
Introduction

ENTER LAUGHING

“MY JAW WAS TIGHT.” I can’t remember the first time I heard this phrase but I’m sure that it was my father who spoke it—whether in response to a slight on the job, an injustice in the world, or a blatantly bad call made by some person in a position of authority. When recounting the incident, which in a different man might have elicited either a stream of obscenities or other exclamations of anger and frustration, my father would say with a mild smile, “I wasn’t angry, but my jaw was tight.” Decades later, when I heard Richard Pryor say, in a sketch on his short-lived television series, that his jaw was tight—expressing his resentment that the then Los Angeles Rams had released their first and only black quarterback, James Harris—I was struck by the resonance of those words. Arguably, there have not been two more different black men on the planet than Richard Pryor and my father—one a comedy icon who profanely and profoundly gave voice to the black experience and lived life with operatic bravado, the other a strong, gentle working man, who was raised in the segregated South, served in World War II, a former sailor, whose idea of “hard” language was “hey, fella,” and who, along with his wife of forty-nine years, struggled to make sure that his six daughters attained a larger piece of the American Dream. Yet the phrase ties them together—and me to both of them. What does it mean when “your jaw is tight”—the physical reality of teeth clenched, unable or unwilling to speak, biding your time, holding your tongue, not saying the things that you yearn to say. And what do you mean when you say, “My jaw was tight,” and how does one respond to the African American legacy of enforced silences: with covert conversations, with sly stories embedded in trickster tales, with kitchen-table witticisms and wisdom. The antithesis of one’s jaw being tight has been performed in monologues on the Chitlin’ Circuit, on comedy club main stages, and on myriad screens, large and small: mouths open, laughing mad is a liberatory act.

Rooted in a history where commentary and critique had to be coded for *the folks* (to borrow Zora Neale Hurston’s oft-repeated moniker for African American communities), black comedy is tied inextricably to the African

American condition. As the annunciation of laughing mad, black comedy also supplied laughter for (white) mainstream audiences when constructed through the narrowing and diminishing lens of minstrel tropes. Nonetheless, the function of humor and the therapeutic value of the accompanying laughter, inside safe, communal black spaces—whether Granny’s front porch or center stage at the Apollo—spoke to specific black experiences. As Langston Hughes notes in the autobiographical prose of *The Big Sea*, the laughter was, more often than not, the weapon used to fight the pain. Providing emotional paraphrasing of lyrical blues sung by “an old beggar with a guitar,” Hughes writes:

You don’t know,
 You don’t know my mind—
 When You see me laughin’
 I’m laughin’ to keep from cryin’¹

Black comedy, in its literal and literary construction, has always overtly *and* covertly explored the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of African American communities. Yet, as Wil Haygood aptly notes, crossover complicates by the manner in which black humor has been produced and consumed: “The Negro comic’s trajectory has gone from minstrel shows and outdoor tents, from honky-tonks to Greenwich Village saloons, from amphitheaters to the big screen. Laughter washing over them like brittle sunshine. Sometimes the laughter is of a confused sort, owing to misinterpretation, the joke merged with history and the ears of whites placed at awkward angles.”²

This book’s aim is to examine the circulation of the black comedic social discourse by focusing on black comic personae that have become firmly ensconced in contemporary mainstream American popular consciousness. By offering detailed analyses of different personae (in their movement across mediums) and the varying ideological and pedagogical imperatives in their comedic discourse, *Laughing Mad* explores the place of African Americans in mainstream American comedy and popular culture and how, by performing myriad notions of blackness, they do or do not speak of and to multiple black experiences. In addition, by interrogating the nature of the laughter fostered by these comic personae, I hope to explore why “crossover” still plays a role in both interracial and intraracial discussions of race within the problematic genre of comedy.

In the years prior to the civil rights movement, the black comic persona occupied clearly delineated spaces for black and white audiences. Crossing over, while possible for a few, required strict adherence to codes of conduct that did not transparently challenge the race relations of the day. The path from America’s first black crossover star, Bert Williams, who, in burnt cork, on the vaudeville and theater stages of the late-nineteenth century and early twentieth, managed to humanize the dim “darky” and dig deeply into the *actual* pathos of the minstrel trope as fodder for his humor while never threatening his mainstream audience, to the cinematic frightened physicality of Mantan Moreland’s

“cooning” and televisual iterations of the misspeaking “Sambo”-like dandy of Tim Moore’s Kingfish on *Amos ’n’ Andy* is long and circuitous. Yet the conception and reception of black comedy on this trek, which varied widely, depending on the audience, illustrates how black comic personae, like the African American condition, were diffused and often distorted in mainstream popular consciousness.

The civil rights movement not only transformed multiple black ideologies—social and political practices, as well as black thought—but it also changed the nature of black comedy. By 1963, the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, the African American condition could not be ignored as the battles for civil rights were waged on multiple fronts—and this part of the revolution was televised. The media coverage of the civil rights struggle forced the recognition of racial inequality into American popular consciousness and acted as a catalyst for growing the movement. Moreover, as television news programming brought the images of Birmingham (peaceful protestors being beaten, sprayed by high-pressure fire hoses, and attacked by dogs at the order of Police Commissioner Bull Connor), as well as Washington, D.C. (the historic march that culminated with Dr. King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech), into living rooms across the country and across the world, race was placed squarely on the discursive table in a highly visible way.

Dick Gregory was there—in Birmingham and in Washington. In 1960 the clean-cut comic, dressed in the conservative manner that replicated the civil rights protestors of the era (a dark suit and tie), had broken the color line when he brought sociopolitically charged black humor to the comedy club mainstream. By 1963 Gregory, whose comedy confronted racial inequality, was using his celebrity to bring attention to the struggle: Gregory was on the front line, leading the first wave of black teens and children in the Children’s Crusade of the Birmingham protest. On May 20, 1963, after being released from jail, the comic addressed the nonviolent protestors congregated at St. John’s Baptist Church: “One of [the] greatest problems the Negro has in America today is that we have never been able to control our image. The man downtown has always controlled our image. He has always told us how we’re supposed to act. He has always told us a nigger know his place—and he don’t mean this, because if we knew our place he wouldn’t have to put all those signs up.”³ One of many truisms spoken that day to a congregation of the civil rights faithful, this humorous statement was also emblematic of the content of Gregory’s comedy. Strong, declarative statements elicited knowing laughter from this audience as it did from those who watched Gregory onstage at The Hungry I in San Francisco or The Playboy Club in Chicago—as well as those who were introduced to the comic via the electronic hearth. As part of the “New Comic” movement, in which Lenny Bruce challenged social and cultural mores and Mort Sahl contested intellectual and political complacency, Gregory challenged everything—and, in so doing, changed the nature of the laughter in black comedy.

No longer was the laughter solely to keep from crying; the civil rights moment marked the beginning of black humor's potential power as an unabashed tool for social change, for the unfiltered venting of cultural and political anger, and for the annunciation of blackness. The humor, as conceived and received within the community, spoke to a deep cultural impulse, extending beyond articulating suffering in muted tones to howling about oppression and subjugation, as well as the victories in survival and amidst strife. Comics and audiences were laughing *mad*.

Over the past forty-five years the black comedian and African American comedy have become progressively more central to *mainstream* popular culture. Just as other forms of black cultural production, such as music—from blues to jazz to soul to funk to hip-hop—that have been sampled (literally and figuratively) and embraced by those on the cutting edge of hipness (or those endeavoring to position themselves there), the black comic emerged as a player in post-civil rights era American comedy. Then as now, the black comic's access to the mainstream pool is restricted by both industrial and taste-cultural imperatives that reflect the sociohistorical moment. Whereas Bill Cosby and Pryor are icons in American comedy, Eddie Murphy, Whoopi Goldberg, Chris Rock, and Dave Chappelle represent new breeds of black comedy for the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium—the black comedic A-list actor with crossover appeal. Although the term *crossover* carries with it the problematic baggage of liberal-pluralist notions of inclusion and industrial imperatives of market share and box office, one cannot ignore the fact that the number of black comics who consistently engage audiences across lines of race, class, culture, and region are relatively few. The process of crossover—and the extension of both humor and influence beyond black communal spaces—adds a problematic twist to the already Byzantine task faced by the African American comic: to be funny, accessible, and topical while retaining his or her *authentic* black voice.

In *Laughing Mad* I offer a cultural theory-informed analysis of a small swath of this rich comedic history of black comic personae as products of the “post-soul era.” The term *post soul*, coined by cultural critic Nelson George, refers to the period after the black power movements. George's assessment of the post-soul babies' experience positions them in a time of extreme changes after an era of *great* change:

They came of age in the aftermath of an era when many of the obvious barriers to the American Dream had fallen. Black people now voted wherever and whenever they wanted and attended integrated schools. They . . . hurried toward a future with a different set of assumptions from any minority kids in American history. . . .

. . . As they grew up, both the black middle class and the black lower class expanded; they grew up with Wall Street greed, neo-con ideology, Atari

Gameboys, crack, AIDS, Afrocentricity, and Malcolm X as movie hero, political icon, and marketing vehicle.⁴

While George names the group from whom both the buppie and B-Boy emerged, Mark Anthony Neal narrows the chronological framework for those he terms “children of soul,” born between the march on Washington in 1963 and the Supreme Court decision in *The Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case (although I would extend the framework back in time to include the late boomers—those born after the beginning of the sit-in movement in Greensboro and the election of JFK in 1960).⁵ Regardless of the term (or which exact time line, for that matter) one prefers, one can discern what forces impacted the processes of identity formation for those whose coming of age coincided with the burgeoning post-soul era. As Neal states, these were the black folks “who came to maturity in the age of Reaganomics and experienced the change from urban industrialism to deindustrialism, from segregation to desegregation, from essential notions of blackness to meta-narratives on blackness, without any nostalgic allegiance to the past . . . but firmly in grasp of the existential concerns of this brave new world.”⁶

Understanding the sociohistorical positioning of this group is vital to this study because the most significant voices in contemporary black comedy are—either chronologically or spiritually—post-soul babies whose comic personae are inflected by complex tastes and cultural practices that emerged in the post-civil rights era, as well as by race, class, gender, and region. Those practices are experiential, based on individual and communal experiences of the African American condition, but they are also mediated: post-soul babies are media babies. The comic persona of the post-soul baby may, albeit rarely, reflect a view of black cultural productions and sociopolitical discourses through rose-colored glasses; but more often than not it is with jaundiced eyes—and this kind of hopeful cynicism (or cynical hopefulness) permeates contemporary black comedy and the construction of the black comic persona.

The comic persona is the performance of the intersection of multiple ideologies and lived experiences. My choice to focus on the persona, which is constructed by acculturation, individual choice, and industrial imperatives—rather than the person—allows for the close examination of the inherent tenuousness of the black comic’s place in contemporary American comedy. By probing the disparities between the stand-up comedian’s comic persona and the one constructed for cinematic and televisual consumption, I investigate the tensions between contemporary representations of blackness and the dichotomies embedded in the term *crossover* (whether achieved by homogenization or as a result of shifts in taste cultures). Given that *Laughing Mad* is not intended to be a “star” study, the autobiographical details that often inflect the content of the comic’s act will be included only when necessary to understand how this background is utilized in the construction of the comic persona. This book teases out the ways

that the black comic persona provides the lens through which sociocultural and sociohistorical shifts in notions of race might be observed—both within the African American community and within mainstream popular culture.

One might be tempted to assert that the edges of the African American comic's rant are trimmed to fit into the construct of a movie star's shtick, with the comedic social commentary—along with the critical bite—left on the cutting room floor. While there are instances when this is undoubtedly true, this volume will illustrate that the trade-offs are far less transparent when complex processes of aesthetic, ideological, and industrial compromise cloud notions of complicity and culpability. Historically, the black comic has retained the ability to get the audience laughing while slipping in sociocultural truths. The boundless promise of the African American comedic actor in social screen comedy, however, remains for the most part unfulfilled as the performance of blackness continues to be made more culturally digestible for mass consumption.

One could argue that the stand-up material of a majority of the aforementioned A-list black comics has placed them on the critical cutting edge of black comedy—as comedic cultural critics with unique insights on the African American (and American) condition. “The comic-as-cultural-critic-and-social-commentator does not merely celebrate or valorize the culture from which he or she emerges. Such comics enable us to understand our culture as they honestly explore it and thus help explain black culture's internal contradictions, stress its positive features and acknowledge its detrimental characteristics.”⁷ Michael Eric Dyson eloquently presents the ideal comedic cultural critic as one not only clear on his or her ideology and pedagogy but also unflinching and unmerciful in his or her comedic critique. This description is reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the role of the rogue, the fool, and the clown in the novel. These figures have, says Bakhtin,

a privilege—the right to be “other” in this world, the right not to make common causes with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available; . . . they see the underside and the falseness of every situation. . . . Their laughter bears the stamp of the public square where the folk gather. They re-establish the public nature of the human figure: the entire being of characters such as these is, after all, utterly on the surface; everything is brought out on to the square. . . . This creates that distinctive means for externalizing a human being, via parodic laughter.⁸

Given that the stand-up comic's persona might arguably be a conflation of the three (the rogue, the clown, and the fool), Bakhtin's assertion that the clown is constructed in opposition to “everything that is conventional and false” (162) seems to capture the essential directive of the comic as cultural critic. According to Bakhtin the laughter elicited by the comic is “of the public square”—understood and defined collectively by and directed to the very community, which the comic (necessarily) lampoons. Consequently, this definition, which

extols the comic's conflation of the insider's knowledge of the community and the outsider's objective view, is part of what empowers the comedic cultural critic to expose the "internal contradictions" within myriad aspects of black life for "us" (African Americans), while still speaking to the multiple forms of hegemony one experiences while living as a black person in America. In order for the comedic discourse produced by the black comic to be effectively edifying, it must be self-aware *and* self-reflexive—able to illicit thought along with the laughter. Given industrial limitations, as well as the "ideas" regarding audience expectations of the comic persona as filtered through primetime network (or netlet) television or mainstream Hollywood film comedy, it appears that following this pedagogical directive becomes progressively more problematic as the comic moves from one medium to the next.

Interestingly, discussion of the African American comic is frequently segregated into discourses around a specific medium—television comedy, film comedy, and stand-up comedy—or a specific genre or subgenre—the interracial buddy film, the ghetto sitcom, or the "black block" sitcoms on Fox, the WB, or UPN. In terms of television history, J. Fred MacDonald's *Blacks and White TV* and Donald Bogle's *Primetime Blues* provide definitive surveys of televisual representations of blackness. While each author grapples with the roles played by depictions of blackness in television and their impact on and reflection of popular culture, the African American comedian is discussed in relationship to specific televisual texts (Jimmie Walker on *Good Times*, Bill Cosby on *The Cosby Show*, Martin Lawrence on *Martin*). MacDonald addresses the connections between the medium's practices, its representations, and their impact on the televisual spectator, acknowledging that because of the limited number of African Americans on prime time, "each performance by an African-American is regarded as a chance to make a statement about realities, [and] each appearance takes on additional weight."⁹ Bogle traces the repetition of black stereotypes from the moment of television to the present and underscores the significance of the black "star" to African American audiences: "Black viewers might reject the nonsense of the scripts on some episodes of *Sanford and Son* or *The Jeffersons* or *Martin*. . . . But they never really rejected a Redd Foxx or a Sherman Hemsley or Martin Lawrence."¹⁰

In *Revolution Televised: Prime Time and the Struggle for Black Power*, Christine Acham skillfully melds historical and textual analysis of significant black-oriented television programs, including *Tom Brown's Journal*, *Soul Train*, *The Flip Wilson Show*, *Sanford and Son*, and *The Richard Pryor Show*. Acham brings to light the "social, political and industrial factors brought about in [the] shift from invisibility to hyperblackness in the late 1960s and 1970s."¹¹ By supplying detailed biographical and performance background on black comics such as Flip Wilson, Redd Foxx, and Richard Pryor, Acham situates programs within a rich sociopolitical and sociohistorical context of televised black experience in the post-civil rights era.

In *Watching Race* Herman Gray explores the manner in which “blackness” is “played out” in contemporary televisual narratives and endeavors to reveal how these narratives “push [African Americans] towards an imaginary center.”¹² Gray asserts that the discourse of race is informed by “the key cultural and symbolic figure in American politics in the 1980s, the ‘sign of blackness’ [which] circulated in a conservative-dominated discursive field, where it continually served to galvanize, articulate, and mobilize the central issues facing frightened, angry, and resentful white Americans. From the Willie Horton political ads and nightly news representations of black criminality, which stirred and fed white fears, to *The Cosby Show*, which quieted them,” Gray traces the industrial shifts that seem to run counter to the ideological imperatives of Reaganism.¹³ Gray asserts that television programs like *Julia* and *I-Spy* can be seen within the context of “assimilationist discourse,” with an ethos of invisibility (where specific social-political issues and racism are constructed as “individual problems”), while series like *The Jeffersons* and *The Cosby Show* fall into the category of “Separate but Equal” (pluralist) discourse, where black characters live and work in hermetically sealed social milieus that are approximately equivalent to their white counterparts. In the shows of the pluralist discourse cultural difference is explored without ever coming into direct conflict with “mainstream” America by “critiquing the hegemonic character of (middle-class constructions of) whiteness or, for that matter, the totalizing constructions of blackness.”¹⁴ The final category of discourse, “Multicultural/Diversity,” is exemplified by the short-lived series *Frank’s Place*, *A Different World*, and *In Living Color*, which “seldom, if ever, adjusted its representation of African American cultural experiences to the gaze of an idealized white middle class audience.”¹⁵ These discursive categories (assimilationist, pluralist, and multicultural) correspond to iterations of comic personae whose humor is purposefully designed to serve much the same function as the aforementioned comedies (from *Julia* to *Frank’s Place*): to speak for and to very specific audiences.

Like *Watching Race*, Beretta Smith-Shomade’s *Shaded Lives* examines televisual representations of blackness from the eighties to the present; however, Smith-Shomade’s interrogation of the representations of African American women across genres (situation comedy, talk show, music videos, new programming) reveals inherent disparities between the essentialized constructions of black womanhood as televisually realized and the lived experiences of black women. Smith-Shomade’s examination of the construction of black women in the situation comedy is particularly instructive in its systematic analysis of these representations as inflected by class and sexuality, as well as race. Smith-Shomade speaks directly to the narrative marginalization of black women’s voices in comedy, which most certainly extends beyond the fictions of the small screen. Astutely observing that sitcoms of the nineties often “excavated stereotypes of White women and superimposed them on Black ones,” Smith-Shomade also notes that “the greater proportion of Black women’s representations remained

in supporting, mammified, and one-dimensional capacities.”¹⁶ *Shaded Lives* sheds light on the unsettling tendency for the normative elements of dominant culture to seep into black comedy. Perhaps more significant, however, Smith-Shomade examines the plethora of ways that black women’s place in comedy is limited by conflicting media images (each of which purports to capture the essence of a singular black female subject), generic conventions, and narrative biases that continue to inflect the stories that are told about black women and that they, in turn, tell about themselves.

Black comedy, and by extension the black comic, often receives “limited” attention when included in film histories that discuss the genre within the larger rubric of contemporary black film. According to Thomas Cripps’s *Making Movies Black* these messages were delivered in dramas but not in film comedy. Donald Bogle’s *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* provides a historical look at a select group of black comedy “stars” to emblemize the relationship between the comedian as comic force and the context of trends in black and white film of their respective eras. While Bogle also touches on the lives and filmic careers of Whoopi Goldberg and Eddie Murphy, his analysis of the *cinematic* constructions of Richard Pryor is the most expansive, rooted in both comedic and industrial shifts of the seventies and eighties. Bogle traces Pryor’s progress as comedic actor through the “crazy nigger” incarnations of *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* (1979) and *Uptown Saturday Night* (1974) to the diluted version of that comic persona in the role that brought him “co-starring” fame in *Silver Streak* (1976). Bogle ends this analysis with the eighties’ cinematic iteration of a Pryor who was disconcerting in pedestrian comedic roles like *Superman III* (1983), in which, Bogle notes, “he looks like a terr’fied Willie Best wandering through the haunted house with Bob Hope in *The Ghost Breakers*.”¹⁷ The use of textual analysis of these film roles in Bogle’s de facto “star” studies and Ed Guerrero’s analysis of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy’s stints in the biracial buddy oeuvre of the late seventies and eighties (with Gene Wilder as Pryor’s white counterpart, and various Anglo actors, including Nick Nolte and Dan Ackroyd as Murphy’s) gives rich narrative and character detail that justifiably complicates the quasi-integrationist “We Are the World” rhetoric that informs this subgenre.

Mel Watkins’s *On the Real Side*, which explores the roots and routes of black comedy, most assuredly informed the post-civil rights era analysis in this study. As the title suggests, Watkins’s exhaustive and insightful history of African American comedy traces the multiple facets of the performance and reception of African American humor. The subversions of minstrel narratives—the little “victories” necessarily “hidden” in character construction, plot, and performance that went unseen by white audiences—to the bold sociopolitical critique of Dick Gregory, whose politically informed and socially aware comedic discourse acted as a model for Pryor, his contemporary, and Rock, his comic progeny, Watkins celebrates the expansiveness, resilience, and ingenuity of African American comedy.

Unlike studies that focused predominantly on either a single medium (stage performance, film, or television), individual televisual or cinematic texts or the comic star, or Watkins's work, which endeavors to span the breadth of black comedy's history, this volume traces the movement of individual black comic personae across media in the latter part of the twentieth century and early twenty-first. In order to determine how the culturally and industrially determined construct of the black comedian's persona is in conversation with both his or her era and the African American condition, *Laughing Mad* provides detailed and nuanced readings of the acts, the televisual and cinematic roles, and the extratextual presence of four post-soul comics, whose arrival in the promised land of crossover came early in their careers and for whom keeping it "real" has been an ongoing struggle, with varying levels of success. Before one can understand where these post-soul comics were (and are) going, it is necessary to understand who had made that comic middle passage before them.

The first chapter provides the requisite background to this cultural study by examining the comic televisual and cinematic personae of four comedians who came of comic age during the sixties and early seventies: Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby, Flip Wilson, and Richard Pryor. As the comic equivalent of the Talented Tenth, their presence in comic mainstream expanded the possibilities for the black comic's success. Examining the paths of these comics reveals how they set the stage for black comedy in the next four decades and how the progression of their comedic trajectories acted as ideological and pedagogical models for the black comedians of the post-civil rights era. The progressively controversial nature of Gregory's comic discourse acted as a de facto decision for him to abandon the quest for crossover success. For Cosby and Pryor the easy move from stand-up stage to television and film, respectively, corresponded to both the historical moment and the "suitability" of their comic personae to the medium into which they sought entry, whereas for both Gregory and Wilson the movement (or lack thereof) was determined as much by individual agency as by the cultural and/or medium specificity of their comedic styles. If there is, indeed, a correlation between ease of entry and mainstream friendliness, it is more circuitous than direct—particularly when one considers that Pryor's "crazy nigger" persona (which was extremely marketable in concert films but entirely unpalatable to prime-time television) could be tailored to fit into the interracial buddy offerings, whereas Cosby's incarnation as comic for *all* audiences brought him the status of televisual icon but never allowed him to emerge as the star in a successful mainstream film comedy. Nonetheless, the career trajectories of these comics, as well as the ways in which their contributions to both black and American comedy have been valorized, vilified, or forgotten, provide both template and cautionary tale to the post-soul generation.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the comedic development and transformation of Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock as emblematic of the first and second waves, respectively, of post-civil rights era African American comedy. Just as the issue

of crossover success was problematic for their civil rights era predecessors, Murphy and Rock navigate the tumultuous waters of the entertainment mainstream with varying levels of success. The examination of the incarnations of Murphy's and Rock's comic personae—as constructed in stand-up and on television in chapter 2 and as realized cinematically and industrially in chapter 3—reveals the changing parameters for what it means to be crossover-friendly. Clearly, their brands of stand-up audaciousness differ—Murphy's “blue” bad boy rap (sexually explicit and socially irreverent) versus Rock's scathing comedic critique (simultaneously radical and reactionary in sociopolitical terms). Both of their comic personae, however, have been “reframed” and “retooled” for mainstream consumption in ways that replicate some of the transformations made by their comic predecessors.

While the changes in Murphy's filmic persona—from Axel Foley's sexualized savvy in the *Beverly Hills Cop* oeuvre to John Doolittle's affable and harried “every-dad-ness” in the *Doctor Doolittle* movies—may seem more extreme than Rock's comic alterations—from cultural critic to new millennial populist hero in classical Hollywood-informed films *Down to Earth* and *Head of State*, both sets of transformations speak to the place of the black comic actor in mainstream comedy. Although no longer de facto second bananas (as in Pryor's roles with Gene Wilder), neither are they exactly comic leading men or direct cinematic iterations of their stand-up personae. When one examines the cinematic translation of Murphy's and Rock's comic personae for mainstream consumption, the questions about the cost of crossover in terms of comedic content and cultural specificity are brought into relief. In keeping self-aware and self-conscious in construction, Murphy's and Rock's comic personae provide partially translated enunciations of blackness that speak to various audiences on variable registers. Thus, for the first and second waves of the post-civil rights era, the emergent black comic persona is necessarily culturally and stylistically hybrid—borrowing, losing, keeping aspects of black experiences that can be utilized as “accessible” material in temporally relevant, medium-specific performances of blackness.

In chapter 4 the intersecting issues of gender, crossover, and sociocultural politics are revealed as integral to Whoopi Goldberg's comic persona. From her Mike Nichols-directed Broadway debut in 1984 to her revised revival of her one-woman show in 2005, from her Oscar-winning turn as Oda Mae Brown in *Ghost* (1990) to her short-lived stint as the spokesperson for Slim-Fast, the comic actor has been consistently engaged in the practice of crossover. Furthermore, with the possible exceptions of Chitlin' Circuit veteran and mainstream sensation Moms Mabley and Pearl Bailey, the “down-home” diva of the stage (Broadway and nightclub), no black female comics have been able to gain the access and success in the entertainment mainstream that Whoopi Goldberg has attained. Yet, as a black woman in American comedy, Goldberg has had to confront gendered notions of “how to be funny,” as well as those tied to the

function of racial and cultural specificity in stand-up comedy, in the theater, and on the big and small screens in the post-civil rights era. Understanding Goldberg's emergence as a crossover diva requires that one look to the past and future of crossover and the black female comic. Through the exploration of the comic kinship between Bailey, Mabley, Goldberg, and diva-in-training Wanda Sykes, one begins to discern how these crossover divas play with and against the cultural politics of sexuality, gender, and race. Moreover, when one examines the correlations between the constant and shifting aspects of Goldberg's comic personae and those of her black female comic predecessors and progeny, the intersections between the extratextual construction of their personae and the impact of the openly espoused politics of each woman on both the mediated construction of her persona and its degree of mainstream acceptance offers fascinating commentary on the position of the black female comic in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.¹⁸

Chapter 5 explores the emergence of Dave Chappelle as a new millennial comic wunderkind. By tracing the comic lineage of the sketch/variety show from Richard Pryor's series in the late seventies through *In Living Color's* netlet era birth in the early nineties, one can discern how and why *Chappelle's Show* marks a point of rupture *and* a point of convergence for conflicting ideological impulses. One can also begin to see how the de facto crossover appeal of the series problematizes the series' and the comic's unique status as industrial and cultural phenomena. Furthermore, the tensions between the comic's stand-up persona and those of his series in terms of the internal and external pressures of widespread de facto crossover success (from the comic himself and from the black community, as well as from his audience, black and white, and from industrial forces, respectively) also must be probed when exposing Chappelle's status as a comic provocateur extraordinaire. Thus, this volume concludes by raising new questions about the presence of emergent black comic voices—across media—that might direct future studies on African American comedy to interrogate further the significant impact of the post-soul baby throughout black and mainstream American popular culture and consciousness. "The post-soul imagination . . . has been fueled by three distinct critical desires, namely, the reconstitution of community, particularly one that is critically engaged with the cultural and political output of black communities; a rigorous form of self and communal critique; and the willingness to undermine or deconstruct the most negative symbols and stereotypes of black life via the use and distribution of those very same symbols and stereotypes."¹⁹

The comic personae and sensibilities of the post-civil rights era comedians examined in *Laughing Mad* resonate with this rumination on the post-soul imagination. By using the microphone as a weapon in comedic discursive combat, Murphy, Rock, Goldberg, and Chappelle have interrogated myriad social and political maladies, including issues of race, and have spoken to multiple articulations of blackness. Yet their comic critique of black communities, social

practices, and media representation, whether in their acts or their televisual and cinematic endeavors, have drawn praise and condemnation from the entertainment mainstream, as well as disparate segments of the very communities they are purported to represent. Whether one considers Goldberg and Murphy, whose comic emergence took place in the eighties, on the cusp of the post-soul era; Rock, in the nineties; and Chappelle, in the new millennium, firmly embedded in a post-soul aesthetic, their comic personae are all in contentious conversation with the sociopolitical milieu of contemporary American society. No doubt excavating these discursive processes and the historical, industrial, and social factors that inflect them will provide an instructive base on which further sociohistorical cultural study on black comedy can be constructed. Without underestimating the significance of my theoretical goals, my most sincere wish is that this book provides insight into how these performers make us laugh when dealing—or not dealing—with race.

My thoughts return to the conflation of emotions and histories in the phrase “my jaw was tight”—those words that, with poignant playfulness, serve to concretize a response to social, political, and economic realities of oppression . . . for my father, for Pryor, for me. Exposing the subtext—the sociohistorical and industrial factors that inform both the material and our reception of it—and discerning the nature of the laughter that the joke, the act, the episode, or the film representation elicits are key to understanding whether the multiplicity of African American identities and black cultural productions are able to resonate with enough force to register not only in mainstream American comedy but in American popular consciousness. But nagging questions remain. How are these comic black voices being acknowledged and constructed—as comedic discourse or as easily dismissed light entertainment without either critical or ideological bite? And what of the laughter? Is it nervous laughter or patronizing laughter? Or are the comic players themselves, like many of us in the audience, jaws still tight, laughing mad? In the end I hope these questions will not be rhetorical.