood movement also provides a clear example of black comedy transcending its role as a form of entertainment to become a form of political speech and activism. Historians take for granted the ways in which black religious expression transcended its spiritual purpose to become a form of political expression during the movement, yet do not always grant the same transcendent purpose to other forms of black expression, including comedy. As historian Lawrence Levine

reminds us though, both comedy and religion were grounded in the same tradition of African American folk expression that allowed black people to make sense of their world and articulate "their feelings, hopes and dreams."[3] And just as black religion assumed a more explicitly political purpose during the civil rights era, so too did black comedy. While not suggesting that comedy is as important as religion, Gregory's participation in the civil rights movement suggests that historians should view comedy in a similar way. By not only transcending the comic stereotype, but also directly challenging the political and social manifestations of those stereotypes with their humor, early 1960s black comedians, particularly Gregory, became a critical voice in the civil rights movement. Black comedians used their humor to attack Jim Crow and critique American race relations in a way that challenged whites to reevaluate their thoughts on race and rights and encouraged all Americans to take a participatory role in the struggle. Black comics themselves took an active role in the struggle, by using their humor as a weapon in the struggle and engaging their audiences – black and white, liberal and conservative, from across the country – in a dialogue that had a direct impact on the movement. And like black preachers, comedians used their visibility to assume leadership roles in the struggle.

"Comedy is Friendly Relations": Dick Gregory and the Integration of Stand-Up Comedy

[3] Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), *xi*.

Gregory's integration of the nightclub circuit was the result of several converging factors in the early 1960s. At the beginning of the 1960s the satirical, or "sick" comedy, that arose in opposition to the homogenizing of American entertainment found itself entering the mainstream of American culture. By 1960, the sense of anxiety over and marginalization and alienation from mainstream culture and politics that had defined the social satire movement since the early 1950s had slowly been co-opted by the same political and cultural institutions that satirists mocked. The incorporation of social satire into mainstream culture was evident in everything from nightclub entertainment and popular music to such unlikely venues as corporate advertising and presidential politics. Admen/satirists such as Howard Gossage and Stan Freberg produced satirical, even self-critical advertisements leading to a flourishing of a "hip consumerism" that regained consumers attention by co-opting the liberal critiques of mass consumer society. The Democratic Party also co-opted satire. As Stephen Kercher notes, both corporate America and the Democratic Party "perceived that honesty and authenticity could be gained through the use of self-effacing, satiric gestures." Kennedy's embrace of satire during both his presidential campaign in 1960 and his early years in the White House, helped make satire a national fad and comics and satirists felt free to criticize everything from the president on down.[4]

Despite initially positioning themselves and their audiences as being alienated from mainstream culture, by 1960 white sick comics found themselves frequently attracting mainstream audiences and becoming part of the mainstream themselves. No longer confined to bohemian comedy clubs and marginal record labels, they appeared

---

[4] Stephen Edward Kercher, "The Limits of Irreverence: 'Sick' Humor and Satire in America, 1950-1964," (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2000), 255-59, 270-74, 284-317.

frequently on television talk shows, including the popular *Jack Paar Show*, and signed recording contracts with national labels. Such exposure allowed the comics' political observations and criticisms to reach audiences that did not necessarily have access to the clubs where comics performed. The effect was similar to that of the party album, but on a much larger scale as the general lack of explicit sexual content of social satirists' routines allowed them to be aired on mass mediums such as television and radio. Bob Newhart's 1960 debut album, *The Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart* reached the number one position on the Billboard chart and became the first comedy album to sell over one million copies. Like other social satirists, stand up comedians soon found themselves co-opted by the same political forces they had originally targeted. Mort Sahl's appearance on the cover of Time magazine, his close ties to the Kennedy family, his informal role as speech writer for the Kennedy campaign and his speech at the 1960 Democratic convention signaled both a "new acceptance of humor in politics" and an acceptance of political dissent in American culture.[5]

Mainstream acceptance of sick humor did not automatically translate to acceptance of African American satirical comedians, requiring black comics to be strategic in their efforts to integrate the nightclub circuit. In thinking about the various places and institutions that African Americans struggled to integrate in the 1950s and 1960s, historians generally focus on public facilities like restrooms, waiting areas and lunch counters. Yet the nightclub stage, even in 1960, was often as segregated as these more recognizable facilities, especially in the South. Thus the integration of the nightclub stage cannot be dismissed as a mere development in American entertainment anymore

---

[5] Jeff Sorenson, *Bob Newhart* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 37; Kercher, "The Limits of Irreverence," 231.

than the integration of interstate busses cannot be chalked up to developments in the travel industry. Furthermore, like efforts to integrate other facilities, the success of Gregory and other black comics in integrating the nightclub stage was a result of more than luck and perseverance (though these things helped). It was also the result of an effective strategy that required comics publicly to present themselves and their humor as "safe," non-threatening and mainstream – even as they challenged the American public to radically alter their ideas of race and democracy.

This strategy was remarkably similar to the one utilized during the student sit-in movement at the beginning of the decade. In early February, 1960 four students – Joseph McNeil, Izell Blair, Franklin McCain and David Richmond - purchased a few items at a Woolworth in Greensboro, NC. In an act that "ignited one of the largest of all Afro-American protest movements," the four students sat down at the lunch counter and, when refused service, remained in their stools until closing. Sensing they were on to something, the students returned the following morning with a group of thirty students from the predominantly black North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College. The protests continued to grow in number and spread throughout North Carolina, as black and white students alike staged sit-ins in their own communities. By the end of February, non-violent protests had taken place in major cities like Baltimore, Nashville, Montgomery, Lexington and Richmond. By mid-April the sit-ins had spread throughout 78 communities in the South and border-states and northern whites showed their support by staging demonstrations and sympathy sit-ins at northern stores. The movement had

spread "like a fever" throughout the country, with over seventy thousand African Americans, as well as thousands of whites, standing up to Jim Crow in dramatic fashion.[6]

Despite significant shifts in leadership style and organizational goals, the student movement mostly continued representational strategies emphasized by the NAACP and the SCLC. Emphasis was placed on respectability, non-violence, adherence to gender norms and middle-class values and appearance. These values are readily apparent in the sit-ins themselves, which, despite their radical implications, partly reflected the middle-class aspirations of the student participants and a continuation of black efforts to become a part of the post-war consumer marketplace.[7] In their attempts to integrate the lunch counters, student leaders instructed participants to "Don't strike back or curse if abused…Show yourself courteous and friendly at all times…Report all serious incidents to your leader in a polite manner. Remember love and nonviolence."[8] Students often wore their Sunday best to sit-ins and began the protests with a prayer. Such appearances made for a dramatic contrast with the violence inflicted upon them by white Southerners. In a column that was reprinted in newspapers throughout the country, James Kilpatrick, editor of the *Richmond News Leader*, contrasted the dignified students "in coats, white shirts, ties…reading Goethe and…taking notes from a biology text" with their white Southern attackers, described as "a ragtail rabble, slack jawed, black jacketed, grinning to

---

[6] Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 9-12; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 71-101; Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 61-87.
[7] Carson, *In* Struggle, 14; Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 190; For the radical potential of the sit-ins see Ella Baker, "More than a Hamburger," in *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader,* ed. Clayborne Carson, et al. (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 120-22; James Baldwin, "A Negro Assays the Negro Mood," *New York Times*, March 12, 1961.
[8] Nashville guidelines quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, 22.

fit to kill…"[9] As with the civil rights conflicts of the 1950s, adopting a public representation that emphasized middle-class respectability proved a valuable tactic in garnering support from the mainstream public for the civil rights protests of the early 1960s.[10]

For black comedians however, such a strategy was radically different than the one they had typically employed for the previous three decades. Since the 1930s black comedians had achieved success with white audiences largely by defying the cultural demands of civil rights organizations. During the 1930s and 1940s, this meant ignoring NAACP demands to eliminate the Sambo stereotype from stage and screen. During the 1950s, it meant openly flaunting the middle-class social and sexual conventions emphasized by the NAACP and the SCLC and valorized in the black media. Black comedians acceptance of these conventions would open the possibility of redefining the rules of black comedy to order to appeal to both civil rights organizations and mainstream audiences.

Credit for this shift goes to Dick Gregory, an inexperienced, 28-year-old Chicago comic. The second of six children, Gregory was born in 1932 in St. Louis, Missouri. A high school track star and president of his class, Gregory attended the University of Southern Illinois – Carbondale, before he was drafted into the Army in 1954. After

---

[9] Kilpatrick quoted at http://www.watson.org/~lisa/blackhistory/civilrights-55-65/sit-ins.html, accessed March 12, 2005. For a broader discussion of the contrasting portrayals in American culture during the 1960s see Julian Bond, "The Media and the Movement: Looking Back on the Southern Front," in *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle,* ed. Brian Ward (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 30-31; Allison Graham, *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race During the Civil Rights Struggle* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 147-68.

[10] It is clear that this lesson extended beyond the Southern civil rights movement. Organizers of the 1960 Operation Alert anti-civil defense demonstrations instructed the women volunteers to be polite, wear their best dress and hose for the protest, so that no one would mistake them for beatniks. See Dee Garrison, "Our Skirts Gave Them Courage," in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 213-14.

returning from the Army, Gregory left college and moved to Chicago, where he worked for the post office. It was not until 1958 that Gregory realized the possibilities of becoming a professional comedian after listening to an emcee at a local Chicago comedy club. "I'd always been the life of the party," Gregory recalled, "but I'd never thought about being a professional entertainer until that minute. But when I walked out of that club, my whole soul was on fire." Gregory began slipping emcees five dollar bills to allow him to perform brief bits that consisted mainly of humorous observations about politics, race and everyday life, hoping to be picked up by one of the many local clubs.[11]

After initially struggling to find a job, Gregory was first hired as an MC at the Esquire Show lounge, where he worked for a year before quitting after the owner refused to raise his ten dollar a night salary (Gregory only worked three nights a week). Gregory then tried his hand at owning his own club where "[he could do anything [he] wanted…do more topical material and less blue material…gain respect as an owner and a performer." The Apex Club opened in the winter of 1959, and although Gregory poured his heart and soul into his operation (not to mention all the money he owned plus all that he could borrow from his friends and his new wife, Lillian, whom he married in February), the club was beset by a particularly harsh Chicago winter that kept crowds away. The club closed later that summer. It was at this point that Gregory came to work for the Robert Show Club after convincing its owner, Herman Roberts, to hire him as MC for $125 a week. The Roberts Show Club hosted some of the top entertainers of the day – Sarah Vaughan, Count Basie, Billy Eckstein, Dinah Washington, Sammy Davis, Jr. and

[11] Gregory, *Nigger,* 89-90; "The Trials of Dick Gregory," *Sepia,* August 1963, 52; Thomas Morgan, "The Two Worlds of Dick Gregory," n.d., PAL Clipping File: Gregory, Dick.

Nipsey Russell – and offered Gregory the chance to perform in front of large black (and occasionally white) audiences.[12]

Gregory's big break came in January of 1961 at the newly built Chicago Playboy Club. For comedians, the Playboy Club stood as one of the most sought after gigs in the country, where a successful stint virtually conferred instant recognition in the world of stand up comedy. Prior to Gregory's appearance, however, the club had only booked white comics. That night was supposed to be no different, as white comic "Professor" Irwin Corey was scheduled to perform. When Corey cancelled at the last minute, Gregory "happened to be the only comic of any complexion available" and was offered the one-night replacement job. Completely broke, Gregory borrowed a quarter for bus fare, hastily boarded the wrong bus, and had to sprint twenty blocks in frigid Chicago weather. When Gregory arrived at the club, minutes before his 8:00 performance, he was met by the club's manager Victor Lounge, who informed Gregory that the evening audience's consisted entirely of white frozen food executives from the South and urged him to postpone his performance. Unfazed, Gregory refused the club's request to cancel. "I was excited from being late," Gregory recalled, "and I was determined – so determined that I ignored Victor. I was certain this was it. I looked into that audience and I didn't see Southern whites. I saw [my wife] and my future. I went for it."[13]

When Gregory took the stage that night, he delivered one of the most legendary performances in the history of standup comedy. Knowing that his audience was

---

[12] Gregory, *Nigger,* 89-90, 111; "The Trials of Dick Gregory," 52; Thomas Morgan, "The Two Worlds of Dick Gregory."

[13] Gilbert Millstein, "Dick Gregory: the Race-Nik Comedian," *Negro Digest,* March 1962, 27; Dick Gregory and Sheila P. Moses, *Callus on my Soul: a Memoir* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 2002), 47. For accounts of Gregory's Playboy Club performance see Gregory and Moses, *Callus on my Soul*, 46-8; Gregory, *Nigger,* 142-45.

potentially hostile, Gregory had to tread slowly at first: "Good evening, ladies and gentleman. I understand there are a good deal of Southerners in this room tonight. I know the South very well. I spent twenty years there one night…" Eventually, after the audience had warmed to the replacement comic, Gregory got around to the topic of southern segregation:

> Last time I went down South, I walked into this restaurant, and the white waitress came up to me and said, "We don't serve colored people here." I said, "That's alright, I don't eat colored people. Bring me a whole fried chicken!"

Twenty years earlier, Gregory might have been run out of the room for telling that joke, perhaps worse if he had told it in the South (even in 1961). On that night though, Gregory reached back to his childhood, hitting the audience with "the kind of jokes [he] used on the bullies back in St. Louis" and delivering an extended set that repeatedly attacked Jim Crow and American racism. As Gregory recalled, "The audience fought me with dirty, little, insulting statements, but I was faster, and I was funny, and when that room broke it was like the storm was over. They stopped heckling and they listened. What was supposed to be a fifty-minute set lasted for about an hour and forty minutes...When I finally said goodnight, those Southerners stood up and clapped, and…took money out of their pockets and gave it to me."[14]

Why Gregory succeeded where so many other black comedians had failed is worth further explanation. At this stage in his career, neither Gregory's talent nor his experience suggested that he would become the first black comic to perform at a top club. In 1961, Gregory was a virtual unknown in the world of black comedy, having never performed any significant engagements outside of Chicago. Although the Playboy Club had brought national attention to Chicago's nightlife, New York and Los Angeles (and to

[14] Gregory, *Nigger*, 144-45. Gregory and Moses, *Callus on my Soul*, 48.

a lesser extent, San Francisco) remained the centers of the entertainment and nightlife world and it was difficult for a black comedian to garner significant attention from the black press without performing in these cities. Even after his breakthrough – which was near universally acknowledged as significant in both the black and white press – commentators described Gregory's humor as "corn[y]" "awkward and obvious," "inauthentic" and "hardly nouveau." "Many of his jokes are the same comic postcards Negroes have been sending themselves for years," wrote one white reviewer. "Like the records on the juke boxes in Harlem, they have been worn down and replaced by others by the time they become bits downtown." Another reviewer suggested the "mechanic" Gregory would be "decimated in an ad-lib duel" against "spontaneously creative" comics like Redd Foxx, Moms Mabley, and Nispey Russell. Black audiences, though approving of Gregory's success and message, were suspicious of a comic whose humor was targeted at and embraced by white audiences. They too compared Gregory unfavorably with Foxx, Mabley, Russell, or any of the up-and-coming comics that the black press touted as the next big thing, and wondered why Gregory succeeded where these others had failed.[15]

Yet while Gregory may have not been the most experienced, the most talented or even the funniest black comedian of the era, he understood the political context in which black comedy operated better than any of his peers. As such he consciously crafted a strategy for reaching mainstream audiences that featured routines and a public persona that closely fit with the image and rhetoric of the movement. In short, he was a political comedian that audiences – white and black, northern and southern, liberal and

---

[15] "Humor, Integrated," *Time,* February 17, 1961, 67-68; Nat Hentoff, "Goodbye Mistah Bones," *Show Business Illustrated,* October 17, 1961, 94; Arthur Steur, "The Space for Race in Humor," *Esquire*, November 1961, 147; Gerald Nachman, "Nipsey Russell: One World After Another," *New York Post*, September 27, 1964.

conservative – could feel comfortable with. More importantly, both veteran comics and "new breed" comics (the name given to black social satirists in the 1960s) were able to borrow aspects of Gregory's strategy and they too gained access to mainstream audiences and helped redefine the nature of African American humor.

Much of this strategy was subtle, subconscious, perhaps even unintentional. Consider Gregory's clothing. Since Timmie Rogers had first abandoned the zoot suit in the early 1940s, the tuxedo stood as the de facto uniform for comics, representing professionalism, respectability, and a rejection of the minstrel image.[16] Yet by the late 1950s, the tuxedo had become an outmoded form of dress for many of the popular young white comics, largely because it was the uniform of choice for the old comics that the sick comics were revolting against –for less formal forms of dress. Adopting a more relaxed form of dress not only distinguished these comics from their predecessors, it also helped them better identify with their younger, hipper audience. "It occurred to me…you mustn't look like any member of the society you're criticizing," Mort Sahl said, explaining his reasoning for not wearing a tuxedo. "I went out and got myself a pair of blue denims and a blue sweater and a white button-down shirt open at the neck: graduate student. Which I was. And I went out there and I did it and it worked. It let the audience relax."[17] Other white sick comics followed in Sahl's footsteps, almost universally abandoning the tuxedo, in favor of a less formal, more relaxed look, *sans* coat and tie.

---

[16] The social and political significance of clothing has a long history in African American culture. See Walter Jenkins, "Slappy White May Well be the Greatest of All," *Black Stars*, May 1981, 46-49; Tera Hunter, *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from its Beginning to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) .

[17] Sahl quoted in Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 242-43.

Black comedians, however, could not completely depart from the formal image without fear of violating notions of respectability within both the black and white community. Older comics, like White, Timmie Rogers, George Kirby and even Russell, continued to cling to the tuxedo (Moms Mabley stuck with her frumpy outfit), out of a sense that the tuxedo held the same significance it did in the 1940s and 1950s. Gregory, perhaps sensing that the tuxedo no longer carried the same cultural connotations, favored wearing three-button black suits while onstage. The choice in clothing helped identify him with the younger, hipper crowd of the sick comics, while at the same time maintaining respectability within both the black and white communities. Observers described Gregory as "immaculately clad," "neatly dressed," a "powerfully put together man of middle height" that looked "just as phthisical as any of his like minded white contemporaries."[18] Other black comedians would adopt this style of dress, and the suit or sport coat and tie soon became the outfit of choice.[19] The *New York* Times, in commenting on a young Bill Cosby's outfit of "plaid sport coat, dark slacks, a conservative tie and a button-down shirt," remarked that while onstage, "he seems to be waiting for a young girl to take to the senior prom."[20] The student comparison is apt, for Gregory and the "new breed" comedians closely resembled the students who took part in the sit-ins and the larger numbers of middle-class blacks who participated in the movement during the early 1960s. On stage, in a black silk suit and black tie, with a

---

[18] "Comic with Point of View," *Newark Evening News*, August 28, 1961; "Humor, Integrated," 67-68; Millstein, "Dick Gregory: The Race-nik Comedian," 27.

[19] This distinction is dramatically evident in a 1966 Ebony article which profiles the top ten African American comedians. Four of the comics (Gregory, Cosby, Cambridge, and Richard Pryor), including the top three, had little comedy experience before 1961 and all wore suits or sport coats while performing. Of the remaining six (Foxx, White, Kirby, Rogers, Mabley and Russell), all had significant experience prior to 1961 and all but Foxx – who himself enjoyed a bit of a second career in the late 1960s and early 1970s – continued to wear either a tuxedo or a costume. "Comedy Row's Top Ten," *Ebony*, April 1966, 105-11.

[20] "Comic Turns Quips Into Tuition," *New York Times*, June 25, 1962.

cigarette in one hand and a scotch in other, Gregory presented a balanced image that both embraced the new comic image while maintaining the dignity and respectability of the black entertainment tradition. His success, and the success of those that followed, can be at least partially attributed to the fact that they looked like the black protestors whose dissent mainstream Americans had begun to embrace. It is no surprise then that pictures of Gregory taken during this period show him speaking at rallies and being arrested in nearly the same outfit that he wore on stage.[21]

The student image is also apt, because Gregory and many of the other new breed comics were themselves either students or had attended college. Like the student protestors, black comedians effectively highlighted their college backgrounds, as a way to identify with and gain access to mainstream audiences. "I always said that the next guy behind me would be coming out of college, would have to," Bill Cosby reflected in a 2000 interview. "What was similar about [he and Gregory] was reading, learning, educating oneself so that you can talk about all kinds of things." The most popular black comedians, like their white counterparts, were "cerebral, irreverent, politically aware," college-educated, and they tailored their routines to a like audience. Both Gregory and Russell had attended college (at the University of Southern Illinois – Carbondale and the University of Cincinnati, respectively). Their college experience allowed them not only to identify themselves as being part of an educated middle class (most articles highlighted their having attended college), it also allowed them to craft more "intellectual type" routines. Gregory was variously described as "perceptive," "intelligent," "articulate" – a

[21] See Gregory, *Nigger*.

"latterday café intellectual."[22] Russell, who had previously mastered the art of fast talking party records, could now deliver "scholarly, off-the-cuff" routines filled with "a conglomeration of lengthy adjectives" that "would bedazzle a convention of semanticists." The enthusiasm that greeted these routines, allowed other, college-educated comics to break through, like the "highly articulate" Godfrey Cambridge, who attended Hofstra and City College in New York before leaving to pursue an acting career, and Bill Cosby who worked his way through Temple University by performing standup at clubs in New York and Philadelphia. These comics all highlighted their educational background in their attempts to gain access to a mainstream audience, and to change the dynamic of African American comedy. As Cosby put it, "Audiences don't go for cheap laughter any more…. You need an education to be a comic today."[23]

Part of this intellectual and dignified, yet slightly hip and irreverent public appearance was the complete abandonment of many of the elements that had characterized black comedy for decades. Despite some scattered initial criticisms that Gregory's routines relied too heavily on dialect, hip jargon, and jokes about narcotics - "unrepresentative stereotypes that work negatively against colored entertainers" - Gregory made a distinct break with the previous generation of black entertainers, many of whom still unconsciously held on to the subtle mannerisms of the minstrel era.[24] Unlike most veteran comics, who had began working in vaudeville as teenagers, Gregory came

---

[22] "Dick Gregory is Great," *New York Journal American*, April 13, 1962; "Integrated Humorist at the Blue Angel," *New York World & Telegraph*, March 20, 1961; *Variety*, February 22, 1961, PAL Clipping File: Gregory, Dick.
[23] "Jokers in the Cards," *Show Business Illustrated,* February 1962, 25; "Nipsey Russell 100%," PAL Clipping File: Russell, Nipsey; George Pitts, "Comedians Are Now Enjoying Greatest Success," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 13, 1962; "Debut of a 'New Breed' Comedian," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 13, 1962; Nachman, *Seriously Funny*, 440-41; "Comic Turns Quips Into Tuition," *New York Times*, June 25, 1962.
[24] "Negro Comics Query," *Variety,* March 8, 1961; "Playbot Interview: Dick Gregory," *Playboy,* August 1964, 46.

to professional comedy fairly late in life, and by that time he had been most influenced by white comics. As Mel Watkins suggests, Gregory's inexperience with the black comedy circuit may have made him "less hampered by the baggage of traditional stage images," and more free to imitate white sick comics. (It is significant that Sahl, the comic that Gregory was most often compared to, also lacked experience at the time of his breakthrough performance) Not only did he not adopt the vaudeville-era stage name – "Moms," "Redd," "Slappy," "Pigmeat" (Nipsey was actually Russell's real name, though, unfortunately, it sounded like a stage name) – of most black comedians, he also did not subconsciously mimic their performance style. [25] Thus, the residual mannerisms of the minstrel era – such as widened eyes, exaggerated expressions and movements, slumped shoulders and the tendency to overplay in front of white crowds – that were present even in such progressive comics as Rogers, Russell and White, were mostly absent in Gregory. [26]

Observers were quick to note Gregory's break with minstrelsy and contrasted him favorably with the previous generation of black comedians. Nat Hentoff, in a lengthy review of black humor, quoted Jack Paar and other reviewers who saw Gregory as "the first of his race to come on as an intelligent comedian without any of the stereotypes long associated with Negro comedy." Gregory's success could be attributed to his ability to discuss race "without any stooping or loss of dignity," argued one *New York Times* reviewer. He "made his mark without resorting to 'Tomming' or being what Negroes call

---

[25] For Gregory's late entry into the entertainment profession see Morgan, "The Two Worlds of Dick Gregory," n.d., PAL Clippings: Gregory, Dick; Gregory, *Nigger*, 100-2. For the residual effects of minstrelsy see Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 498-501. In the same Ebony article cited above, you can also see the stark contrast in stage mannerisms between the new comics and the old ones. Foxx, White, Kirby, Rogers and Mabley are all making faces typical of the same vaudeville era humor that was falling out of favor. "Comedy Row's Top Ten," 105-11.
[26] Watkins, *On the Real Side.*

a 'handkerchief head," and by breaking with the image of blacks as "laughingly servile, sly, stupid, ignorant, improvident, untrustworthy (in an amusing way) and so on." Significantly, critics argued that Gregory was "a far remove from the rubber-stamped Amos 'n' Andy humor," "a caricaturist rather than a caricature." Of course, these reviewers failed to note that it was in fact white audiences and the white-controlled entertainment field that dictated acceptable stage mannerisms and prevented earlier comedians from breaking the stereotype. *Pittsburgh Courier* entertainment columnist George Pitts highlighted this distinction, saying, "In past years the only kind of Negro comic accepted by whites has been at the Amos 'n' Andy level where the Negro has been made to look an ignorant, slow-shuffling idiot. Not so with Gregory." While white reviewers may not have been as perceptive as Pitts in recognizing the root cause of the barriers that Gregory overcame, most viewed Gregory as representing a break with the past.[27]

By avoiding the trappings of minstrelsy, Gregory was able to command respect and attention from white audiences, without evoking feelings of pity or resentment. For Gregory, the challenge was to address the issue of racism without making the audience feel sorry for him. "When I step on that stage, in their neighborhood, some of them are going to feel sorry for me because I'm Negro," Gregory reasoned. "Those who feel sorry for me might laugh a little at first. But they can't respect someone they pity, and eventually they'll stop laughing." At the same time, Gregory had to avoid appearing too bitter or aggressive. He was after all, a black comic ridiculing white society in white owned clubs in front of white audiences. Gregory described this balancing act:

---

[27] Millstein, "Dick Gregory: The Race-Nik Comedian," *26*; Hentoff, "Goodbye Mista Bones," 64; *Current Biography*, June 1962, 29-31; "Comedian Dick Gregory Making it Big," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 18, 1961.

> I've got to go up there as an individual first, a Negro second. I've got to be a colored funny man, not a funny colored man. I've got to act like a star who isn't sorry for himself – that way, they can't feel sorry for me. I've got to make jokes about myself, before I can make jokes about them and their society – that way, they can't hate me. Comedy is friendly relations.

To maintain these "friendly relations," Gregory self-consciously fashioned a routine that appealed to mainstream white interests. Over 80 percent of his jokes were "*white* material," aimed at white comic tastes.[28] Many of his jokes – particularly his warm-up jokes – were humorous observations devoid of political commentary. Gregory often joked about the danger of cigarettes (while he smoked onstage), his troubles with the IRS and his problems with his mother-in-law. He also, with the help of a substantial research budget and two full time writers (one black and one white), was able to craft specific routines for local audiences, making specific references to local events and personalities. These somewhat benign topics served to balance Gregory's more biting comments on American politics. Even when Gregory moved to political topics he was careful not to divide his audience. Thus while he frequently mocked American leaders at all levels – John F. Kennedy, Adam Clayton Powell, Richard Daley, George Wallace – he saved most of his jokes for Russian leader Nikita Khrushchev, a safe target that most Americans would be comfortable laughing at.

Even when addressing the sensitive subject of race relations, Gregory managed to be cutting without being overly aggressive or turning his audience against him. Part of Gregory's strategy was to make fun of himself, before he turned to joking about his audience. As Gregory described it:

---

[28] Steur, "The Space for Race in Humor," 147. Listening to Gregory's routines from the early 1960s confirms this figure, as much of his routines consist of apolitical filler, and political jokes that do not directly address race relations.

> *Just my luck, bought a suit with two pair of pants today…burnt a hole in the jacket.*
>
> That's making fun of yourself.
>
> *They asked me to buy a lifetime membership in the NAACP, but I told them I'd pay a week at a time. Hell of a thing to buy a lifetime membership, wake up one morning and find the country's been integrated.*
>
> That makes fun of the whole situation.
>
> Now they're listening to you, and you can blow a cloud of smoke at the audience and say:
>
> *Wouldn't it be a hell of a thing if all this was burnt cork and you people were being tolerant for nothing?*
>
> Now you've got them. No bitterness, no Uncle Tomming…Now you can settle down and talk about anything you want: Fall-out shelters, the Congo, H-Bomb, the President, children.

The ability to first laugh at himself, and at the situation of blacks in general, was key to Gregory's success with white audiences. "He has learned to chuckle at himself as a Negro as well as at the passions that race around the Negro's efforts to achieve the full blessings of democracy," wrote one white publication. Another found that "what makes Gregory so refreshing is … that he feels secure enough to joke about the trials and triumphs of his own race." Gregory could "joke successfully about the NAACP as well as the PTA."[29]

Even when he moved to the topic of segregation, and began making fun of his audience, Gregory managed to avoid alienating or offending them. Observers described his racial material as displaying "no rancor," "bright but not brassy," "cautious," "deft"

---

[29] Gregory, *Nigger*, 132; "Humor, Integrated," 67-68; "Adorning the News," *New York Times,* June 18, 1961.

and "carefully measured so that… it wouldn't draw blood."[30] Gregory effectively spread the blame for the racial situation, so that no one group was singled out. Southern whites of course received the brunt of Gregory's attacks, but many of his attacks focused on Northern whites, who were quick to criticize the South but ignored the sorry record of race relations in their own backyard. This was partly a reflection of Gregory's own personal view of the situation. In a 1964 interview for *Playboy* magazine, Gregory noted, "up North [white people] like to condemn racial segregation in the South, but when I'm down in Mississippi, I see the big white house where the white folks live, and two hundred yards behind it is the shack where the Negroes live, and I'm thinking how we can't live this close to the white folks up North." This also reflected Gregory's ability to balance his attacks without offending an entire segment of his audience. While Southerners and racial conservatives were no doubt uncomfortable with his racial barbs, the inclusion of Northerners and liberals made Gregory's routines seem less like attacks and more like routines observations. This idea is further supported by the fact that many of Gregory's jokes focused on the shortcomings of northern blacks and black leaders, who did little to help the situation or made too big a deal about racism. In one joke, he implicitly compared himself to those blacks who acted irrationally in protesting racism, telling his audience that he had learned to rationalize the race situation, so it "[didn't] bug [him] as much as it should."[31] As this suggests, Gregory's humor was actually quite moderate – particularly when compared to other comedians of the era. "Some people

---

[30] "Comic with Point of View," *Newark Evening News*, August 28, 1961; "Humor, Integrated," 67-68; "Adorning the News"; Hentoff, "Goodbye Mistah Bones," 94.
[31] "Playboy Interview: Dick Gregory," 40; Dick Gregory, *In Living Black and White*, Colpix CP 417.

keep waiting for him to say outrageous things," Max Gordon, co-owner of the Blue Angle in New York said, "but he cools it. He's no Lenny Bruce."[32]

Also part of keeping his white audience from getting too uncomfortable, Gregory (at least in the beginning) also eliminated any blue humor from his routines.[33] Unlike in the 1950s, when sexual references were seen as edgy and a way to gain access to white audiences, sex had become an obstacle in black attempts to integrate comedy (as it was for black attempts to integrate other social institutions in this country). For a black comedian hoping to perform in front of mainstream white audiences, sexual jokes not only prevented you from performing on television, it also made it difficult to perform civil rights oriented humor, as white customers would either dismiss the performer as being "that Negro stereotype comic" or become so "hung up with the Negro sex mystique" that they get uncomfortable and do not laugh at the non-sexualized jokes.[34] Sex, particularly interracial sex, became a topic to avoid, even when audience members themselves introduced it into the routine. During one of Gregory's performances in Indiana in 1960, an inebriated Hungarian woman shouted, "You're handsome!" The white audience froze, their mood about to turn hostile, until Gregory replied, "Take another drink. You'll think you're Negro. Then you'll run up here, kiss me and we'll both have to leave town in a hurry." (The place then burst out in laughter.)[35]

---

[32] Hentoff, "Goodbye Mistah Bones," 94.
[33] Judging by the available evidence, this trend seems to have only lasted a couple of years. By 1963 Gregory had started to introduce more sexualized humor into his routines (though nothing compared to the material found on party albums) and other comics would soon follow.
[34] Gregory, *Nigger*, 131-32; Morgan, "The Two Worlds of Dick Gregory." A few years ago I was presenting a paper on Gregory at a conference and a senior historian remarked that Gregory was not black humor, because "black humor was filthy." While I disagree, it does suggest the huge difference not only in style, but also in substance, between Gregory and those comics who began their careers before him.
[35] Gregory, *Nigger*, 135.

Eliminating the sexual references did not mean eliminating the masculine features that had characterized African American humor for decades. Comics still emphasized, and audiences still valued the assertive, aggressive routines that featured cutting commentary and combative give and take between the comedian and his audience.[36] Gregory himself often cast his role as a comedian in explicitly masculine terms. When asked if, when growing up, he wanted to be a comedian, Gregory replied, "I wanted to be everything the white folks wanted to be. I wanted to be Buck Jones, the cowboy, the Long [sic] Ranger; *I wanted to be all of the things that represented manhood in a sick society*."[37] Indeed, in his 1964 autobiography, Gregory's development as a comedian closely mirrors his development as a man: humor was used to fend off bullies who picked on him for being skinny and not having a father; to ease the humiliating effects of discrimination, when "all the manhood [he] won…out on the track was taken away when [he] got into town" during college; to aggressively disarm hecklers who called him "nigger" during his performances.[38]

Once stripped of their explicitly sexual content, the masculine qualities of African American humor fit well with the gender politics of the civil rights movement. Historian Paula Giddings describes the 1960s as a "masculine decade," and notes that "[i]n the beginning, the civil rights movement had served to confirm masculine as well as racial assertiveness."[39] While women made up the bulk of the participants in demonstrations and meetings, were crucial in organizing protest campaigns, and held prominent positions

---

[36] For more information on the masculine aspects of African American humor see Chapter Three.
[37] Roger M. Williams, "Dick Gregory: From Stand-Up Comic to Lie-Down Martyr," *World,* August 15 1972, 20, PAL Clipping File: Gregory, Dick.
[38] Gregory, *Nigger*, 79.
[39] Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 314.

in local and national civil rights organizations, rarely were their efforts noted within the mainstream media. The press, along with the public (and, until recently, most historians) placed more value on those typically masculine qualities of the movement – charismatic leadership, confrontation and direct action – while minimizing or ignoring women's contributions altogether. Just as the media tended to focus on the masculine aspects of the movement, so too did it tend to focus on the masculine aspects of comedy – which perhaps also explains why Moms Mabley, despite outselling every other black comedian in the 1960s, never achieved the same recognition as other comics and also perhaps why black female comedians have continued to struggle to achieve the same artistic and financial recognition as their male counterparts.

It makes sense then that Gregory's breakthrough would come at the Chicago Playboy Club, the nation's premiere nightclub that combined masculine excess with middle-class respectability, and racial justice with gender oppression. The first of what would be many nightclubs opened throughout the world by businessman and sexual impresario Hugh Hefner, the Chicago Playboy Club first opened its doors in 1959. Patrons paid a fifty dollar membership fee entitling them to a "key" – the Chicago club sold 35,779 keys in its first year – which gave them access to the club, which was billed as "Disneyland for adults." As a private club, the Playboy reflected the sensibilities of the men's magazine it was named after - top-dollar dining and entertainment coupled with beautiful women clad in scanty bunny outfits – and suggested both an air of sophistication and exclusiveness as well as a sense of impropriety. Men and women could gather at the Playboy and flout social and sexual conventions by listening to hip entertainers and flirting with the Bunnies, all within the safe confines of a club that was

ultimately designed for upper-middle=class professionals and that held strict rules preventing artists from performing blue material and bunnies from having social contact with the guests. This combination was the foundation of the club's breathtaking success in the early 1960s. In the last three months of 1961 alone, the club hosted 132,000 guests (making it the world's busiest) pushing the yearly gross receipts past four-and-a-half million.[40]

Also part of Playboy's masculine sensibility (as well as its success) was its commitment to civil rights and ending Jim Crow. A three part feature in the Pittsburgh *Courier* noted that "a new dimension in civil rights has emerged as a striking by-product of the Playboy fantasyland – the startling awareness that respect for all men is as much a part of the playboy image as the swimming pool, the walnut paneled playroom, the bevy of beauties or the tastes for fine wines, food and art." This respect for equality between the races was reflected in every aspect of the Playboy enterprise, including hiring at the corporate level (Playboy had black employees in key positions including night manager of the Hollywood club, promotions art director and supervisor of the dark room), the selection of bunnies and playmates (December 1958 featured a "sepia beauty" as playmate and the clubs routinely hired not only black, but Asian and Hispanic women to serve as bunnies), the integrated format of the syndicated television variety show Playboy's Penthouse, the corporation's support of black acts, the public image of Hefner and the attitudes of the company's customers. "You see, I'm no civic leader; I'm not a religionist. It is not surprising that these people [the Playboy man] would wear a mantle of civil rights," Hefner said. "But I represent, I guess I am the symbol of the swingingest,

---

[40] See *Variety* February 7 and March 22, 1961, PAL Clippings: Playboy Club; "Playboy Bunnies are the Most!" *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 10, 1962.

the heppest cat around. Yet I have very strong beliefs in the equality of men. Just as the pipe I smoke becomes part of the image, so will my deep convictions about human rights."[41]

Reaction to Gregory's Playboy Club appearance in January was swift and overwhelmingly approving. Right after the performance, Chicago critics almost daily praised Gregory as the "hottest and most unusual new talent in show biz," and dubbed him the Negro version of Will Rogers and Mort Sahl. (To which Gregory would comment, "In the Congo they call Mort Sahl the white Dick Gregory.") After a favorable review in *Time* the following month, national publications soon began to take notice. "Dick Gregory is streaking off the launching pad like a Canaveral success," the reviewer in *Variety* said. "Consensus is that…Gregory out-comets Bob Newhart, another Chi product." Reviewers were also quick to note that Gregory was "the only member of his race thus far to join with and hold his own" with other "topical" comedians. However, more than a mere "novelty," reviewers predicted he would "become a hit with the sophisticated nightclub audience." Gregory's success was not just a personal one however, as reviewers predicted that soon other black comedians would follow. The *Pittsburgh Courier* noted, "With the advent of Gregory there are signs that this barrier against Negro comedians is about to be breached."[42]

---

[41] "Playboy Clubs vs. Jim Crow," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 24, 1962; "Playboy Employs the BEST Regardless of Race," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 3, 1962; "Playboy Bunnies are the Most!"; "Playboy of the Western World," *Ebony*, July 1965, 103-11; Dave Hepburn, "Playboy Club Opening Postponed; Hefner Empire Includes Many Negroes," *New York Amsterdam* News, August 11, 1962; Russell Miller, *Bunny: The Real Story of Playboy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984).

[42] "Dick Gregory – Humor Integrated," n.d.; "Humor Integrated," *Time,* February 17, 1961, 67-68; "Dick Gregory, Chi Avant-Gardist, 1st Negro Comic to Hit Plush Intimeries," *Variety*, February 22, 1961; "Comic Withers Prejudice Cliches," *New York Times*, March 20, 1961, PAL Clipping File: Gregory, Dick; *Pittsburg Courier*, March 18, 1961.

Significantly, both black and white publications viewed Gregory's integration of the nightclub world through the lens of the civil rights movement and often framed his integration of the Playboy Club as a significant civil rights victory. Many compared it to Jackie Robinson's integration of Major League Baseball less than fifteen years prior. Others looked to the world of black comedy itself. "Not since Bert Williams taught England's King Edward VII how to shoot craps had there been such an uproar over a Negro comedian," *Ebony* magazine enthused (referring to Williams's integration of the Broadway stage nearly six decades earlier). "Dick Gregory, the object of all this adulation is the first Negro comedian to crack the color line in comedy…His success may lead to a relaxation of the bar against other Negro comics." [43]

Black comedians themselves responded to Gregory's success with a mix of jealousy, relief and caution. Many black comedians, who had worked years, even decades, to perfect their craft, were upset that a young, inexperienced comic was taking the spotlight that they thought was rightfully theirs. "I have letters from people who told me after Gregory made it that they actually felt guilty about not hiring me first," Nipsey Russell said, before egotistically adding, "If I *had* been first, some of these others couldn't have made it. They would have been compared to me." Russell, along with Slappy White and Timmie Rogers actually accused Gregory of stealing their material – a distinct possibility considering they performed at Roberts while Gregory was the emcee – and followed the comic around to his shows to find out "which of [their] material not to use any more." Recognizing that Gregory had in fact redefined the rules and restrictions on black humor, comics were also fearful of being compared to Gregory, or being boxed into doing a certain type of humor. "*Now* the bookers tell us we can do social satire,"

[43] Steur, "The Space for Race in Humor," 155; "Dick Gregory," *Ebony*, May 1961, 67.

Russell complained. "*Now,* I'm being courted to do records other than party albums. But they're still categorizing me as a *Negro* comedian. Damn it, I want to make it as a comedian, period. But the way things are going now, every time we come on the floor we'll be expected to say something funny about a lynching." Redd Foxx joked, "I've been here a long time…and I still think I can make it my way. Besides, as mixed as I am in my background with Chinese, Indian and African blood, I don't want people saying I'm a yellow Dick Gregory." Moms Mabley, although pleased with Gregory's success, cautioned, "Don't expect anything to happen too fast…They still have only one Sidney Poitier up there. You don't see them beating up the bushes for more. And you *know* he didn't learn to act all by himself." [44]

Despite these fears and resentments, Gregory's success had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the careers of these comedians and on black comedy in general. His success proved to nervous agents, producers and audiences that a black comedian could in fact make white audiences laugh. And while Gregory received the bulk of the media attention, booking agents, producers and audiences were now willing to test out other black comics, thus greatly expanding the commercial opportunities for black comedians in ways not seen since the 1920s. Just over a year prior, black comics had bemoaned the state of the profession and had questioned whether to continue trying to break in. By 1962 comics were performing in top clubs and attracting wider, and whiter audiences. Among nightclubs it was the Playboy franchise that led the way. In addition to Gregory's six-week run, other comics were given the chance to perform for various Playboy Clubs, now located throughout the country. Both Moms Mabley and Slappy White performed at the Chicago club by the end of the 1961. Nipsey Russell was scheduled to headline at the

[44] Nachman, "Nipsey Russell: One World After Another;" Hentoff, "Goodbye Mistah Bones," 94.

opening of the Playboy Club in New York in 1962, before construction delays and problems obtaining a liquor license forced the club to reschedule Russell's performance. Slappy White performed for the Teamsters conventions at the Playboy Clubs in Miami and Chicago in early 1962.

Other clubs soon followed. Gregory was immediately booked at the hungry i in San Francisco, the Blue Angel in New York, the Latin Casino in New Jersey, and Freddie's in Minneapolis. Slappy White had a two week engagement at the 500 Club in Atlantic City, where Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr. normally performed. In 1962, Redd Foxx made "his first outing as a headliner in an ofay club" when he opened at the Summit on Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, and later headlined at the Crescendo and the Interlude. Russell's performances at the Baby Grand in Harlem, which previously catered to local blacks and a few adventurous whites, now attracted a 50-75% white audience, including many celebrities.[45]

This dramatic change in fortune can be seen in the revival of the career of George Kirby. Kirby was a mimic comic who came up through the vaudeville ranks and performed throughout the country with top band leaders such as Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway. While Kirby's career enjoyed considerable popularity in the early 1950s, it began slipping in the mid-1950s due to his addiction to heroin and in 1957 he left the entertainment word to enter the Federal hospital in Lexington, KY. Kirby returned to comedy in late 1960, and was greatly helped by Gregory's success, which made audiences more willing to laugh at the racial elements of Kirby's humor. By May, 1961 Kirby had performed as major clubs in both Miami and Las Vegas, becoming the first

---

[45] "Slappy White Dislikes Offensive Comedy," *Pittsburgh* Courier, May 12, 1962; *Current Biography*, December 1972, 9-11, PAL Clipping File: Foxx, Redd (1962-1989).

black comedian to perform in the main room of a Las Vegas hotel, when he performed at the Riviera with Harry Belafonte (the two had previously performed together at Harrah's in Lake Tahoe, after Belafonte had watched Kirby perform at a Carnegie Hall benefit). He had also appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show, made a guest performance with Sarah Vaughan at Basin Street East in New York and was in the middle of an extended run at the Chicago Playboy Club. The following year, he became the first black comedian to perform at New York's Copacabana.[46]

Like Gregory's Playboy Club date, it is important that we view these successive integrations of various comedy clubs as civil rights victories, for audiences and the comedians themselves often did so. Consider Slappy White's successful integration of the New Orleans Playboy Club. Following the success of the Chicago Playboy Club, Hefner decided to franchise the club, awarding the first two franchises to owners in Miami and New Orleans. Like Miami, the New Orleans club did not admit black patrons, citing a Louisiana ordinance mandating segregation.[47] The club was open to booking black guests, and they tapped White to integrate the stage, as Gregory "was too controversial to play the southern clubs." Driving to the front of the club in his Cadillac, White "walked through the front door," and began his four week contract. White's success in performing in front of an all-white audience struck local black leaders as an empty victory and a tacit acceptance of segregation, and after the first week the local NAACP came by White's

---

[46] Kirby was no doubt also aided by Sammy Davis, Jr.'s pioneering efforts in integrating resorts in Las Vegas and Miami (see chapter 3). Arthur Gelb, "Comedian Makes a Surprise Comeback at 35," *New York Times*, May 17, 1961; "George Kirby Will Be the First Negro Comedian at NY's Copa," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 20, 1962.

[47] The Miami and New Orleans Playboy Clubs' refusal to seat black patrons was an unintended embarrassment to Hefner, who had not required franchise owners to operate desegregated facilities. Miami's refusal was particularly embarrassing, for in that case the club owners were not bound by local laws and instead chose not to integrate. Hefner eventually bought back the club from the owners, at a significant markup, and also worked behind the scenes to change the law in New Orleans.

hotel and "they told [him] they didn't think [he] should be working the Playboy Club because they didn't allow blacks to come in and it was segregated." White listened politely, but disagreed. "I said, look fellas, I've found a way to get in because as you can see I'm in there every night. Now you find a way to get in." While it is tempting to view White's response cynically, as a way to avoid canceling a lucrative engagement, it is more accurate to say that White saw his Playboy Club performance as a crucial first step in not only integrating the club but in helping to solve the race problem.[48]

In addition to more club work, Gregory's breakthrough also paved the way for increased recording contracts and television appearances. Almost immediately after his Playboy performance, Gregory signed a two record deal with Colpix for $25,000, later released as *In Living Black and White* and *East and West*. Both Moms Mabley and Slappy White had their performances at the Chicago Playboy Club recorded and released on record (as *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* and *Slappy White at the Playboy Club*). Black comics also appeared more frequently, and in a different capacity, on shows like *Ed Sullivan Show* and the *Jack Paar Show*. Paar in particular had long been a leader in booking black comedians (though he did cause quite a controversy when he invited Stepin' Fetchit to appear in the late 1950s) and his outspokenness on civil rights issues made him a favorite of the black press. Still, while Paar had allowed black entertainers to perform on the show, never had he allowed them to take part in the discussion panel after they had performed, prompting the *Pittsburgh Courier* to wonder, "If Mr. Paar is so strongly against segregation, why not give some authorities on the subject a chance to air

---

[48] "Slappy White Dislikes Offensive Comedy"; "Slappy White Tops New Orleans Playboy Bill," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 15, 1962; Walter Jenkins, "Slappy White May Well Be the Greatest of All," *Black Stars*, May 1981, 48.

their views publicly as members of his panel? All Negroes are experts in this field."[49] After being invited to appear on the show, Gregory demanded to sit on the panel and Jack Paar agreed to his demand. "I can honestly say there was no harassment," Gregory later said. "I kept wondering why it had never happened before. It was almost like an oversight on Black folks' part. We had just automatically accepted that treatment." Once on the panel, Gregory did not have to hold back and was able to offer his critiques of politics, segregation and racism to a national audience. During one panel Gregory observed: "Watching television is somewhat different for me than for you. There I am, looking at the end of the Dinah Shore program. She throws the whole world a kiss, and I know that kiss wasn't meant for me." After watching Gregory appear on Paar, the wife of a black comedian said, "It was startling enough…to see a Negro sitting in one of those side chairs on the Paar show instead of just doing his act and walking off. But what he said!"[50]

Other comics would soon follow, and the sight of black comedians appearing on talk shows as both a performer and a participant became a common one in the early 1960s. Within the span of a little over a year, black comedians went from being a marginal presence in the world of comedy, performing in small clubs and on party albums, to central players, performing in top clubs, appearing on television and signing lucrative recording contracts. The transition was dramatic. As Gregory joked to a Playboy Club audience, "the way things are going, soon you'll need to be my color to get a job."[51]

---

[49] Sammy Davis, Jr. had appeared on the panel but as a guest host, not as a performer, and had sat in the host's chair and not on the panel couch. "Does Jack Paar Show Practice Segregation?" *Pittsburgh Courier,* April 16, 1960.
[50] Gregory and Moses, *Callus on my Soul*, 274; Hentoff, "Goodbye Mistah Bones," 66.
[51] Gregory, *In Living Black and White*.

"Once you get them laughing, you can say anything": African American humor and the critique of race relations

The significance of Gregory's breakthrough and the integration of the comedy circuit was not just the presence of black faces in a previously all-white medium. After all, black comics had been integrating various sites of comedy - stage, film, radio, television, and nightclubs – for decades prior to Gregory's Playboy Club appearance. What makes this period significant in the broader history of the politics of African American comedy is the type of comedy being performed. Unlike previous decades, where racial commentary had to be hidden from white audiences, communicated through veiled references, or interspersed with sex jokes, by the early 1960s black were free to address a variety of topics, including marriage, taxes, presidential politics, nuclear proliferation, the space race and most especially, the subject of race and race relations.

By publicly addressing the sensitive topic of race relations in their routines and off stage comments, black comics inserted themselves into the debates surrounding the civil rights movement. Humor scholars have long noted the ability of standup comedians to function as shamans, anthropologists or cultural mediators by exposing society's deeply held values and beliefs, as well as its anxieties and flaws.[52] These characterizations however, fail to take into account the explicitly political functions that African American comedians assumed in the 1960s. Not only did comics expose the oppressive, and often ludicrous, nature of segregation and American race relations, they did so in a way that directly benefited the movement. Comedians became civil rights spokespeople, even (in the case of Gregory) movement leaders. They not only exposed

[52] For theories on the role of the comedian on popular culture see Albert Goldman, *Freak Show* (New York: Athenaeum, 1971); Stephanie Koziski, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist: Intentional Culture Critic" *Journal of Popular Culture* 18, no. 2 (1984): 57-76; Lawrence Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1985): 71-80.

society's problems, they indirectly encouraged their audiences to take a participatory role in the struggle. Though their politics were often in lock step with mainstream civil rights organizations and leaders, black comedians continued to challenge the tactics, values and opinions of the white liberals and the black elite. These challenges suggest an alternate vision of civil rights politics in the early 1960s, one that enhances our understanding of the civil rights politics of the period.

As we have already seen, the process of breaking with the minstrel tradition and inserting comedy into mainstream political discussion did not require comedians to completely abandon jokes that had served them well for decades. The South continued to be a prominent target of ridicule, as black comics drew upon a rich tradition of humor that mocked Jim Crow and Southern segregation. Jokes about the Ku Klux Klan, lynching, and the unintended uses for burning crosses – for barbequing ribs, keeping warm during the winter and for providing light when the streetlights in the black neighborhood inevitably failed – remained common. Slappy White joked about getting along fine in the South because "[a]ll the nicest places have signs on 'em saying they's *only* for me. You see, my name's Slappy White!" In a live performance at the Chicago Playboy Club, Moms Mabley told the familiar joke in which a black man is pulled over in the South for running a red light. When the officer came to the window and asked the driver why he ran the red light, the driver responded, "'Cause I seen all you white folks goin' through on the green light, I thought the red light was for us." The 1960s may have brought a new dynamic to the civil rights struggle, but some of the jokes that had carried throughout that struggle still proved effective. [53]

---

[53] Steur, "The Space for Race in Humor"; Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club,* Chess LP-1460; Nipsey Russell, *Comedy Sampler*, Humorsonic Records NR 708; Dick Gregory, *Running for*

Yet even though many of the themes were familiar, they were worded in ways that not only reflected their new mainstream audiences, but also the new political context of the civil rights movement. The above jokes, and many others like them, were designed for black audiences prior to the *Brown v. Board* decision. Thus many of them targeted the absurdities of segregation; absurdities that black audiences knew all too well. However, in the years following *Brown*, integration became a common theme as well. Consider the following jokes. In one joke, a black comic makes fun of an advertising campaign urging viewers to "come on Down to Florida" by pointing out black vacationers' experiences with segregation:

> I jumped in the black pool [down in Florida]. See cause I found out down there they have a white pool and a black pool and they are exactly alike except that the black pool don't have any water in it.[54]

Except for the specific reference to the advertising campaign, this joke could have been told in the 1940s. On the other hand, Gregory tells a similar joke, only he emphasizes the experiences of blacks with integration in his hometown of St. Louis:

> [A]ll our parents made us get out there whether we could swim or not…. They [white city officials] were real nice to us, they knew they had to integrate [so] they hired a new lifeguard for us…he was blind. It was a glorious day [when] we all walk[ed] out to that integrated swimming pool, diving board fifty feet up in the air. We got up on the diving board, they blew the whistle, we jumped and they drained the pool.

Even well-worn jokes about restaurant segregation took on new meaning when situated within the context of the student sit-on movement. "I'm really going to have to cut my show short 'cause I have to leave here this morning and go down to North Carolina to sit in the restaurants," Gregory would tell his audience at the Playboy Club. "It's not funny, I

President, VeeJay VJLP 1093; Slappy White, *Slappy White at the Playboy Club*, Mercury MG 20692; Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at Geneva Confernce*, Chess LP 1463.

[54] Gregory, I*n Living Black and White;* Godfrey Cambridge, *Ready or Not…Here's Godfrey Cambridge,* Epic FLM 13101.

have a kid brother been sitting in the restaurants for six months and like he's so damn sure he's not gonna get waited on, he don't even take no money with him. Wouldn't it be funny if they serve him and [he's] broke?"

As this example suggests, the racial humor of the new generation of black comics reflected the sensibilities not only of their newly obtained mainstream audiences, but also the particular politics of the period. Rather than reflecting general ideas about racial segregation, comedians referenced particular civil rights leaders, tactics and protests. Slappy White updated a familiar joke about black bus drivers by referencing the Freedom Riders, joking that "The Freedom Riders have been on so many busses in the South every city in the South now has a Negro bus driver. And you should see him trying to make a left hand turn with his arm out the back window." Gregory, whose large staff of writers and his voracious appetite for reading newspapers allowed him to stay up-to-the-minute with his humor, also situated many of his jokes within particular campaigns or cities. In one routine, Gregory addressed the 1962 campaign in Albany, Georgia – the first organized direct-action campaign since the bus boycott movement to involve King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Referring to a march during which 267 black youths (Gregory, in a moment of comedic license, said 700.) were arrested while humming, Gregory asked his audience, "Did you ever think you'd see the day when hummers would have to go to jail? And all them kids were doing…was humming some hymns. Can you imagine had they caught them praying?"[55]

---

[55] Slappy White, *Slappy White at the Playboy Club*, Mercury MG 20692; Dick Gregory, *Talks Turkey*, VeeJay LP 4001. For information on the Albany Movement see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 524-58; Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 85-109.

While her routines were perhaps the least modern of those black comedians who achieved prominence during the early 1960s, even Moms Mabley updated her jokes by situating them within the context of the movement. In "Dream of a Southern Governor," Moms Mabley awoke to the "nightmare" scenario of a Martin Luther King, Jr. presidency, with Adam Clayton Powell, Roy Wilkins, Dinah Washington and Louis Armstrong as high-ranking government officials. She also used specific events in her routines, telling her audiences, "Yes baby, what I told you about Salem is true, they put Moms in jail," or telling them a fairly tale about Little Cindy Ella, who has been prevented from going to the biggest dance of the season at the University of Mississippi. The use of fairy tales and nursery rhymes had long been a favorite Mabley technique, but in "Cindy Ella," Mabley places the fairy tale in the context of James Meredith's battle to integrate the University of Mississippi. Meredith becomes prince charming and Attorney General Bobby Kennedy becomes the fairy godmother. Using his two magic wands – the Constitution and the Civil Rights Bill – Kennedy transforms Little Cindy Ella into a white American, and sends her off to the dance in a carriage driven by white horses, driven by a white chauffer, with explicit instructions to be home by midnight. This "fairy tale" solution to the problem of segregation - suggestive perhaps on the Kennedy administration's reluctance to pass tangible civil rights measures – comes crashing down when Cindy Ella loses track of time:

> The clock struck twelve. Her beautiful white dress had turned to rags. The bow on her head had turned to a stocking cap. She looked down, and her gold slippers had turned to sneakers. She looked out her window and her coach had turned to a wagon. And the beautiful white horse to an old nag. And her chauffer had turned to Pigmeat [Markham]. Everybody on the floor was gazing at poor Little Cindy Ella, the little colored girl, dancing with the president of the Ku Klux Klan. This story is to be continued. Her trial comes up next month![56]

[56] Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Convention*; Moms Mabley, *Out on a Limb,* Mercury MG 20889.

In addition to addressing civil rights issues, black comics also made frequent references to foreign leaders, issues and events. These references served as a basis for comics to insert themselves into the larger arena of Cold War politics, something that white sick comics had been doing for years. Rather than directly critique US foreign policy however, black comics often directed the comedic barbs at foreign leaders and Communist countries. Soviet premiere Nikita Khrushchev was a frequent target of ridicule, as was Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Mabley continued to put herself at the center of international affairs in her routines, serving as a US representative to both the United Nations and to the Geneva Convention. This hypothetical position allowed her to insult Khruschev directly, calling him an FBI – "fat bald and impossible" – and challenging Soviet women to a fight "*down home*" - "'Cause those women over there don't know nothin' about no razor blades and throwin' that can of lye." Such remarks allowed black comics to establish a relationship with their audience; rather than us (blacks) versus you (the white audience); it became us (Americans) versus them (Communists).

At the same time however, the politics of the Cold War could be used against the United States, as comics frequently linked the South to America's Cold War enemies. Like Communist Russia, China and East Germany, the American South became a foreign, backward and hostile country. Moms Mabley, borrowing popular Cold War terminology, referred to the South as being "behind the scorched curtain," and would tell her audiences of her travels: "I'm tellin' you, I've met so many foreigners in my travelin'…Georgonians, Alabamians, Mississippians, Texassesses…." Gregory blamed his being fired from the post office on his habit of placing mail for Mississippi in the foreign mail box and suggested that the recent construction of the Berlin Wall might

inspire the South to build "a wall right at the Mason Dixon line" to keep blacks from fleeing the South.

By linking the South to Communism in this manner, comics effectively used Cold War politics to comment on race relations. This was a similar tactic to the one used by mainstream civil rights leaders, who used international concerns as leverage in their petitions to the federal government for the expansion of civil rights protections. This tactic became even more effective during the early 1960s, when dramatic confrontations – the Freedom Rides in 1961, James Meredith's efforts to integrate the University of Mississippi in 1962, and the Birmingham campaign in 1963 – attracted worldwide media attention that threatened America's democratic image in the world. Civil rights leaders used this to their advantage, and used the language of American democracy to highlight the hypocrisy of American race relations. Comics used similar tactics to make fun at the absurdity of Jim Crow. During the negotiations for the tractors-for-prisoner trade with Castro, Nipsey Russell proposed on the *Jack Paar Show* to "send Ross Barnett twelve cotton gins in exchange for fifty Freedom Riders."[57] Gregory described Mississippi as "probably the only state in the whole wide world where a fair trial is considered something primitive," and argued that Khrushchev could have sat in a Georgia courtroom and "gone back to Russia to make Communism work." Communism may have been hostile and backward in the minds of most Americans, but black comics effectively demonstrated that for most black Americans, the "democratic" South remained a far greater threat.[58]

---

[57] Steur, "The Space for Race in Humor,"147.
[58] Mabley, *Moms Mabley at Geneva Conference*; Dick Gregory, *East and West*, Colpix CP 420; Gregory, *Running for President*; Dick Gregory, *So You See…We All Have Problems*, Colpix CP 480.

The newly liberated countries in Africa served a similar function. Africa had long held a significant place in black cultural and political imagination.[59] This was especially true in the 1960s, as 1960 alone witnessed the independence of 17 African nations, brining the total to 25. The most significant of these was the Republic of Congo, whose independence from Belgium amid a bloody conflict attracted international media attention. For black comics, the Congo served as a useful reference point for their routines, which, on the surface tended to paint Africans in a very unflattering light. Gregory expressed pleasure at reading a headline that suggested the Congolese were "finally beginning to swing on our side. Now the paper didn't just come out and say that. I think it said, '73 Witchdoctors Join Blue Cross.'" Jokes about cannibalism were common. Slappy White - who often walked onstage at the beginning of his routines beating tom-toms and telling his audience he's "sending home a message to advise the family to put their clothes on because the missionaries are coming" - joked about doing a television show in the Congo called "Eat the Press." Gregory complained about constantly being asked by white audiences and reporters why white troops were not being sent to the Congo. "You know damn good and well why they're not sending white troops to the Congo – War Brides" Gregory told his audience. "Send them boys over there and they marry them native girls and bring them back home. Five years after its all over, meet one of them cats at the bus line coming home from work and say, "Man you better hurry up home, your wife just ate up the whole block."

---

[59] Kevin Gaines, *African Americans in Ghana: Black Expatriates and the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); James Hunter Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans: Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

In portraying the Congo as a savage and even bloodthirsty place, comedians could effectively compare it with the South. In this respect the Congo functioned as a sort of reverse Mississippi, where *whites* lived in terror of racial violence. "Don't laugh at those cats in the Congo," Gregory implored his audience. "They tryin' to balance out the world for me. See now, you can go to Mississippi, I can't. I can go to the Congo, and you can't." As her first act as president, Moms threatened to "give a certain southern governor a job as ambassador to the Congo and let him go crazy looking for a men's restroom with WHITE on it!" [60]

> Aw, everybody was there. They had a ball. Yeah. All them men from the Congo, some of 'em was late getting there 'cause they had plane troubles, and they had to be grounded in Arkansas, Little Rock. One of them Congo men walked up to the desk in Little Rock and said, 'I'd like to reserve a room please.' The man said, ' We don't cater to your kind.' He said, 'No, you misunderstand me. I want it for my wife. She's your kind.[61]

The resulting appearance of African delegates from these newly independent states in the US – and in Washington, D.C. in particular - could be used to further disrupt audience notions about segregation. Comics played off whites' inability to distinguish between Africans and African Americans. White updated the familiar lunch counter joke to play off of this uncertainty, joking about a trip he took from Washington to New York along the segregated Route 40: "I walked into a restaurant on Route 40, and the man said, 'I'm awful sorry, but I can't serve you.' I said, what do you mean you can't serve me? You don't know who I am – I might be from Ghana.' He said, 'Well, you're not Ghana eat in here.'" Similarly, Gregory joked about being stopped for drunk driving in Washington, D.C. and saying, "Lieutenant, wouldn't you be in a heckuva lot of trouble if

---

[60] *New York World Journal Tribune*, May 3, 1967, PAL Clipping File: White, Slappy; Gregory, *East and West*; White, *Slappy White at the Playboy Club*; Gregory, *In Living Black and White;* Moms Mabley, *I Got Somethin' to Tell You*, Chess LPS 1482.
[61] Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the UN,* Chess LP 1479.

you hit me with that nightstick here in Washington, D.C. then found out I'm an African?" White confusion could also be a source of frustration, as comics expressed resentment at being automatically equated with Africans. When another black comic deboarded his plane in Las Vegas to be greeted by 114 degree heat and a "local yokel" saying "Boy I bet you colored people sure do love this heat," he fumed:

> I've been out of Africa for over three hundred years. If it's not air conditioned at the hotel when my woman and I get there, we be picketing in the morning." I mean, what does he think I am, an Ashanti tribesman? He probably figures I'll get my war canoe and drive down the gambling strip in Vegas going [speaks 'African' language] – with my Kirari blowgun going "ptooey."

Jokes like these not only reinforce African stereotypes of savagery, they also explicitly distinguish black Americans from these stereotypes.[62]

Though certainly problematic, these jokes reflected the broader strategy of the civil rights movement – which sought to highlight southern white savagery through unfavorable comparisons – and the attitudes of many of their audience members – who themselves would look down on and distinguish themselves from white southern violence. Yet the fact that some of the most cutting comments were reserved for racism in the North suggests that comedians were willing not only to challenge their core audience, they were also able to push a civil rights agenda different from that of the SCLC and SNCC into the mainstream consciousness. Although many black comics could claim Southern roots, by the early 1960s many no longer performed, much less lived in the South. Gregory was based in Chicago; Moms Mabley, Nipsey Russell, and Bill Cosby lived in New York; Redd Foxx lived in Los Angeles. For them, the problems of the North – discrimination in housing and jobs, police brutality, rampant (though largely hidden)

---

[62] White, *Slappy White at the Playboy Club*; Gregory, *So You See…We All Have Problems*; Cambridge, *Them Cotton Pickin' Days Are Over,* Epic FLM 13102.

racism and prejudice – represented more personal, and equally important problems to those faced by blacks in the South. Comics frequently seized the opportunity to educate their white Northern audiences of the problems in their own backyard. "We're so unfair with the South," Gregory told a San Francisco audience. "We push all the racial tension on the South and it happens all over… Take my hometown of Chicago. When the Negroes move into one large area and it looks like we might control the votes, they don't say anything to us. They have a slum clearance. You do the same thing out her on the West Coast but you call it freeways." In the following joke, Gregory turns the issue of Northern segregation back on his audience in order to explain why many Northern blacks are able to drive seemingly expensive cars:

> Lotta people don't understand how we can own so many Cadillacs with them inferior jobs. Well, racial segregation buys us Cadillacs. You have a country club you can join. I can't, so I save five hundred a year. You know damn well I'm not taking my family to Florida this winter – that's another fifteen hundred I save. Walk out of here tonight and get hit by a bus, I'm not going to the best hospital where they're going to charge me twenty-five hundred, so I go to city hospital for free. Figure it out, I save twenty five hundred plus two thousand – [for] forty-five hundred General Motors will sell me anything I want.

By making blacks the beneficiaries of segregation, Gregory is able to highlight the extent to which segregation exists in the North and shatter the myth that Northern blacks are irresponsible in their conspicuous consumption. [63]

By highlighting the inconvenient fact of Northern racism, black comedians directly challenged the racial attitudes of their "liberal" audiences. This is especially true for Godfrey Cambridge, perhaps the most successful comic to follow in Gregory's immediate wake. Born in Harlem, raised in Nova Scotia and educated at Flushing High School and Hofstra University (leaving before graduation to pursue acting), Cambridge

---

[63] Gregory, *East and* West; Gregory, *In Living Black and White*.

had little direct experience with Southern Jim Crow, once describing himself as a "northern urban Negro [who] don't know nothin' about Mississippi!" In addition, unlike many other comics of the period, who got their start in vaudeville or comedy clubs, Cambridge came to comedy by way of the legitimate theater. He was a cast member of *The Living Premise*, a play whose sole target was race relations, and had donned white face in his role as a raped and murdered white woman in Jean Genet's *The Blacks*, for which he won an Obie from the Village Voice in 1961. Cambridge had also played Cousin Gitlow in Ossie Davis's *Purlie Victorious*, a conscious spoof on an Uncle Tom character that sang *Old Black Joe*.[64] Cambridge was awarded a Tony for his performance and critics heralded the play as a "victory" and "the merriest kind of proof that the times have changed" citing *Purlie's* references to the Montgomery bus boycott and lines like "What the Negro needs is not grits but greatness, not fat back but fightback [*sic*]."[65] By 1962, Cambridge's success on stage had also earned him several guest spots on television, including roles on the *US Steel Hour*, *Naked City* and the *Defenders*.

In his role as standup comic, Cambridge would become the most persistent critic of northern racism and "liberal" racial attitudes. Tired of being the only black man at the party and having to talk about the race problem with white partygoers when he really wanted to talk about his golf score, Cambridge devised a "Rent-a-Negro" to satisfy the "crying need" for whites to feel comfortable with social integration. Having made the mistake of "rent[ing] them too light," Cambridge has to deal with an angry white customer who used his Rent-a-Negro plan, only to have a white man show up at his door.

---

[64] For information on Cambridge see Nachman, *Seriously Funny,* 437-43; Mel Gussow, "Laugh at this Negro, But Darkly," *Esquire*, November 1964, 64-65, 155; "Debut of a 'New Breed' Comedian," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 13, 1962.

[65] Poppy Cannon White, "Purlie Victorious," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 3, 1962.

When the customer called to complain, Cambridge asked to speak to his employee. "Baby, will you tell that man that you're colored – you're costing me money." To which the man replied, "I'm not colored, I just have more fun that way." "So I had to go over and fill in for him to protect my money," Cambridge complained.

> I had to go there and answer all those very hip questions. Yes, I like watermelon. We have watermelon soup, watermelon pie, fried watermelon. Joe Louis is a heckuva fighter. Dance? Yeah…The cat said, 'That wasn't very good.' I said, 'Well, I'm only part colored.' And if they really got on my nerves I had a cute way of getting back at them. Cause what I do is, we'd sit there at the table eating and I starting eating my mashed potatoes with my bare hands. And I'd hear the mother saying, 'Shh. Don't say nothing. He don't know no better and if they get mad he may picket the house.' Do you know that I sat there at that table with them six people with all of us running our hands through that mashed potatoes. I got so disgusted I got up and left the table.[66]

Cambridge, along with Gregory, also frequently joked about housing segregation in the North, an often unacknowledged – and violently enforced – form of racism in northern cities and suburban communities. As successful entertainers who could afford to buy into wealthier white neighborhoods, this topic struck especially close to home for many African American comics, for whom a house in the suburbs stood as a symbol not only of success, but also of the limits of northern racial liberalism. As Godfrey Cambridge joked, "You have no idea the amount of havoc that a Negro can cause on an average middle-class American city just walking down on a Sunday morning with a copy of the *New York Times* Real Estate section under his arm." Gregory told of his new white neighbors, not realizing that a black family had just moved in next door, approached him and said, "Hey, boy! You're really doing a wonderful job on these people's front. I've been living next door here for the last fifty years and I've never seen this place looking so good during the winter time. What do you get for doing that?" To which Gregory

---

[66] Cambridge, *Ready or Not*.

replied, "Oh, I get to sleep with that woman inside," before walking over to the husband and asking, "You want me to do yours next?" Comics also joked about moving into a white neighborhood and planting watermelons and cotton, stereotypical signs of "blackness," in the front yard or on the terrace. In one joke, after integrating the San Francisco neighborhood of Pacific Heights, Cambridge screamed (in a thick black dialect), "Yeah, mama, we got it at a bargain! We put the watermelon vines over there come spring, and the barbeque over there…"[67]

Jokes like these played off of not only white fears of integration, but black fears as well. For upwardly mobile African Americans, being the first to move into a white neighborhood not only provoked curiosity – at best – and violence – at worst – from the white community, it also made them representative of, and to a certain degree, responsible to the black community. Comedians frequently joked about the NAACP's attempts to police black behavior in white neighborhoods, by discouraging any behavior considered to be "black." Gregory, who in response to white audience members requests to speak up, would reply, "I can't talk loud because the NAACP tells me not to – it destroys this new image of us." In another routine Gregory highlighted the extent to which NAACP efforts to eliminate blackness had been codified:

> I just moved into an all-white neighborhood not too long ago. The other day, I'm out raking my snow…and I don't want to rake no snow, but anytime you're the first Negro in this town to move into an all-white neighborhood, the NAACP sends you that little booklet…Page two tells you how you're supposed to dress like. You just go out in this all-white neighborhood and rake your snow on your lawn in work clothes; no stocking cap. Page Two says you will wear an Ivy League suit and a T-Shirt – no coat 'cause we want to make them think we're healthy. [After you rake the snow] you go in the house and you get your wife and kids and you walk out on the lawn and you build a snowman so you can convince your neighbors that we have tight family ties – that we get along. Page seven says

[67] Godfrey Cambridge *Ready or Not*…; Gregory, *Talks Turkey*; Godfrey Cambridge, *Them Cotton Pickin' Days Are Over*.

> that if you have to whup your wife in that all-white neighborhood, put her in the car, take her to Argel Gardens, beat the hell out of her, take her home and tell the neighbors she got hit by a bus.

In addition to illustrating that some of the misogynist language that had characterized earlier forms of African American humor had carried over into the next generation, jokes like these tapped into middle-class blacks' fear of integration. By showing that integration was a difficult process for both sides, comics not only educated their white audiences (many of whom were themselves experiencing the trials of integration), they also helped assuage their fears of undesirable blacks moving in next door.

African American humor also addressed more basic economic fears about integrated housing. One of the more tragic results in residential integration was a phenomenon known as blockbusting. Once a black presence had been established in a white neighborhood, unscrupulous real estate agents would convince white residents that the black presence had resulted in a decline in property values. Fearful of living in an integrated neighborhood, and worried that their investment would soon be worthless, white home owners sold their homes to real estate agents for below market value, who then sold them at a premium to black home buyers. Cambridge poked fun at this phenomenon by telling his audience about the time he got off in Scarsdale (an exclusive suburb just North of New York City) and "in the fifteen minutes it took [him] to get another bus, property values dropped 50%." Yet black comics were quick to point out, that block busting negatively impacted both black and white, as blacks often had to pay far more than the house is worth only to see its value to plummet the moment they moved in. Gregory, in response to NAACP request to monitor his behavior, so as to not depreciate property values, replied, "Buddy, they just charged me $75,000 for a $12,000

house – I'll depreciate this whole block!" Another joke pointed out that depreciation was also a major concern to those black families who were the first to move into a white neighborhood: "What the white people don't realize is that the Negro that's living there, he's not afraid of bricks and bombs and burning crosses, he's afraid that another Negro will move into the neighborhood."

If comics, in an effort to educate their white audiences, presented a sympathetic view of the suburban black middle class's struggle, they were less than generous to those blacks who distanced themselves from the black community after integrating. Since the early twentieth-century, jokes that mocked black attempts to become white had been a staple of African American humor, both on stage and in the streets. Comedians of the 1960s drew liberally on this tradition in their attacks on blacks who benefited from the civil rights struggle, but then claimed that the struggle was not their problem. For Gregory, "The New Negro [was] nothing more than an Ivy League suit, the short haircut, and the *Wall Street Journal* under one arm and the *New York Times* under the other and *Jet* and *Ebony* tucked in between them." Cambridge joked about the janitor who brought an attaché case with him each morning on the commute in from the suburbs and was so ashamed to buy a watermelon, he had it wrapped and told his friends it was a bowling ball.

Although historians are beginning to recognize the contributions of comedians to the movement, they have tended to gloss over the impact of their comedy. This is particularly true for Gregory. Historian Brian Ward argues that "it is unlikely that Gregory actually converted too many people to the black cause through his satire. Black fans hardly needed convincing of the cruel absurdities of Jim Crow, while his white fans

were almost by definition broadly sympathetic and willing to have their collective consciences wittily pricked." While it is true that Gregory's core nightclub audience consisted of well-heeled white liberals, by no means was his entire audience sympathetic to his cause. Southerners and northern whites that lived by restrictive real estate covenants, also attended Gregory's shows, if only out of a morbid sense of curiosity, and the efforts that Gregory went through to balance his material suggests that the audience was not always entirely "willing." Ward's comment also ignores the sheer breadth of Gregory's exposure. By 1964, Gregory had released several best-selling albums, had written books of humor and an autobiography, had made numerous appearances on television and had been interviewed by nearly every popular periodical, black or white, in the country. His appearance on Jack Paar was particularly important for, as Gregory relates, "Not until Oprah has there been a TV talk show host in recent years with the power of Jack Paar. Going on his show was like having your book chosen as Oprah's book of the month."[68]

Because of this national exposure, Gregory enjoyed a position that only a handful of civil rights leaders enjoyed. More importantly, he used this exposure to constantly educate and challenge his audience to challenge their assumptions on civil rights, becoming a bona fide leader in his own right. Like the sermons of black southern preachers, Gregory's routines were infused with a dual purpose and served to both entertain and inform/inspire. To understand the potential of Gregory's routines, it's perhaps useful to view them as political speeches rather than comedy routines. For

---

[68] Ward, *Just my Soul Responding*, 313; Millstein's *Negro Digest* (*New York Times*) article suggests Gregory's audience consisted of a wide spectrum of whites, only a handful of which were truly sympathetic to the cause. See Millstein, "Dick Gregory: The Race-Nik Comedian," 27; Gregory and Moses, *Callus on my Soul*, 274.

Gregory the line between lecturing and entertaining was a blurry one and his performance at San Diego State is a good example of how the two could meld into a single event. Recorded in 1963, Gregory ended his routine and immediately launched into a question-and-answer session with his audience. In many ways, Gregory's responses during the question and answer session sound like one-liners from his standup routine. Consider the following response on liberals – "[They ask], 'What can we give you tomorrow?' But the people who are hung up in this minority struggle want something today . . . The Northern liberal and the Southern liberal to me represent the third man in a fistfight." Had Gregory said this during his routine he would have provoked laughter. Yet the audience didn't laugh. As the liner notes suggest, "for a time, the comedy [was] over." Showing that "once [he gets] them laughing, [he] can say anything," Gregory is able to remove politics from the guise of humor, forcing the audience to think rather than laugh.[69]

Gregory's audiences often unexpectedly found themselves in middle of a civil rights dialogue when they had expected (and paid for) a comedic monologue. Gregory would sternly tell his audiences to "Wake up!" to the injustices in their own backyard. Like most comics, Gregory had his fair share of hecklers. Rather than humiliate them (though he did that as well), Gregory would use them as an opportunity to engage in a civil rights dialogue. In the middle of a bit on the 1960 election, a woman interrupted him to voice her support to Eisenhower's presidency. When she objected to his reply – "It didn't matter to me who won" – he reminded her, "You've been voting for a long time, I haven't." During another performance he was told that a group of white students from

---

[69] My understanding of the cultural effects of black humor comes from a number of sources. See Boskin, *Sambo*; Koziski, "The Standup Comedian as Anthropologist"; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*; Jerome Zolten, "Black Comedians: Forging an Ethnic Image," *Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 2 (1993): 70-71. For information on the San Diego State performance see liner notes to *My Brothers Keeper*. Dick Gregory, *My Brothers Keeper,* Gateway GLP 9007.

Ol' Miss were in the audience. Gregory sought them out between sets and asked them if they thought that James Meredith (who had integrated Ol' Miss the previous semester) would return the next semester. When they replied "no," he told them, "the money you spent in here tonight is going to me and I am going to take it and give it to Meredith for his tuition."[70]

Gregory's comedy also served as a useful model for civil rights activists to remain defiant without turning the mood of the situation to one of violence. The use of humor in the student movement was key from the beginning. Students told jokes during demonstrations, at the office and in jail as a way of coping with incredibly stressful and potentially dangerous situations. As Clayborne Carson notes in his discussion of the sit-ins, "the delicate balance between militancy and restraint produced tensions often released through humor." (The joke about not serving colored people in restaurants was popular among the demonstrators.) But more than simply releasing tensions, comedy became an effective weapon in the struggle. Indeed, for a group of activists committed to non-violence, comedy provided a useful way of attacking segregation while adhering to their principles. A well-timed joke or insult, hurled at a Southerner whose entire society was under siege, could be more effective than a punch, shaking his belief system while maintaining the moral high ground.[71]

---

[70] "The Trials of Dick Gregory," *Sepia*, April 1963, 57.
[71] Carson, *In Struggle*, 12, 204-24; Payne, *I Got the Light of Freedom*, 172. My limited correspondence with SNCC veterans supports the idea that humor permeated the movement.

"Now part of the Movement": Dick Gregory and Black Comic Activism

The very nature of Gregory's humor made him an effective spokesman for the movement. Not only did he enjoy national visibility, but he appealed to a broad audience that ranged from working-class blacks to well-heeled white liberals. He even drew the support of the NAACP, an organization that traditionally had a very antagonistic relationship with African American comics. Shortly after gaining his fame, movement leaders called upon Gregory to use it in support of the movement. Gregory obliged by performing fundraisers for CORE and the NAACP, and quickly developed friendships with civil rights leaders such as James Farmer, Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins and Martin Luther King, Jr. In addition, when not doing benefits for movement organizations, Gregory made sure that nightclubs owners advertised his performances in the black and white press, inserting non-segregation clauses in his contracts and donating a significant portion of his income to various civil rights causes.

Though important, plenty of entertainers, black and white, had been performing at benefits and donating money to the cause. At the end of 1962 Gregory would be called upon to do more when Medgar Evers asked him to come to Mississippi, to speak at a voter registration rally in Jackson. The request evoked a feeling of surprise and fear in the comic. As Gregory put it, "It's one thing to be bold in New York or in Chicago – it's a whole other matter to be bold in Mississippi."[72] Like many African Americans, Gregory was aware of Mississippi's reputation as the most backward and racist state in the union, an awareness that developed in his childhood in St. Louis and grew sharper when the pictures of a badly mutilated Emmett Till were printed on the cover of *Jet* magazine. This

[72] Gregory and Moses, *Callus on my Soul*, 53.

well-deserved reputation had kept most of the prominent civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins, from even visiting the state, much less setting up shop there. In accepting Evers invitation, Gregory was taking a risk that few entertainers were willing to take.

When Gregory arrived in Mississippi he met a smiling Evers, who escorted him to a rally in Jackson. At the rally, Gregory listened to an old man, who had just been released from prison after serving a year for killing a white man who tried to burn down his house. Until his prison sentence, the man had never spent a night apart from his wife of sixty years; on the second night of his sentence she died. The story had a profound effect on Gregory, who later recalled:

> I was now part of the Movement. This seventy-five-year-old man had gone to jail at the end of his life fighting for all the Emmett Tills; he was fighting for my unborn child. I knew there was no amount of money that would ease his pain or bring back his wife. I was almost ashamed that all I could do was make a monetary offer.[73]

Gregory would have the opportunity to do more than make a monetary offer to the movement when, after the rally, Evers introduced Gregory to the mother of Clyde Kennard, a man who had been falsely convicted to seven years hard labor for stealing five bags of chicken feed after trying to integrate Mississippi Southern College.[74]

Kennard's situation greatly moved Gregory, and he made a public New Year's resolution (onstage at Chicago nightspot, Kelly's) to get Kennard out of jail. The Kennard case became somewhat of a *cause celebre* for Gregory, who talked about him to

---

[73] Gregory and Moses, *Callus on my Soul*, 59.
[74] For a complete account of Kennard's case see Dittmer, *Local People,* 79-83. See also "The KGB of the Cotton Patch: How Mississippi Spied on Black College Students," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 21 (1998): 34-35; Nadine Cohodas, "James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 16 (1997): 112-22; James W. Silver, "Mississippi: The Closed Society," *Journal of Southern History* 30, no.1 (1964): 3-24.

whoever would listen. Gregory sent representatives to Mississippi to gather facts on the case. One of the items obtained on the fact finding mission was a copy of a medical report that showed that Kennard suffered from colon cancer and not only had been refused treatment, but was forced to perform hard labor. "I figured I'd get the story and release it," Gregory revealed in an interview with *Playboy* magazine, "and when American find out, America get him out [sic] - 'cause there are certain things even the bigots don't want to see even a nigger go through." The public relations campaign was successful in forcing Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett to suspend Kennard's sentence indefinitely in early 1963. Once freed, Kennard was admitted to Billings Hospital at the University of Chicago to undergo treatment. It was too late however, and Kennard died in the summer of 1963 at the age of 36.[75]

Gregory's efforts in the Kennard case attracted the attention of student members of SNCC who were in the midst of a campaign in LeFlore County, Mississippi. LeFlore, located in Delta Cotton Country, was home to 30,000 African Americans, most of them sharecroppers and nearly all of them poor. Since 1955, the Federal Government, through the Department of Agriculture, provided basic foodstuffs to the state to distribute to its poor population during the harsh winter months. It was up to each individual county to decide whether or not to request the food and consequently to pay for its storage and distribution. In LeFlore County, need was high as 60 percent of the population - 28,173 people - was eligible to receive aid. Although both black and white qualified, it was the black population that received most of the assistance.

---

[75] "Playboy Interview: Dick Gregory," 40. For Gregory's efforts to free Kennard see "How Dick Gregory Saved Clyde Kennard's Life," *Sepia*, April 1963, 54; Gregory and Moses, *Callus on my Soul*, 61.

As the civil rights movement spread throughout the South, LeFlore County became the target of voter registration drives organized by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), an umbrella organization of civil rights organizations working in the Delta. Sensing it was under attack, the LeFlore County Board of Supervisors elected to end the county's participation in the program, save for the 5,835 people on the public welfare rolls. The effect on the black population would have been disastrous. African Americans accounted for over 90 percent of the nearly 23,000 people dropped from the program. COFO's Atlanta office and Friends of SNCC offices in the North sent out a nationwide call for help. Various community groups, churches, liberal organizations and colleges responded to the call. Gregory assisted the effort of these civil rights groups in transporting food to Mississippi and distributing it to needy blacks. Not only did Gregory serve as a visible spokesman for the effort, he also financed a significant portion of the cost for transporting the food out of his own pocket.

Stung by criticism that his involvement was only a "cheap publicity stunt," Gregory accepted State Welfare Commissioner Fred Ross' challenge to take over "the entire food distribution problem" in LeFlore County. Needing to raise $37,000 (the cost of maintaining the food distribution program for one year) Gregory issued a previously unreleased recording. This LP, released under the title *My Brother's Keeper* was recorded a month earlier at San Diego State College. Rather than being a comedy routine, *My Brother's Keeper* was the question-and-answer session that followed. Gregory sold these records for $1.60 with all profits going to the efforts in LeFlore. The NAACP bought 10,000 of the albums and distributed them to local branches in 26 cities to sell at

fundraisers, meetings, rallies and gatherings. The UAW and CORE also purchased a number of albums.[76]

Eventually Gregory helped bring in more than seven tons of food into LeFlore County. His efforts, along with his willingness to lead the march in Greenwood the following April, established Gregory as an important ally in the civil rights movement. In May, Martin Luther King, Jr. asked Gregory to join the SCLC in Birmingham, where the city's notorious police chief Eugene "Bull" Connor had turned fire hoses on marching city school children the previous week. Less than two hours after arriving, Gregory led 19 school children from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, carrying a sign that read "Everybody want Freedom." Gregory was the first of over one thousand protestors arrested that day and went to jail for the first time. While in jail, Gregory received "the first really good beating [he] ever had in [his] life, a professional job. End to end, up and down, they didn't miss a spot."[77]

No longer faced with accusations that his participation in the movement was a cheap publicity stunt, Gregory participated in demonstrations whenever movement leaders called. Historian Brian Ward notes that "Gregory was not just in Mississippi in the 1960s, he was everywhere, frequently putting his body as well as his time and talent on the line." In August of 1963, Gregory participated in the March on Washington. He and his wife Lillian participated in a voter registration drive in Selma, with the comic's wife – who was pregnant with twins – spending a night in jail. In 1964, Gregory went on a 23-state tour for SNCC that eventually brought in $35,000. In January of that year he

---

[76] J. Morsell to D. Gregory, March 13, 1963; Gloster Current to Co-Worker, March 27, 1963, NAACP III A 148, "Gregory, Dick – Record Orders for 1963-65."

[77] Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 275; Gregory, *Nigger*, 178-79; "The Trials of Dick Gregory," 51-55.

was arrested for participating in an anti-segregation drive in Atlanta (he spent Christmas in jail for sitting-in at Atlanta's Dobbs House) and was arrested the following month in Pine Bluff, Arkansas for participating in a sit-in demonstration at a local truck stop. The next month, he participated in demonstrations in Cambridge, Maryland. He also participated in local movements in San Francisco, Chicago, and Phildelphia. Gregory's commitment to the struggle often forced him to cancel performing engagements, often to the consternation of club owners who waited months to book the still-hot comedian.[78]

Following up on his generosity in 1963, Gregory, along with syndicated columnist Drew Pearson (who had previously criticized Gregory's efforts in Mississippi), organized a campaign to donate 20,000 Christmas turkeys to Mississippi in December of 1964. As part of the "Christmas For Mississippi," Sammy Davis Jr., along with Eartha Kitt and George Kirby, agreed to a December 20th benefit in Chicago to help raise money for the operation. Local Supermarket Food Fair donated 1,000 turkeys and the local taxicab drivers' union contributed money to charter a plane on Christmas morning. Lawrence Guyot coordinated the distribution effort, "utilizing services of all the civil rights organizations active throughout the sixty-two counties." Though the effort was directed at the "systematic deprivation and segregation of the negro," the turkeys were to go to poor Mississippians of both races. "Certainly WE do not wish to be accused of discrimination – even between the dark and white meat!"[79]

---

[78] Ward, *Just my Soul Responding*, 313; "Jails Fill as Protests Rise," *Student Voice,* January 27, 1964, 1; "Rev. Jones Soon to be Released," *Student Voice,* February 11, 1964, 4; "Gregory, Hansen Sentenced, Fined," *Student Voice,* March 3, 1964, 2; "Dogs, Fire Hoses Quell Protest," *Student Voice,* March 3, 1964, 1.

[79] For information on the "Christmas for Mississippi Campaign" see Dick Gregory, *The Shadow that Scares Me* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 11-28; D. Gregory to R. Wilkins, December 3, 1964, NAACP III A 148, "Gregory, Dick – General 1962-65."

On December 23, Gregory boarded a cargo plane filled with turkey's bound for Mississippi, at the same time as two trucks filled with turkeys departed for the state. When the plane arrived at the Jackson airport, Gregory and his family, along with other members of the committee were greeted by Charles Evers, brother of the civil rights worker who had been murdered earlier that year, and other members of the Mississippi reception committee. "Welcome to the Magnolia State, land of the brave niggers and home of the nervous white folks," Evers quipped. The group quickly distributed the turkeys to grateful Jackson residents. The next day, in front of a camera team from the Huntley/Brinkley report, Gregory, Evers and Reverend James McGraw, distributed a truckload of turkeys to hungry Jackson residents. Hoping to demonstrate on national television that "Christmas for Mississippi" was an "integrated project," Evers brilliantly gave the first turkey to a white Mississippian.[80]

All told, Gregory's "Christmas in Mississippi" project distributed twenty thousand turkeys to poor Mississippi residents in Jackson, Gulfport, Clarksdale and other Mississippi communities. Fifteen hundred turkeys went to Mississippi whites, three hundred to a reservation of Choctaw Indians, and some to Chinese families. These residents, many of whom were so impoverished they had never had a turkey, shed "tears of pure joy and gratitude, streaming down worn and weary cheeks." Fannie Lou Hamer, the Mississippi sharecropper who had become a leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, reportedly said, "I'm forty-seven years old, and I've had a turkey once in my life, and I had to buy it on the installment plan." The White Citizens Council was

[80] Gregory, *The Shadow the Scares Me*, 22-25.

not as amused; they had a sack of sweet potatoes and two possums delivered to Gregory's home in Chicago.[81]

Though frequently overlooked, it is hard to overestimate Gregory's importance to the movement. His celebrity status allowed him to bring instant attention to local struggles and galvanize local black communities. His industry-leading salary freed him from having to raise funds for his own involvement, while simultaneously allowing him to fund civil rights efforts throughout the country. And his willingness to risk not just his career but also his very life for the struggle, set the standard for other artists and entertainers. The NAACP – who had come to the comic's defense when a Queens nightclub cancelled the comic's contract as a result of his participation in the movement - called Gregory's Mississippi efforts "an extension of the NAACP's work in Mississippi" and "one of the most significant contributions to the civil rights struggle."[82] When *Newsweek* asked blacks to rate their leaders, Gregory rated with Ralph Bunche and Thurgood Marshall. Civil rights leaders rated the comic even higher.[83]

Conclusion: "Arthur Uncle" and the Death of the Sambo

Godfrey Cambridge's most significant routine, and the one he considered his "greatest achievement" was a character study of the black comic stereotype, titled "Arthur Uncle" (a play off of "Uncle Tom"). Loosely based on the Cousin Gitlow role in *Purlie Victorious*, "Arthur Uncle" presented the audience with a character of a shuffling Sambo

---

[81] *Ibid.*
[82] NAACP to sell 10,000 Dick Gregory records to help bias victims, March 15, 1963, NAACP III A 148, "Gregory, Dick – Record Orders for 1963-65"; NAACP hits New York firing of D. Gregory, April 20, 1963, NAACP II A 148, "Gregory, Dick – General 1962-65."
[83] "Who Are the Leaders – How They Rate," *Newsweek*, July 29, 1963, 31.

comic set amidst the black protest movement of the 1960s. Cambridge based Arthur Uncle on actors like Willie Best, Mantan Moreland, and Stepin Fetchit. As the lead in a Broadway musical, Arthur Uncle is successful, and yet this success has drawn scorn from his fellow black actors and actresses. In offering Arthur Uncle's excuses for lack of participation in the struggle, Cambridge clearly mocks the lack of participation not only of black entertainers in the 1930s but also black entertainers in the 1960s: "The last time I picketed in 1938, I got me such a splinter in my hand." More significantly, Cambridge interrogates and challenges many of the excuses comics offered during the previous decades for their role in perpetuating stereotypes. The core of the routine is a conversation between Arthur and the offstage voice of a white producer:

> [Offstage] We're considering you for a part in our next production. How do you feel about playing a controversial Negro?
>
> [Arthur Uncle]: You mean somebody like Nat Turner or Martin Luther King?
>
> [O]: Well, it's a servant, Arthur, that shuffles a little and sings.
>
> [A] When does this take place?
>
> [O] It's a Civil War play.
>
> [A] Oh, that's alright, because that's the way it was in them days…
>
> [O] Let me tell you a little bit about the character, Arthur. He's the only slave that fought for the South.
>
> [A] Is that the only part that I can play?
>
> [O] Well, we only have one Negro in the play. You see, Arthur, with one Negro we feel we can really speak for your people.
>
> [A] I could make a statement, 'cause that's the way it was in them days. They did have a few that fought on the side of the South. That's historically accurate.
>
> [O] What we've done Arthur is we've updated it to the 1960s.

> [A] Oh. Well, they've still got a few who do that till this very day.
>
> [O] Now the choreographer is here. Would you dance for us a little bit? [Arthur dances] Not that Arthur, try a shuffle…
>
> [A] Well, I tell you. I don't mind shufflin'. Cause actually a shuffle is a sign of defiance. See, that man gives me the food while it's hot, and you just sort of get back at him by taking your time till it gets cold. Like this.
>
> [O] Forget the defiance now, Arthur. Really enjoy it. Throw in a little song, would ya?
>
> [A] Yasuh. [He sings]
>
> [O] That's fine, Arthur. You've got the part.

As a comic who not only resisted performing in stereotypical roles to further his own career, but also worked tirelessly to ensure that future comics would not have to make that choice, Cambridge stood in stark contrast to Arthur. Despite Arthur's sobbing plea to his fellow black actors that he just wants to work, Cambridge holds the character up to ridicule by his audience. In the punch-line, after the plea, Arthur shouts, "I'll be on television before you are!" suggesting that for all of the half-hearted justifications and appeals to black employment, black entertainers had primarily been concerned with the advancement of their own careers rather than the betterment of the race. The end result is that Cambridge's audience ultimately judges Arthur and the Sambo stereotype that he represents as being unworthy of sympathy.[84]

---

[84] Godfrey Cambridge, *Ready or Not*. Euell Kim discusses a similar trend in modern theater, in which audiences and actors play a role in "assessing the value of the culture's daunting legacy of stereotypes and icons," by casting judgment on those actors most responsible for the stereotypes. In these plays, historical figures, like Stepin Fetchit, are portrayed in a way that the actors are able to revise and critique them and the audience is able to "participate in the ritual of adjudication, either actively or as witnesses." I find Cambridge's "Arthur Uncle" to follow a similar pattern, in that Uncle offers a defense for his actions and the audience is ultimately expected to reject his defense and find him guilty of perpetuating stereotypes for personal gain. See Euell Kim. "Signifyin(g) Ritual: Subverting Stereotypes, Salvaging Icons," *African American Review* 31, no. 4 (1997): 667-75.

While Cambridge's judgment was perhaps overly harsh and ignored the important trailblazing efforts of the comics who preceded him, he did highlight the fundamental shift that occurred in black comedy in the early 1960s. The political gains made by African Americans had again negotiated breathing room for the expansion of black humor out of the confines of stereotype. Thanks to the efforts of civil rights activists and organizations, black comedians were now able to demand (and receive) a variety of roles and opportunities. The movement helped to make the image of the shuffling black Sambo unpalatable to mainstream audiences and black comedians like Cambridge were able to make a very public break with the performance styles and material that had characterized black humor for decades. Now, not only was political humor accepted from black comedians, it was almost required, and comics used this license to mock Jim Crow and segregation every chance they had. No longer the target of protests and accusations of selling out the race, comedians actively participated in the movement and fought along side civil rights organization in the battles to end segregation. Together, comics and the movement, in the words of Joseph Boskin, drove the "final nail in Sambo's coffin" and "pushed Sambo offstage and into the shadows of history."[85]

[85] Boskin, *Sambo*, 221-23.

Conclusion

In April 1966, *Ebony* magazine proudly celebrated the "new school" of black standup comedians that had "achieved fame because they portray in a humorous way the sadness which is still the lot of many Negroes." The days of "black 'funnymen'…blinking their eyes humbly, muttering incoherently and scratching their heads while coming on strong as slow-walking, slow-talking ninnies" were over. These funnymen also "reflected sadness, but the indignities they suffered made laughter impossible for all but those whites who enjoyed the position of their former slaves." Comedians like Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, Moms Mabley, Redd Foxx, Slappy White, and Nipsey Russell had moved to the forefront of national discussions on civil rights and their jokes had "become classics, referred to in editorials and media far beyond the normal scope of nightclub comics." The comedians had scored an impressive victory in the struggle for dignified black comic images and had redefined the rules and restrictions on black humor, allowing for the full integration of black humor into American culture.[1]

Yet the victory of integration also brought with it a sense of dissatisfaction and anxiety. By the mid-1960s, black comedians began to resist the political label, fearful of being compared to Gregory or being boxed into doing a certain type of humor. Redd Foxx joked, "I've been here a long time…and I still think I can make it my way. Besides, as mixed as I am in my background with Chinese, Indian and African blood, I don't want people saying I'm a yellow Dick Gregory." Having won the ability to perform racial humor, black comics felt trapped by racial humor's limitations. "I regard myself not as a Negro concentrating on racial comedy, but as a satirist who deals in universal human foibles," Cambridge asserted, echoing a familiar theme among black comedians. "*Now*

[1] "Comedy Row's Top Ten," *Ebony*, April 1966, 105-11.

the bookers tell us we can do social satire," Russell complained. "*Now,* I'm being courted to do records other than party albums. But they're still categorizing me as a *Negro* comedian. Damn it, I want to make it as a comedian, period. But the way things are going now, every time we come on the floor we'll be expected to say something funny about a lynching."[2]

This ambivalence towards integration, long present in black communities, became increasingly prevalent as watershed civil rights victories – the March on Washington in 1963 and the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 – failed to bring about the fundamental changes that many activists, particularly the younger activists of SNCC, had imagined. Such sentiment increasingly found its way into comedians' routines, as comics refashioned old jokes to challenge openly the actual gains of integration. Cambridge's joke about desegregation in Florida is typical of this comedic questioning:

> While I was down there in Florida I watched the final integration of one of them lunch counters down there, and it was a gas. They had finally gotten the 46th writ granted by some court. It was a typical day of integration in a southern town: six National Guard battalions, about 25 or 30 state troopers. And a colored cat walked in behind the lawyer with the writ and walked into the restaurant and he saw a sign that said 'White Only.' He grabbed that sign and ripped it apart and threw the pieces on the ground. He walked in, they read the writ, and the cat said, 'Now cook that hamburger, fix that coffee and don't mess it up baby. I want everything you've been giving everybody else.' So the fellow prepared it under sanitary conditions. The colored fellow took a sip of that coffee and a bite of that hamburger and went 'Phewwwww.' He said, 'Is that what you've been feeding white people all of these years?' The man said, 'Yes, that's what we've been doing.' The colored fellow got up off his seat, went out, found that 'White Only' sign and banged it right back together again.[3]

This questioning was even more pronounced in the North, where civil rights legislation did little to improve the material and social conditions of black Americans, who struggled to deal with police brutality, massive unemployment, and dilapidated schools. It is in this

---

[2] Nat Hentoff, "Goodbye Mistah Bones," *Show Business Illustrated,* October 17, 1961, 94.
[3] Cambridge, *Ready or Not*, Epic FLM 13101.

context that proponents of Black Nationalism, most notably Malcolm X, found their most enthusiastic support, preaching a form of black self-reliance that emphasized revolution over the integrationist policies of mainstream civil rights organizations. The public appearance of unity that had brought together civil rights leaders and organization under a common set of goals and strategies was quickly disintegrating.

The same long simmering tensions that emerged in the mid-1960s also manifest themselves in the relationship between black comedians and civil rights organizations like the NAACP. As early as 1963, Association leaders expressed concern that Gregory's on-stage politics may have "ominous meaning" for the organization. In a letter to NAACP senior leaders, Director of Branches Gloster Current warned of "certain signs of change or confusion" in Gregory that made him seem "not unfriendly" to Black Nationalists. "Gregory was obviously, either unintentionally or subconsciously parroting the Black Nationalist line," Current warned. The comic's disparaging remarks about both the NAACP – he joked that "more Negroes have Playboy keys than NAACP memberships" – and CORE – an organization "full of people who almost finished college" and of white members "who looked like communists are supposed to look" – during his public appearances threatened his alliance with the Association. "In view of the fact that he has become our involuntary spokesman, an effort will have to be made immediately to get across to him the importance of being responsible and accurate in his assessment," Current urged the leadership. "In fact, it would not hurt us any if he would go back to being strictly a topical comedian but I believe it is too late."[4]

[4] G. Current to Wilkins, Carter, Morsell, Moon, and Mitchell, April 25, 1963, NAACP III A 148, "Dick Gregory."

Too late, indeed. Gregory would continue to move away from his role as comedian and embrace his role as political leader, though in typical fashion he would continue to blur the lines between the two. By the late 1960s, Gregory was calling himself a "social commentator who uses humor to interpret the needs and wants of Negroes to the white community," while running for mayor of Chicago in 1967, for President on the Peace and Freedom Ticket in 1968, and involving himself in numerous social justice activities.[5] In his role as activist, Gregory embraced ideologies, such as Black Nationalism, and organizations, such as the Nation of Islam, that were in conflict with traditional civil rights organizations like the NAACP. His 1964 autobiography *Nigger*, while attempting to rob the much-despised epithet of its cultural power (the dedication to his mother joked that whenever she "heard the word 'nigger' again, remember they are advertising my book"), nonetheless reintroduced the term into public black comic performance.[6] Other comics would follow a similar path. In 1968, Godfrey Cambridge, despite his insistence that he was "not a social activist," became a charter member of the committee organized to help pay off the $50,000 promissory note forfeited by Eldridge Cleaver when the Black Panther leader jumped bail.[7] Redd Foxx, along with newcomer Richard Pryor, would frequently use "nigger" in his routines before black and white audiences. "When Dick first used the word *nigger* it was shocking to me," Foxx remarked, "but now it flows so free, it don't mean nothing to me no more to say it in front of an audience."[8]

---

[5] Gregory quoted in Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Postwar America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 21-22.
[6] Dick Gregory, *Nigger: An Autobiography* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1964).
[7] New *York Post*, December 28, 1968, PAL Clipping File: Godfrey Cambridge.
[8] Leonard Feather, "*Penthouse* Interview," *Penthouse*, March 1971, 60-63, PAL Clipping File: Foxx, Redd (1962-1989), 1962-1974.

Though the NAACP's concern is understandable, Current's memo reveals a critical misunderstanding of the relationship between comedy and the civil rights movement. Humor, unlike other forms of political speech, is nearly impossible to contain and deploy for strictly ideological purposes. Though free of their minstrel trappings, black comics continued to resist the limitations of respectability, as Cambridge suggested when he joked, "I know that's [getting drunk] bad for our image but I don't give a damn. If Roy Wilkins don't want to drink that's his business. I like the sauce."[9] Even when they were functioning as spokespeople for the movement, black comics – onstage anyway – were not operating on behalf of the NAACP or any other civil rights organizations. Jokes that challenged social taboos about race and attacked the racist power structure of the South were primarily intended to make their audiences laugh, not necessarily to further the political goals of the civil rights movement. When such positions became mainstream, it is no surprise that comics like Gregory moved on to challenging new taboos – even if that meant attacking organizations that were allies.

Gregory's 1968 presidential run effectively marked the end of his career as a comedian, though he would continue to put his caustic wit to use in the quest for social justice. This transition would take place in the same year that Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, and both events serve as endpoints to an important chapter in American history. Yet while King's death occasioned countless academic and popular studies that sought to analyze his influence on the movement, the role of the black church and black religion in civil rights, and the impact of the civil rights struggle on our nation's history, the role of comedians and African American comedy has barely

---

[9] Cambridge, *Them Cotton Picking Days Are Over,* Epic FLM 13102.

attracted notice. Sambo may have "disappeared into the shadows of history," but those comedians who hastened his demise have largely followed.[10]

The preceding pages have attempted to correct this oversight, for the story of African American comedy in the civil rights era offers many lessons. It demonstrates the power of culture in general, and comedy in particular, to create community, articulate shared values, identify problems, mock one's enemies, delegitimize the opposition, and imagine a world free of the crushing oppression of racism. These functions were critical to the civil rights movement, which required blacks throughout the South to rise up *en masse* against Jim Crow and whites to rethink long held assumptions about race and rights. The role of black comedians in these efforts challenges historians to continue rethink their notions of politics and reevaluate their definitions of political leadership. Yet at the same time, African American comedy reminds us that the political impact of culture is rarely clear-cut or easily defined. Black comedians both reinforced and challenged the political goals and ideals of the civil rights movement, often times within the same routine or performance. Historians and scholars should thus take caution when trying to view black culture through the lens of resistance. For even the most incisive and politically astute forms of oppositional culture can reinforce stereotypes, undermine strategies and distract from political projects.

These lessons are no less relevant today. The comic stereotypes that were seemingly vanquished in the 1960s have been reborn and African American comedy remains a central site of black cultural politics. In 2005, comedian Dave Chappelle began shooting the third season of his sketch comedy show *Chappelle's Show.* In its first two

---

[10] Joseph Boskin, *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of the American Jester* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 221-23.

seasons, *Chappelle's Show* was a runaway hit, earning applause from critics and catapulting the young comedian to stardom. Critics and audiences praised the irreverent, politically charged humor and compared Chappelle to Dick Gregory.[11] Yet Chappelle became increasingly convinced that white audiences were taking away the wrong message and were laughing at him, not with him. When a blackface sketch planned for the third season that was designed "to underscore the severity of the n-word" drew laughter from members of the white crew, Chappelle realized the implications of his comedy. "It was a sketch that was funny, but socially irresponsible," Chappelle said in an interview with Oprah Winfrey. "I know the difference between people laughing with me and people laughing at me," the comic said, "[and I don't] want black people to be disappointed in me for putting that out there."[12] Realizing that his comedy was potentially harming the race, Chappelle walked away from the show and his fifty million dollar contract with the Comedy Central network.

The challenges faced by Dave Chappelle are but the latest in the long struggle that has faced African American comedians in this country. Writing in the seminal 1925 collection *The New Negro*, Jessie Fauset praised black humorists and imagined a world in which the "descendents of Mother Africa" could move beyond the barriers imposed by race:

> All this beyond any doubt will be the reward of the 'gift of laughter' which many black actors on the American stage have proffered. Through laughter we have conquered even the lot of the jester and the clown. The parable of the one talent still holds good and because we have used the little which in those early painful

---

[11] Mark Fisher, "We've Gone From LET FREEDOM RING to BLING-BLING," *Dayton Daily News*, January 27, 2006, http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=977312661&sid=21&Fmt=3&clientId=9269&RQT=309&VName=PQD, accessed September 30, 2008.

[12] Tim Goodman, "Fame Finally Got to Chappelle. Well Sort of. More Like his Conscience," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 6, 2006, http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=981684171&sid=23&Fmt=3&clientId=9269&RQT=309&VName=PQD, accessed September 30, 2008.

> days was our only approach we find ourselves slowly but surely moving toward that most glittering of all goals, the freedom of the American stage. I hope that…Bert Williams the inimitable, will clap us on with those tragic black-gloved hands of his now that the gift of his laughter is no longer tainted with the salt of chagrin and tears.[13]

While Fauset's vision may not yet be fully realized, the "gift of laughter" of black comedians of the civil rights era moved it ever closer to reality.

[13] Jessie Fauset, "The Gift of Laughter," in *The New Negro,* ed. Alain Locke (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 167.

Bibliography

Manuscript Collections

American Civil Liberties Union Records. Public Policy Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

The Papers of the Congress of Racial Equality, 1941-1967. Wisconisn State Historical Society; Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corporation of America, c1980. Microfilm.

Gosden-Correll Collection. Cinema-Television Library and Archive of Performing Arts, Doheny Library, University of Southern California.

Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Flournoy E. Miller Papers, Helen Armstead-Johnson Theater Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.*

Papers of the National Urban League. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Roy Wilkins Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Frank Schiffman Apollo Theatre Collection, 1935-1973. Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Clipping Files

Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. [Cited as PAL Clipping File]

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library. [Cited as Schomburg Clipping File]

---

* In addition to the original files available at the Library of Congress, I have also used the microfilm version, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Frederick, MD: University Publications of American, 1982-. Microfilm. Readers can discern the version by the way it is cited. The microform version will appear as NAACP part/series/reel (ex. NAACP 15/B/9) while the original manuscripts will appear as NAACP part series reel, "folder" (ex. NAACP II A 277, "Films: Hollywood Bureau, 1945-49").

Periodicals

Atlanta Daily World
Baltimore Afro-American
Billboard
Chicago Defender
Crisis
Ebony
Harlem Liberator
Jet
Los Angeles Sentinel
Negro Digest
New Jersey Afro-American
New York Amsterdam News
New York Times
Newsweek
Opportunity
Pittsburgh Courier
Sepia

Secondary Sources

Allen, Ernest, Jr. "Ever Feeling One's Twoness: 'Double Ideals' and 'Double Consciousness' in The Souls of Black Folk." *Contributions in Black Studies* 9/10 (1990-1992): 55-69.

Anderson, Jervis. *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981.

Anderson, Lisa M. *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1997.

Archer, Leonard C. *Black Images in the American Theater: NAACP Protest Campaigns - Stage, Screen, Radio and Television*. Brooklyn, NY: Pageant-Poseidon, 1973.

Armstrong, G. Blake and Kimberly A. Nuendorf with James E. Brentar. "TV Entertainment, News, and Racial Perceptions of College Students." *Journal of Communication* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 153-76.

Austin, Gerlyn F. "The Advent of the Negro Actor on the Legitimate Stage in America." *The Journal of Negro Education* 35, no. 3 (Summer 1966): 237-45.

Bailey, Pearl. *The Raw Pearl*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1968.

Baldwin, Brooke. "The Cakewalk: A Study in Stereotype and Reality." *Journal of Social History* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 205-18.

Barlow, William. "Black Music on Radio During the Jazz Age." *African American Review* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 325-28.

Barnouw, Erik. *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Bates, Beth Tompkins. "A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941." *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (April 1997): 340-77.

Berg, Manfred. *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005.

Berger, Phil. *The Last Laugh: The World of Stand-Up Comics*. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1975.

Berger, Roger A. ""The Black Dick": Race, Sexuality, and Discourse in the L.A. Novels of Walter Mosley." *African American Review* 31, no. 2 (1997): 281-94.

Bertrand, Michael T. *Race, Rock, and Elvis*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Bogle, Donald. *Bright Boulevard, Bold Dreams: The Story of Black Hollywood*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2005.

———. *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001

———. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film*. New York Continuum, 1992.

Bond, Julian. "The Media and the Movement: Looking Back from the Southern Front." In *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*, edited by Brian Ward, 16-40. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001.

Borstelmann, Thomas. *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Boskin, Joseph. *Sambo: The Rise and Demise of the American Jester*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Boyle, Kevin. *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*. New York: Henry Holt, 2004.

———. "The Kiss: Racial and Gender Conflict in a 1950s Automobile Factory." *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 2 (1997): 496-523.

Branch, Taylor. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.

Breazeale, Kenon. "In Spite of Women: "Esquire" Magazine and the Construction of the Male Consumer." *Signs* 20, no. 1 (1994): 1-22.

Briggeman, Jane. *Burlesque: Legendary Stars of the Stage*. Portland, Or: Collectors Press, 2004.

Brockmann, Stephen M. "The Politics of German Comedy." *German Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2000): 33-51.

Brown, Sterling. *The Negro in American Fiction*. Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1968.

Bruce, Dickson D., Jr. "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness." *American Literature* 64, no. 2 (June 1992): 299-309.

"Brudder Bones: The New Acceptabilty of Ridiculing Black People." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 17 (Autumn 1997): 91-93.

Bundy, William Beinhart and Colin. *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

Buni, Andrew. *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier: Politics and Black Journalism*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974.

Bynum, Victoria E. ""White Negroes" in Segregated Mississippi: Miscegenation, Racial Identity, and the Law." *The Journal of Southern History* 64, no. 2 (1998): 247-76.

Carby, Hazel. "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context." *Critical Inquiry* 18 (January 1992): 738-55.

Carby, Hazel V. "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues." In *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, edited by Robert G. O'Meally, 469-82. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Carson, Clayborne. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Case, Leigh Caroline. "Hawaiian Eth(n)ics: Race and Religion in Kamehameha Schools." *William and Mary Bill of Rights Journal* 1 (1992-1993).

Case, Mary Anne. ""The Very Stereotype the Law Condemns": Constitutional Sex Discrmination Law as a Quest for Perfect Proxies." *Cornell Law Review* 85: 1447-91.

Chafe, William H. *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

Chambers, Jason. "Equal in Every Way: African Americans, Consumption and Materialism from Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement." In *Advertising and Society Review*, 2006.

Chappell, Marisa, Jenny Hutchinson and Brian Ward. "'Dress modestly, neatly...as if you were going to church': Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement." In *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement*, edited by Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, 69-100. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999.

Chude-Sokei, Louis Onuorah. *The last "darky" : Bert Williams, black-on-black minstrelsy, and the African diaspora*. Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2006.

Classen, Steven D. *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles Over Mississippi TV, 1955-1969*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

Clayborne Carson, et al., ed. *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*. New York: Penguin 1991.

Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Cohen, Naomi W. *Not Free to Desist: The American Jewish Committee, 1906-1966*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972.

Cohodas, Nadine. "James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 16 (1997): 112-22.

Coleman, Robin R. Means. *African American Viewers and the Black Situation Comedy: Situating Racial Humor*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998.

Cook, Robert. *Sweet Land of Liberty? The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Longman, 1990.

Cooper, Ralph with Steve Dougherty. *Amateur Night at the Apollo: Ralph Cooper Presents Five Decades of Great Entertainment*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990.

Cripps, Thomas. "*Amos 'n' Andy* and the Debate Over American Racial Integration." In *American History / American Television: Interpreting the Video Past*, edited by John E. O'Connor, 33-54. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1983.

———. *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

———. *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

———. "The Death of Rastus: Negroes in American Films since 1945." *Phylon* 28, no. 3 (3rd Qtr. 1967): 267-75.

Croucher, Sheila L. *Imagining Miami: Ethnic Politics in a Postmodern World*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997.

Cuordileone, K. A. "'Politics in an Age of Anxiety': Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960." *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 2 (2000): 515-45.

Czitrom, Daniel. "The Politics of Performance: From Theater Licensing to Movie Censorship in Turn-of-the-Century New York." *American Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (December 1992): 525-53.

Davis, Angela Y. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Vintage, 1998.

Davis, Arthur P. "Growing up in the New Negro Renaissance: 1920-1935." *Negro American Literature Forum* 2, no. 3 (Autumn 1968): 53-59.

Davis, Jr., Sammy and Jane and Burt Boyar. *Why Me? The Sammy Davis, Jr. Story*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.

Deburg, William Van. *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Delgado, Richard. ""About Your Masthead: A Preliminary Inquiry Into the Compatibility of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties"." *Harvard Civil Rights - Civil Liberties Law Review* 39, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 1-15.

Dent, Gina, ed. *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michelle Wallace*. Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1992.

Denton, Sally and Roger Morris. *The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America, 1947-2000*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.

DeVan, William A. "Toward a New Standard in Gender Discrimination: The Case of Virginia Military Institute." *William and Mary Law Review* 33 (1991-1992).

Dittmer, John. *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994.

Dowdy, G. Wayne "The White Rose Mammy: Racial Cultures and Politics in World War II Memphis." *The Journal of Negro History* 85, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 308-14.

Dudziak, Mary L. *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Dunn, Marvin. *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997.

Eagles, Charles W. "Toward New Histories of the Civil Rights Era." *The Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 4 (2000): 815-48.

Early, Gerald L. *This Is Where I Came In: Black America in the 1960s*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

Eastman, Ralph. "Central Avenue Blues: The Making of Los Angeles Rhythm and Blues, 1942-1947." *Black Music Research Journal* 9, no. 1 (1989): 19-33.

———. "'Pitching Up a Boogie': African-American Musicians, Nightlife, and Music Venues in Los Angeles, 1930-1945." In *California Soul: Music of African Americans in the West*, edited by Jacqueline Cogdell DjeDje and Eddie S. Meadows. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

Elam, Harry J., Jr. "The Device of Race: An Introduction." In *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*, edited by Jr. and David Krasner Harry J. Elam, 3-16. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

Ely, Melvin Patrick. *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon*. New York: The Free Press, 1991.

Epstein, Lawrence J. . *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2001.

Erenberg, Lewis A. "From New York to Middletown: Repeal and the Legitimization of Nightlife in the Great Depression." *American Quarterly* 38, no. 5 (1986): 761-78.

Eskew, Glenn T. *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Estes, Steve. *I am a Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.

Euben, J. Peter. *Corrupting Youth : Political Education, Democratic Culture, and Political Theory*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997.

———. *Platonic Noise*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Everett, Anna. "Lester Walton's Ecriture Noir: Black Spectatorial Transcodings of 'Cinematic Excess'." *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 3: 30-50.

———. *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909-1949*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001.

Fairclough, Adam. *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987.

Fauset, Jessie. "The Gift of Laughter." In *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke. New York: Athenaeum, 1992.

Fejes, Fred. "Murder, Perversion, and Moral Panic: The 1954 Media Campaign against Miami's Homosexuals and the Discourse of Civic Betterment." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 3 (July 2000): 305-47.

Fiske, John. *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Fletcher, Tom. *The Tom Fletcher Story - 100 Years of the Negro in Show Business*. First Edition ed. New York: Burdge & Company, Ltd., 1954.

Fox, Ted. *Showtime at the Apollo*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983.

Foxx, Redd and Norma Miller. *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor*. Pasadena, CA: Ward Ritchie Press, 1977.

Freberg, Stan. *It Only Hurts When I Laugh*. New York: Times Books, 1988.

Fredrickson, George. *The Black Image in the White Mind: the Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Friedman, Andrea. "'The Habitats of Sex-Crazed Perverts': Campaigns against Burlesque in Depression-Era New York City." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7, no. 2 (1996): 203-38.

Gaines, Kevin. "Rethinking Race and Class in African-American Struggles for Equality, 1885- 1941." *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 2 (1997): 378-87.

———. *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Gardner, Michael R. *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002.

Garrow, David J. *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*. New York: Vintage Press, 1986.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black." *Representations* 10, no. 24 (1988).

Genovese, Eugene. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* New York, 1974.

Giddings, Paula. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: Bantam Books, 1984.

Gill, Glenda E. *No Surrender! No Retreat! African American Pioneer Performers of Twentieth-Century American Theater*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Glasscock, Jessica. *Striptease: From Gaslight to Spotlight*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003.

Goings, Kenneth W. *"The NAACP Comes of Age": The Defeat of Judge John J. Parker*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Graham, Allison. *Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Gray, Herman. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for 'Blackness'*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

Greenberg, Cheryl. "The Politics of Disorder: Reexamining Harlem's Riots of 1935 and 1943." *Journal of Urban History* 18, no. 2 (1992): 397-419.

Greenberg, Jack. *Crusaders in the Courts : How a Dedicated Band of Lawyers Fought for the Civil Rights Revolution*. New York: BasicBooks, 1994.

Gregory, Dick. *Nigger: An Autobiography*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1964.

———. *The Shadow that Scares Me*. New York: Doubleday, 1968.

Gregory, Dick and Sheila Moses. *Callus on my Soul*. Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 2002.

Guerrero, Ed. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.

Haggins, Bambi. *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007.

Hall, Jacquelyn Dowd. "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past." *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005).

Hamamoto, Darrell Y. *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology*. New York: Praeger, 1989.

Harding, Vincent. *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement*. New York: Orbis, 1990.

Harrison, Daphne Duval. *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988.

Harry J. Elam, Jr. and David Krasner, ed. *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Haygood, Will. *In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Helbling, Mark. "Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance." *Negro American Literature Forum* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 39-47.

Hendra, Tony. *Going Too Far*. New York: Doubleday, 1987.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. et al. *Speaking of Race, Speaking of Sex: Hate Speech, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties*. New York: New York University Press, 1994.

Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Hine, Darlene Clark. *Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas*. New ed. ed. Columbia: Univeristy of Missouri Press, 2003, 1979.

Hollis, Cassandra. "'From Amos and Andy to Cosby and All The Way Back Again' A Textual Analysis of Predominantly Black Situation Comedies and the Presence of Traditional Stereotypes At The End of the Twentieth Century " Ph.D. Dissertation, Georgia State University, 1999.

Holmquist, Kristen. "Cultural Defense or False Stereotype: What Happens When Latina Defendants Collide with the Federal Sentencing Guidelines." *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 12 (1997): 46.

Hunter, Tera W. *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women' Lives and Labors After the Civil War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Hyatt, Marshall and Cheryl Sanders. "Film as a Medium to Study the Twentieth-Century Afro-American Experience." *Journal of Negro Education* 53, no. 2 (1984): 161-72.

Jacobson, Matthew Frye. *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Janken, Kenneth Robert. *White : the Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP*. New York: New Press Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2003.

Jefferson, Miles. "The Negro on Broadway, 1955-1956: Pits and Peaks in an Active Season." *Phylon* 17, no. 3 (3rd. Qtr. 1956): 227-37.

Jhally, Sut and Justin Lewis. *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992.

Jonas, Gilbert. *Freedom's Sword : The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America, 1909-1969*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

Jones, Beverly W. "Before Montgomery and Greensboro: The Desegregation Movement in the District of Columbia, 1950-1953." *Phylon* 43, no. 2 (1982): 144-54.

Jones, Gerald. *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcoms: Selling the American Dream*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1992.

Kasner, Sam and Jennifer MacNair. *The Bad & the Beautiful: Hollywood in the Fifties*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002.

Kelley, Robin. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free Press, 1994.

Kelley, Robin "House Negroes on the Loose: Malcolm X and the Black Bourgeoisie." *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (1998): 419-35.

———. *Yo' Mama's DisFUNKtional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Kellner, Douglas. "Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism and Media Culture." In *Gender, Race and Class in Media*, edited by Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, 5-17. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995.

Kercher, Stephen E. *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Kercher, Stephen Edward. "The Limits of Irreverence: 'Sick' Humor and Satire in America, 1950-1964." PhD diss., Indiana University, 2000.

Kim, Euell. "Signifyin(g) Ritual: Subverting Stereotypes, Salvaging Icons." *African American Review* 31, no. 4 (1997): 667-75.

Kluger, Richard. *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.

Kofsky, Frank. *Lenny Bruce: The Comedian as Social Critic and Secular Moralist*. New York: New York, 1974.

Krasner, David. "Parody and Double Consciousness in the Language of Early Black Musical Theater." *African American Review* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 317-23.

———. *Resistance, Parody and Double Consciousness in African American Theater, 1895-1910*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Krassner, Paul. *Paul Krassner's Impolite Interviews*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999.

Krylova, Anna. "Saying 'Lenin' and Meaning 'Party': Subversion and Laughter in Soviet and Post-Soviet Society." In *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society Since Gorbachev*, edited by Adele Marie Barker, 243-65. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Lau, Peter F. *From the Grassroots to the Supreme Court: Brown v. Board of Education and American Democracy*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

Lawson, Steven F. *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America Since 1941*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, 1997.

———, ed. *To Secure These Rights: The Report of Harry S. Truman's Committee on Civil Rights*. New York: Bedford / St. Martin's 2004.

Lawson, Steven F. and Charles Payne. *Debating the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield 1998.

Leab, Daniel. *From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.

Lester, Julius. *All is Well*. New York: Morrow, 1976.

Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Lewis, David Levering. *W.E.B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963*. New York: Henry Holt, 2000.

———. *When Harlem was in Vogue*. New York: Penguin, 1997.

———, ed. *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*. New York: Viking, 1994.

Lichter, Robert S., Linda S. Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Daniel Amundson. "Prime-Time Prejudice: TV's Image of Blacks and Hispanics." *Public Opinion* 10, no. 2 (Jul/Aug 1987): 13.

Lichter, S. Robert, Linda S. Lichter, Stanley Rothman, and Daniel Amundson. "'Prime-Time Prejudice: TV's Images of Blacks and Hispanics'." *Public Opinion* 10, no. 2 (July/Aug 1987): 13-16.

Ling, Peter J. "Gender and Generation: Manhood at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference." In *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, edited by Peter J Ling and Sharon Montheith. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999.

Ling, Peter J. and Sharon Montheith. "Gender and the Civil Rights Movement." In *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement*, edited by Peter J. Ling and Sharon Montheith, 1-16. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999.

Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990.

Littauer, Amanda H. "The B-Girl Evil: Bureaucracy, Sexuality, and the Menace of Barroom Vice in Postwar California." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (2003): 171-204.

Litwack, Leon F. *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft : Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Lusky, Louis. "The Stereotype: Hard Core of Racism." *Buffalo Law Review* 13 (1963-64): 450-61.

MacDonald, J. Fred. *Blacks and White TV: Afro-Americans in Television Since 1948*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1983.

———. *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Decline of Network TV*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990.

———. "Radio's Black Heritage: Destination Freedom, 1948-1950." *Phylon* 39, no. 1 (1978): 66-73.

Mack, Kenneth W. "Law and Mass Politics in the Making of the Civil Rights Lawyer, 1931-1941." *Journal of American History* 93, no. 1 (2006): 37-62.

Mallon, Florencia. *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Mapp, Edward. *African Americans and the Oscar: Seven Decades of Struggle and Achievement*. Lanham, Maryland
: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2003.

———. *Blacks in American Films: Today and Yesterday*. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1972.

Marable, Manning. *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.

Markham, Pigmeat with Bill Levinson. *Here Come the Judge!* New York: Popular Library, 1969.

Marling, Karal Ann. *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Martineau, William H. "A Model of the Social Functions of Humor." In *Psychology of Humor*, edited by Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee. New York: Academic Press, 1972.

May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

McDaniel, Patricia. "Shrinking Violets and Caspar Milquetoasts: Shyness and Heterosexuality from the Roles of the Fifties to "The Rules" of the Nineties." *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 3 (2001): 547-68.

McNeil, Genna Rae. *Groundwork : Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983.

Medhurst, Andy. ""Introduction"." In *The Colour Black: Black Images in British Television*, edited by Therese and Jane Gerson Daniels. London: BFI Publishing, 1989.

Mercer, Kobena. ""General Introduction"." In *The Colour Black: Black Images in British Television*, edited by Therese and Jane Gerson Daniels. London: BFI Publishing, 1989.

Meyerowitz, Joanne, ed. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994.

Miller, Russell. *Bunny: The Real Story of Playboy*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984.

Minsky, Mort. *Minsky's Burlesque*. New York: Arbor House, 1986.

Moehring, Eugene P. *Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas, 1930-1970*. Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1989.

Mohl, Raymond A. *South of the South: Jewish Activists and the Civil Rights Movement in Miami, 1945-1960*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004.

Morris, Aldon D. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*. New York: The Free Press, 1984.

Morton, David. *Off the Record: The Technology and Culture of Sound Recording in America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000.

Nachman, Gerald. *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003.

Naison, Mark. *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*. New York: Grove Press, 1983.

Nathan, Hans. *Dan Emmett and the rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977.

Neuhaus, Jessamyn. "The Importance of Being Orgasmic: Sexuality, Gender, and Marital Sex Manuals in the United States, 1920-1963." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9, no. 4 (2000): 447-73.

———. "The Way to a Man's Heart: Gender Roles, Domestic Ideology, and Cookbooks in the 1950s." *Journal of Social History* 32, no. 3 (1999): 529-55.

Newman, Kathy M. "The Forgotten Fifteen Million: Black Radio, Radicalism, and the Construction of the 'Negro Market'." In *Communities of the Air: Radio Century, Radio Culture*, edited by Susan Merrill Squire, 109-33. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

Nickel, John. "Disabling African American Men: Liberalism and Race Message Films." *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 1 (2004): 25-48.

O'Neill, William L. *American High: The Years of Confidence, 1945-1960*. New York: The Free Press, 1986.

Payne, Charles. *I Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Black Freedom Struggle*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Peterson, Jennifer. "The Competing Tunes of "Johnny Guitar": Liberalism, Sexuality, Masquerade." *Cinema Journal* 35, no. 3 (1996): 3-18.

Petty, Ross, Anne-Marie Harris, Toni Broaddus and William M. Boyd, III. "Regulating Target Marketing and Other Race-Related Advertising Practices." *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 8 (2002-2003).

Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*, *Gender & American culture and index.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Reddick, Lawrence. "Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations: Motion Pictures, Radio, the Press, and Libraries." *Journal of Negro Education* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1944): 367-89.

Regester, Charlene. "Stepin Fetchit: The Man, The Image, and the African American Press." *Film History* 6, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 504-06, 18.

Riggs, Marlon T. "Ethnic Notions." California Newsreel, 1987.

Robinson, Armstead L., and Patricia Sullivan. *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991.

Robinson, Jo Ann. *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987.

Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. New York: Verso, 1999.

Rogin, Michael. *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

———. "'Democracy and Burnt Cork': The End of Blackface, the Beginning of Civil Rights." *Representations*, no. 46 (Spring 1994): 1-34.

Romero, Victor C. "Are Filipinas Asians or Latinas: Reclaiming the Anti-Subordination Objective of Equal Protection After *Grutter* and *Gratz*." *University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law* 7 (2004-2005): 765-86.

Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover, VT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

Ross, Becki, and Kim Greenwell. "Spectacular Striptease: Performing the Sexual and Racial Other in Vancouver, B.C., 1945-1975." *Journal of Women's History* 17, no. 1 (2005): 137-64.

Ross, Ronald. "The Role of Blacks in the Federal Theater, 1935-1939." *Journal of Negro History* 59, no. 1 (January 1974): 38-50.

Rubenstein, Robert Fogelson and Richard, ed. *The Complete Report of Mayor LaGuardia's Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935*. New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969.

Rudwick, August Meier and Elliot. "The Origins of Non-Violent Direct Action in Afro-American Protest: A Note on Historical Discontinuities." In *Along the Color Line*, edited by August Meier and Elliot Rudwick. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976.

Sarat, Austin, ed. *Race, Law, and Culture: Reflections on Brown v. Board of Education*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Savage, Barbara Diane. *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.

Savage, Sean J. *Truman and the Democratic Party*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997.

Schaefer, Eric. "The Obscene Seen: Spectacle and Transgression in Postwar Burlesque Films." *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 2 (1997): 41-66.

Schiffman, Jack. *Harlem Heyday: A Pictorial History of Modern Black Show Business and the Apollo Theater*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1984.

———. *Uptown: The Story of Harlem's Apollo Theater* New York: Cowles Book Company, Inc., 1971.

Schilling, James Von. *The Magic Window, American Television, 1939-1953*. New York: Hawthorne Press, 2003.

Schneider, Mark Robert. *"We Return Fighting": The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2002.

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990.

Shaw, Arnold. *Belafonte: an Unauthorized Biography*. Philadelphia: Chilton Co., 1960.

Sheppard, Alice. "Social Cognition, Gender Roles, and Women's Humor." In *Women's Comic Visions*, edited by June Sochen, 33-56. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1991.

Shin, Andrew, and Barbara Judson. "Beneath the Black Aesthetic: James Baldwin's Primer of Black American Masculinity." *African American Review* 32, no. 2 (1998): 247-61.

Shtier, Rachel. *Striptease: The Untold Story of the Girlie Show*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Silver, James W. "Mississippi: The Closed Society." *The Journal of Southern History* 30, no. 1 (1964): 3-24.

Sitkoff, Harvard. *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

———. *The Struggle for Black Equality*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.

Smith, Ronald L. *Comedy on Record: The Complete Critical Discography*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988.

Sochen, June. "Slapsticks, Screwballs, and Bawds: The Long Road to the Performing Talents of Lucy and Bette." In *Women's Comic Visions*, edited by June Sochen, 141-57. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.

Soderberg, Jon Allyn. "The Virginia Military Institute and the Equal Protection Clause: A Factual and Legal Introduction." *Washington and Lee Law Review* 50 (1993): 21.

Sorenson, Jeff. *Bob Newhart*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

Sotiropoulos, Karen. "Staging Race: Black Cultural Politics Before the Harlem Renaissance." PhD diss., City University of New York, 1999.

Stokes, Melvyn. *D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation : A History of "The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time"*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Stowe, David W. "The Politics of Cafe Society." *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 4 (1998): 1384-406.

Sugrue, Thomas J. "Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940-1964." *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 551-78.

Sullivan, Patricia. *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

"The KGB of the Cotton Patch: How Mississippi Spied on Black College Students." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 21 (1998): 34-35.

Theoharis, Jeanne and Komozi Woodward, ed. *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South*. New York: Palgrave, 2003.

Thomas, Bettye Gardner and Bettye. "The Cultural Impact of the Howard Theater on the Black Community." *The Journal of Negro History* 55, no. 4 (October 1970).

Tomberlin, Joseph A. "Florida and the School Desegregation Issue, 1954-1959: A Summary View." *Journal of Negro Education* 43, no. 4 (Autumn 1974): 457-67.

Torres, Sasha. *Black, White, and In Living Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

Tushnet, Mark V. *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

———. "Thurgood Marshall as a Lawyer: The Campaign Against School Segregation, 1945-1950." *Maryland Law Review* 40 (1981): 411-34.

Tyson, Timothy B. "Robert F. Williams, "Black Power," and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle." *The Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (1998): 540-70.

Vasey, Ruth. "Foreign Parts: Hollywood's Global Distribution and the Representation of Ethnicity." *American Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1992): 617-42.

Walker, Nancy. ""Toward Solidarity: Women's Humor and Group Identity"." In *Women's Comic Vision*, edited by June Sochen, 57-81. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991.

Walker, Samuel. *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Wallace, Michele. "*Uncle Tom's Cabin*: Before and After the Jim Crow Era." *The Drama Review* 44, no. 1 (2000): 137-56.

Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

———, ed. *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001.

Watkins, Mel. *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying and Signifying - The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.

———. *Stepin Fetchit: The Life and Times of Lincoln Perry*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005.

Watts, Jill. *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood* New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

Weems, Robert E., Jr. *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

Weisbrot, Robert. *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Plume, 1990.

White, Claytee D. "The Roles of African American Women in the Las Vegas Gaming Industry, 1940-1980." master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1997.

White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1985.

White, Shane and Graham White. *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from its Beginning to the Zoot Suit*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998.
White, Walter. *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White*. New York: The Viking Press, 1948.
Williams, Elsie. *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995.
Williamson, Joel. "Wounds Not Scars: Lynching, the National Conscience, and the American Historian." *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 4 (1997): 1221-53.
Wu, Frank H. "Changing America: Three Arguments about Asian Americans and the Law." *American University Law Review* 45 (1995-1996): 818.
Yang, Mina. "A Thin Blue Line down Central Avenue: The LAPD and the Demise of a Musical Hub." *Black Music Research Journal* 22, no. 2 (2002): 217-39.
Zangrando, Robert L. *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980.
Zolten, J. Jerome. "Black Comedians: Forging an Ethnic Image." *Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 2 (1993): 70-71.

Discography

Bailey, Pearl. *More Songs for Adults Only*. Roulette R 25101.
——— . "*Naughty but Nice*." Roulette SR 25125.
Cambridge, Godfrey. *Ready or Not…Here's Godfrey Cambridge*. Epic FLM 13101.
———. *Them Cotton Pickin' Days Are Over*. Epic FLM 13102.
Foxx, Redd. *Laff of the Party.* Dooto DTL 214.
———. *Laff of the Party, Volume 8*. DooToo, DTL-265
———. *The Sidesplitter, Volume I*. Dooto DTL 253.
———. *This is Foxx*. Dootoo DTL 809.
Gregory, Dick. *East & West*. Colpix CP 420.
———. *In Living Black and White*. Colpix CP 417.
———. *My Brother's Keeper.* Gateway GLP 9007.
———. *Running for President.* VeeJay VJLP 1093.
———. *So You See…We All Have Problems.* Colpix CP 480.
———. *Talks Turkey.* VeeJay LP 4001.
Mabley, Moms. *The Funniest Woman in the World.* Chess LP 1447.
———. *Funny Sides of Moms Mabley.* Chess LP 1482.
———. *I Got Something to Tell You.* Chess LP 1479 .
———. *Moms Mabley at Geneva Conference.* Chess LP 1463.
———. *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club.* Chess LP 1460
———. Moms Mabley at the UN. Chess LP 1479.
———. *Out on a Limb.* Mercury MG 20889.
Russell, Nipsey. *Confucius Told Me….* Humorsonic Records 701.
———. *Guzzling and Giggling Party.* Humorsonic Records 704.
———. *The Lion's Tale (Or How to Make the Party Roar)*. Humorsonic Records 708.
———. *Ya Gotta Be Fast*. Humorsonic Records 707.
White, Slappy. *Slappy White at the Playboy Club*. Mercury MG 20692.
———. *Just for Laughs, Volume I.* Bull Records B-11.

Curriculum Vita

Justin T. Lorts

Education:

2008	Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick Ph.D., Department of History
1998	University of California, Berkeley B.A., History

Experience:

2008-Present	Associate Director, Interschool Programs, College of Arts and Science, New York University
2005-2008	Class Adviser and Associate Faculty, Gallatin School of Individualized Study, New York University
2002-2005	Lecturer, Department of American Studies, Rutgers University, New Brunswick
2001-2004	Instructor, Department of History, Rutgers University, New Brunswick

Publications:

"*Iron Chef* and the Changing Image of the American Kitchen," *Salad Bowl*, Fall 2003.

"Scholastic Aptitude Test." *Dictionary of American History*, ed. Stanley Kutler et al. New York: 2003.