

**Enter Laughing:
American Humor Studies in the Spirit of Our Times**

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As the new editor of *Studies in American Humor*, I welcome readers to the next phase of the oldest journal devoted to humor scholarship. Founded by the American Humor Studies Association in 1974 and published continuously since 1982, *StAH* specializes in humanistic research on humor in America (loosely defined) because the universal human capacity for humor is always expressed within the specific contexts of time, place, and audience that research methods in the humanities strive to address. Such methods now extend well beyond the literary and film analyses that once formed the core of American humor scholarship to a wide range of critical, biographical, historical, theoretical, archival, ethnographic, and perhaps digital studies of humor in performance and public life as well as in print and other media. *StAH's* expanded editorial board of specialists marks that growth. On behalf of the editorial board, I invite scholars across the humanities to submit their best work on topics in American humor and join us in advancing knowledge in the field. Our web site, www.studiesinamericanhumor.org, has submission details.

My goals for the journal begin with sustaining the high standards set by my predecessors, most recently Ed Piacentino, Professor of English at High Point University, who did so much during his tenure to bring high-quality scholarship to our readers.¹ Although our core audience consists of the members of AHSA who sponsor *StAH*, serve on its editorial board, and submit their research (we imagine them pouring over each printed issue from cover to cover when it reaches their mailboxes), our readers also include a broader group of students and scholars—both Americanists and humor aficionados—who read individual articles in our print and electronic editions in response to bibliographic citations in databases and published work. We will strive through ample submissions, blind review, editorial guidance, and careful production to continue giving our readers two lively, solid, and worthwhile issues each year.

But a change in editors also requires looking ahead, and in that vein I offer these remarks about the future of the journal and the field, and invite *StAH* readers to join me in reflecting on the theoretical, methodological, critical, and historical work needed for American humor studies to flourish today as a field that adds in significant ways to understanding American culture. Upcoming issues will feature responses from subscribers and members of the editorial board. I invite others who would like to weigh in publicly on these matters in a future issue to contact our editorial office <studiesinamericanhumor@ohio.edu>.

Here I raise two concerns to start the discussion: theory and community. Perhaps as a result of repeatedly teaching Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), surely in response to developments in the humanities over the past dozen years—notably the theoretical challenges of transnational American studies, the international cultural studies movement, and digital humanities—I feel keenly that our field needs new theoretical paradigms to guide our research. Paradigms, Kuhn observed, identify the questions that researchers address as well as stipulate conceptual approaches to those questions. The pioneering work in the 1920s and '30s by Jessica Tandy (*Crackerbox Philosophers*, 1925), Constance Rourke (*American Humor*, 1931), and

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Walter Blair (*Native American Humor*, 1937) derived from a nationalist paradigm of American exceptionalism: it privileged explicitly domestic folk figures such as the crackerbarrel philosopher and the minstrel, as well as regional narrative modes such as the mock-oral narrative and tall tale. These figures and genres highlighted a politically inflected rhetoric that not only stressed differences between American comic sensibilities and those of their English cousins, but also reinforced the ideological premises behind them. In the early years, humor research grounded in American exceptionalism both contributed and reflected the worldwide nationalism of the day, an impulse that supported the development of American Studies, folklore research, and modern ethnography along with less salutary movements such as fascism.

Indeed, American humor studies led the way for twentieth-century research on American culture broadly as a demotic rather than an elite construction, considering that the works by Tandy, Rourke, and Blair antedate the landmark studies of American cultural history appearing between the world wars: Vernon Parrington's *Main Currents of American Thought* (1927), Perry Miller's *New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939), and F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941). In fact, Matthiessen cited Rourke's book as "a stimulus" to his method, but more to the point here is his endorsement of architect Louis Sullivan's insistence that "true scholarship"—defined as "the highest type of thought, imagination, and sympathy"—identifies its creator as "a citizen, . . . a true exponent of democracy" (xix, xv). These nationalist approaches made sense in the 1920s and '30s for a U.S. still uncertain of its spot on the world stage and still defensive, especially *vis à vis* the Europe that formed the post-colonial backdrop for the republican ideology celebrated by these Americanists, over sneers at the very idea of "Civilization in the United States," as Matthew Arnold titled his 1888 attack. After all, Arnold not only took Americans to task over our "glorification of 'the average man,'" but specifically deplored our "addiction to 'the funny man,' who is a national misfortune there" (Arnold 489). Americans' addiction to humor and scholars' interest in it have not abated in the 21st century. Indeed, the rise of cable television and the Internet, the global reach of American media, and the role of humor in contemporary politics and economics (media are big business, and comic films and television dominate our media) make humor as central as ever to the study of American life.

All the more reason, then, for *Studies in American Humor* to help lead humanistic inquiry into the comic achievements and impulses of American culture. As I've argued elsewhere, humor is more than a playful mode of representation and expression. Humor both dramatizes and mocks social relations because it explicitly addresses an audience. Humor both articulates and lampoons expressive practices because it aims at (comic) effect. And humor both highlights and questions beliefs because it targets specific values or viewpoints. In a variation of the process that Johan Huizinga locates at the heart of play (Huizinga 3–19), humorist and audience collude to suspend social rules for the shared thrill of violating them, if only symbolically through language, visual art, or other mode of representation, such as dress or mime—as in the hilarious travesties of classical dance, including *Swan Lake*, by the transvestite troupe Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo—even as the transgressions of joking implicitly reassert the very cultural codes that the humor rejects. That's why I think it's worth revisiting an 1838 definition of national humor that Walter Blair borrowed from the *London and Westminster Review*, although its outmoded assumptions about "the collective mind of the nation" repress the diversity captured by Edward Said's evocative musical metaphor of contrapuntal lines of experience within a culture (W. 137; Said 18).

The nineteenth-century critic, identified by the *Wellesley Index* as John Robertson, defined a nation's humor as its "institutions, laws, customs, manners, habits, characters, convictions,—their scenery whether of the sea, the city, or the hills,—expressed in the language of the ludicrous." (W. 137, 138–39). Long before Foucault, Robertson saw ideology and the state as social facts that are as locally inflected as the human and physical environments, and he ranks customs and beliefs as forces shaping people's lives. We can recognize the translation of life to the ludicrous in a cognitive operation that neurosciences increasingly confirms: what Nancy Walker called the capacity to "perceive irony and incongruity, . . . [and] hold two contradictory realities in suspension simultaneously."² Analysis of how humor at once invokes and critiques the status quo includes not only the transgressions of rank and rules that Bakhtin called the carnivalesque (*Rabelais* 266–77), but also various rhetorical techniques that tack between matter and manner, present and past, them and us—where humanities scholars have a particular contribution to make.

These opportunities point to my second concern: If paradigms constitute scientific research communities, as Kuhn observed, by defining what work counts as biology or physics and thereby who qualifies as a biologist or physicist, then what happens in the absence of concepts or constructs that can weave together the comic expressions of varied times, places, and voices under the rubric of American humor studies? (Or perhaps I should say, "into the fabric"—obviously plaid?) What makes this effort crucial, in my view, is that wonderful contemporary scholarship only sometimes feeds a collective enterprise at present because, in the absence of unifying paradigms, humanities research on American humor has splintered among academic specialties—especially the interdisciplinary fields of women's, African-American, Native American, and ethnic studies, where they do not always get the recognition they deserve. The problem marks an unfortunate consequence of good developments. In the 1980s and '90s, as Americanists probed the field's ideological commitments, they winced at the *native* in Blair's title, scoffed at Rourke's claim that "women had played no essential part in the long sequence of the comic spirit in America" (Rourke 269, 142), and took their business elsewhere. (In Rourke's defense, I should credit her inclusion of Emily Dickinson as well as her naming the African-American Minstrel, with the Yankee and Backwoodsman, in her trio of classic American characters in *American Humor*.) But even as some scholars dismissed humor studies as passé, irrelevant, or lightweight, others gave it new vitality within ethnic, gender, and area studies. Only some of this research has found its way back to nourish American humor studies more broadly, however, so that its insights might circulate with greater impact. Books such as Lanita Jacobs-Huey's *From the Kitchen to the Parlor* (2006), Bambi Haggins's *Laughing Mad* (2007), and Glenda Carpio's *Laughing Fit to Kill* (2008) offer lessons on traditions of African-American humor not only for colleagues in anthropology, media studies, and literature, but also for scholars of other American comic traditions. Books jump disciplinary barriers more easily than journal articles, but the exigencies facing scholarly presses create opportunities for *SAH*.

Periodicals have a long history of constituting communities, as Benedict Anderson has shown, so I hope that *Studies in American Humor* can redress challenges to community, affirming that scholars of American humor have common or overlapping interests despite disciplinary differences. Editorial policy can lead the way by making more formal and evident the journal's longstanding commitment to humanities scholarship on American humor in all media, genres, and forms. Our expanded editorial

board and special issues with open calls on previously under-represented topics, such as “*MAD Magazine* and Its Legacies,” slated for fall of 2014, represent two supporting strategies, and I hope that readers will suggest others. More immediately, however, an expanded book review section in each issue will augment the annual review of scholarship in our spring number, “The Year’s Work in American Humor Studies,” an innovation by former editor Karen Kilcup of the University of North Carolina-Greensboro and now alternating between James Caron (University of Hawaii, Manoa; even-numbered years) and Bruce Michelson (University of Illinois; odd-numbered years). Under the leadership of Tracy Wuster (Austin, TX), founder of the blog *HA! Humor in America* <<http://humorinamerica.wordpress.com/>>, and co-founder with Amy Ware (University of Texas) of the American Studies Association’s Humor Studies Caucus, our expanded book review section will support interdisciplinary humor scholarship by alerting *StAH* readers to new books, articulating research ideals and values, and supporting authors and publishers contributing to the field. Authors and prospective reviewers should contact Wuster through the journal website.

Redressing the challenges we face will take more than editorial tinkering, however. So here I propose four possible moves—and invite readers to offer others—for post-nationalist and transnational approaches that can advance a collective project led by contributors to this journal to inform and update theoretical, historical, and critical practice in American humor studies. In specifying moves to (1) identify taxonomies that reflect a diverse population, (2) incorporate the economic or transactional dimensions of humor, (3) embrace international and transnational traffic in comic traditions and innovations, and (4) consider cross-media practices and influence, I offer broad strokes for updating our approaches within disciplines (since most of us face peer review within traditional fields) while also enhancing interdisciplinary conversation. Literary humor in all genres and eras will remain a staple of *StAH*, so perhaps too many of my examples cite contemporary popular comic media, but these areas, which lack the models available to scholars working on materials with longer traditions of critical and historical analysis, strike me as most in need of theoretical invigoration.

The critical move to devise new taxonomies for archetypes and other categories has already begun. Gregg Camfield offers an approach in *A Necessary Madness* (1997) that he calls amiable humor for its “pleasure in the chaotic exuberance of life,” showing how nineteenth-century domestic literary humor framed the new contradictions between individual freedoms and social constraints that played out in American family life (Camfield 5, 186). In rejecting the didacticisms of aggression theory and its variations for pragmatist realism, Camfield shows a preference for philosophy grounded in the same nineteenth-century America as the imaginative works he examines even as he draws on twentieth-century neuroscientific understanding of how the brain and mind process humor. But how might his vision of family relations in culture frame humor outside the context of nineteenth-century fiction that he examines in *Necessary Madness*? For that matter, does the family still represent the basic social unit of American society considering that recent situation comedies have substituted alternative groups such as neighbors (*Friends*, 1994-2004) and colleagues (*The Office*, UK 2001-03, USA 2005-13) for the nuclear families of *Father Knows Best* (radio 1949-54, TV 1954-60), which *The Simpsons* (1989-present) has lampooned for the last twenty-five years?

Camfield’s focus on family nonetheless highlights one avenue for rethinking taxonomies to replace those of Blair and Rourke, whose archetypes drew on an eighteenth century understanding of humor as psychological and behavioral dimensions

of inner character. In fairness, I should note that Blair updated his categories when he and Hamlin Hill wrote *America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (1978), but their division of humorists into Reputables and Subversives, while making room for the cosmopolitan sketches of Washington Irving, multi-ethnic writing by Langston Hughes and Leo Rosten, and women such as Anita Loos and Erma Bombeck, did not move us much beyond Philip Rahv's famous 1939 contrast between the Palefaces and Redskins.

Efforts to transcend this and other variations on the genteel/vernacular divide should not only revisit matters of class, as James Caron recently advocated in offering the Gentleman Humorist as one of three categorical personas, including the Backwoods Roarer and Gentleman Roarer Humorists (Caron, "Lewis Gaylord Clark"), but also challenge other binaries. The most obvious binary still implicit (alas) in humor studies is white/other, which marginalizes such comic literary lights as Sherman Alexie and Louise Erdrich, who work in otherwise genteel genres such as the novel. Other approaches have yet to pose an elegant solution to the taxonomy problem, however. In *The Book of Negro Humor* (1966), for instance, Langston Hughes offered seven black types to Rourke's one—"cool comics," jokers and jivers, preachers and parishioners, versifiers and raconteurs—yet forty years later Mel Watkins needed to add "The Bad Nigger" to the cast (Hughes *passim*; Watkins 469). Beyond racial categories, binaries such as male/female, English/multi-lingual, or even print/non-print humor also reinforce hierarchies that humor studies would do better to probe and interpret than adopt, underlining the need for new principles for interpreting comic archetypes or personas, not just longer lists of them. I admire Joanne Gilbert's work on what she evocatively calls women's "performance of marginality" in stand-up comedy, but we also need approaches that replace identity with other categories. Not that I have the answer: for a recent survey of comic traditions in the American novel, I divided a multi-ethnic cast of stock figures into insider and outsider representations, but was not satisfied by the result ("From the Sublime"). More promising possibilities have emerged based on social roles instead of identity categories. One role is political, giving us (among other possibilities) the Citizen Clown, who "comically highlight[s] communal values by disrupting them" through his transgressive behavior, as Caron describes Mark Twain (*Mark Twain: Unsacred* 20), though the definition applies beyond literary humor to film and stand-up comedy. Another role is historical, giving us (in one instance) the Post-Soul Comedian, who juggles personas at "the intersection of multiple ideologies and lived experiences" for multiracial audiences, in Bambi Haggins's analysis of performances by Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, and Dave Chapelle (5). A third role is rhetorical, giving us the Performed Self, whose narrative disclosures take the idea of the self-made individual ad absurdum by constituting a self at odds with conventional notions of identity, authenticity, and stability, as I saw self-presentations by Mark Twain, Garrison Keillor, Margaret Cho, Jon Stewart, and Jerry Seinfeld (*Twain's Brand* 27–69). Yet another possibility for drawing together diverse personas might be to consider American experience as represented through named postures of superiority, inferiority, and equality in their various inflections—scornful, confessional, suffering, instructional—as exemplified by John Gerber's classic conception of the comic pose. But deeper thought might suggest others more useful to give comic analysis the rich cultural perspectives that Caron and Haggins are bravely leading us to pursue.

The idea here (to extend Said's musical metaphor) is to understand American comic culture as symphony of harmonies and dissonances, not just dominant melodies and counterpoints. Consider, for example, African-American humor and Jewish-

American humor, which both have well-developed bodies of scholarship documenting wide influence in stand-up comedy, comic prose fiction, and film comedy. What can we learn about contemporary comic film and television by comparing the insights into African-American humor by Mel Watkins, Lanita Jacobs, Bambi Haggins with those on Jewish-American humor by James Bloom and Ruth Wisse? Alternatively, how do Native American tricksters, both in folklore and literary works like Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues* (1996), compare to those of African-American folklore and literary representations? Here we need to keep in mind Ralph Ellison's warning in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" that comic categories can become so abstract that individual variations vanish because "from a proper distance *all* archetypes would appear to be tricksters and confidence men" (46). But a comparative view can highlight how distinct historical and ideological factors elucidate differences among traditions, while tracing how a variety of comic traditions together contrapuntally constitute American humor. No matter how we go about the task, however, I hope we can explore both overlaps and contrasts among the gendered, ethnic, minority, multilingual, factional, hegemonic, and regional American humors that over the past two decades have expressed unique standpoints on American experience in specific times, places, and expressive forms.

A second move might take a longer view and treat American comic traditions and trends as arising and circulating within "communities of comedy and commerce" with members both here and elsewhere. Taking up small and large instances of the local, national, and international markets (commercial, demographic, or political) can illuminate social and economic forces behind the conventions, forms, and trends of mass-mediated humor and live performances, and thereby expose the ideological commitments that they embody. Here I mean *market* in the literal sense. Probing the material conditions for American humor, at home and elsewhere, recognizes not only its cultural significance as a commodity with international reach in an era when media contribute some \$50 billion annually to the economy (U. S. Census Bureau), but also its fundamental feature as American popular culture: audiences vote with their wallets as well as their attention, what marketers call "eyeballs" in a metaphor that (myopically?) excludes audio forms. How do the successes and failures of various comic products reflect, support, or shape social trends domestically and wherever else they appear? Rebecca Krefting's analysis in "Laughter in the Final Instance: The Cultural Economy of Humor (or Why Women Aren't Perceived to Be as Funny as Men)" offers one compelling answer to that question. We need more.

Humor periodicals and humor in periodicals will provide important examples of these processes, whose comic connections between creators and audiences remain largely unmined. Recent examples of the treasures that await include Robert Scholnick's essays on *Vanity Fair* during the Civil War. The primary sources offer many surprises, even in cases where (as with the *New Yorker*) reprint collections and memoirs have kept materials accessible and reputations alive: the most topical and original humor may be least amenable to collection, while memoirs tend to valorize their authors and *their* friends at the expense (deliberate or otherwise) of those outside their circle. Cranking through microfilm in the 1990s, I was astonished to learn how many women other than Dorothy Parker and Helen Hokinson contributed to the fledgling *New Yorker*. Today many magazines and newspapers have put their archives online, which—along with full-text databases of historical periodicals from ProQuest and EBSCO, including the latter's new collection based on materials in the American Antiquarian Society—reduce the grunt work and multiply the rewards of recovering, retrieving, and interpreting one-off

and series humor in periodicals. I would look forward to reviving “The Recovery Room,” Karen Kilcup’s occasional *STAH* department, to reprint short items out of copyright (or for which permission can be obtained) along with commentary on their significance. Here as in full-length studies, even lesser lights can illuminate: research on social themes and political topics, recovery of individual writers, artists, and editors, circulation of individual pieces and ideas among publications—various approaches promise expanded knowledge of concerns, sensibilities, and expressive practices locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally via the traffic that marked points of reciprocal influence not only between England and the U.S. but also among individual editors. David E. E. Sloane’s *American Humor Magazines and Comic Periodicals* (1987) reports some of the transatlantic connections while outlining how vast is the field of American periodicals, for we know that newspapers also contributed to periodical humor, most famously in Mark Twain’s contributions to the Virginia City, Nevada, *Territorial Enterprise* and such landmarks of journalism history as the 1835 “Great Moon Hoax” in the *New York Sun*. But many questions remain. Do humor magazines differ from other periodicals across the long nineteenth century in reflecting urbanization and frontier settlement, railroad travel and transport, and changes in demographics and literacy? What about American periodical humor in languages other than English or for various minority groups? Here I’m thinking particularly of Langston Hughes’s Jesse Semple “Ruminations” in the *Chicago Defender*, and of Zora Neale Hurston’s writings in *Opportunity*, as well as earlier writings in the Yiddish press, but much valuable work remains to recover these materials. The diversity of periodicals for niche audiences opens opportunities to study how multi-lingual and ethnic humor not only mediates between the culture of origin and American contexts, but also varies among groups. Topical, ephemeral, and often local or regional, periodicals humor has lots of room for researchers’ original and important insights into what topics comic writers and artists find worth tackling (and in what ways), what humor editors find worth circulating, and what humor audiences find worth consuming.

The marketing dimensions of modern political activism also means that, aside from the audiences for explicitly political media such as editorial newspaper cartoons, communities constituted by shared comic sensibilities can become political blocks. But the reverse also occurs, as exemplified by Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert’s 2010 “Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear” and Michael Moore’s films. What can we learn about American concerns and values from the relationship between marketing and humor, as shown in recent psychological studies,³ when the mnemonic power of humor raises its importance for marketers? Perhaps more important, what about those audiences? Humor obtains its rhetorical power by evoking—some would say *provoking*—a comic response from its audience, but understanding audiences remains mainly a trade secret of comedians in the absence of sustained ethnographic and reception work required by scholars. Notable exceptions include the essays collected in Judy Batalion’s *The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and Its Audiences* (2012) and Lanita Jacobs-Huey’s “‘The Arab is the New Nigger’: African American Comics Confront the Irony and Tragedy of September 11,” but the range of comic forms and venues, past and present, begs us to examine reception now that we can leverage new digital tools, including online commentary and tweets, along with archival research and participant observation to do so.

The market metaphor of commerce also specifically invites us to think about how humor in the public and mediated spheres differs from spontaneous interpersonal

joking in conversation. In addition, the market metaphor of commerce embraces comic play, whether public or private, as a social currency of power, interpersonal exchange, and human bond because humor as communicative act is explicitly transactional even outside the commercial markets of mediated popular culture. Ways in which audiences punish some humor with neglect or scorn and reward other humor with applause, laughter, and further markers of success (including fortune and fame) constitute feedback loops that shape the products that follow. Successful film franchises exemplify this process, though before the *National Lampoon* vacations, Bob Hope *Road* pictures, or Buster Keaton slapsticks came the nineteenth-century Literary Comedians, such as Artemus Ward and John Phoenix, whose writings aimed at a market of fans. Mark Twain built a successful career by managing the humor markets, not only by providing audiences the comic entertainment they sought in his big subscription books, but also by husbanding his copyrights, publishing atypical works pseudonymously or privately, and withholding others to protect his reputation as a crucial business asset—that is, a brand. Indeed, from his 1872 fantasy of a publishing pirate’s colophon to his 1906 decision to wear a white suit, with Mark Twain’s Patent Scrap Book (1873) and a patented history game (1884) in between, Samuel Clemens commodified and capitalized on the Mark Twain brand. Similar choices animate other writers as well as filmmakers, cartoonists, and performers of stand-up comedy: they all must find audiences, or fail.

Other media and live performances treat local audiences to local concerns through local plots, lingo, people, and accents in recognizable locales, despite the pressures of global trade in the entertainment and information landscape. Too small to warrant mass-mediated attention, these performances escape the homogenizing market pressures that stifle the transgressions on which much humor depends, but they provide rich subjects for ethnographic and other approaches to regional study. (Of course, some of these transgressions are merely vulgar or thrive only amid a small group.) By the same token, we know that the most capital-intensive media such as television and film are actually produced with international marketability in mind. Examining this process for contemporary humor locally in comedy clubs, newspaper columns, and radio shows—all still local media—as well as internationally in TV syndication, book reviews and sales, and film box-office receipts (along with sequels, fanzines, and fan blogs) can expose cultural patterns of consumption and enjoyment for scholars to interpret along with the comic details within and between individual products. I look forward to learning from such studies.

Which leads to a third possible move: tracking the different political meanings that arise in the local, national, and international markets for the exchange, commercial or interpersonal, of comic performances and mass-media products. One lesson from Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* that I’ve found particularly relevant to humor is that local and domestic meanings also imply relations to international and global practices; as Sheldon Pollock put it, vernacular politics always embrace the local by rejecting the cosmopolitan or imperial (592). Local accents, topics, and characters persist and thrive in an increasingly global entertainment and information landscape produced either with international circulation in mind or in resistance to such homogenized or hegemonic practices. To take the most famous example from the history of American literary humor: by celebrating America’s post-colonial separation from England, the framed mock-oral vernacular tale obscures our imperialist colonization of native peoples and lands here at home. More broadly, a transnational orientation invites us to consider a broad range of *mutual* influences, direct and indirect, on *and* by American humor and its

creators. To start, we should revisit antebellum humor, particularly by participants in international traditions of verse satire, amiable humor, and the periodical essay or sketch. Doing so will recover the range of American comic traditions across the ideological—and perhaps linguistic—spectrum as Anglo-American and other continuities join the more familiar divergences as objects of study. Traditions of learned wit and hoax also have much to offer. Lawrence Berkove has identified one fruitful path, the Nevada traditions of the hoax within what he calls the Sagebrush School of American humor, which he has theorized in the context of western speculation in minerals, but the Mississippi River setting of Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* (1857) points to opportunities worth exploring in earlier periods and other regions. And other international comic veins have yet to be mined in their American modes. The reverse process, by which the United States exported comic practices, has yet to move from film, comics, and fine arts scholarship to studies of literary humor.

Particularly promising opportunities lie in graphic humor, because editorial, gag, and animated cartoons all have significant international circulation. Of course, that circulation can yield startling differences in response, as we saw during the 2006 controversy over the cartoons depicting Mohammed published by *Jyllands Posten* in 2005, but it also points to the influence of Japanese manga along with *Calvin and Hobbes* on Aaron McGruder's comic strip *The Boondocks*. But to suggest how productive such scholarship can be, consider the example set by folklorist Elliot Oring, whose 2003 book *Engaging Humor* offers a stunning comparison of American, Australian, and Israeli narrative humor. He begins by noting their common penchant for tall talk, humor of character, and jokes about civilization, and concludes that we if we go beyond their stereotypical conceptions of unique national character, we can see that the three cultures, all shaped by distinct European invasions, share a "double vision" of their common experience of life on the imperial frontier, in which hearty pioneers battled hostile physical environments and indigenous populations. Comparisons with English-language humor from across the (former) commonwealth offers obvious starting points for additional such inquiries, which might build on Kerry Soper's analysis of the American iteration of the British TV mockumentary *The Office* by comparing elements of the UK, American, French, German, Québécois, Chilean, and Israeli counterparts. Humor specialists also have contributions to make on the comic dimensions of rap and other strands of hip hop culture in studies that explore diasporic adoptions themselves or consider cross-cultural continuities and disruptions. The rich repertoire of conceptual, historical, and critical tools developed in American humor research has much to offer the broader community of interest in global popular culture.

Which suggests a fourth move: engaging multiple media for comparative study of themes, audiences, and techniques. Neil Schmitz led the way on this approach thirty years ago with his remarkable *Of Huck and Alice* (1983), which invoked George Herriman's *Krazy Kat* newspaper strip as a landmark of comic modernism. Yet the literary focus identified in Schmitz's subtitle, *Humorous Writing in American Literature*, points to the opportunity that remains. Producers of stand-up comedy or literary humor or film live in a swirl of other media that feed and respond to the spirit of the times. And individual comic spirits often express themselves in more than one medium. In "The Problem of Speech Genres," Bakhtin envisioned any single communicative instance—from an oral statement to a play or novel—a single link in a society's great chain of utterances, but despite his linear metaphor, he recognized multiple vectors of influence and constraint, not least the imagined audience (cf. esp., 83, 91, 100), especially in the

aesthetic expressive forms that occupy scholars of American humor. Cross-media analysis particularly lends itself to formalist studies that may have theoretical impact, but criticism also has much to gain from such interdisciplinary research. Critics know that expression in any medium bears the mark of factors ranging from historical and cultural conventions and political rules to the economics of production, logistical limits of time and space, and receptiveness (or existence) of audiences. Literary, film, and art historians have a long tradition of examining these factors, but how comic traditions move across media or how we might think of such interactions has received less attention. M. Thomas Inge has led the way in probing relations between comics and literature; more recently Bruce Michelson explored the significance of new printing technologies for the production and cultural meanings of Mark Twain's humor, Rob King brought Constance Rourke's concepts into analysis of early film comedy, and Jennifer Greenhill has explored "the mechanics of visual deadpan" in Winslow Homer's painting. But many topics and figures remain unexplored. Consider, for instance, the slim body of scholarship on the cultural significance of polymaths like Robert Benchley, who worked in film and print and reviewed theatrical productions, as well. Studies of specific periods would also benefit: how do radio and film, the new popular media of 1920s and '30s, fit within a humor landscape previously dominated by print? Does the Little Man humor of the 1920s live on in contemporary stand-up comedy by male comics like Jim Gaffigan who flaunt their status as what Benjamin Nutter, one of my undergraduate students, called "Beta Males"? And what might we make of M. Thomas Inge's observation that *MAD* had already passed its first birthday in December 1953, when Mort Sahl first appeared on stage in San Francisco and Tom Lehrer in New York in the same week?

Research across media can lead us to surprising connections. A personal case in point: an important link in my understanding of nineteenth-century vernacular humor as an epistemological challenge to the status quo came from a study of African-American political rhetoric not at all concerned with humor, Grant Farred's *What's My Name?: Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (2003), which I found cited in an article on Aaron McGruder's comic strip *The Boondocks*. My sense that mock-oral humor and some print cartoons shared what Özge Samanci calls an "amateur aesthetic" found support in Farred's case for Muhammad Ali, C.L.R. James, Stuart Hall, and Bob Marley as intellectuals whose rhetoric "resists, subverts, disrupts, reconfigures, or impacts the dominant discourse" and replaces "the accepted, dominant intellectual modality and vocabulary . . . [with] a new positioning and idiomatic language" (1). That is, their very standpoint represents "a subaltern or postcolonial voice" (11). This view of the vernacular as a counter-hegemonic rhetoric operating conceptually as well as linguistically revitalized for me James Cox's observation that a vernacular vision at its most profound, as in *Huckleberry Finn*, not only represents "a way of saying," but also presents "a way of being" (176). As represented through the spare, amateurish art and rich dialogue of *The Boondocks*, that way of being enables vernacular humor to transcend dialect politics—which McGruder lampoons through his characters' many languages, including Huey Freeman's Black Panther accusations, Cesar's signifyin', Grandpa's '50s slang, and Tom Dubois's political correctness—and reclaim the potential for potent satire through the eyes of a child.

In this context, consider the confessional and observational strands of stand-up comedy that enact what Eric Rothenbuhler in another context has called the American "cult of the individual": how might we account for the growing importance of stand-up in an age when families no longer gather around the electronic hearth but rather watch

alone on either large screens in their bedrooms or tiny ones in their hands? And how does this glorification of the individual fit within globalization processes that increasingly place us in mass categories while Internet surveillance reduces us to smaller and smaller commercial and political demographics? Perhaps more pressing to longtime members of the American Humor Studies Association, how does literary humor adapt to—or influence—a multimedia environment in which popular and non-print forms predominate? And conversely, how can we understand the cultural significance of *MAD* magazine, *Saturday Night Live*, *Second City*, and other American comic institutions, considering their influences not only on stars such as Lynda Barry and Art Spiegelman, Amy Poehler and John Belushi, Elaine May and Eugene Levy, but also on many of us in humor studies, whose comic sensibilities were shaped by them?

Crossing media lines may also help scholars of American literary humor tap the experience and comic sensibilities of our students. While we hook our students on humor analysis by illuminating the significance of their own popular culture en route to a tour down distant or unfamiliar roads, they can attune us to the sensibilities driving current trends, especially on the small screens in their pockets. The narrative bias of literary humor studies means that much comic verse remains to be recovered along with the humor in popular music and the fine arts, especially painting and sculpture. Theoretical tools for such work already exist. Although she also drew on Sheri Klein's *Art and Laughter* (2007), Lorraine Cox (Union College) showed the enduring power of incongruity theory in a 2010 paper on the three-dimensional and performance art of Michael Arcega, whose maps made of Spam call attention to the political commitments already embedded in any material—in this case, a luncheon meat introduced by a colonial power cast as a protector. So I hope that future research will address still more varieties of genre, medium, ethnicity, language, and origin. For a recent example, consider Vampire Cowboys, an Off-Off Broadway performance group that defines itself as “a ‘geek theatre’ company that creates and produces new works of theatre based in action/adventure and dark comedy with a comic book aesthetic” (<http://www.vampirecowboys.com/index2.htm>). Its 2012 production, *War is F**king Awesome*, combined video and live action to trace the history of American political bloodlust that Richard Slotkin years ago called “regeneration through violence” through the escapades of Unity Spencer, an undead superheroine nicknamed U.S. (get it?) who fights America’s wars when called from her eternal day job as White House cook, with occasional advice from the “magic Injun” embedded in her head, Chief Killsalot. The company’s co-directors Qui Nguyen and Robert Ross Parker have a singular vision, but it arises from multiple media and has multiple antecedents in the history of American and world humor.

Despite the length of these remarks, I imagine that others have ideas at least as good as these four moves for ways in which *Studies in American Humor* can help resolve the theoretical, methodological, and critical challenges facing us. I invite their responses and expect to publish some in these pages. Other scholars may prefer to demonstrate their commitments through their submissions to the journal, and I welcome those responses as well. But all our efforts hold promise at a time when, despite questions of the humanities’ role in the academy (Bérubé; Liu; Schuessler), humor seems daily more relevant to American political and media culture, and when humanists now have new tools for probing the significance of comic expression across regions and groups of American society. *The Daily Show*, *The Onion*, and Steven Colbert’s Super PAC may steal the headlines, but thanks to cable TV and the Internet, stand-up comedy keeps

crossing boundaries while box office receipts for film comedies outpace those of all other film genres (Nash Information Services), and humor animates contemporary global multimedia forms such as *Twitter* and *YouTube* as well as the texts and illustrations that speak to us across centuries of North American history. Indeed, the interdisciplinary historical, rhetorical, and social components of humor research that once made it central to understanding American culture ought still to do so in an era defined by postmodern irony, abundant mass media, ethnic studies, and critical theories, including the post-colonialisms that underlay the earliest theories of divergence between American and British humor. In this context, we scholars of American humor should seize our role—in the academy and in public discourse—as guides to comic meanings, past and present, in American culture. In this worthy endeavor, I hope that *StAH* will lead the way.

Notes

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at a conference session sponsored by the American Humor Studies Association at the American Literature Association meeting in San Francisco, CA, in May of 2012. Many thanks to Linda Morris, James Caron, and Linda Bergmann for their advice on recasting it for this purpose.

² Walker 82. An example of neuroscientific research into humor is Mobbs, et al. Caron, “From Ethology”; surveys other scientific and anthropological approaches to humor.

³ For recent studies of this effect, see, for example, Abed; Schmidt and Williams; Carlson.

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