

Introduction

Humor Matters

In the 1960s, Dick Gregory and Bill Cosby electrified white audiences with comedy acts that echoed millions of African American voices demanding political, social, and economic equality. Gregory led the paradigm shift with an edgy brand of racial humor that represented African Americans seeking immediate gains. He shocked whites with his biting satire and transformed the comic stage into a platform for protest and leadership in the African American struggle for freedom. Cosby, a slightly younger comedian, soon followed with a less jarring style that featured family-friendly storytelling and excluded racial material. He patiently and strategically allowed the appeal of humor rooted in universal humanity to nudge whites toward viewing African Americans as equals. Gregory and Cosby fused art and politics to a degree comparable to more recognized cultural celebrities, such as Muhammad Ali, Harry Belafonte, and Sammy Davis Jr. Both comedians contributed to the advancement of civil and human rights in America. Their careers transcended the boundaries in which humorists are often confined.

Humor is a universal language that consists of simple as well as deeply perceptive observations of lifeways, such as music, dress, government, and child rearing, that exist within a specific culture. It unifies groups and societies by communicating members' thoughts regarding established norms, quite often coupling them with exaggeration, oddity, or ridiculousness. Dexter Gordon asserts that "humor arises from passion and has always provided a serviceable channel for expressing human feelings." This idea is especially characteristic of the role of humor in the African American experience. "When the rage of the oppressed is spoken,"

Gordon posits, “humorous discourse may provide a vital rather than a merely convenient channel.”¹ Gregory and Cosby employed humor as a “safe” medium through which their grievances against white supremacy could be registered. It invited less backlash than more aggressive channels, such as public protest. Using humor to defuse volatile topics proved invaluable to both comedians, who communicated serious messages in vastly different styles.

Stand-up comedy is the delivery of topical material from an individual humorist’s perspective. For the most part, it is absent any scripts or props. It is a complex art form distinguishable from the retelling of humorous tales. Stand-up comedians are identifiable by their original routines, which differ widely in material, style, and timing. Performers invest considerable thought and practice in crafting their succession of bits that can work to entertain, unite, and educate audiences. Lawrence Mintz argues that stand-up comedy is the most “deeply significant form of humorous expression” as well as the “purest public comic communication.”² Its boundaries are as infinite as each artist’s imagination and rhetorical skill. Dave Chappelle, perhaps the leading current African American comedian to carry the torch of racial satire, goes to great lengths to protect that purity. Chappelle prohibits cell phones at his concerts to encourage the “opportunity for artists to really flex their muscles without the fear of the repercussion of the overly sensitive.”³

In the 1960s, stand-up comedy provided a new channel through which ideas representative of African Americans’ aims for freedom and equality could be expressed to mainstream America. Gregory and Cosby, the first African Americans to experience crossover success as professional stand-up comedians, emerged as pioneers in delivering topical material independent of the booking agents, club owners, and social order that had long repressed their comedic predecessors. Cosby reveres the long tradition of African American comedy that positioned his rise, particularly the “sad” case of Bert Williams, whose legendary talent proved no match against American racism in the early twentieth century. To obtain work, Williams and his contemporaries in the first half of the twentieth century accepted gigs that usually depicted African Americans as second-rate citizens and buffoons, which fell far short of the creative license that characterizes professional stand-up comedy. Cosby credits the 1950s as the decade when the bed of modern African American comedy received its flowering. Redd Foxx, LaWanda Page, Timmie Rogers, Nipsey Russell, Flip Wilson, Rodney Winfield, and many others in that era carried African

American stand-up comedy on the chitlin' circuit—a network of venues that played to African American audiences.⁴ But they longed for broader appeal. Gregory and Cosby, conversely, felt no such constraint in the 1960s. As the nation's first professional African American stand-up comedians with mainstream success, they enjoyed an unprecedented combination of independence and top billing, which heightened the significance of the political messages embedded in their humor.

Gregory and Cosby joined a wide range of African American cultural activists in the post-World War II era whose craft doubled as weapons in the fight against Jim Crow. Aram Goudsouzian's biography of America's first dark-skinned leading man, *Sidney Poitier: Man, Actor, Icon*, documents the delicate manner in which Poitier effected advancement for African Americans through character portrayals that popularized "positive images of blacks." Suzanne Smith's study *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* establishes the record company as a unique product of the Motor City with musicians who helped cement African American images and sounds in the cultural landscape of America and the world. Jules Tygiel's work on Jackie Robinson positions the athlete as the right man in the right sport to demonstrate that African Americans deserved equal opportunity within the playing field and beyond.⁵ In *Stars for Freedom: Hollywood, Black Celebrities, and the Civil Rights Movement*, Emily Raymond reconstructs the activism of a group of African Americans who used their fame to help advance the movement. Raymond identifies Belafonte, Ossie Davis, Sammy Davis Jr., Ruby Dee, Gregory, and Poitier as the "Leading Six" celebrities involved in the struggle. A host of additional studies further examine the confluence of politics and African American culture. Gregory and Cosby entered the theater of civil rights alongside an established cast of cultural activists, although both commanded unprecedented roles as stand-up comedians.⁶

Freedom in Laughter expands the landscape of activism to include Gregory's and Cosby's often overlooked contributions to the African American struggle for freedom. Its inquiry into the background, character, and motivations of the cultural icons reveals complex identities that have yet to be investigated at length in connection to the movement. Its focus on the politics of African American comedy broadens our understanding of the fight for equality. It also juxtaposes the two leading African American comedians at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, demonstrating opposing strategies adopted by peer entertainers to attack segregation and Jim Crow. African American comedians were agents of cultural protest.

They possessed far greater access to large audiences of whites than more recognized African American activists, such as preachers, politicians, and business and organizational leaders. The subtle but powerful medium of humor licensed them to register ideas that would have been received with far greater controversy if delivered through other channels.

Gregory's and Cosby's linkage as activists who are better contextualized in comparison to one another locates them in the long tradition of racial uplift debates between African American leaders. Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, and Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. preceded Gregory and Cosby in promoting divergent paths to black advancement. However, Gregory's and Cosby's opposing ideologies as leading contemporaries in the arena of comedy warrant stronger analysis. *Freedom in Laughter* documents the changes within and between the comedians' politics of humor and their larger significance to the movement.

Chapter 1 reconstructs the remarkably similar childhoods and young adult experiences of Gregory and Cosby. This narrative eliminates class as an explanation for their different styles as professional stand-up comedians and public espousal of civil rights and Black Power goals. Gregory and Cosby, growing up in St. Louis and Philadelphia, respectively, experienced near parallel backgrounds in education, athletics, employment, and the military prior to performing stand-up in the 1960s. Both shined shoes to earn money, served in the US armed forces, attended college on athletic scholarships, and discontinued undergraduate study to pursue careers in comedy. The congruency is astounding and quite illuminating with respect to the foundation of their later politics.

Chapter 2 documents the challenges and successes that met both comedians as they introduced a new cultural politics in African American comedy in the early 1960s. Civil rights victories, such as the *Brown* decision, and the emergence of respectable African American cultural celebrities, such as Jackie Robinson, Sidney Poitier, and the Motown lineup, helped engineer greater openness among white liberals to the African American experience. Rising numbers of whites—including Hugh Hefner, who gave Gregory his first mainstream gig in 1961—were enthralled by Gregory's uncensored African American humor, which helped pave the way for Cosby's mainstream debut in 1963. However, African Americans who had previously heard Gregory's jokes in private circles were critical of the originality of his act and the unprecedented attention it received in the white press. Cosby, like Gregory, received immediate acclaim from whites.

While most knew him as the next comedic star, they had no awareness of Cosby's strategic and painstaking efforts to carve an identity as the anti-Dick Gregory.

Chapter 3 focuses on the unprecedented fame, fortune, and creative license Gregory and Cosby experienced as acts with huge crossover success from 1963 to 1965. Both comedians enjoyed lucrative bookings and cemented themselves in American popular culture with guest appearances on *The Jack Paar Show* and *The Tonight Show*, two widely viewed television programs. Gregory and Cosby capitalized on book contracts that allowed further reach of their humor and life stories, but their comedy albums most captured the fascination of many thousands across the country. As new cultural celebrities, the comedians received friendly invitations as well as challenges from fellow African American celebrities and the press corps to join the front lines of the struggle for African American freedom, particularly in the South. Their responses proved to be polar opposites. Gregory canceled lucrative engagements in favor of participating in demonstrations, while Cosby humorously proclaimed himself "not bright enough to lead" and instead sent money to those on the front lines.⁷ Tracing the comedians' bookings, earnings, stage material, and politics of representation during these years explains why Cosby, not Gregory, became the first African American to star in a continuing role on a television series, *I Spy*, in 1965.

Chapter 4 examines Black Power ideology from 1966 to 1968 and documents the extent to which Gregory and Cosby identified with its principles. Both agreed with the logic of African Americans using violence to defend themselves against racially motivated attacks, yet both maintained a personal commitment to nonviolence. Gregory accepted his first role in a motion picture during this period, but his entertainment career began to pale in comparison to his crusade against racism, corruption, and injustice. He used personal funds to run for mayor of Chicago, protest the war in Vietnam, publicize issues related to the Native American experience, and campaign for president of the United States. Meanwhile, Cosby's deracialized humor and public persona earned him greater earnings, acclaim, and opportunities as a comedian and actor. It also protected him from becoming like Gregory, whom he considered "broke and broken" after Gregory challenged American business, government, and society.⁸ This chapter explains Gregory's and Cosby's increased divergence from 1966 to 1968 as a product of their responses to the radical politics that characterized the period.

Chapter 5 follows the comedians' professional activities from 1969 through the early 1970s. Facing debt caused by his near total removal from the comedy circuit and large donations to those fighting for African American equality, Gregory reemerged as a popular and controversial speaker on college campuses. From September 1969 to June 1970, his flight expenses incurred to fulfill speaking engagements totaled more than \$30,000.⁹ The amount suggests the earnings paid by universities for his visits; however, it represents only a fraction of the millions earned by Cosby for his acting, writing, producing, and directing in the television and film industry. Both comedians faced criticism for their respective politics and representations of race and masculinity. "Of course [Gregory is] an agitator," Alfred Aronowitz wrote in his column.¹⁰ "Cosby projects the image of 'a kind of half-man who, had he lived at the time of Nat Turner, might have sold Turner down the river,'" Faith Berry charged.¹¹ Chapter 5 also investigates the comedians' evolving styles and goals, as Gregory shifted to delivering politically and racially charged messages to white youth on college campuses, while Cosby focused on delivering educational messages to adolescents across the races.

An epilogue considers the comedians' post-1970s career trajectories. Gregory continued to champion the struggle for black freedom and involved himself deeply in other human rights issues, such as campaigns to end war, poverty, and hunger worldwide. His patented formula for a nutrition shake earned him millions and helped fulfill his desire to contribute to progress in developing countries. But Gregory's unorthodox methods and outlandish rhetoric alienated many who otherwise would have supported his causes. Cosby earned his doctorate in education and continued a prosperous career in television and film. His 1980s sitcom, *The Cosby Show*, became one of the most successful productions in American television history. But Cosby's brand has suffered irreparable damage in recent years. He met severe criticism for his comments about African American parenting, naming, slang, and attire in a 2004 address known as the "Pound Cake Speech." His sexual assault conviction and dozens of additional allegations spanning decades have shattered his once towering legacy. Cosby's long reign as "America's favorite dad" is over, but for years he remained at the center of popular culture while Gregory stood on the periphery. Their differing presence in the conscience of the nation reflects their divergent politics of representation in the 1960s and early 1970s.

The civil rights era is most often symbolized by images of marches, boycotts, and fiery political leaders, but the artistic voice that championed

the movement is a critical component of the broader effort required to combat segregation and Jim Crow. African American comedy in the 1960s and early 1970s embodied the anger, hope, fear, and expectations of nearly 12 million disfranchised citizens. Gregory and Cosby carried the banner of freedom on their behalf with unique and creative voices that dealt subtle, yet powerful, undercuts to American racism. Their talent in a changing America lifted them to heights previously unimaginable for African American stand-up comedians. The world became their stage.