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Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America

By David Gillota

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When wielded by the white majority, ethnic humor can be used to ridicule and demean marginalized groups. In the hands of ethnic minorities themselves, ethnic humor can work as a site of community building and resistance. In nearly all cases, however, ethnic humor can serve as a window through which to examine the complexities of American race relations. In *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America*, David Gillota explores the ways in which contemporary comic works both reflect and participate in national conversations about race and ethnicity.

Gillota investigates the manner in which various humorists respond to multiculturalism and the increasing diversity of the American population. Rather than looking at one or two ethnic groups at a time—as is common scholarly practice—the book focuses on the interplay between humorists from different ethnic communities. While some comic texts project a fantasy world in which diverse ethnic characters coexist in a rarely disputed harmony, others genuinely engage with the complexities and contradictions of multiethnic America.

The first chapter focuses on African American comedy with a discussion of such humorists as Paul Mooney and Chris Rock, who tend to reinforce a black/white vision of American race relations. This approach is contrasted to the comedy of Dave Chappelle, who looks beyond black and white and uses his humor to place blackness within a much wider multiethnic context.

Chapter 2 concentrates primarily on the Jewish humorists Sarah Silverman, Larry David, and Sacha Baron Cohen—three artists who use their personas to explore the peculiar position of contemporary Jews who exist in a middle space between white and other.

In chapter 3, Gillota discusses different humorous constructions of whiteness, from a detailed analysis of *South Park* to “Blue Collar Comedy” and the blog *Stuff White People Like*.

Chapter 4 is focused on the manner in which animated children’s film and the network situation comedy often project simplified and harmonious visions of diversity. In contrast, chapter 5 considers how many recent works, such as *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* and the Showtime series *Weeds*, engage with diversity in more complex and productive ways.

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Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America By David Gillota Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

"A valuable addition to the field, *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America* makes a fresh and compelling argument with fascinating readings of many performers and comic routines in stand-up, film, and television." (Joyce Antler *Brandeis University* 2012-09-10)

"A fascinating comparative study of contemporary ethnic humor in popular culture, illuminating the truth that ethnic groups are made and unmade not in isolation, but in dynamic relation to each other." (Michele Elam *author of The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* 2013-03-04)

"Using comic performance—stand-up, situation comedy, animated television series, and children's films—Gillota looks at the impact of diversity on humor. Recommended." (*Choice* 2014-01-01)

"Gillota's work is an important contribution to a growing body of scholarship on the serious business of comedy. His work makes a strong case as to why it is necessary to analyze a particular society's humor if one seeks to understand its values and the ways in which its history continues to shape its culture today." (*Journal of American Ethnic History*)

About the Author

DAVID GILLOTA is an assistant professor in the humanities department at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. He has published essays on American humor in *Journal of Popular Film and Television* and the *Journal of Popular Culture*.

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