

Hist1017/AS1017

Black Humor

Prof. Patrick Rael, Bowdoin College, Spring 2013

Meets: TuTh 11:30-1:00, Sills 209
Office hours: TuTh 2-4, by apt.

Office: 211C Hubbard
Phone: x3775
prael@bowdoin.edu

This first-year seminar explores a long American cultural tradition of humor centering on people of African descent. Representations of African Americans, and African Americans themselves, have long been a component of American laughter — either as objects of derision, or as potent social commentators. This course explores the history of black humor stretching from nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy to Saturday Night Live. We will view recorded performances, read historical material, and engage a complex theoretical literature on this subject. Students should be ready to encounter edgy material that may be considered offensive. Subjects may include Amos and Andy, Moms Mabley, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, Wanda Sykes, and Dave Chapelle.

Level: This course is a first-year seminar, intended to do several things: introduce students to their subject areas, introduce students to college-level paper-writing, practice introductory skills in their discipline (in this case, history), and socialize students to the seminar experience. This last objective is important. Seminars at any level require the intensive participation of students. Do not expect your professor to provide highly-structured lectures; it is up to the students to carry this class forward. This course will also challenge you to practice presenting your ideas, in both written and oral forms. We will practice various forms of paper writing, and end the class with a run-through of the entire process of writing a research paper. The course will require considerable work outside of class. I expect students to spend at least six hours per week outside of class reading, reviewing class notes, and preparing course assignments. Finally, we will of course watch films during our weekly film lab.

Course website: The material for this course may be found online through the Blackboard system. You will find a copy of this syllabus, as well as all the reading and paper assignments. You may easily refer to the website for the most recent course assignments and requirements. You will also find my website <<http://academic.bowdoin.edu/faculty/P/prael/>> useful. It links to guides on writing, plagiarism, and other matters crucial to your success in history courses.

Books: Please purchase these required books from the campus book store or online.

Watkins, Mel. *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1999.

Carpio, Glenda R. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Rampolla, Mary Lynn. *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*. 3rd edition. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 2001. A short, concise, and complete guide for history undergraduates.

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 6th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. The ultimate student guide to citations and paper writing.

Hacker, Diana. *Rules for Writers: A Brief Handbook*. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. A handy reference for tackling writing problems.

GRADING

Class participation and attendance (10%): Thoughtful participation and consistent attendance are particularly crucial in a seminar class such as this. Remember that in a seminar setting, students have the opportunity to carry the

conversation forward. Please come to class prepared to contribute, and take responsibility for the conversation. I will help us think about what those contributions might look like.

Workshops and assignments (20%): Throughout the semester, I will ask you to complete a number of smaller workshops and assignments. These are designed to practice the individual skills necessary to complete bigger papers. Each will be graded on a five-point scale. Your total score for these assignments will be compressed into a 20-point scale.

First paper (20%): A formal paper due about half-way through the course. This paper will give you a chance to practice the skills and methods you'll need for your final paper. The paper will be broken down into steps, as below:

Road map	5%
First draft	5%
Final draft	10%

Presentations (2 @ 10% = 20%): For each of your two major papers you will offer a class presentation. This will introduce your subject, frame your central question or problem, and offer a hypothesis (tentative solution). Your presentation should engage the class with film clips and source material, and pose questions we can wrestle with.

Final paper (30%): A formal research paper assignment combining the skills we've worked on throughout the semester. Your paper may not be about a single performer, but must engage several performers, and speak to a particular theme, problem, or concern. This will be broken down into steps, as below:

Annotated bibliography	4%
Road map	2%
First draft	10%
Peer evaluation	2%
Self evaluation	2%
Final paper	10%

COURSE CONTRACT

Attendance: No absences are “excused” -- you are responsible for all material covered during missed class days. Those who may miss class to attend extra-curricular events are requested to inform me, as a courtesy, of planned absences. If special considerations (such as illness) prevent you from fulfilling course obligations, please provide me with documentation so we may consider an exception. Remember that it is your responsibility to initiate any discussion about missed work. Because it is disruptive to the entire class, please do not excuse yourself in the middle of a class session, unless you are sick or have an emergency. I do not mind the use of laptops in the class for taking notes, but the use of laptops for personal use during class is disruptive and prohibited. Same goes for cell phones: please keep them turned off and out of sight.

Late or missed assignments: Unless stated otherwise, assignments are due at the beginning of class; assignments handed in later in the day (during or after class) will be considered one day late, and graded down appropriately. A final but crucial point: *All work must be completed in order to pass this course.*

A note on academic honesty: Each author owns his or her own ideas, words, and research. You *must* give appropriate credit — generally in the form of quotations and proper footnotes — when using the work of another scholar. I expect you to be familiar both with Bowdoin's honor code, and with the guidelines for proper citation and attribution of sources provided for this course. If you have any questions, ask rather than take risks. *Plagiarism, whether intentional or not, is a serious violation of academic standards and Bowdoin's honor code.* I will enforce violations of the honor code by bringing immediate, uncontested action before the Judicial Board. Minimum penalties for plagiarism will be to fail the course.

Offensive materials disclaimer: Students occasionally find some course materials offensive. *This is especially likely to happen in a course such as this, which will expose students to crude sexual humor, profanity, and socially taboo subjects.* Views expressed in the material we will cover do not reflect my own personal opinions. The academic enterprise invites vibrant class

discussion, which balances critical thinking with mutual respect. Students are expected to take responsibility for their experience in this course by examining their own reactions to material they consider offensive. At all times, our priority will be critical engagement with scholarly material. By continuing with this course, you are agreeing to be held academically accountable for all required materials in the syllabus, regardless of your own personal reactions to it. Students who are unwilling either to hear or think critically about such material are encouraged to drop this course at their discretion.

Disabilities: Students who have documented learning disabilities with the Office of the Dean of Student Affairs may be entitled to various accommodations. It is your responsibility to initiate with me any conversation over accommodations.

SCHEDULE OF CLASS MEETINGS

- This is a tentative schedule, liable to change to suit class needs. The online syllabus always offers the most recent version of the syllabus.
- All readings should be completed before class.
- We will not discuss each reading with the same degree of rigor. I will do my best to let you know when to make special efforts with your reading. You are, however, responsible for all the assigned material, whether or not we discuss it in class.
- Readings listed with ® should be available through the "course readings" section of the Blackboard website.

	9/4 Welcome Assignment given: Diagnostic essay Visit by Carmen Greenlee
9/9 Introductions Assignment due: Diagnostic essay Assignment given: first paper	9/11 Slavery Read: Watkins, ch. 1
9/16 Using the library Library session with Carmen Greenlee	9/18 The antebellum North Read: Watkins, ch. 2
9/23 Writing day No reading — research for papers instead. We will discuss diagnostic essays and the writing process	9/25 After the Civil War Read: Watkins, ch. 3
9/30 Presentations No reading — research for papers instead.	10/2 Presentations Paper: Road map due
10/7 Jim Crow Read: Watkins, ch. 4	10/9 Ethnic notions Paper: First draft due We will view "Ethnic Notions" in class.
10/14 No class for fall break	10/16 Birth of a Nation Read: Watkins, ch. 5
10/21 The Harlem Renaissance Read: Watkins, ch. 6	10/22 In-class film Paper: Final draft due We will view "That's Black Entertainment" in class. Read: Watkins, ch. 7
10/28 Writing conferences Paired meetings with Prof. Rael to discuss papers.	10/30 Writing conferences Paired meetings with Prof. Rael to discuss papers.
11/4 Race records and black film Read: Watkins, ch. 8	11/6 The Civil Rights era Read: Watkins, ch. 12

11/11 The Black Power generation Read: Watkins, ch. 13	11/13 Gender and sexuality Read: TBA
11/18 Presentations	11/20 Presentations Paper: Annotated bibliography due
11/25 Presentations	11/27 Presentations Paper: Road map due
12/2 Open session TBA	12/4 In-class film We will view “Why we Laugh: Black Comedians on Black Comedy” in class Paper: First draft of paper due
12/9 Open session TBA	12/11 Wrap-up Paper: Peer and self-evaluation due
12/18 Final paper due 12:00 noon	