

Response to Jacqueline Bussie

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In James Weldon Johnson's "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," the protagonist reflects on the intensity and significance of laughter within black communities. "These people talked and laughed without restraint. In fact, they talked straight from their lungs and laughed from the pits of their stomachs. And this hearty laughter was often justified by the droll humor of some remark. . . . I have since learned that this ability to laugh heartily is, in part, the salvation of the American Negro."¹ Here Johnson suggests that laughter has something to do with black people's survival within the violent arrangements of white supremacy. This laughter that he refers to is a visceral, gut-level form of expression, a mode of responding to the absurd quality of racial formations that involves the depths of the body. Jacqueline Bussie's chapter "Flowers in the Dark" is a powerful elaboration of Johnson's insight. Looking at Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and drawing on the theories of a diverse set of thinkers (Cone, Hopkins, Williams, Bakhtin, and others), Bussie sets out to show how laughter can work to interrupt pernicious arrangements of power. According to Bussie, laughter, especially for those who inhabit the underside of these arrangements, can be subversive.

Laughter, in other words, is a way of unveiling incongruities and social contradictions that are often masked or neglected. Because these contradictions are embodied (they leave marks on black bodies), contradiction is typically intertwined with pain and suffering. As the example of Paul D laughing at Sethe's crime illustrates, laughter can be an incipient form of critique (acknowledging the absurdity of an oppressive system) and it can alleviate or at least mitigate the intensity of that absurdity as experienced by the oppressed. As Bussie points out, confronting the grotesque/monstrous through laughter is painful but it also is generative of new life and alternative possibilities. This is why in her novel, *Jazz*, Morrison suggests that "laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears."² Laughter is serious because the incongruities captured by laughter are serious. (We often laugh to keep from crying). Within the African American context that Morrison documents, laughter is complicated because it does not seem like the appropriate response to conditions that are anything but funny. In his essay, "Extravagance of Laughter," Ralph Ellison mentions how laughing barrels functioned in Southern communities to conceal black people's laughter, to prevent laughter from entering into and disrupting public spaces. Ellison suggests that because black people's laughter defied expectations and befuddled those who only saw the wretchedness in black people's predicament, these barrels were set up to maintain the order of things. Is it that public laughter by the oppressed reminds the oppressor of social incongruities that are obscured by the semblance of

¹ James Weldon Johnson, "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man," in *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), p. 423.

² Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Plume Books, 1992), p. 113.

order (not to mention how this social order is always beset by forms of resistance, even if only implicitly)? Does the extravagance and excess of this laughter indicate that even in the dark, flowers bloom, that even amid painful conditions, we can discover hope, pleasure, delight, and possibility? If so, then we might say, with Bussie, that laughter is a particular mode of embodying the space between mourning and hope, or pain and possibility. As laughter expresses the otherwise inexpressible pain suffered by the subjugated, it also prevents these subjects from being completely absorbed and “captivated” by the affective grips of various mechanisms of power. Laughter reminds us that another world is indeed possible and that this tantalizing possibility is intimated in the cracks and fissures of the present order (or in the “cracking up” that constitutes laughter).

Although Bussie articulates these possibilities brilliantly, I wonder if we can press her on the other sides of laughter. If laughter can express or even reveal social tensions and incongruities, it can also be a way to easily resolve or conceal forms of social unease that resist being disclosed. Of course, as Bussie points out (pp. 235-236), alleviation of the absurd pain involved in being victimized is one of the enabling functions of laughter. Yet what happens when this alleviating quality is appropriated, absorbed, and exploited by the culture/entertainment industry? Insofar as we live in a sit-com culture that often desires immediate pleasure disconnected from pain, we should be somewhat suspicious about the implications and effects of laughter within everyday life. Laughter is often a way of deflecting (in the sense of ignoring) the very contradictions that it captures and renders expressible. As Theodor Adorno points out, laughter, especially within the context of the entertainment industry, “replaces pain with its jovial denial.”³ I am certainly not claiming that the forms of laughter and comedy within black communities are reducible to Adorno’s description of the culture industry. I certainly do not want to accept the assumptions that undergird his infamous critique of jazz music. Yet the centripetal forces of the culture industry seem to be having an increasing influence and grip on black culture, black aesthetic production, comedy, music, and so forth. Amiri Baraka articulated this concern in his prescient text, *Blues People*. Conformity, repetition, and capitulation seem to be qualities that are just as prevalent in black communities as they are in other communities. Therefore, laughter can easily become a way of avoiding, rather than confronting, absurdities and contradictions within black life. I am thinking for instance of how many black people laughed at Michael Jackson during his lifetime, made fun of his “grotesque” appearance, and accused him of desiring to be white. Laughter became a form of derision and ridicule. Instead of naming and highlighting the broader conditions and arrangements that shaped Jackson’s life - race-inflected standards of beauty, rigid conceptions of black identity, child abuse, or the alienation and loneliness that often accompanies celebrity status - laughter was typically directed or deflected toward Jackson (and not toward the broader conditions that we are all implicated in). Laughter, to return to Morrison, is serious because it can quickly and easily transition from critique to acceptance, from a form of unveiling to a form of evasion, from

³ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 112.

identifying social tensions and incongruities to scapegoating, or deflecting these tensions toward an easy, convenient target. We have to be vigilant of these ambiguities as we strive to work within them and toward a better world where more people flourish and “grow flowers.”