

Black Like Me: The End of Reciprocity?

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I propose then a theater in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator seized by the theater as by a whirlwind of high forces. A theater which, abandoning psychology, recounts the extraordinary, stages natural conflicts, natural and subtle forces, and presents itself first of all as an exceptional power of redirection.

—Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*

Cris Mayo wrote her essay sometime before November 2007. Between the first time I read her essay in January 2008 and the time I wrote this response, I was pushed in a very different direction from her stated “general concern”:

to analyze black humor’s strategies of playing with the audience, disrupting passive spectatorship, and insisting on nonreciprocity, features that may be useful to intervening in stalled discussions. I begin by tracing a general history of humor’s relationship to power....

The signifying pedagogy derived from black humor traditions, through its pleasures and complexities, ultimately offers a way to move from spectator to participant, to a more knowing, critical partner in examining knowledge and forms of engagement. Everyone wants to be in on the joke, even if it means being part of the reason for the laughter and as such being part of the problem.

I still want to take up some of the premises contained above, namely the push to the spectator that is made possible through nonreciprocity, as well as the challenges inherent in the proposition. Mayo’s singling out of black humor and black queer camp allows me to focus on two tacks in this response, both of which are dependent on her conditions and categories of analysis, but depart somewhat in focus and intended endgame. In the first section of my response, I am going to take up the question of what humor, that has as its subject and object the Other, *might* do, that critical pedagogy with its demand for reciprocity of power and communication, might not. In the second section, I suggest a contemporary instance of metacommunication that is not humorous but may function in some of the same ways that Mayo attributes to Marlon Riggs and to Damali Ayo.

Christopher Hitchens, in an infamous 2007 essay in *Vanity Fair*,¹ took up a somewhat sociobiological argument about why “women are not (by and large) funny.” His basic premise rested on his contention that humans do most things they do in order to propagate the species. Humor in a woman is never going to replace nice boobs and childbearing hips as attractors for heterosexual males, so, his argument goes, being funny is just a waste of evolutionary juice for women. The aggression, and what Fran Leibowitz characterizes as a quality of preemptiveness, of humor makes it unappealing for women in, or in search of, relationships with men. And the actual scatological and gross humor that appeals to many male funny bones is, on Hitchens’s account, ridiculous (not in a good way) to women who routinely hold life and death in their hands. Thomas Hobbes’s analysis of what makes us (men) laugh supports this idea that

Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those grimaces called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.²

The black humor that propels Mayo's essay serves a function like the category of women that are outsiders in Hitchens's account. As Mayo proposes, it is humor that is, in fact, meant to alienate rather than ingratiate. Dave Chappelle's crisis of conscience was spurred by the realization that instead of invoking the "laughter of the damned," he was inspiring catch phrases — "I'm Rick James, Bitch!" — and giving permission for white audiences to "rent" the black experience and let him do all the work of the critique of racism. The audiences that made Chappelle's show one of the most successful on cable seemed unable to disassemble the layers of his comedy that cut at racism and whiteness *and* at black insufficiency. If, as Artaud suggests, we need a theater of cruelty that is like tooth extraction with pliers and no anesthetic, Chappelle's audience got their hands on some nitrous oxide and managed to enjoy the tool twisting in their mouths. The pleasures of the text overcame the audience's capacity to apprehend the difficult and harsh realities of racism that Chappelle offers both bluntly and slyly.

And, on the level of performance, it is not the cruelty we can exercise upon each other by hacking at each other's bodies, carving up our personal anatomies, or, like Assyrian emperors, sending parcels of human ears, noses, or neatly detached nostrils through the mail, but the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all.³

In one sketch from his show, Chappelle asks us to imagine the unimaginable: the black president who brings his posse to the White House in a way that invokes the same anxiety as all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria (unlike the sight of Sigma Nu's doing the same). In the meantime, Barack Obama went from being the cute younger brother of the "first black" President of the United States (following Chris Rock's 1992 sketch on *Saturday Night Live*: "So we got a big election coming up. Who's gonna win? Bill or Bob? Bob or Bill? I like Clinton. Know why I like Clinton? Because he's got real problems. He don't got president problems, he got real problems like you and me, like running out of money, his wife's a pain in the ass, all his friends are going to jail. I know Bill Clinton, I *am* Bill Clinton!") while giving Hillary Clinton an ever-enlarging sense of inevitability, to being a winner of more contests and pledged delegates than Clinton and rocking through the shoals of "the burden of inevitability" himself. What was funny in the fall when he was just one of the guys (see "Obama Girl" on YouTube) turned toxic when a very short clip of Obama's minister, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, "damning" America was quick-circ'd on the Internet and television "news" programs. Here is the aggression and preemption of the silence around the actions of the government, delivered on Sunday morning rather than Saturday night (live), from the pulpit rather than from Madison Square Garden. The most quoted segment of Wright's sermon culminates:

The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law, and them wants us to sing "God Bless America." No, no, no. Not "God Bless America"; God damn America! That's in the Bible, for killing innocent people. God damn America for

treating her citizens as less than human. God damn America as long as she keeps trying to act like she is God and she is supreme.⁴

Obama was pushed to distance himself from Wright's oratory (itself an echo of an earlier critique of Michelle Obama's remark that the embrace of her husband around the country made her "really proud" of her country for the first time in her adult life). But the context of Wright's sermon, keying off Luke 19:27-44, is an extended analysis of the dangers of relying overmuch on government to solve human ills when, in fact, it is creating human misery and compounds problems by lying and manipulating. Why, Wright asks, should we (any of us, but especially the descendants of Africa) rely on governments that, from Nebuchadnezzar to George W. Bush, are always most committed to conserving power, when God is the alternative — God does not lie to us; God does not fail us.

Wright is the aggressive soothsayer whose oratory is in turns angry and hortatory. Just like the call from Chappelle or Rock provides an organic sense that the truth is being told in a way that allows a twisted smile if not a laugh, Wright's call does not disguise the long critique of the passive acceptance of both the superordinate and subordinate. This is not a simple call to worship, but a call to be awake and be in the world differently. God in this sermon is constantly God, but change in the world comes only at the hands of human agents. The radical pedagogy of Wright's liberation theology (also found in Martin Luther King and elsewhere in one segment of the African American religious experience — not in the Creflo Dollar message of the embrace of a capitalist American Dream) is a somber B-side to the theater of racial absurdity/cruelty birthed by Richard Pryor and carried on in various iterations. Why then, should we be surprised that out of their "pleasure box," these moves disconcert or even enrage the audience? When these language strategies work, audiences *should* be shocked out of complacency, out of comfort, out of cognitive resonance. The problem raised by Mayo is one whose responses are necessarily everywhere in and on the air, and in classrooms, churches, and theaters.

1. Christopher Hitchens, "Why Women Aren't Funny," *Vanity Fair* (January 2007), at <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/01/hitchens200701?currentPage=1>.

2. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1946), in the context of how passions are expressed, 36 (part 1, ch. 6).

3. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary C. Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

4. Jeremiah Wright, "Confusing God and Government" (sermon delivered on April 13, 2003). The sermon is transcribed at <http://www.democraticcentral.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=1814>.