

QUARRY FARM SYMPOSIUM

“AMERICAN HUMOR AND MATTERS OF EMPIRE”

OCTOBER 2-3, 2020





Quarry Farm in the 1870's



Quarry Farm Today

American Humor and Matters of Empire

A Quarry Farm Symposium

Symposium Chair

Judith Yaross Lee, Ohio University

Keynote Speaker

John Wharton Lowe, University of Georgia

Presenters

Jalylah Burrell, San Jose State University

James E. Caron, University of Hawai'i, Mānoa

Darryl Dickson-Carr, Southern Methodist University

Christopher Gilbert, Assumption University

Bambi Haggins, University of California, Irvine

Maggie Hennefeld, University of Minnesota

Kate Morris, Santa Clara University

Linda Morris, University of California, Davis

Stanley Orr, University of Hawai'i, West O'ahu

Matt Seybold, Elmira College

Todd Nathan Thompson, Indiana University of Pennsylvania

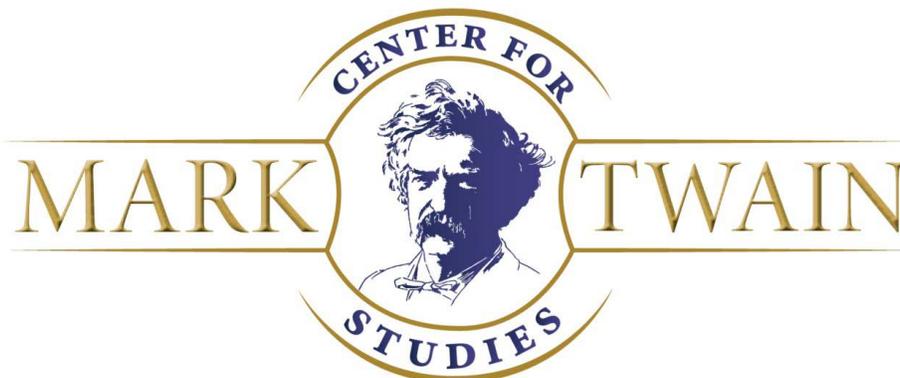
Moderators

David V. Gillota, University of Wisconsin-Platteville

Lawrence Howe, Roosevelt University

M. Montserrat Feu López, Sam Houston State University

Tracy Wuster, University of Texas



SYMPOSIUM SCHEDULE

Friday, October 2

(All times designated are Eastern Daylight Time)

2:00-2:15 p.m. Gathering and Informal Introductions

2:15-3:15 pm Official Welcomes and Keynote Address

CMTS Welcome

Joseph Lemak, Director, *Center for Mark Twain Studies*

Symposium Welcome

Judith Yaross Lee, Distinguished Professor Emerita of Communication Studies, *Ohio University*

Keynote Address

John Wharton Lowe, Barbara Lester Methvin Distinguished Professor of Southern Literature, *University of Georgia*

“Coyote’s Jokebook: Native American Humor and the Dismantlement of Empire”

Judith Yaross Lee has given us much to consider in her pathbreaking essay, “American Humor and Matters of Empire”; her analysis sweeps across frontiers of history, literature, and most genres to redefine the parameters of the comic world first shaped by Constance Rourke so many years ago. My address today will apply Lee’s theories to what I call “internal imperialism,” which best describes the centuries-long assault on indigenous peoples of North America, a trajectory that sadly continues to this day. Fortunately, the rich resources of Native humor have combated these assaults repeatedly, and never so much as during the past thirty years. My talk will briefly show how humor has been used in Native cartoons, art, drama, film, and stand-up comedy, and then consider examples of literary Native humor in the works of Thomas King, Gerald Vizenor, James Welch, Sherman Alexie, and LeAnne Howe.



John Wharton Lowe is the Barbara Lester Methvin Distinguished Professor of Southern Literature at the University of Georgia. Previously he was Robert Penn Warren Professor of English and Comparative Literature, and Director of the Program in Louisiana and Caribbean Studies at Louisiana State University. Dr. Lowe has also taught at the University of Munich, Harvard University, Saint Mary’s College (Notre Dame), and Columbia University, where he earned his Ph.D. He is author or editor of nine books, including *Conversations with Ernest Gaines* (1995), *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston’s Cosmic Comedy* (1997), and *Calypso Magnolia: The Crosscurrents of Caribbean and Southern Literature* (2016). He has published widely on the humor of African American, Native American, Italian American, Southern, Asian American, and circum-Caribbean literatures. He is the recipient of the MELUS Lifetime Achievement Award for Distinguished Contributions to Ethnic Literary Studies, and has served as President of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature, the Southern American Studies Association, MELUS, and the Louisiana Folklore Society. He is currently writing the authorized biography of Ernest J. Gaines.

- 3:15-3:30 p.m. Informal Q&A with John Wharton Lowe
or Break and Socializing
- 3:30-4:45 p.m. Session One: Contemporary Humor of American Empire
- Moderator: David V. Gillota, *University of Wisconsin-Platteville*
- “Continental Drift: On Monuments, Memory and Kent Monkman”
Kate Morris, *Santa Clara University*
Linda Morris, *University of California, Davis*
- “The Issue with Empire and a Comic Stretch of the Imagination”
Christopher Gilbert, *Assumption University*
- “Stand-Up Comedy & Survival”
Bambi Haggins, *University of California, Irvine*
- 4:45-5:00 p.m. Reflections on the first day from Judith Yaross Lee
- 5:00-5:15 p.m. Informal Q&A with Session One Presenters
or Break and Socializing
- 5:15-5:45 p.m. Virtual Happy Hours Hosted by Individual Organizations
Participants are encouraged to enjoy a beverage of their choice

Saturday, October 3

- 1:00-1:50 p.m. Session Two: Antebellum Entanglements with Empire
- Moderator: Tracy Wuster, *University of Texas*
- “Gender Matters: Addison and Steele’s Amiable Satirist as a Regime of Truth in Antebellum America”
James E. Caron, *University of Hawai’i, Mānoa*
- “‘[W]e could enter into the spirit of his wit and humour’: Lessons from Native Pacific Studies for American Humor Studies”
Todd Nathan Thompson, *Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

- 1:50-2:15 p.m. Informal Q&A with Session Two Presenters
or Break and Socializing
- 2:15-3:05 p.m. Session Three: Early 20th Century Comic Confrontations with
European Imperialism
Moderator: M. Montserrat Feu López, *Sam Houston State University*
- “The Funny Man vs. the Butcher: Anti-Imperialist Trolling & the International
Reception of *King Leopold’s Soliloquy*”
Matt Seybold, *Elmira College*
- “‘Tyranny at Home’: Feminist Slapstick Comedy on the Brink of Global
Catastrophe”
Maggie Hennefeld, *University of Minnesota*
- 3:05-3:30 p.m. Informal Q&A with Session Three Presenters
or Break and Socializing
- 3:30-4:45 p.m. Session Four: Matters of Empire in Post-WWII Humor and Satire
Moderator: Lawrence Howe, *Roosevelt University*
- “‘Strange and Beautiful Country’: Era Bell Thompson’s Boundary-Crossing Humor”
Jalylah Burrell, *San Jose State University*
- “‘I wonder which of you is real’: John Kneubuhl’s Indigenous Confidence Man”
Stanley Orr, *University of Hawai‘i, West O‘ahu*
- “Apocalypse Always: The End of Empire in African American Writing Since
World War II”
Darryl Dickson-Carr, *Southern Methodist University*
- 4:45-5:00 p.m. Informal Q&A with Session Four Presenters
or Break and Socializing
- 5:00-6:00 p.m. Wrap-Up and Farewell Happy Hour: Matters of Empire and
American Humor Studies
Moderator: Judith Yaross Lee, Ohio University
Participants are encouraged to enjoy a beverage of their choice

AMERICAN HUMOR AND MATTERS OF EMPIRE

A Quarry Farm Symposium

ABSTRACTS

(arranged by order of delivery)

Session One: Contemporary Humor of American Empire

Moderator: David V. Gillota, *University of Wisconsin-Platteville*, author of *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America*

Kate Morris, *Santa Clara University*
klmorris@scu.edu

Linda Morris, *University of California, Davis*
lamorris@ucdavis.edu

“Continental Drift: On Monuments, Memory, and Kent Monkman”

During the first several months of 2020, visitors entering the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City were greeted by two monumental canvases that depict a mass of humanity adrift in rising seas, or laboring to come ashore on an already-overcrowded island. The paintings, *Welcoming the Newcomers* and *Resurgence of the People*, are by contemporary Cree artist Kent Monkman, whose not-so-subtle interventions into colonialist narratives hinge on the artist’s clever reworking of European representational tropes. The figures that writhe and struggle and cavort across these two dystopic landscapes are all quotations from the Met’s vast collection of European paintings and sculptures, especially those that depict Indigenous North Americans.

This presentation will explore the role that humor plays in Monkman’s relentless quest to upend empire, one painting at a time. The artist’s talent for parody and satire is on full display in his earlier painting cycle, *Four Continents*, completed in 2012. The four large (7x11’) canvases in the series represent Asia, Europe, Africa, and America – each continent allegorized as a statuesque female in the manner of Daniel Chester French’s *Four Continents* sculptures installed along the façade of the United States Customs House in lower Manhattan in 1907. French’s works, in turn, were also an artistic quotation of the Italian artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo’s *Apollo* and the *Four Continents* fresco painted in Germany in 1752. Of particular interest is Tiepolo’s depiction of America as a bare-breasted woman wearing a feathered headdress riding a monstrous crocodile, and this is the motif that Monkman reproduces in his *Miss America* of 2012.

If Tiepolo’s “original” was meant to depict America as wild, uncivilized, and ripe for the taking, Monkman’s painting insists on the opposite. His America is a land overrun with Europeans from past and present: politicians and businessmen, missionaries, conquistadors, and frontiersmen savage one other in a never-ending quest for dominion while Indigenous men and women do their best to stay above the fray. Characteristic of so many of Monkman’s camp parodies, *Miss America* features the artist’s transgender alter ego, Miss Chief. Here she reigns over the chaos at her feet. Through parody, Monkman exposes the absurdity of both the “original” image and the laudatory rhetoric of colonialism that inspired it.

Miss Chief's trickster antics frequently blur the line between camp and tragedy, and in the end of this presentation we will turn our attention to Monkman's recent highly controversial painting *Hanky Panky* (2020). In this work, Miss Chief stands over an apprehensive Justin Trudeau on his hands and knees, pants down and restrained by two Native women. Gathered around this group, a crowd of indigenous women bear witness to the unnamed ritual that Miss Chief is about to perform. To a woman, they are laughing uproariously.

Kate Morris is Professor of Art History and Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, Santa Clara University. She is past president of the Native American Art Studies Association and the author of a number of works on Native American art. These include: *Shifting Grounds: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art* (2019) and "Crash: Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Indigenous Art," *Art Journal*, 76, no.2 (2017). She is co-editor with Veronica Pascalacqua of *Native Art Now: Recent Developments in Contemporary Native American Art* (Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, 2017); and co-editor with Bill Anthes of *Art Journal: Special Issues on Contemporary Indigenous Art*, 76, no.2 (2017). Most recently, she co-authored with Linda Morris "Camping Out with Miss Chief: Kent Monkman's Ironic Journey," *Studies in American Humor* (forthcoming).

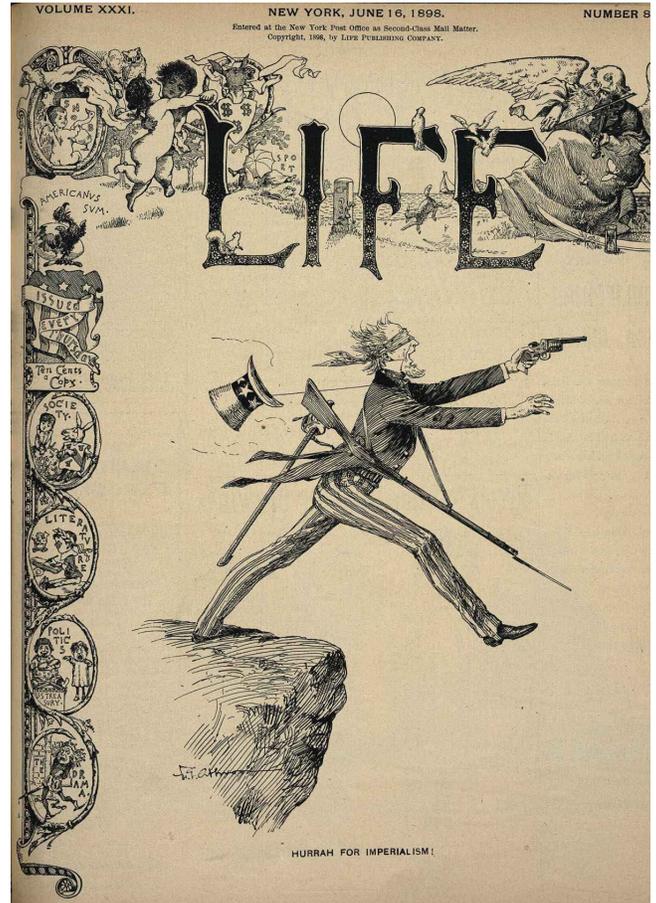
Linda Morris is Distinguished Professor Emerita, University of California, Davis, Department of English. She is past president of the Mark Twain Circle of America and the recipient of both the Olivia Langdon Clemens Award, presented by the Mark Twain Circle, and the Charlie Award, from the American Humor Studies Association. Her published works include *Gender Play in Mark Twain: Cross-Dressing and Transgression* (2007) and *Women's Humor in the Age of Gentility: The Life and Works of Frances Miriam Whitcher* (1992). She has published articles about Mark Twain's *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as well as articles on the humor of Marietta Holley, Roz Chast, and Mary Lasswell. Most recently, she co-authored with Kate Morris "Camping Out with Miss Chief: Kent Monkman's Ironic Journey," *Studies in American Humor* (forthcoming).



Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's The Four Continents (America) (1752) left;
Kent Monkman's Four Continents (Miss America) (2012) right

“The Issue with Empire and a Comic Stretch of the Imagination”

Society. Literature. Drama. Politics. According to a caricature by Francis Gilbert Atwood that appeared on the cover of *Life* in June of 1898, these constitute *Americanus Sum*, or what it means to be American. Of course, society is rendered as Alice taking advice from the White Rabbit, literature as a schoolboy with a laurel wreath practicing letters, politics as a brattish child soliciting a baron of the U.S. treasury, and drama as a cross between a king and fool brandishing a sword in the streets. Filling out the comic image is Uncle Sam, armed with a sword of his own, a rifle, and a pistol. He is walking, blindfolded, pointing the pistol into thin air in front of him, and taking a final step before falling off a cliff. The thing is, in this comic image, to proclaim *civis Americanus sum*—“I am an American citizen”—is akin to proclaiming “HURRAH FOR IMPERIALISM!” To see the comicality in the caricature is to see U.S. Americanism for its imperial overreach and yet as anything but a stretch of the imagination.



“Hurrah For Imperialism!” *Life*, Vol.31, No.810. (1898)

This hapless, haphazard Uncle Sam presents an old image of the U.S. from when it was marching headlong into what many now refer to as the American Imperium at the turn of the twentieth century. But it is also a feature image in the so-called “Empire Issue” put out by online comics publication *The Nib* in July 2019. The U.S. looms large here, but so does the Soviet Union, the Monarquía Hispánica, and even Amazon. In this talk, caricature is situated as something of a rhetorical *counterforce* to imperialism, redeploying the discursive makings of imperial imaginaries and the disturbing realities of actual empires to reveal the follies in their shared setups. The argument begins with the notion that imperialism, as a rhetoric, constitutes what French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman might call a “disimagination machine,” bleeding into all aspects of everyday life from material goods and digital platforms through civil institutions and cultural properties to militaries and militarized spaces of society. It ends with a case about caricature as a representation of comic imagination in the interest of anti-imperialism. There is more to the anti-imperialist bent in caricatures of empire, though. In *The Nib*’s “Empire Issue,” caricature cuts across various cartoons and comics to reiterate and recast the disimaginative tools of imperialism as a form of casuistic stretching, or a rhetorical mechanism for expanding empires. Caricature is casuistic stretching reimaged, comically, and represented as a rhetorical force for amplifying to the ridiculous what is all-too-real in imperialism’s disimaginings.

Chris Gilbert is Assistant Professor of English in the areas of Communication & Media at Assumption University. His work, which looks at the role of humor in cultural politics and in particularly comic responses to controversy and conflict, appears in a variety of leading journals, including *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, *Communication & Critical/Cultural Studies*, *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, *Studies in American Humor*, and more, as well in numerous edited volumes. He also has a book forthcoming in late 2020 or early 2021, entitled *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly: Caricature and National Character in U.S. War Cultures*.

Bambi Haggins, *University of California, Irvine*
bhaggins@uci.edu

“Stand-Up Comedy & Survival”



Amber Ruffin on Late Night with Seth Myers

The myriad images of anti-Black racism, transphobia, and xenophobia posted and tweeted across social media has been taking its toll on many of us—emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. While I feel encouraged and invigorated by folks taking to the streets to protest police violence, I am concerned for those doing the righteous thing amidst a pandemic. [Speaking of pandemics, just because you say the Rona can’t spread during the summer doesn’t make it so.] As a Black American woman living at this historical moment in a toxic socio-political climate, and as a scholar whose work has engages comedy as political and social discourse, I know that it is

laughter—whether mad, nervous, overdetermined, or undertheorized—that is keeping me, at least, relatively sane. In particular, I’d like to explore how various permutations of recent stand-up comedy, particularly since the beginning of 2020, have addressed surviving these truly outrageous times—without denying the realities of everyday and institutional racism. By examining Amber Ruffin’s “Police Stories” on *Late Night with Seth Meyers* along with *The Daily Social Distancing Show with Trevor Noah*, *The Black Guy Who Tips*, and (of course) Dave Chappelle’s *8:46*, I hope to illustrate how discussing issues of race through the lens of comedy can be both affirming for and accessible to multiple audiences. Getting folks to listen, to see, and to understand the cultural contexts for comic discourse—and the lived experiences that inform them—is vital. Engaging this comic discourse will not always be comfortable—change rarely is.

Bambi Haggins is Associate Professor in the Department of Film and Media Studies at UC Irvine. Her work explores race, class, gender, and sexuality in American comedy across media. Her first book, *Laughing Mad*, was awarded the Katherine Singer Kovács Book Award. Her work has been published in *Cinema Journal*, *Framework*, *Ms.*, and *The New York Times* as well as several edited collections. Haggins wrote Showtime’s *Why We Laugh: Funny Women* and was historical consultant/onscreen talent for HBO’s *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley* (both 2013). Haggins is currently editing “TV Memories: Letters to Our Televisual Past,” in which scholars reflect upon their personal experiences as television viewers, and she is beginning a project about comedy, Black culture, and reception in these days of the Rona and rage.

Session Two: Antebellum Entanglements with Empire

Moderator: **Tracy Wuster**, *University of Texas*, Executive Director of the American Humor Studies Association and author of *Mark Twain, American Humorist*

James E. Caron, *University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa*
caron@hawaii.edu

“Gender Matters: Addison and Steele’s Amiable Satirist as a Regime of Truth in Antebellum America”

My talk will show how an Anglo-American tradition of taming the unruliness of comic laughter and the aggressiveness of the satirist results in antebellum American culture adapting a colonial heritage to create comic artifacts. The milieu for this adaptation of the Anglo-American tradition is the world of mid-nineteenth century periodicals published in the United States. The paradigm for the tradition, however, has its origins in Addison

and Steele's *The Spectator* and their advocacy of an amiable laughter that softens—even feminizes—the ancient view of the satirist as a dispenser of harsh tongue-lashings and witty barbs in order to reform comic butts. Addison and Steele's parameters for a so-called amiable satirist establish a regime of truth for American writers throughout the antebellum period. This talk will utilize several figures to sketch the regime of truth and suggest its reach: Lewis Gaylord Clark, long-time editor of the *New York Knickerbocker*; William Thackeray, English author and satirist; George William Curtis, American author, lecturer, satirist, and early editor of *Harper's Monthly*; Sara Willis Parton, American author, journalist, and satirist, best known by her pen name, Fanny Fern. While Clark as editor embodies the gentlemanly purveyor of an amiable laughter advocated by Addison and Steele, Thackeray and Parton function as contested sites within the American periodical world about the contours of the regime of truth—that is, for what constitutes not just good satire but also the proper temperament for satirists. Curtis champions Thackeray as the best of satirists, and in so doing utilizes the Addison/Steele paradigm that feminizes the satirist as amiable and gentlemanly. Notably, this argument for an amiable satirist does not open a congenial space for Parton's Fanny Fern persona to be also recognized as a legitimate amiable satirist. The transnational paradigm of Addison and Steele allows for, even insists upon, a softer image for the satirist, but a woman assuming the comic aggressiveness of satire remains a challenge to what antebellum American culture acknowledges as proper satire.

James E. Caron retired as Professor of English at the University of Hawai'i, Mānoa, where he taught American literature for thirty-six years. He has published articles on satire, the tall tale, antebellum comic writers, laughter and evolution, Mark Twain, George Washington Harris, Frank Norris, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Faulkner, Charlie Chaplin, Hunter S. Thompson, and Bill Watterson. In addition, he has published *Mark Twain, Unsanctified Newspaper Reporter* (2008) and co-edited a collection of essays on Charlie Chaplin, *Refocusing Chaplin: A Screen Icon in Critical Contexts* (2013). "His new book, *Satire as the Comic Public Sphere: Post-modern 'Truthiness' and Civic Engagement*, will appear in 2021. He is the former president of the American Humor Studies Association and senior associate editor of its journal, *Studies in American Humor*.



Image from the frontispiece of Vanity Fair (1848)

Todd Nathan Thompson, *Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

“[W]e could enter into the spirit of his wit and humour’: Lessons from Native Pacific Studies for American Humor Studies”

The quote in my title is from American sea Captain Amasa Delano’s *Narrative of Voyages and Travels*, wherein he praises “Abba Thulle, the king” in Palau as “a most sportive and delightful companion.” Delano writes, “We had become so much acquainted with the language, that we could enter into the spirit of his wit and humour, and were able to find new sources of admiration for his character in his moments of the greatest levity.” Unlike his namesake, whose unshakeable ethnocentrism blinds him to the truth of a revolt in Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855), Delano in this moment from his 1818 narrative works to learn Abba Thulle’s language so that he may understand “the spirit of his wit and humour” more or less on its own terms. How can humor scholars do the same when working in Eurocentric traditions but seeking to understand native humors based in non-Western epistemologies?

In my talk I will synthesize insights from the field of Native Pacific Studies, framing them as lessons/warnings that humor scholars should apply/heed in their research on the intersections of humor and empire in all its incarnations. Greg Dvorak, in his essay “Oceanizing Pacific Studies,” complains of the “bizarre mix of myopia, hubris, and apathy with which American discourses often presume to own and know ‘the Pacific.’” He notes the field’s “long history of looking through colonial optics at indigenous subjects, marginalizing Native voices as background noise with no agency,” and calls for scholars to think instead “about articulations, not assimilations, acknowledging difference by seeing the contradictions and nuances that form cultural identity through intimate genealogies.” Such appeals for intellectual complexity should motivate humor scholars to recover or reframe native humor (or that of other marginalized groups) in ways that highlight resiliency, agency, and cultural autonomy. Situating native humor in conversations about contact demonstrates how humor, and even humor criticism, can work as decolonial tactics.

But even such efforts might reflect, and recursively reinforce, unconscious ethnocentrism. As historian Noelani Arista points out in her history of the relationship between Hawai’i and the US in the nineteenth century, even well-intentioned “revisionist work’s emphasis on restoring ‘agency’ to Hawaiian historical actors carries another risk: the unreflective use of Western historiographical paradigms, tropes, and plots in telling histories of culturally Othered peoples.” How, then, can those who study American humor and empire avoid repeating the ethnocentric and imperial impulses of humor and of historiography? I will detail potential methodologies applicable to all who seek to conduct responsible scholarship on American humor and empire; to demonstrate their possibilities and pitfalls, I will apply these methodologies to comic moments in two travel narratives: Delano’s *Narrative* and Rev. John Williams’ *Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands* (1837).

Todd Nathan Thompson is Professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. He is also Treasurer-Secretary of the American Humor Studies Association. Todd is author of *The National Joker: Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Satire* (2015). Todd has earned research fellowships through the Center for Mark Twain Studies, the American Antiquarian Society, the Library Company of Philadelphia, and the Lilly Library. His work on political satire and pre-1900 American literature has also appeared in *American Periodicals*, *Scholarly Editing*, *Early American Literature*, *ESQ*, *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, *Studies in American Humor*, *Teaching American Literature*, and elsewhere. He currently is at work on a book project entitled *Savage Laughter: Nineteenth-Century American Humor and the Pacific, 1840-1880*.



ABBA THULLE.

King of the Palau Islands,
taken 1791.

Portrait of Abba Thulle, a king in
Palau, from Captain Amasa Delano’s
Narrative of Voyages and Travels
(1818)

Session Three: Early 20th Century Comic Confrontation with European Imperialism

Moderator: **M. Montserrat Feu López**, *Sam Houston State University*, author of *Fighting Fascist Spain: Worker Protest from the Printing Press*

Matt Seybold, *Elmira College*
mseybold@elmira.edu

“The Funny Man vs. the Butcher: Anti-Imperialist Trolling & the International Reception of King Leopold’s Soliloquy”

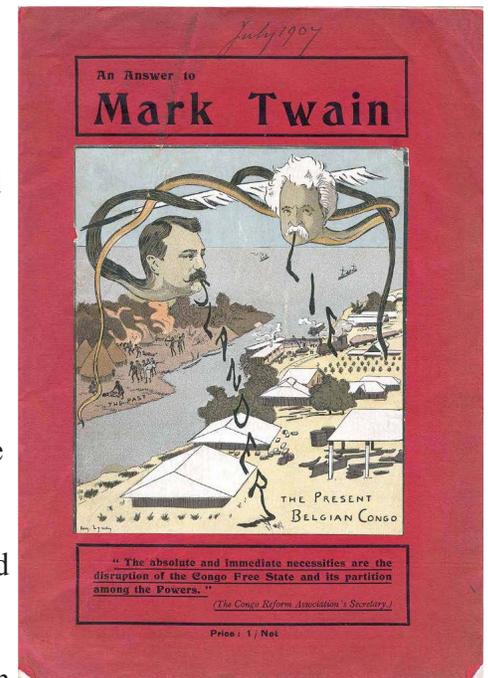
As early as 1888, in a response to Matthew Arnold’s attack on American humor, Mark Twain contended that the humorist was a powerful political agent. Contradicting some of his earlier self-loathing estimations of his profession, Twain wrote that his was “a useful trade, a worthy calling” and later, more famously, in “The Chronicle of Young Satan,” that “against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.” I argue that the apotheosis of Twain’s apologia for American humor does not come until he published *King Leopold’s Soliloquy* in 1905. Twain’s audacious ambition was to use his unprecedented international celebrity to bring down an empire. And, though of course Twain’s pamphlet does not adequately explain by itself the end of Belgian colonialism, it is arguably a tipping point. That the state felt compelled to produce agitprop about a foreign national was proof that Twain’s assessment of the “assault of laughter” was not hyperbolic. King Leopold’s powers in the Congo were explicitly reduced soon thereafter and the crown’s authority never fully recovered.

Matt Seybold is Assistant Professor of American Literature & Mark Twain Studies at Elmira College. He is the resident scholar at the Center for Mark Twain Studies and editor of MarkTwainStudies.org. He co-edited the *Routledge Companion to Literature & Economics* (2018) and a special issue of *American Literary History* on “Economics & American Literary Studies in the New Gilded Age” (2019). Other recent publications can be found in *Aeon*, *American Studies*, *Henry James Review*, *Leviathan*, *Los Angeles Reviews of Books*, *Mark Twain Annual*, and *T.S. Eliot Studies Annual*. His current book project is on the political economy of mass media during Twain’s lifetime.

Maggie Hennefeld, *University of Minnesota, Twin Cities*
mhennefe@umn.edu

“‘Tyranny at Home’: Feminist Slapstick Comedy on the Brink of Global Catastrophe”

“Empire abroad entails tyranny at home,” argued the twentieth century political philosopher Hannah Arendt. Exploitative colonialist rivalries among a handful of bloated European nation-states goaded the entire world into catastrophic, senseless war in 1914 and recoiled disastrously on the home front. This paper sources alternative images of “tyranny at home” in the archives of silent cinema, focusing on films that blatantly mocked and defiled the patriarchal, white supremacist, and capitalist ideologies reproduced to wrangle consensus for colonialist regimes of empire. I emphasize anarchic silent film comedies that depict feminist domestic violence, free-wheeling identity play, and volatile labor uprising, all produced in Europe on the brink of World War One. They



Front cover of *An Answer to Mark Twain*, anonymously published in Brussels (1907) in reply to King Leopold’s *Soliloquy*. Pictured are Mark Twain and E. D. Morel.

spotlight characters that we might anachronistically call “Nasty Women”: pranksters and activists who spoke truth to patriarchal power with their gleefully destructive disregard for gendered social norms and feminine corporeal decorum. To be a Nasty Woman means refusing to be disciplined or silenced, while embracing the messiness inherent in gender and sexual difference and engaging as an energetic participant in feminist political life. Comedienne characters such as Léontine, Rosalie, Pétronille, Cunégonde, Lea, Tilly, Sally, and Wanda seized the reins of institutional power to expose the absurd illogic of the entire system. Bellwethers of looming global catastrophe, their antics further paved the way for the tactics of political resistance that would help combat fascism’s attempts to inflict colonialist techniques of domination on its domestic populations in the 1930s. I argue that the dismantling of empires abroad always has a foothold in the slapstick politics of how we imagine, critique and repudiate the ideologies of tyranny at home.



A frame enlargement from the French silent film, Cunégonde reçoit sa famille (1912)

Maggie Hennefeld is Associate Professor of Cultural Studies & Comparative Literature and McKnight Presidential Fellow at the University of Minnesota. She is the author of *Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* (2018), co-editor of the journal *Cultural Critique*, and co-editor of the two volumes: *Unwatchable* (2019) and *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure and Violence* (2020).

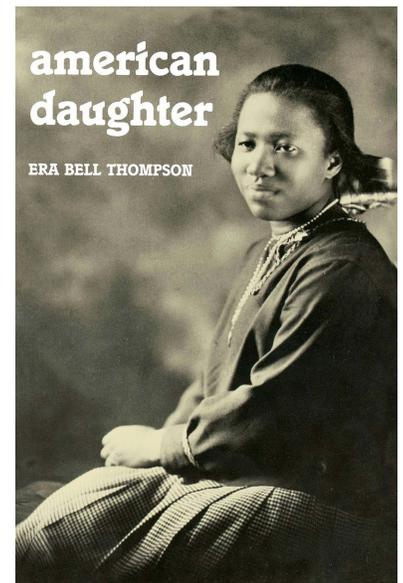
Session Four: Matters of Empire in Post-WWII Humor and Satire

Moderator: **Lawrence Howe**, *Roosevelt University*, Editor of *Studies in American Humor* and co-author of *Refocusing Chaplin: A Screen Icon Through Critical Lenses*

Jalylah Burrell, *San Jose State University*
 jalylah.burrell@sjsu.edu

“‘Strange and Beautiful Country’: Era Bell Thompson’s Boundary-Crossing Humor”

The publisher’s note on North Dakotan Era Bell Thompson’s 1946 memoir *American Daughter* describes the book as an attempt to answer this question frequently asked of Thompson, “What in the world was a nice Negro girl like you doing in that godforsaken country in the first place?” Although “godforsaken country” explicitly refers to the Driscoll, ND, plains where her family settled at the urging of a resourceful uncle, it also recalls the landscape of American humor writing and contemplates black women’s place in both. In this talk, I examine Thompson’s uses of humor in the memoir to consider black womanhood in relationship to constructions of the frontier so central to the American comedic tradition. I also engage Thompson’s humorous imaginings of the “wild and wooly west” in her contributions to the *Chicago Defender*, which she wrote under the pseudonym Dakota Dick.



Cover of American Daughter (2004 reprint of the 1986 edition)

Jalylah Burrell is Assistant Professor of African-American Studies at San Jose State University. She holds a PhD in American Studies and African American Studies from Yale University, and her scholarship was previously supported by postdoctoral fellowships at DePaul University's African and Black Diaspora Department and Rice University's Center for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Her current book project is "Capacity for Laughter: Black Women and the American Comedic Tradition."

Stanley Orr, *University of Hawai'i, West O'ahu*
sorr@hawaii.edu

"I wonder which of you is real': John Kneubuhl's Indigenous Confidence Man"

An anonymous 1859 review of Herman Melville's *The Confidence-Man* reflects, "One of the indigenous characters who has figured long in our journals, courts, and cities, is 'the Confidence Man': his doings form one of the staples of villainy, and an element in the romance of roguery. Countless are the dodges attributed to this ubiquitous personage, and his adventures would equal those of Jonathan Wild." As Matthew Seybold argues, Melville stands as the foremost literary interpreter of the confidence man figure, one rivalled only by Mark Twain. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), for example, reads as "a behavioral handbook for conning, replete with impersonations, seductions, larcenies, evasions of prosecution, and thoughtful justifications of each." Melville and Twain, respectively, found rich pickings in the home-grown figure of the American grifter. But what of the truly Indigenous confidence man--the Native trickster who bamboozles settler-colonial establishments?

John Kneubuhl (1920-1992) was a Samoan-American playwright whose dramas traversed Ivy League theatre, Hollywood culture industries, and Oceanic Modernism (stage plays that integrate metropolitan avant-garde with Polynesian cultural practices). His dramaturgical career bracketed 20 years as a freelance television writer for programs such as *Gunsmoke*, *The Fugitive*, and *Star Trek*. Kneubuhl's explorations of the confidence man trope run from his student drama *Saint Mac* (1941) to his late teleplay "Strangers in Our Own Land" (*Hawaii Five-0*, 1968). While Kneubuhl's *Adventures in Paradise* episode "Touch of Genius" (1961) features two nefarious art swindlers reminiscent of the King and the Duke in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, "The Isaiah Quickfox Story" (*Wagon Train*, 1965) critically recasts Twain's Injun Joe in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876).

In this paper, I analyze Kneubuhl's most elaborate dramatization of the Indigenous confidence man: his fictionalization of Sam Amalu in "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo," a 1966 episode of *The Wild Wild West*. Boasting descent from Hawaiian royalty, Amalu (1917-1986) graduated from Punahou School in 1935. Discharged from the Army in 1941 for impersonating an officer, Amalu undertook many colorful schemes, including the 1962 "Mystery Hui" hoax by which he tendered a bogus multi-million dollar offer for Sheraton's Hawai'i properties. The deal evaporated when Amalu was arrested in Seattle and ultimately incarcerated for passing bad checks in California. While serving time at Folsom, and for years after his release, Amalu wrote a column for the *Honolulu Advertiser*. In *Unsustainable Empire: Alternative Histories of Hawai'i Statehood* (2018), Dean Itsuji Saranillo finds in Amalu a "kolohe" (mischievous) trickster who challenged U.S. colonization of Hawai'i. Kneubuhl anticipated this interpretation by immortalizing Amalu as Prince of the South Sea Coral Islands (Nick Adams), a wily Polynesian aristocrat bent upon destabilizing



Nick Adams as the Prince of the South Sea Coral Islands in "The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo," from the television series Wild, Wild West. (First broadcasted in March 1966)

American hegemony in Oceania. I discuss “The Night of the Two-Legged Buffalo” in terms of the relationship between Kneubuhl and Amalu (they studied together at Punahou) as well as the former’s lifelong engagement with the confidence man trope, postcolonial thematics, modernist absurdism, and Polynesian clowning traditions such as the Samoan *fale ituu* genre.

Stanley Orr is Professor of English and interim Humanities Division Chair at the University of Hawai‘i, West O‘ahu, where he teaches courses in writing, literature, and screen studies. Orr earned a B.A. in English at U.C. Riverside and a Ph.D. in English at UCLA. He has published a number of essays in critical anthologies as well as articles in journals such as *American Quarterly* and *Jouvert: A Journal of Postcolonial Studies*. Orr’s book *Darkly Perfect World: Colonial Adventure, Postmodernism, and American Noir* was published by The Ohio State University Press in 2010. At present, Orr is conducting research on the teleplays of dramatist John Kneubuhl. In his latest publication--“Diving-Dress Gods: Modernism, Cargoism, and the *Fale Aitu* Tradition in John Kneubuhl’s ‘The Perils of Penrose’” (published in *New Oceania: Modernisms and Modernities in the Pacific* [2019])--Orr analyzes the ways in which Kneubuhl infused his writing for the TV series *Adventures in Paradise* with techniques drawn from Samoan comic theater.

Darryl Dickson-Carr, *Southern Methodist University*
dcarr@mail.smu.edu

“Apocalypse Always: The End of Empire in African American Writing Since World War II”



In the introduction to her landmark study, *The Apocalypse in African-American Fiction* (1996), Maxine L.

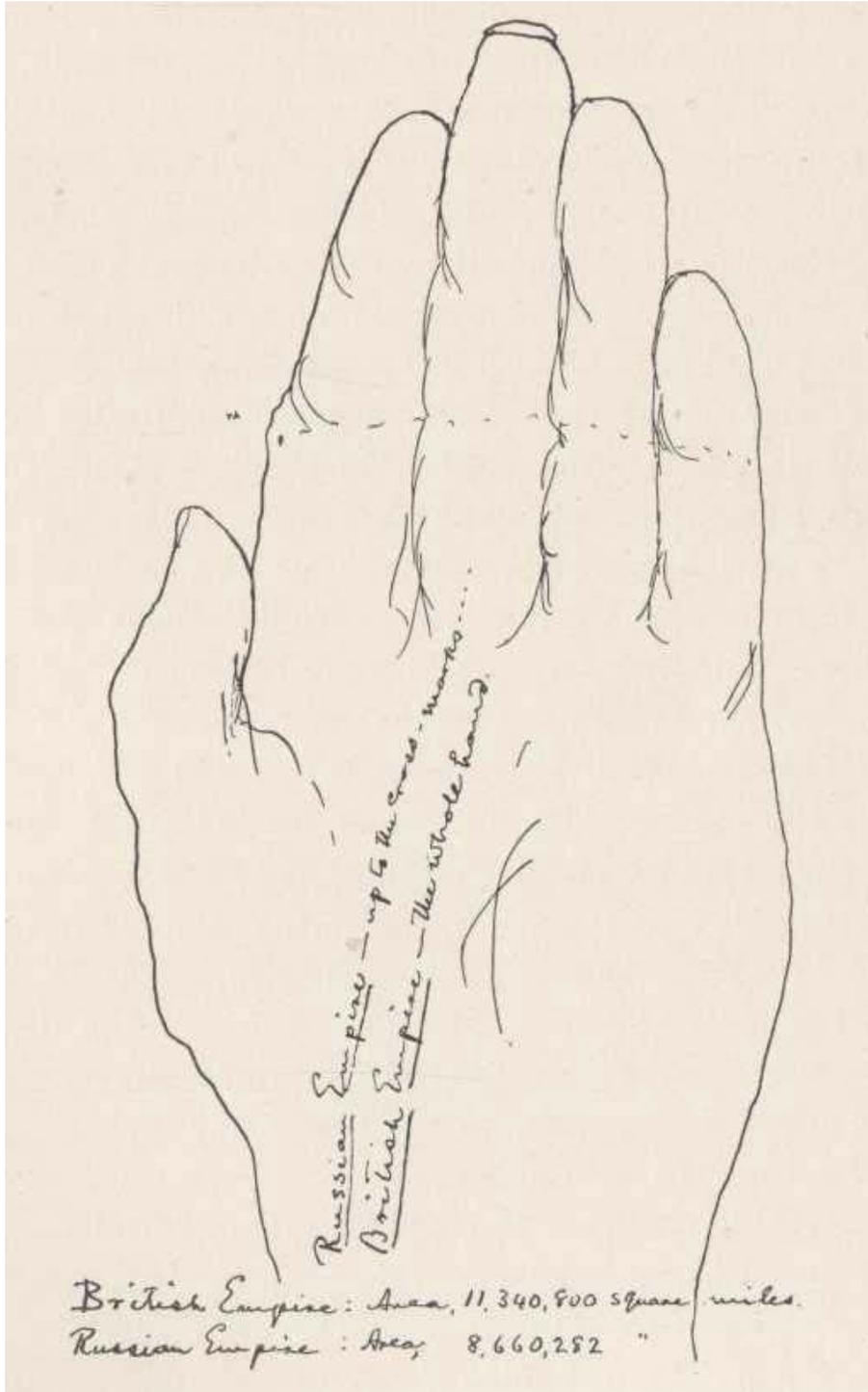
Montgomery contrasts the American exceptionalism that has defined the United States since World War II with the apocalyptic vision that has remained a trope in African American rhetoric and literature for three hundred years. This trope intention-ally undermines the idealism and supposed consensus that defined the postwar years, as African American writers engage in prophecies warning of the nation’s destruction from within and without. In more recent years, Afro-pessimism as exemplified in the writings of Ta-Nehisi Coates, *pace* James Baldwin, has developed to counter the narrative of racial progress that has defined mainstream American discourse. Rather than posit

idealism, African American apocalyptic and pessimistic voices reiterate that until Americans reconcile with a past filled with slavery, genocide, imperialist expansion, peonage, Jim Crow, *de facto* segregation, police violence, and a massive prison-industrial complex, the dominant progressive vision cannot obtain. The American Century was, in fact, an illusion built on slavery and exploitation.

Taking Montgomery’s text as a template, this paper focuses on select essays by Baldwin, Coates, Toni Morrison, June Jordan, and Percival Everett; novels including Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), John A. Williams’ *Captain Blackman* (1972), Paul Beatty’s Man Booker Prize-winning *The Sellout* (2014), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and Percival Everett’s *Erasure* (2001); and the satirical films *Bamboozled* (dir. Spike Lee; 2000) and *C.S.A.* (dir. Kevin Willmott 2004). After tracing developments in African American critical thought beginning with David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Henry Highland Garnet, this paper continues through such Black Nationalists as Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, and rests on liberation theologians such as William Jones (*Is God a White Racist?* [2001]) and Jeremiah Wright. The paper argues that the Apocalyptic vision and Afro-pessimism act as counternarratives to and critiques of American imperialism.

Since the Atlantic slave trade and chattel slavery in the Americas, people of the African Diaspora have lived with the very real possibility of apocalyptic destruction, of obliteration, of genocide in the name of Manifest Destiny and the American Empire. Forestalling that maleficent destiny has not only inspired movements and public policy, but fully informed black intellectual traditions. The works studied herein remind us that unchallenged imperial expansion may well lead to Black America's destruction.

Darryl Dickson-Carr is Professor and Chair of English at Southern Methodist University. He has authored *Spoofing the Modern: Satire in the Harlem Renaissance* (2015), *The Columbia Guide to Contemporary African American Fiction* (2005), and *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (2001).



Mark Twain's sketch of a hand as empire.
From *Following the Equator*, chpt. 17 (1897)

American Humor and Matters of Empire

A Proposal and Invitation

JUDITH YAROSS LEE

ABSTRACT: This article draws on a broad range of examples to outline how imperialism can serve as a key concept for the cultural analysis of American humor across varied themes, media, genres, historical eras, and identity standpoints. Judith Yaross Lee invites other scholars to join her at the 2020 Quarry Farm Symposium on the topic—and in their own research on stand-up comedy and literary, film, television, and graphic humor—in order to probe how the unequal transnational political relationships of imperialism have shaped the basic components (plot, character, incident), rhetorical conventions, and comic techniques—the constituent matters of empire—underlying comic traditions in the United States. Three seem immediately important: *colonial continuity* with comic traditions drawn from those of previous European imperial powers in the Americas, *postcolonial discontinuity* in comic traditions (such as vernacular humor) marked by anti-imperialist and anti-aristocratic ideologies grounded in the American Revolution, and *neocolonial hybridization* of native, immigrant, and other national or ethnic comic traditions through U.S. hegemony across the land and people of North America (and beyond). This new paradigm aims to capture the culturally specific ideological work of American humor and to braid the diverse themes, stock characters and plots, media, rhetorical conventions, and techniques that have been shaped by colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial relations in U.S. contexts into what Edward Said called a contrapuntal harmony.

KEYWORDS: theory of humor, theory of comedy, satire, humor and ideology, imperialism, postcolonial tradition, colonial tradition, neocolonial tradition

doi: 10.5325/studamerhumor.6.1.0008

Studies in American Humor, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2020

Copyright © 2020 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

Humor needs to come in under cover of darkness, in disguise,
and surprise people.
—Garrison Keillor, 1985

The hit Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* (2011), by Matt Stone and Trey Parker, depends on a simple, familiar joke: earnest, fresh-faced young men bring their American viewpoints and ideology to a primitive or corrupt world, where the locals first doubt their ideas—as when Elders Price and Cunningham describe Joseph Smith receiving the golden plates—but convert (at least temporarily) when fundamental tenets are adapted to local views. The outwardly inept Cunningham achieves a key success, for instance, when he prevents an AIDS sufferer from raping a baby by telling him that the *Book of Mormon* states that “Joseph laid with a frog and his AIDS was no more.”¹ Fans of the show praise its originality, but the plot echoes the credo of fictitious frontiersman Simon Suggs that “it’s good to be shifty in a new country” and a host of other stories.² An example from nineteenth-century fiction is Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), in which the time-traveling (or dreaming) hero brings dynamite, bicycles, and other modern miracles to sixth-century Britain with first comic, then disastrous results, while from twentieth-century film, we have all those Bing Crosby–Bob Hope *The Road to . . .* movies and most recently, the Seth Rogan–Evan Goldberg bromance *The Interview* (2014). All these plots owe something to Europe’s picaresque tradition and classical theatrical comedies, though their American heroes tend less toward the sharp-witted pícaro and more toward the bumbling American naïf. In reversing the European invasion of North America by sending Americans abroad and celebrating a US superiority over primitive, corrupt, and menacing comic others in their homelands, these plots also rely on several rhetorical practices within a transnational rubric that brings together American humor and matters of empire. The most obvious link to imperialism here is a plot that burlesques historical invasions, but characterizations further support it in at least three ways: by framing Americans as inventive in their methods of transplanting

1 Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone, *The Book of Mormon* (New York: Dey St. Books, 2011), 58.

2 [Johnson J. Hooper,] *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs, Late of the Tallapoosa Volunteers* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1845), 12.

their religion and values abroad (if not also generous in their desire to transplant it), by downplaying their ruthlessness and dishonesty, showing it to be comically warranted by the joys of joking or the danger of local threats, and by presenting their success as virtue unexpectedly rewarded. Scholarly recognition that Mark Twain's novel imagines American imperialism has not extended to awareness that similar plots shape many later comic works.³

These characterizations specifically twit condescending British and other former masters or elites of the modern American empire in a fantasy that asserts postrevolutionary American ideals of the ordinary (usually white) citizen. The comic trope of the American underdog who outsmarts ostensible betters has won much attention as ideologically American under the label “vernacular humor” because its use of dialect or regional speech signals, as Leo Marx famously put it, “a style with a politics in view . . . of an egalitarian faith . . . [that] sweeps aside received notions of class and status—and of literature.”⁴ But the label “vernacular” obscures the tradition's origins in the postcolonial rhetoric of the early US, as Americans reoriented their relationship with Britain following the Revolution. By imagining themselves as innocent victims of empire, they, conveniently enough, evaded responsibility for the American imperium that followed as the US grew westward by focusing attention eastward, across the Atlantic, instead.⁵ (On the vexed question of when the US became an empire, I stand with scholars who trace the nation's first colonial act to July 13, 1787—two months before the Constitutional Convention ended—when the Confederation Congress passed the Northwest Territory

3 See, for example, David Sewell, “Hank Morgan and the Colonization of Utopia,” *American Transcendental Quarterly*, n.s., 3, 1 (1989): 27–44; John Carlos Rowe, “How the Boss Played the Game: Twain's Critique of Imperialism in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 175–92; Stephen H. Sumida, “Reevaluating Mark Twain's Novel of Hawaii,” *American Literature* 61, no. 4 (1989): 586–609; and Judith Yaross Lee, *Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 71–91.

4 Leo Marx, “The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature,” *Die neuen Sprachen*, 1958, repr. in *The Pilot and the Passenger: Essays on Literature, Technology, and Culture in the United States* (1958; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8.

5 Judith Yaross Lee, “The International Twain and American Nationalist Humor: Vernacular Humor as a Post-Colonial Rhetoric,” *Mark Twain Annual* 6 (2008): 33–49.

Ordinance asserting hegemony over land and people beyond the boundaries of the thirteen original states, by declaring, “The said territory, and the States which may be formed therein, shall forever remain a part of this Confederacy of the United States of America.” As Peter Onuf and Edward Watts have shown, the ordinance thus represents the first effort to create what Thomas Jefferson called an “empire of liberty” to counter European empires led by monarchs.)⁶ The label “vernacular” also yokes the trope to literary humor, although my few examples thus far show how the tradition’s hallmarks have driven films, musical theater, and newspaper sketches for some two centuries.

Understanding the vernacular tradition in the context of imperialism, however, not only highlights the deep cultural significance of the comic conventions themselves—the form, plot, character, language, style, and the like—but also suggests a larger schema of imperial relationships. That is, postcolonial disjunction and rejection imply an earlier tradition of colonial continuity with imperial rhetorical practices, while the rise of the US imperium implies a parallel comic tradition reflecting assertion of that power in what we might call a “neocolonial” or “hegemonic” tradition (for the lack of a better term). All three categories—colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial—have blurry edges, to be sure, because rhetorical conventions can outlive the circumstances that give rise to them and because imperialism promotes cultural adaptation. But the schema offers a framework for drawing together and examining the ideological and cultural work of many if not all American comic traditions—including those expressing Native, African, ethnic, and

6 “An Ordinance for the Government of the Territory of the United States Northwest of the River Ohio,” *Miscellaneous Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-89, Records of the Continental and Confederation Congresses and the Constitutional Convention*, Record Group 360, National Archives (<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=8&page=transcript>); Peter S. Onuf, introduction to *Statehood and Union: A History of the Northwest Ordinance* (1987, ebook repr., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), n.p.; Peter S. Onuf, “Democracy, Empire, and the 1816 Indiana Constitution,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 111 (2015): 5-29; 22; Edward Watts, *An American Colony: Regionalism and the Roots of Midwestern Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 10; Douglas Brinkley, “Thomas Jefferson’s Empire of Liberty,” *American History* 38, no. 3 (2003): 76-81; 94-97; Julian Parks Boyd, “Thomas Jefferson’s Empire of Liberty,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 24, no. 4 (1948): 538-54.

other minority experiences: instead of lumping all white and minority dialects together as *the* vernacular tradition or sorting ethnic traditions into distinct silos, the transnational context of humor and empire posits the US as an imperial center that absorbs and adapts other cultural practices and has colonies both at home and abroad. Reframing the dominant tradition of vernacular humor, with its *eirons* and reverse invasions, as an expression of postcolonial ideology both invites reconsideration of the genteel traditions descended from European models and recognizes distinct minority humors as hybrids that belong to the larger, messier, transnational whole.⁷ So I hope that readers will find the discussion here sufficiently provocative to spark their desire to participate in the 2020 Quarry Farm Symposium on the same theme, either as writers sharing their analyses in this vein or as scholars responding to the selected symposium papers that *StAH* will publish in 2021.

In proposing imperialism as a key concept for an updated paradigm (to use Thomas Kuhn's term for the nexus of concepts and approaches that define a scholarly field) for the study of American humor, I mean the phrase "matters of empire" to suggest the unequal transnational political relationships shaping the basic components and rhetorical conventions of comic traditions in the United States.⁸ Just as Homer's matter of Troy, Malory's matter of Britain, Mark Twain's matter of Hannibal, and Garrison Keillor's matter of Minnesota highlighted the meanings of place in those imagined worlds, so matters of empire (in the plural because empire constitutes more than a single phenomenon) shows the significance of transnational rhetorical and political relationships in American comic expression, reflecting both continuity with and divergence from imported (and exported?) international traditions across many media and eras.⁹

7 This essay builds on my research and teaching as Senior Professor of American Culture at Leiden University The Netherlands, in the spring semester of 2016, but the course and ideas presented here represent my own perspective based on that experience, not that of the Council for the International Exchange of Scholars, the Fulbright Scholars Program, Leiden University, or any other organization.

8 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th ed. (1962; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 11-12.

9 Henry Nash Smith develops the idea of the matter of Hannibal in *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,

My proposal draws mainly on ideas developed by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), although a large scholarly literature on postcolonial theory also addresses the US context.¹⁰ In explaining his thesis that local and domestic meanings reflect international and global practices, Said notes that some American texts bear “a peculiarly acute imperial cast” characterized by a “paradoxically . . . ferocious anti-colonialism, directed at the Old World”¹¹—an insight that applies particularly well to vernacular humor. Similarly, his idea that “every cultural form is radically, quintessentially hybrid” due to intercultural contact suggests the value of reframing America’s genteel comic tradition in terms of continuity with its colonial heritage, on the one hand, and of reimagining the humor of ethnic and racial minorities (already hybridized as Jewish American, Native American, and so on) as international traditions colonized by the American imperium, on the other.¹² Finally, Said’s goal of countering “the tendency for fields and specializations to subdivide and proliferate” in order to advance “an understanding of the whole, when the character, interpretation, and direction or tendency of the cultural experience are at issue,” speaks to my long-standing concern about the way research on American humor has splintered into disparate media, genre, and ethnic traditions.¹³ The recent distinction between humor

1962), 71–91. I borrowed Smith’s conception in proposing the matter of Minnesota when I was writing my book on Garrison Keillor; see *Garrison Keillor: A Voice of America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 1–27.

10 See, for example, Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); Arnold Krupat, “Postcoloniality and Native American Literature,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 7, no. 1 (1994): 163–70; C. Richard King, ed., *Postcolonial America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, eds., *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000); Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Robert J. Scholnick, “Extermination and Democracy: O’Sullivan, the *Democratic Review*, and Empire, 1837–1840,” *American Periodicals* 15, no. 2 (2005): 123–41.

11 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 63.

12 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 58.

13 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 13; Judith Yaross Lee, “Enter Laughing: American Humor Studies in the Spirit of Our Times,” *Studies in American Humor*, n.s. 3, no. 28 (2013): 1–15; 2–3.

and comedy studies is yet another manifestation of that splintering, which I hope the matters-of-empire paradigm can reverse.

The interdisciplinary study of American popular culture that began in the 1920s and '30s participated in the worldwide movement of folklore research exemplified by Stith Thompson's six-volume *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1932-36).¹⁴ Pioneering works by Jennette Tandy on cracker-barrel philosophers, Constance Rourke on the common sources of American folk and literary productions, and Walter Blair on regional and generational narrative formulas combined analysis of individual comic examples with ideological interpretations of recurring character types and plots, but their focus on print humor, their nationalist vision of the United States, and (Rourke excepted) their conception of a mainly white Anglo-American culture—all signs of those times—have long since left a vacuum that remains unfilled.¹⁵ General theories of humor such as those proposed by Bergson, Freud, and Bakhtin (apostrophized ad absurdum) can aid close readings but not analyses of how a specific culture's comic impulses play out; as Terry Eagleton recently put it, "Laughter itself is purely a question of the signifier—mere sound without sense—[but] it is socially coded through and through."¹⁶ Disciplinary studies of humor and comedy that consider literary, performance, film, television, visual/graphic, and internet examples have much to offer in their own right, but they may take for granted American media, legal, and referential contexts; neglect formal anomalies, differences, and commonalities across media; or sideline the lineage that constructs an American humor studies. Fifty years have passed since the last comprehensive history, Jesse Bier's *The Rise and Fall of American Humor* (1968), whose 473 pages made a little room for Jewish contributions to comic page and stage but barely nodded at

14 Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folk-Tales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends*, 6 vols. (Bloomington: [Indiana University Press], 1932-36).

15 Jennette Reid Tandy, *Crackerbox Philosophers in American Humor and Satire* (1925; repr., Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1964); Constance Rourke, *American Humor a Study of the National Character* (1931; repr., New York: New York Review Books, 2004); Walter Blair and Franklin Julius Meine, *Mike Fink, King of Mississippi Keelboatmen* (New York: Holt, 1933); Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (1937; 2nd ed., Scranton, PA: Chandler Publishing Company, 1960).

16 Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), 2.

women's or African Americans'—not to mention Native or Asian Americans' traditions (and distinctions within all these groups and others). Similar omissions also mar Blair and Hamlin Hill's barely more recent stab at a comprehensive theoretical overview, *America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (1978), with its then-current semiotic binaries of “the reputable” and “the subversives,” *eirons* and *alazons*.¹⁷ Studies of the political underpinnings of American humor have tended toward more narrow topics.

The problem became clear to me after many years of reviewing scholarship for this journal's annual feature, “The Year's Work in American Humor Studies.” I called for solutions when I became editor in 2013 and began proposing my own as time went on.¹⁸ In one of the most relevant contributions, Cynthia Willett explores the philosophical significance of US hegemony in her important study of twenty-first century performance comedy, *Irony in the Age of Empire* (2008). There, drawing especially on the ideas of Martha Nussbaum and Cornel West, Willett asks, “Might the American preference for the apparent superficialities of the comic demeanor open a deeper perspective on freedom and democracy that could revitalize a sense of who we are, . . . toward a pleasure-loving social ethic of freedom?”¹⁹ Her answers to the question include insightful analyses of Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000), Margaret Cho's stand-up comedy, and remarriage films that vary the rom-com formula, but here I am asking a question with a broader historical and political sweep: how can we update theoretical approaches to American comic expression as a cultural phenomenon born of specific people, places, politics, media, ideas, and times in a way that incorporates transnational factors?

I intend the ideas presented here to be more invitational than definitive, not least because the topic is huge and my analysis rests on genres and examples that I know best. I begin with the postcolonial strand of American humor, even though historically it came second, in order to highlight its role in the ideological pivot between European traditions inherited through North American colonization and their inverse in US neocolonial

17 Jesse Bier, *The Rise and Fall of American Humor* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968); Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, *America's Humor: From Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

18 Judith Yaross Lee, “Enter Laughing,” 1-2.

19 Cynthia Willett, *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 33.

hybridization of native, African, and immigrant comic practices. The three strands—colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial—follow but do not replace each other in strict historical sequence. Some traditions that American colonists drew on to adapt European comic practices to their local environments endure to this day; some colonial traditions were revised to assert U.S. cultural as well as political independence; other hybrids emerged as the US colonized native peoples, African slaves, and immigrants from many lands. Matters of empire in this schema thus refer to vectors of political and social influence that imply but need not articulate political themes.

Postcolonial Comic Traditions

The postcolonial strand of American humor remains highly visible across many media and thematic contexts as a distinct expression of US republican ideology. For a recent example, consider the 2017 comic strip “The Reign of Mad King Donald” by Tom Tomorrow, the pen name of Dan Perkins (1961-).²⁰ Whatever else one might say about its caricatures—the palette of royal red and gold for King Donald Trump, red, white, and blue for campaign manager turned presidential advisor Kellyanne Conway, and green-back green for venal political advisor Steve Bannon (punningly placed on the far right of each panel)—the strip takes its satiric hook from American contempt for monarchy and aristocracy (see fig. 1). Born in the historical clash between New English colonists and their emperor, mad King George III (1738-1820), the revolutionary values of freedom from tyranny and equality between leaders and the people have sustained patriotic rejection of the British empire by framing (white) Americans as victims of the British king—the better to distract everyone from internal colonization of First Peoples and kidnapped Africans at home. Dave Chappelle articulated that dissonance in his 2004 *For What It's Worth* tour when he reported his patriotic pride in learning that the American administrators had removed Saddam Hussein's image from Iraqi money following the 2003 invasion but then wondered why no one instituted similar political remedies here at home: “I was actually proud to be an American, because that is a subtle psychological nuance of oppression, to have a dictator on your money, and it's thoughtful

²⁰ Tom Tomorrow (pseudonym for Dan Perkins), “The Reign of Mad King Donald” (2017), <http://www.alternet.org/comics/mad-king-donald>.

to be able to take that motherfucker off for the good will of another person. Right? But then I thought, well, if we could do that for Iraq, what about our money, man? Our money look like baseball cards with slaveowners on 'em!"²¹

Likewise, the comic critique of Tomorrow's strip plays out in the ideological clash between the Constitution's description of the US executive and its characterization of Trump and his cronies. We can note how Bannon displaces both traditional Republican operatives Conway and Reince Priebus after the first panel, and we can invoke Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia in comic contrasts among reportorial narration, Trump's colloquialisms, and his aides' sycophancy as the strip voices key ideas and phrases from Trump's campaign and early weeks in office.²² But critique of monarchy as the embodiment of imperial tyranny—with Britain as its model—shapes the strip's implied claim that Trump has usurped US democracy.

Yet Tom Tomorrow just visualizes old rhetorical tropes. Soon after the Revolution, both Americans and the British defined American culture through divergence from British practice. The ink on the Constitution had barely dried when in 1789 Noah Webster called for "a national language, as well as a national government" as "the means of commanding respect abroad."²³ Indeed, soon after the Constitutional Convention ended, the first comedy by an American playwright performed in America began revising the Shakespearean double marriage plot, as updated via Richard Sheridan's *School for Scandal* (1777), for US audiences. In *The Contrast* (1787), Royall Tyler frankly set American values against those of former colonial masters. The Anglophile fop Billy Dimple (25)—it rhymes with Silly Simple—does not get the good American girl: among other failings, his Anglicized name change from Van Dumpling sums up the insincerity that renders him unworthy of the "sensible Maria" who falls more happily and appropriately in love with the shabby but virtuous Colonel Manly of the "late war" and

21 Dave Chappelle and Stan Lathan, dirs., *Dave Chappelle: For What It's Worth*, Fillmore Auditorium, San Francisco, CA, September 4, 2004 (available on DVD from Sony Pictures Home Entertainment).

22 Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in his *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 270-422, esp. 278-79, 301-31.

23 Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789; repr. Menston, UK: Scholar Press, 1968), 406.

recent Shays' Rebellion.²⁴ Manly's joining the state's rather than the insurgent farmers' side of that conflict shows his patriotism. Moreover, his rustic sidekick Jonathan is not a servant but merely a "waiter" (the dialogue insists) and in any case Manly's political and economic equal—unlike "a neger," already unfortunately marked as subaltern.²⁵ Jonathan lacks the sophistication to understand *The School for Scandal*, but he does not lack the US citizen's virtues. A yeoman farmer and Revolutionary war veteran who spurns city women to save himself for the girl back home, Jonathan is a "true Yankee . . . son of liberty" and aptly named for the New England folk figure who embodied America as John Bull's country cousin.²⁶ Folk Jonathan's Old Testament name and regional manners signal his Puritan heritage, but he also Americanizes a stock character of classical drama, the *eirōn*: a figure whose outward simplicity (including his rustic speech) belies inner virtues. In addition to introducing these adaptations, the play opens with an explicitly anti-imperial politics that makes a nationalist appeal to equality: "EXULT, each patriot heart!—this night is shown/A piece, which we may fairly call our own;/Where the proud titles of 'My Lord! Your Grace!'/To humble Mr. and plain Sir give place" (20). So it's fitting that Jonathan brought down the house each night with "Yankee Doodle," a British army song that originally spoofed New Englanders but was quickly appropriated by them to affirm American difference—the feather in place of macaroni, an elaborate high-fashion headdress, sign of the effete British culture that the Yankees rejected.²⁷ (See fig. 2.) Like the difference between macaroni and Yankee doodle, the title of Tyler's play highlights the invidious contrasts between English and American manners and values that make *The Contrast* an exemplar of comic matters of empire on the cusp of colonial and postcolonial divergence.

As a stock figure poked at in gentle fun for his authentic goodness and naïve inability to recognize corruption—or jokes—all around him, Brother Jonathan characters have reaffirmed the postcolonial ideology behind

24 Royall Tyler, *The Contrast*, ed. James Benjamin Wilbur (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), 28.

25 Tyler, *The Contrast*, 54.

26 Tyler, *The Contrast*, 73.

27 Details of the history are at <https://allthingsliberty.com/2013/12/short-history-yankee-doodle/>, though my account comes from Blair, *Native American Humor*, 17-18.

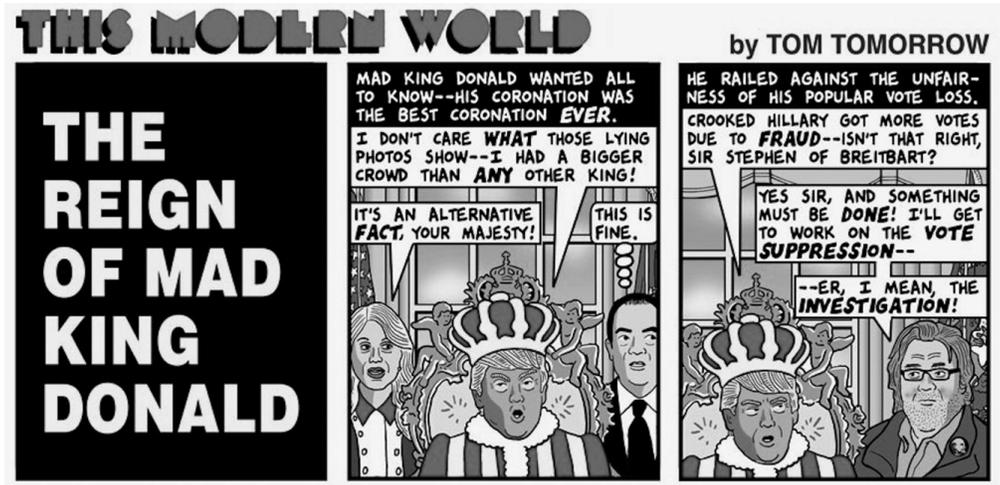


Figure 1 The first three panels of Tom Tomorrow's strip equate the newly inaugurated Donald Trump with King George III, reference former campaign manager Kellyanne Conway's response to questions about the size of his inauguration crowd, and depict his right-wing advisor Steve Bannon as displacing her and chief of staff Reince Priebus. Tom Tomorrow, pseud. Dan Perkins, "The Reign of Mad King Donald," February 8, 2017, <http://www.alternet.org/comics/mad-king-donald>. © Tom Tomorrow.

The Contrast in every medium of American humor since then. Seba Smith renamed him Jack Downing in the influential newspaper letters that he began writing in 1831 that led to Jack's spontaneous mock-nomination for president three years later by fans some four hundred miles away.²⁸ Will Rogers, "the cowboy philosopher," adopted the persona for his comic political radio commentary and newspaper sketches one hundred years later. In between came Huckleberry Finn and a host of other naïfs who turned out to have hearts, if not of gold, better than their rough exteriors promised. The mythology of the unexpectedly successful innocent, adult rube, bumbler, or simple child was perpetuated in television sitcoms such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* (CBS, 1962-71) and *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-). Films such as *Private Benjamin* (1980) extended the convention of the *ieron* to the stock character of the Jewish American princess who proves her mettle (and eventually turns down the man whom convention would have her marry).

28 "[For President, Major Jack Downing]," *National Intelligencer*, July 17, 1833, 3, col. 3. Jack Downing stands out as the ancestor in this vernacular vein of prose rather than stage humor, but Blair notes that the fictional letters of Yankee Joe Strickland preceded Downing's; see Blair, *Native American Humor*, 24-27, 38-45.

All these figures, like the unwitting heroes of *The Interview* and *The Book of Mormon* and Mark Twain's innocent Americans abroad, reinscribe post-colonial values when they, as exemplifications of the common American scorned by aristocratic societies, outwit their supposed domestic or foreign superiors to prove that book learning and social rank do not confer wisdom or warrant success.

The eironic quality of these figures is often embedded in their speech. Jonathan's New England dialect launched a long line of humor equating language and political difference. And by 1838, eighteen years after Sydney Smith sneeringly asked in the *Edinburgh Review* who, "in the four quarters of the globe, . . . reads an American book?," a writer for the *Westminster Review* insisted, "A few writers have appeared in the United States, who, instead of being European and English in their thought and diction, are American"—and every one of the seven books he cited was a work of humor.²⁹ His phrase "styles of thought and diction" brings together the key elements of what became known as vernacular style—language and ideology, language *as* ideology, and a connotation of oral language—in perhaps the earliest claim of American humor's distinctiveness. In this argument from the mother country, which we need to recognize as postcolonial rhetoric, language politics with comic potential topped the list of differences in part because both elements stood in for class and political difference. Moreover, when the writer defined national humor as the "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," he located culture in social interactions and practices, which include language.³⁰ By that time, however, the merger of American language, American behavior, and American ideology was already cemented on both sides of the pond in the skeptical word "Americanism," adapted from "Scotticism."³¹

29 Sydney Smith, review of *Statistical Annals of the United States of America* (1818), *Edinburgh Review* 33 (1820): 69-80; 79; H. W., pseudonym for John Robertson, "Yankeeana: Slick, Crockett, Downing, Etc.," *London and Westminster Review* 32, no. 1 (December 1838): 136-45; 137.

30 H. W., "Yankeeana," 138-39.

31 According to the OED, the term "Americanism" acquired all these senses between its coinage in the 1781 *Pennsylvania Journal* by Scottish immigrant John Witherspoon

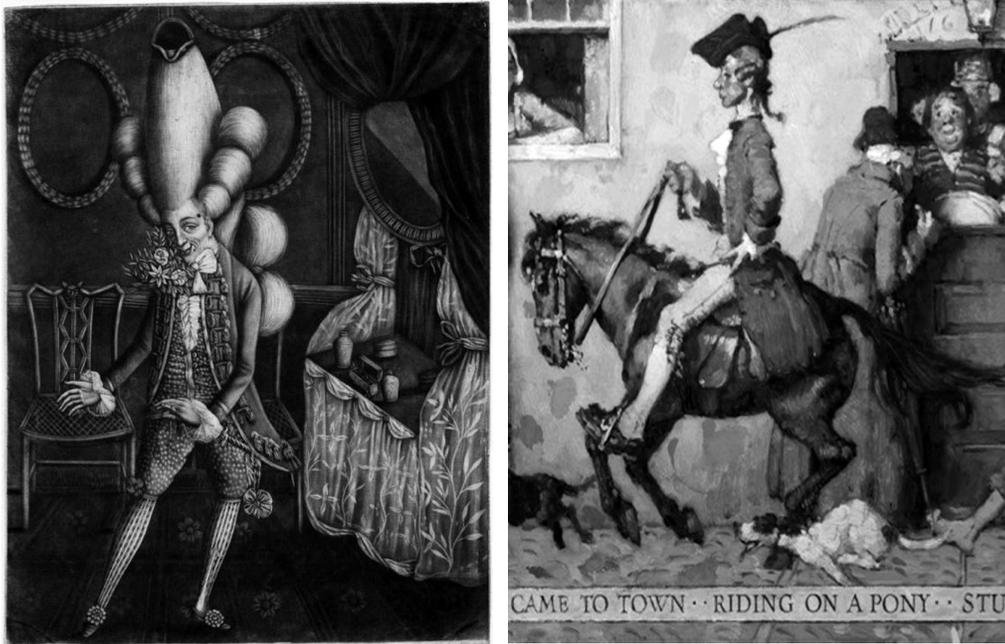


Figure 2 The eighteenth-century figure known as the macaroni affected excessively fashionable, effete clothing and manners, as illustrated above by Philip Dawe in *The Macaroni. A Real Character at the Late Masquerade* (1773). The Yankee who considered the modest feather in his cap the equivalent of the macaroni's fine dress proved himself—at least, to such an observer—a doodle, or rustic dimwit. The dignified Yankee depicted in the segment from Norman Rockwell's *Yankee Doodle Mural* (Nassau Tavern, Princeton, NJ, 1937) reflects how Americans appropriated the insult as a sign of (postcolonial) pride in the plain virtues of the ordinary citizen.

More important, from its 1838 standpoint, Britain characterized American humor ideologically in a transatlantic context as deviations from English customs, especially social refinement, and from English politics, especially the monarchy, and as grounded in distinctive American situations and settings, especially the so-called wilderness. These ideas became foundational for American humorists and scholars. Vernacular humor translated British dramatic traditions of the lower-class comic subplot to the political stage, where nation replaced class as the butt of the jokes while the lowly showed up their supposed superiors. The Yankee 'cuteness of Sam Slick, the ironic naivete of Jack Downing, and the tall talk of David Crockett have endured since the 1830s not only as comic paradigms adaptable to other regions,

(who adapted the term from “Scotticism”) and its 1833 (re)migration to the United Kingdom via the *Edinburgh Review*.

media, and times (and as stock figures such as Langston Hughes's Jesse B. Semple in multiethnic American humor) but also as touchstones for theorists and historians of American comic practice in analyzing rhetorical tropes as vectors for values.³² The vernacular tradition, whose best-known instance is probably *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), presents its unlikely heroes and their democratic values in just about every medium from comic strips and newspaper columns to film and literary fiction well into the current moment.

Contrasts between virtuous vernacular types and their corrupt European, eastern, urban, or other elite antagonists seemed defensively anachronistic, however, by 1889, when Mark Twain published his reverse invasion in *A Connecticut Yankee*—which he told a friend was “a contrast,” by then a familiar trope in the vein of Tyler's play.³³ That the US had become an imperial power through settler colonialism and war was no secret by midcentury. An Oregon newspaper had adopted the motto “Westward the Star of Empire Takes Its Way” in 1844, two years before the Mexican-American War, and by 1861 a painting of the same name by Emanuel Leutze hung in the US Capitol.³⁴ Lawrence Buell sees *Connecticut Yankee* as marking the end of America's postcolonial era because it imagines American imperialism as beneficial before it ends in catastrophe, but the endurance of vernacular conventions in comically conceived modern road trips—think of the Yankees of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) and *National Lampoon's European Vacation* (1985)—suggests ideological needs that persist. Two seem most evident. First, sustaining the old Anglo-American contrast conveniently maintains America's postcolonial posture of national innocence and victimization in international affairs. As Joel Wendland put it, “pretense of innocence” is part of “the cultural thread that runs through the history

32 Judith Yaross Lee, “From the Sublime to the Ridiculous: Comic Traditions in the American Novel,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the American Novel*, ed. Alfred Bendixen (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 220-29.

33 Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, ed. Bernard L. Stein, vol. 9 of *The Works of Mark Twain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 8.

34 Fred Lockley, *History of the Columbia River Valley from the Dalles to the Sea* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1928), 730, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015021226439;view=1up;seq=7>.

of the U.S. empire.”³⁵ Second, as I have noted elsewhere, the international focus on the transatlantic British-American relationship to define imperialism conveniently distracts attention from the colonized natives left out of such a national myth and from the white invaders who stole their lands.³⁶

Both outcomes point to ways that matters of empire open up American humor studies, because they expose the nationalist bias behind the genteel-vernacular binary that has framed American humor studies since 1925.³⁷ By contrast, thinking about American humor in light of empire can not only help scholars reframe the invidious elite/little-guy contrast in a transnational context but also help us trace continuity with other cultural traditions—regional, national, and ethnic—under a large, contemporary theoretical tent. Imperial and neocolonial traditions express opposite colonization experiences, however. Whereas imperial traditions reflect the influence of former political masters on American comic practice, neocolonial traditions signal domestic US hegemony over the national or ethnic practices of native Americans, kidnapped Africans, and immigrants. Insofar as the dominance of English marks both vectors of imperial influence, obscuring the differences between them with respect to political agency, language use also points to the politics embodied in ostensibly nonpolitical detail. As Junot Díaz puts it, “All our history, all our crimes, all the good things we’ve done are embedded in that thing, that fluid thing we call language.”³⁸ Conceived broadly in this way, rhetorical and thematic matters of empire give American comic rhetoric what Edward Said calls a contrapuntal harmony, weaving discernable restatements, inversions, and modulations into a rich and complex whole.³⁹

35 Joel Wendland, “Orientalism and the U.S. Empire: A Reading of Royall Tyler’s *The Algerine Captive*,” *Nature, Society, and Thought* 20, no. 2 (2007): 161-89; 165.

36 Lee, “The International Twain and American Nationalist Humor,” 44-45.

37 See Jessica Tandy’s 1925 work on cracker-barrel philosophers, Constance Rourke’s *American Humor* of 1931, and Walter Blair’s now mortifyingly titled *Native American Humor*.

38 Armando Celayo, David Shook, and Junot Díaz, “In Darkness We Meet: A Conversation with Junot Díaz,” *World Literature Today* 82, no. 2 (2008): 14-19; 17.

39 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 18.

Colonial Traditions

Matters of empire most clearly shape American humor through comic practices inherited through European colonial rule in North America. To the extent that American humor relies on the English language and textual forms, it remains tied to the British empire. But forms, character types, language, social conflicts, and plot resolutions borrowed or inherited from various European imperial cultures retain and thus implicitly endorse their original political and social values in the American context—even when topics veer from explicitly political themes—through the hybridization process that Said describes.

Here belong the classic comedies of English theater that underlie American romantic, slapstick, and situation comedy on stage and screen. American comic magazine sketches likewise descend from their British counterparts, as do many forms of comic verse, especially verse satires. For instance, consider links between the marriage plot of the British stage and the American rom-com, whose conservative vision of personal fulfillment and social equilibrium through heterosexual marriage still equates the nuclear family of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries with society at large—as if the lovers were starring in an Elizabethan play and marriage had not declined as social practice on both sides of the pond in the decades since Northrop Frye noted the conservative social values of the marriage plot in western comedy.⁴⁰ So it's fitting that both the teen rom-com *Ten Things I Hate About You* (1999) and the classic Cole Porter musical *Kiss Me, Kate* (book by Sam and Bella Spewack [1948]) translate Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1590-92) into the American context of West Coast Seattle in the millennial film and East Coast New York in the postwar version, while both remain true to old gender norms. Posters for the film version of *Kiss Me, Kate* (dir. George Sidney, MGM [1953]) featured the Petruchio figure, Fred Graham, spanking the Kate figure, Lilli Vanessi, in a throwback to recently restored prewar patriarchal norms; *Ten Things* reflects third-wave feminism in the Seattle girls' scheming against their father and suitors, because Kate gets her boy as well as her wish to go to Sarah Lawrence College. The 2001 Meg

40 Northrop Frye, "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," in his *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), 163-86.

Ryan-Hugh Jackman romantic comedy *Kate and Leopold* more pointedly articulates imperial Anglo-American politics through its time-travel plot in which American individuality and modernity yield, like the woman protagonist herself, to genteel nineteenth-century English nobility. This fantastic iteration of imperial transportation to Britain's (former) colony of New York promises a happier ending than what resulted from the seventeenth-century transportations of convicts from debtor prisons to America's Georgia colony or from the more recent transportations of convicts, ending in 1868, to its Australian penal colonies, and indeed the film ends in broad triumph. Having successfully wooed the ambitious marketing professional named Kate, the once-disaffected Third Duke of Albany (kin to the namesake of New York's capital) returns to nineteenth-century England, where Kate's technological problems with her Palm Pilot will become moot and he will invent an improved elevator—and thereby create the future New York from which the protagonists fled.

The imperial hallmarks of Anglophilia, paternalism, and nostalgia so evident in *Kate and Leopold* suggest why the rom-com formula has proved so resistant to the nontraditional, modern American experience of family, community, and love, as Jeffrey Melton observes in “Romancing the American Dream: The Coen Brothers' *Raising Arizona*.”⁴¹ If the film's final joke hinges, as Melton argues, on readers' recognition that the American Dream is “always on the horizon, . . . forever beckoning and forever receding as we ceaselessly move toward it,” the rom-com's affirmation of love and family offers the Coens' couple mainly ironic consolations of dramatic and social convention. Does such irony also invite rethinking the international political significance of sitcom formulas that have shifted from endorsing a society in which, as the title states, *Father Knows Best* (NBC radio [1949-54], NBC TV [1955-58]; CBS TV [1954-55, 1958-60]) to parodying such nuclear families as *The Simpsons* or invoking modern families of choice and opportunity such as depicted in *Friends* (NBC [1994-2004])?

Another line of imperial continuity comes into focus if we look at humor periodicals generally and comic sketches—in prose and art—specifically. James Caron doesn't mention imperial ties in his 2014 essay on antebellum humor descended from Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's writing

41 Jeffrey Melton, “Romancing the American Dream: The Coen Brothers' *Raising Arizona*,” *Studies in American Humor* ser. 4, 3, no. 1 (2017): 1-21.

for the *Spectator* in 1711-12, but he does allude to similar ideas in describing the “struggle to adapt the amiability and gentlemanly qualities of the British tradition to the rowdier and more democratic realities of the United States.”⁴² Caron’s analysis of conceptions of humor in the *Knickerbocker* (1833-5) in particular shows that editor Lewis Gaylord Clark followed the *Spectator*’s example: his own writing offered amiable laughter and friendship along with benevolent and educational satiric critique as he created a metaphorical editor’s table where like-minded thinkers could gather to produce and enjoy humor. But Caron argues that other humorous periodical writers in this vein—including Washington Irving, Sara Parton (writing as Fanny Fern), and Charles Leland—also cultivated what Leland called the *Knickerbocker*’s “sunny genial social atmosphere” and thereby established a “republic of comic *belle lettres*” that any reader, for the modest cost of a subscription, could join.⁴³ Indeed, the imagined community that Caron finds in the *Knickerbocker*’s republic of comic *belles lettres* parallels what David Shields in *Oracles of Empire* calls British America’s “crucial institution of . . . belletrism”: the social club in which gentlemen shared their neoclassical poems on matters of state, including Juvenalian satires.⁴⁴

Still, Caron’s antebellum examples were written in English, whereas James Russell Lowell’s *Biglow Papers* of 1848 prefaces its epistolary satire with four pages of Latin text relieved only by a few words in Greek because, explains narrator Homer Wilbur, AM, “I do not know what is the good of academic training and two diplomas unless they make us skilled in the dead languages.”⁴⁵ Such jokes partly explain why Lowell’s abolitionist, antiwar text tends to get overlooked; it is acknowledged mainly in the anthologized excerpts of the marginally literate dialect rhymes by the fictional Yankee private Birdofredom Sawin. Writing in the postcolonial tradition of humble speakers, Sawin reports with ironic acceptance his leg, arm, fingers, and eye lost to the Mexican-American war—an analogy for how foreign entanglement

42 James E. Caron, “Comic *Belles Lettres* and a Literary History of the American Comic Tradition,” *Studies in American Humor*, n.s. 3, no. 29 (2014): 13-34; 27.

43 Caron, “Comic *Belles Lettres*,” 17, 20-21.

44 David S. Shields, *Oracles of Empire: Poetry, Politics, and Commerce in British America, 1690–1750* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 6–9.

45 James Russell Lowell, *The Biglow Papers*, first series, ed. Thomas Wortham, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 14-17 (trans. 174-80).

will injure both US democracy and its citizens. These anthologized excerpts, like the newspaper originals, valorize Sawin's anti-imperialist verses as examples of the vernacular tradition of dialect writing, yet the book version sets them within a rhetorical frame that reveals the limits of colonial forms in expressing anticolonial ideas, even in an ironic mode. When they were first published in the *Boston Courier*, Sawin's verses appeared within letters from the fictitious farmer Hosea Biglow, another dialect writer, who had versified them before submission because he imagined himself a poet, whereas Hosea's own poems opposing the war appeared within letters from his father, Ezekiel. In the book, by contrast, this epistolary antiwar narrative follows an extensive and highly ironic pseudoeditorial apparatus—a headnote, introduction, biographical material, and so on—provided by the pompous pastor Homer Wilbur, MA, whose words in Latin, Greek, and pedantic English open the volume. That is, even before Hosea Biglow has a chance to argue against the war on the ground that it repudiates revolutionary values or to make appeals to religious and antislavery sentiments, readers must wade through Wilbur's elitist, self-serving remarks, including a humble brag that reveals his imperial sympathies along with injurious remarks about some of Biglow's poems: "I should not, perhaps, have felt entitled to take so great liberties with them, had I not more than suspected an hereditary vein of poetry in myself, a very near ancestor having written a Latin poem in the Harvard *Gratulation* on the accession of George the Third."⁴⁶ Lowell undercuts his critique of manifest destiny by setting the vernacular verses by Hosea and Sawin in a textually elaborate nest of comic and ironic monologues capped by Homer's self-ridicule, although the complex form of *The Biglow Papers* ought to appeal to contemporary scholars seeking antecedents of postmodern instability, as J. Javier Rodríguez points out.⁴⁷ Adding Wilbur's mock erudition to the nested homespun voices highlights the clash between the conquests of manifest destiny and republican ideology and suggests ways in which matters of empire expand our understanding of the comic canon.

Examining matters of empire can likewise recover the Dutch heritage of Washington Irving, James Kirke Paulding, and other Knickerbocker humorists of the Hudson River Valley, which was part of the New Netherland colony of

46 Lowell, *Biglow Papers*, xv.

47 J. Javier Rodríguez, "The U.S.-Mexican War in James Russell Lowell's *The Biglow Papers*," *Arizona Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2007), 1-33; 3.

1614-67 and 1673-74. Americanists have long focused exclusively on Irving's English sources and downplayed the idea of what Richard McLamore calls "a Dutchman in the attic," but Elizabeth Funk has identified a host of Dutch influences on *Knickerbocker's History of New York* (1809), including not only Irving's own comic coinage from the Dutch language he heard daily but also many Dutch folk traditions present in the Hudson River Valley and preserved by Jacob Cats in his 1639 jokebook, which provided the *History's* Dutch epigraph: "De waarheid die in duister lag, / Die komt met klaarheid aan den dag"—that is, "the truth that lies in darkness comes clear with light of day." Funk claims that "the couplet is not only part of the burlesque; it is also Irving's rightful motto."⁴⁸ Perhaps more to the point: my Dutch students at Leiden University noted that Irving's portraits of the English and Dutch reflected each other's stereotypes across the nations' contentious nineteenth-century relations, suggesting how much Dutch heritage remains buried, perhaps along with the Spanish influences on the satire of postcolonial American nationhood and self that McLamore sees in Irving's *Conquest of Granada*.⁴⁹

Comic verse represents another imperial heritage overdue for recovery. Verse satires, in particular, have a significant history that deserves more attention. For a recent example, consider "The Ghastlygun Tinies," a parody of Edward Gorey's *Gashlycrumb Tinies* (1981) by writer Matt Cohen and artist Marc Palm in the December 2018 issue of *Mad* magazine.⁵⁰ Like Gorey, Cohen and Palm present an alphabet of woe through simplistic rhymed couplets and amateurishly drawn portraits that show twenty-six children in the moments before their deaths. Gorey's victims meet their ends in comically imaginative, anticlimactic ways, despite the gothic crosshatching of the accompanying images: "E is for Ernest who choked on a peach F is for

48 Richard V. McLamore, "The Dutchman in the Attic: Claiming an Inheritance in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*," *American Literature* 72, no. 1 (2000): 31-57; Elisabeth Paling Funk, "Knickerbocker's New Netherland: Washington Irving's Representation of Dutch Life on the Hudson," in *Over (T)here: Transatlantic Essays in Honor of Rob Kroes*, ed. Kate Delaney and Ruud Janssens, European Contributions to American Studies (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2005), 135-47; 136-37.

49 Richard V. McLamore, "Postcolonial Columbus: Washington Irving and *The Conquest of Granada*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 48, no. 1 (1993): 26-43.

50 Edward Gorey, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies, or, After the Outing* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1981), 26.

Fanny sucked dry by a leech.”⁵¹ By contrast, Cohen and Palm’s children all die in a mass shooting at school and vary mainly in their innocent pursuits at the time they are killed: “M is for MEGAN who’s studying math” runs the verse below a drawing of a chalkboard impressively filled with equations and graphs; “N is for NATHAN who’s caught in the path” as he walks down a hall already strewn with open books, rulers, and the like.⁵² (See fig. 3.) The deadpan tone of their text neatly imitates Gorey’s, yet their understatement, marking resignation in the face of routine school massacres, damns the government’s failure on gun control; amateurishly drawn figures suggest a child’s perspective and, in this context, convey the dreadful world in which they live. Insofar as the alphabet books’ formula implies a children’s primer, however, the grim tone of both can be seen as parodying the line of children’s literature beginning with *The New England Primer* (c. 1688), whose illustrated rhymed couplets imparted a stern Puritan worldview to generations of colonial American children along with the alphabet: “In Adam’s Fall/ We sinned all. The Idle Fool/ Is Whipt at School.”⁵³ One need not trace Cohen and Palm’s version back to British New England to appreciate its satire on feckless political leadership in the face of a ruthless gun lobby: “Q is for QUINN whose life had just begun [;] R is for Reid, valued less than a gun.”⁵⁴ But the framework of humor and empire makes manifest the grim underpinnings of Gorey’s parody in the colonists’ Calvinist morality and associated fatalism that, as Cohen and Palm’s parody implies, together authorize today’s neo-Puritans to prioritize the fetus and gun owner over the schoolchild.

As a tradition, verse satire reflects what Shields has called “the ideals of civility and empire” in Britain: the idea that “a witty and eloquent response to something going on around you was considered the highest mark of civilization.”⁵⁵ This context expands the significance of Royall Tyler’s obscene

51 Gorey, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies, or, After the Outing*, [9, 11].

52 Matt Cohen, writer, and Marc Palm, artist, “The Ghastlygun Tinies,” *Mad*, December 2018, 18–21. The feature was nominated for a 2018 Eisner Award.

53 Paul Leicester Ford, *The New-England Primer; a History of Its Origin and Development; with a Reprint...* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1897), 65.

54 Cohen and Palm, “The Ghastlygun Tinies,” 20.

55 David Shields, “The Library of America Interviews David S. Shields about American Poetry of the 17th and 18th Centuries,” *Library of America e-Newsletter* (2007): 2, <https://loa-shared.s3.amazonaws.com/static/pdf/shields.pdf>.

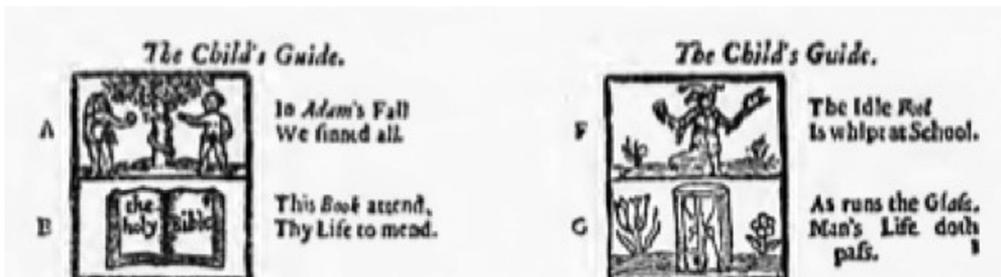
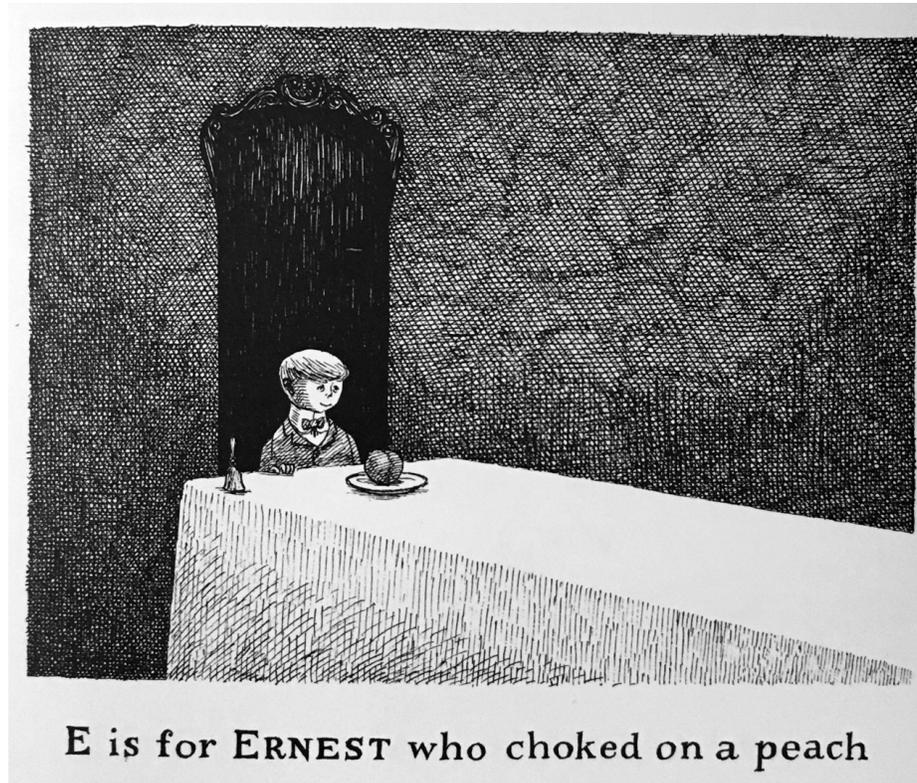
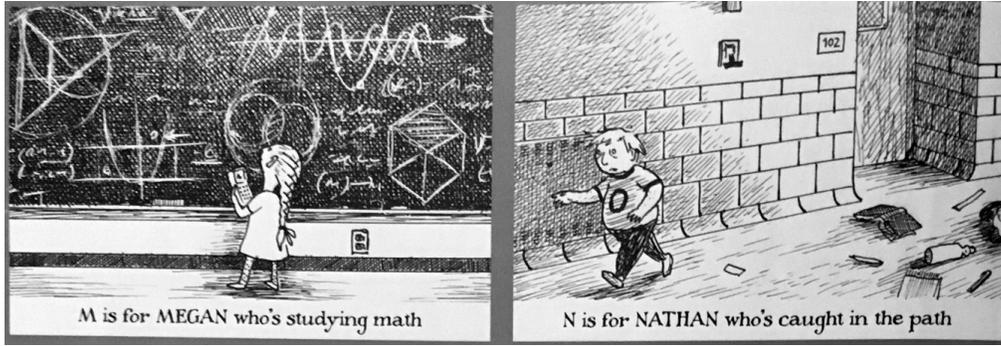


Figure 3 Modern parodies of the *New England Primer* by Matt Cohen and Marc Palm and by Edward Gorey both channel the gothic vision of the Calvinist original with their litany of children's senseless deaths. Matt Cohen and Marc Palm, "The Ghastlygun Tinies," *Mad*, n.s. 4 (December 2018): 18–21; 20; © E.C. Publications, Inc.; Edward Gorey, *The Gashlycrumb Tinies, or, After the Outing* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1981), 9. © Edward Gorey.

comic poem “The Origin of Evil” (1793), which spoofs *Paradise Lost* by imagining what that naked pair might do in the Garden of Eden: when Adam “teaz’d his virgin wife,” Eve “toy’d him with her roving hand,” with the expected result coyly announced in a double entendre: “Stately grew the tree forbidden.”⁵⁶ The poem’s bilingual Latin and English quotation from Milton invokes two imperial languages, in a delightful incongruity between high style and low thought. But if Tyler’s risqué verses push the boundaries of polite society in ways fitting to a revolutionary era (and he had such a reputation as a rake that John Adams forbade a marriage with his daughter), the poem’s politics appear to be far more conservative. As one scholar has noted, given that revolutionary rhetoric equated the biblical tree of knowledge and American tree of liberty, the libertine celebration of sex seems a hyperbolic satiric expression of Federalist concern that populist unrest would destroy the new republic.⁵⁷ Tyler’s personal and literary history provides evidence for this reading too. Like *The Contrast*’s Jonathan and Captain Manly, Tyler fought to suppress Shays’ Rebellion, and his neoclassical forms and elevated diction here serve as rhetorical counterparts to his conservative domestic politics, which contrasts with his patriotism in the international context of *The Contrast*.

Shields’s work also suggests an explanation for why one set of debates on the American Revolution, Constitution, and republican government more generally played out in verse satires. Their titles claim a cosmopolitan, imperial lineage of learning and authority as they explicitly reach out to a well-read audience: *The Anarchiad: A New England Poem* (1786–87), by Connecticut Wits David Humphreys, Joel Barlow, John Trumbull, and Lemuel Hopkins; *The Milkiad* (1789), by the pseudonymous Martin Martial; *The Democratiad* (1796), by Lemuel Hopkins; and *The Spunkiad; or Heroism Improved: A Congressional Display of Spit and Cudgel* (1798), attributed to John Woodworth—to name just a few. When I wrote about these mock epics thirty years ago as “Republican rhymes” (1987), I saw

56 Royall Tyler, “The Origin of Evil: An Elegy,” in *Evans American Imprint Collection*, 5, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/n20067.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

57 Jorg Thomas Richter, “Hereditary Sin and the Post-Revolutionary Phallacy: An Essay on Royall Tyler’s ‘The Origin of Evil’ (1793),” in *Making National Bodies: Cultural Identity and the Politics of the Body*, ed. Stefan L. Brandt and Astrid M. Fellner (Trier, Germany: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2010), 92–93.

attempts to democratize an aristocratic form, but today it is their conservatism that stands out to me.⁵⁸ For instance, the eighth installment of *The Anarchiad* drops its heroic couplets for ballad form for its ridicule of republican intellectual and literary abilities in “Elegy on a Patriot.” Three verses sum up the poem’s contempt:

In yonder dark and narrow lodging,
There rests a patriot’s body,
Which, after many a slip and dodging,
Death took in safe custody.

...

To fellow creatures he was kind,
To brethren, staunch and hearty;
He help’d the *weak*, and led the *blind*,
Whene’er he led his party.

...

Should man from ills be free, t’were strange,
’Twould be on earth a rarity;
So our good hero had the mange,
The *itch* of popularity (41-43).⁵⁹

Purportedly written by someone condescendingly named Tweedle, described as “a poet, . . . now principal bard of his chaotic majesty, filled with the poetic flautus,” this ballad extends the Connecticut Wits’ sneer at William Wimble, pseudonym for the anti-Federalist judge William Williams.⁶⁰ Its invective and singsong rhymes not only clash comically with the label “elegy” but also mock Wimble’s populist politics through the contest between

58 Judith Yaross Lee, “Republican Rhymes: Constitutional Controversy and the Democratization of the Verse Satire, 1786–1799,” *Studies in American Humor*, n.s. 2, 6 (1988): 30-39.

59 David Humphreys, Joel Barlow, John Trumbull, and Lemuel Hopkins, *The Anarchiad: A New England Poem* (1786–87); repr., Gainesville, FL.: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1967: 41-43.

60 *The Anarchiad*, 7.35; J.K. van Dover, “The Design of Anarchy: *The Anarchiad*, 1786-87,” *Early American Literature* 24, no. 3 (1989): 237-47; 237, 243.

Tweedle's vulgar poetics and the Wits' elite neoclassicism. Early Americanist Colin Wells argues that such comic verse "arose out of a unique intersection of poetic form and political discourse between 1765 and 1815," and the detailed analyses of *The Anarchiad* and other burlesques in his remarkable new book, *Poetry Wars*, will help humor specialists tie the genre's elite style to the so-called empire of liberty that emerged as the United States flexed its ambitions across the continent.⁶¹

Perhaps more important from the perspective of reframing American humor studies, restoring American verse satire to the canon of American humor brings a large body of women's comic production back into view. The prolific Carolyn Wells (1862-1942), a big name at the turn of the last century, remains little known today, although she published some 170 books by 1902: anthologies of satire, parodies, whimsey, nonsense—genres inherited from English verse—as well as collections of her writing for *Life*, *Puck*, and *Judge* (leading magazines of the day) along with the *Lark*, home to the infamous "Purple Cow" school of comic verse. (Wells was also the poet who finally persuaded Gillett Burgess to drop the *Lark*'s prohibition on women contributors.) Her fame earned her a spot on the program to read verses in honor of Mark Twain at his seventieth birthday dinner in 1905. Margaret Stetz has begun recovering Wells's significance as not only the premier parodist of her day but also the leading theorist of comic verse—explicitly through her introductions to anthologies of the genre and implicitly through her own verse parodies and satires. This work had the temerity to judge and mock highly regarded American and British authors for their ideas and skill as poets using a distorting mirror—that is, to best them at a game from which she was excluded. Recovering Wells as a parodist, Stetz argues, reframes the canon of American women's comic writing "as participating self-consciously not only in social debates over the re-arrangement of gender roles, but in cultural debates over the formation of taste."⁶² The satiric line from British verse to Wells's parodies and Baird Leonard's character sketches in free

61 Colin Wells, *Poetry Wars: Verse and Politics in the American Revolution and Early Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 1-2.

62 Margaret D. Stetz, "'To Amuse Intelligently and Cleverly': Carolyn Wells and Literary Parody," in *Transgressive Humor of American Women Writers*, ed. Sabrina Fuchs Abrams (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 18.

verse, “Metropolitan Monotypes,” which ran in the *New Yorker* about once a month between 1925 and 1930, also offers new opportunities to rethink urbane American humor in the international cosmopolitan contexts included in matters of empire.

Neocolonial Comic Traditions

Comic traditions related to the United States as an empire reflect several types of neocolonial hegemony as American influence flows into and out of the North American imperial center. US culture has absorbed and shaped the comic practices of conquered peoples, former slaves, and immigrants, yielding a huge array of minority ethnic and racial humors as a result of internal colonization both literal and metaphorical. English language use stands at the heart of this process, but other dimensions of assimilation and adaptation at home and abroad are a part of it as well. Commercial and informal cultural imperialism exports comic media products and genres: stand-up comedy, news parody, and other American(ized) media products take root abroad, resulting in local comic expression that takes on hybrid, or hyphenated, inflection. Examples include the many international spin-offs of *The Daily Show* (Comedy Central, 1996-) and international versions of *Mad* magazine that translate some features and produce new ones themselves—and I hope that others can suggest the scope and neocolonial significance of these and related adaptations. A similar hybridization has also inflected some American postcolonial forms. Whereas the bumbling American *eiron* who outwits the corrupt other belongs to the postcolonial comic tradition, the bumbler’s reverse invasion joins the hegemonic comic tradition of American empire if it successfully remakes someplace else in the American image, representing dominance as good will. And what characterizes humor produced in lands under literal US territorial control, which extends from Guam and American Samoa in the eastern and southern Pacific to Puerto Rico and other islands in the Caribbean?

Consider the Old and New World humor that both swirl through *Blazing Saddles* (1974), written by Mel Brooks and Richard Pryor. The film’s parody sends up racial myths of manifest destiny (high school and Hollywood versions), including the erasure of black cowboys and the Chinese laborers who built the transcontinental railroad, but African

American and Jewish American comic perspectives undercut the white triumphalist saga further. Cleavon Little's wine-sipping, Cole-Porter singing sheriff gives a Euro sophistication to the African trickster: Bart outwits two enemies—racist townsfolk and a corrupt government—just as the signifying monkey bests both the lion and the elephant. In another reversal, Bart lampoons whites across the social spectrum as his intellectual and moral inferiors through his clever evasions of the racist treatment they would subject him to. For his part, Brooks's Yiddish-speaking Indian chief satirizes westward expansion as a foundational American act equivalent to Jews' exodus from Egypt and settlement in the promised land. The promotional art on the DVD cover encapsulates this rhetoric: the script on the chief's headdress is not a geometric design but Hebrew, stating "kosher l'pesach" (kosher for Passover), a double joke on the holiday's celebration of escape from slavery and resettlement in freedom. And lest you think I'm pushing small jokes too hard, note the key scene in which the Indian chief takes pity on Bart's family, forced by racist whites to run in a separate defensive circle when Indians attacked their wagon train.⁶³ Brooks made a last-minute choice to speak Yiddish instead of "pure gibberish," as originally intended (because, he said in 2016, "No one's going to know the difference"). But what he shouts is, "Let them go," just like Pharaoh freeing the biblical Hebrews, because, "You know, the similarities." When his interviewer prompted, "Both are nomadic tribes," Brooks clarified: "Both had land taken from them, both like cured meats . . . yeah, exactly."⁶⁴ In a scene about white racism and Indian violence, the Jewish humor of imagining natives through the lens of the Old Testament joins the hegemony of casting them as villains who threaten manifest destiny. Or, as Peter Antelyes notes, "a characteristic Jewish mode of diasporic commentary . . . has it both ways, critiquing and enacting the western mythos as a mode of Americanization" through Yiddish redface performance.⁶⁵ One can examine *Blazing Saddles*

63 Mel Brooks, dir., *Blazing Saddles*, 30th anniversary special ed., screenplay by Mel Brooks et al., (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004).

64 David Fear, "Mel Brooks: Why 'Blazing Saddles' Is the 'Funniest Movie Ever Made,'" *Rolling Stone*, August 31, 2016, <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/features/mel-brooks-on-gene-wilder-and-making-blazing-saddles-w436989>.

65 Peter Antelyes, "'Haim Afen Range': The Jewish Indian and the Redface Western," *MELUS* 34, no. 3 (2009): 15-42; 16.

for its satire on Hollywood, send-up of classroom history, and its postmodern, self-conscious ending, but all its humor gains meaning through the lens of the empire, as adaptations of Yiddish and African comic traditions join parody and slapstick to lampoon American myth. And I hope that this analysis suggests how matters of empire encompass not only a comic rendering of manifest destiny but also the rhetorical hybrids marking the imperium at home.

We can probe the idea of internal American colonies further through Sherman Alexie's Native American humor of the rez and Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographically grounded humor that she documents in southern Florida's African American communities. Alexie sees humor as "my green card," permitting participation in US culture.⁶⁶ John Lowe traces what he calls Hurston's "cosmic comedy" to her role as griot or public storyteller and the Yoruba heritage of comic gods who trick and transgress, on the one hand, and her commitments to modernism and social justice, on the other.⁶⁷ But Eatonville and other towns that she chronicles in her novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), the short fiction of *Mules and Men* (1935), her folklore collections, and her manuscript *De Turkey and de Law* (1930), which was her contribution to her aborted theatrical project with Langston Hughes, all present culturally rich social relations and cultural traditions in communities colonized by white America. Paul Laurence Dunbar's so-called plantation stories—especially the dialect poetry influenced by his parents' lives as slaves and his reading of work by Hoosier poet James Whitcomb Riley, himself influenced by Scottish poet Robert Burns—provide another variation on colonial and neocolonial themes along with links to folk, popular, and literary culture.

The worldwide ubiquity of stand-up invites more scrutiny as a matter of empire, and I hope that others will delve into the possibilities. For the moment, I would note that Americans claim too much credit for originating stand-up comedy, given that storytelling is universal and that antecedents of stand-up include the Yiddish tumbler and British stage traditions of

66 Joshua B. Nelson and Sherman Alexie, "'Humor Is My Green Card': A Conversation with Sherman Alexie," *World Literature Today* 84, no. 4 (2010): 39-43; 43.

67 John Lowe, *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston's Cosmic Comedy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 1-24.

the dramatic monologue along with the lyric poetry and epistolary fiction that put monologues into print. (A fairly straight line runs from Benjamin Franklin's fourteen chatty Silence Dogood letters to Cliff Arquette's televised performances of letters from Mount Idy and Garrison Keillor's letters from Barbara Ann Bunsen, which became his Lake Wobegon monologue.)⁶⁸ What *has* shaped the American monologue known as stand-up, and which the US has exported, is its commitment to individualism, notably in privileging a modern variation on the self-made man: a performed persona who both is and is not the performer.⁶⁹ This conception of the self was first posited by William James, who theorized that we all have as many social selves as people we interact with as a result of the perceptual phenomenon now known as the social construction of reality.⁷⁰ Pragmatism, America's only home-grown school of philosophy, has developed from that insight into a view of knowledge and society, democratic in its grounding in the ordinary individual, that James previewed in 1878 when he observed, "The knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth . . . Mental interests, hypotheses, postulates, so far as they are bases for human action—action which to a great extent transforms the world—help to *make* the truth which they declare."⁷¹ As I detailed in *Twain's Brand*, this notion of performed self has driven stand-up comedy since Charles Farrar Browne's public lectures as Artemus Ward in the 1860s, but considering how stand-up comedy has become the chief genre for exploring hybrid identities—as African American, Asian American, Arab American, disabled American, wife-mother-daughter, LGBTQ American—the humor offered via the

68 Benjamin Franklin, letters from Silence Dogood, *New-England Courant*, April to October; Cliff Arquettes, letters from Mount Idy to Charlie Weaver, *The Jonathan Winters Show*, CBS-TV, 1967-69; Garrison Keillor, letters from Barbara Ann Bunsen, *A Prairie Home Companion*, Minnesota Public Radio, June 1976-January 1981. See also Lee, *Garrison Keillor*, 13-14, 188n34.

69 David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 33-46; John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or Abjection in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 11-27; Lee, *Twain's Brand*, 27-69.

70 William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (New York: Henry Holt, 1890), 1:294, 337.

71 William James, "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 12, no. 1 (1878): 1-18; 17.

format in the context of American empire suggests a way to examine how American ideology frames intersectionality through what Joanne Gilbert has called, in the feminist context, “performing marginality.”⁷²

Margaret Cho, in particular, has played with the performance of self in intriguing ways that destabilize Asian American identity. Her 2000 tour *I’m the One That I Want*, which explored generational conflicts between immigrant parents and their US-born children as well as the many ways white people essentialize Asian Americans and misunderstand their Americanness, included a very funny riff in which Cho performed her double consciousness of a colonized self under the white gaze before reversing the standpoint and turning her *gaze* on whites: “Your eye is too big! . . . Also, you are too tall! [looking up toward the ceiling in horror] You’re too tall!”⁷³ She took a more personal tack in her 2004 performance tour *Revolution*, which opened with her demurely costumed in a fringed Asian headdress with stylized wig and shoes, all of which she silently peeled off until she finally remarked, challenging racist premises of externally marked identity in an exaggerated African American accent, “You know I would neva get dischinky of a haircut, please—oh, please!”⁷⁴ These examples affirm the hybrid nature of stand-up as a form developed in the US as a British colonial legacy, expertly refined to express the identities of colonized American minorities, and then exported to the world as a product of US cultural imperialism.

A more literal comic view of US empire emerges from reverse invasions, which downplay American international engagement or aggression through ridicule yet praise it through the plot structure of comic triumph. Reverse invasions uphold US hegemony by affirming their American heroes, typically *eirons* (often buddies) and the democratic values that they embody and pursue. The formula has evolved since Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), which stops short of a full-fledged endorsement of American empire because Hank Morgan’s modernization of sixth-century Britain kills fighters both inside and outside his electric fence in the battle

72 Lee, *Twain’s Brand*, 38–39; Joanne R. Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

73 Margaret Cho, *I’m the One That I Want* (Fox Lorber, 2001), DVD.

74 Margaret Cho, *Revolution*, filmed live at the Wiltern Theatre, Los Angeles, May 2-3, 2003, Margaret Cho and Bruce Daniels (New York: Wellspring, 2004), DVD.

for his “beautiful civilization.”⁷⁵ When Hank’s sidekick Clarence reports, “We had conquered; in turn we were conquered,” the stalemate fulfills comic logic as it delivers poetic justice: how else to square the Yankee’s fantasy with history writ large (European history as we know it) and small (the hole in Sir Sagramore’s armor, now accounted for by Hank’s tall yarn)?⁷⁶ Like many a buddy film before it, however, the 2014 film *The Interview* gleefully goes further, as does the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*. The musical ends by endorsing hapless Elder Cunningham’s success, achieved through lies and venal self-interest: he wins the girl, the converts, and his supervisors’ applause, although the triumph of Mormonism over local beliefs seems a very mixed victory considering his absurd version of it. The ending of *The Interview* likewise validates all the Americans involved in fomenting a democratic revolution to overthrow North Korea’s strongman leader, Kim Jong Un, with quite the bloodbath (and before it, vomitbath) of his guards along the way. The plot fulfills the dreams of the louche media braggart who fantasized that Navy Seals would rescue him after a successful spy mission, the nerdy journalistic *eiron* who yearned for professional credibility equal to his intellect, and the scheming CIA seducer and her straight-man partner who roped the buddies into this supposedly patriotic endeavor. But whatever else one might say about the production’s critical stature (6.5/10 from IMBD, 51 percent from Rotten Tomatoes) or financial success (\$12.3 million at the box office and \$40 million in digital rentals vs. a budget of \$44 million), *The Interview* itself says a lot about the comic sensibilities of its Hollywood principals (puerile?) and North Korean subjects (absent). Its clichés underscore the film’s place in an American comic tradition of manic international adventures running from Mark Twain’s *Innocents Abroad* (1866) through the teen sex comedy *Eurotrip* (2004). Fictions regarding the North Korean leader’s love of American popular culture—Luke Skylark’s celebrity talk show and Katy Perry’s hit songs drive the plot—aligned with the real world in startling ways when hackers launched a cyberattack on Sony Pictures and threatened violence against theaters that screened the film, which North Korea had called “an act of war” for depicting its leader’s violent assassination.⁷⁷

75 Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, 456.

76 Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, 489.

77 Martin Fackler, Brooks Barnes, and David E. Sanger, “Sony’s International Incident: Making Kim Jong-Un’s Head Explode,” *New York Times*, December 14, 2014, A1.

The American hero need not travel abroad, however, to imagine US hegemony's historical reversals. Philip Roth's fiction relocated European events to American communities for forty years: comic incongruities at once claim and mock a central US role in world affairs by bringing World War II to American baseball fields in *The Great American Novel* (1973), resurrecting Anne Frank to small-town New England in *The Ghost Writer* (1979), and setting Nazi pogroms in Kentucky in *The Plot Against America* (2004).⁷⁸

Not every satire of American imperialism nor every transnational comic plot belongs to this comic tradition of US international hegemony or neocolonialism. I would exclude, for example, such discursively explicit satires of American imperialism as Mark Twain's "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" (1901) and Finley Peter Dunne's *Mr. Dooley in Peace and War* (1898), despite their political significance in response to the Spanish-American War and its aftermath.⁷⁹ Formally and ideologically such satires belong to the postcolonial tradition, with Dunne's Irish dialect-speaking bartender taking his place among the homespun oracles that Mark Twain represented in his time as the comic persona of Samuel Clemens.

Other transnational works pose more complex challenges. If the sitcom developed from Jack Benny's innovations on radio, as Kathryn Fuller-Seeley has demonstrated, and enjoyed its first flowering in American broadcasting, then the BBC mockumentary sitcom *The Office* (2001-3) began in a form imported from and then exported back to the US, where it evolved over nine seasons on NBC (2005-13).⁸⁰ *The Daily Show*, which has spawned imitations in Armenia, Croatia, and Iran (among at least eleven international adaptations as of late 2019), followed a reverse journey from the BBC's *That Was the Week That Was* (1962-63) through the "Weekend Update" segment of *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-). Still other transnational productions, such as Sacha Baron Cohen's mockumentary film *Borat* (2006), seem to fall firmly within a distinct national comic tradition: the British music hall tradition

78 Lee, *Twain's Brand*, 92-106.

79 Mark Twain, "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," *North American Review* 172, no. 531 (1901): 161-76; Lowell, *Biglow Papers*; Finley Peter Dunne, *Mr. Dooley in Peace and in War* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1898).

80 Kathryn H. Fuller-Seeley, "Becoming Benny: The Evolution of Jack Benny's Character Comedy from Vaudeville to Radio," *Studies in American Humor* ser. 4, 1, no. 2 (2015): 163-91.

of sketch comedy best known to Americans from reruns of *Benny Hill* gave Borat its nude scene, cross-dressing, poop jokes, and humiliation of ordinary folks, along with a dialect-speaking protagonist who is a malevolent outsider rather than a heroic immigrant *eiron*. That is, despite its US setting, *Borat* is not American humor any more than *Connecticut Yankee* is British humor, and both works illustrate the need for a rhetorical and formal rather than strictly thematic approach to transnational analysis. But I hope that others will join me in pursuing these questions.

As I see it, speaking of American humor—or, as Tracy Wuster prefers to frame it, humor in America⁸¹—means recognizing comic expression from US vantage points, expression framed not simply by creators' identities and experiences but also by the social milieu that shaped them and the media and political systems in which they find audiences to amuse. To be sure, First Amendment freedoms protect American comic productions in all media, thereby enabling satiric critique specifically prohibited in some places, and digital platforms offer low technical and economic barriers to entry. Yet advertisers, the Federal Communications Commission, and industry leaders constrain programming on broadcast television and cable, as when CBS canceled the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (1967-69) over the hosts' antiwar satire, while fear of terrorism nearly derailed the opening of *The Interview*. The atmosphere in a performance space may also have chilling effect: Dave Chappelle walked away from his TV show when his white crew laughed at his ironic blackface sketch in ways that felt racist to him.⁸² Memes and short videos fly freely around the internet, but social media platforms can cut off whomever their stakeholders (or their algorithms) choose, as when Facebook briefly censored a newspaper's version of the Declaration of Independence as hate speech.⁸³ Humor scholarship need not explicitly address such social

81 Tracy Wuster, ed., *HA! Humor in America*, <https://humorinamerica.wordpress.com/>.

82 "Censorship: The Fickle Finger of CBS," *Time*, April 18, 1969: 66-67; Bambi Haggins, "In the Wake of 'The Nigger Pixie': Dave Chappelle and the Politics of Crossover Comedy," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones, and Ethan Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 233-51; 233.

83 Bill McCarthy, "Did Facebook Remove, Censor the Declaration of Independence?," *Politifact.com*, <https://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2018/jul/10/blog-posting/did-facebook-remove-post-quoting-declaration-indep>.

or systemic factors, but neither should an interdisciplinary humor studies ignore the historical and critical analyses central to the study of a culture's comic traditions and formulations. These practices nearly always bear specific social imprints, even when nonverbal, as in uncaptioned cartoons and slapstick: signs communicate culturally, and who triumphs in a comic fight always counts.

The exceptionalist understanding of American vernacular humor acquired its classic formulation in a 1958 context that long ago faded from view. Leo Marx did not intend a manifesto when he praised “a style with a politics in view”; rather, he announced a more modest goal, to defend Walt Whitman and Mark Twain, distinguishing them philosophically as well as stylistically from writers in the genteel tradition that George Santayana had scorned in 1911.⁸⁴ Just as important, however, as the elements by which Marx interpreted the vernacular as a pro-American, prodemocratic, antiliterary, antielite, and anti-European style is the audience to whom he presented them: European readers of a German literature journal. He likewise set his thesis in a transnational context, noting that writers since James Fenimore Cooper had used “a drama of cultural contrast” to answer the question “What does it mean to be an American?”⁸⁵ It's felicitous that Marx's description evokes the very subject, technique, and title of Royall Tyler's play, so central to my conception of American humor and empire. If today we have a more jaundiced view of American distinction than Tyler or Marx, place the US in a more global context, and admit to our imperial crimes, I hope that engaging American humor and matters of empire—across examples of graphic and literary humor as well as film and stand-up comedy by creators of many standpoints and backgrounds—will reveal the comic wealth and cultural insight that empire bequeaths.

I look forward to exploring these ideas with many of you at the Quarry Farm Symposium, in *StAH's* pages, and beyond.

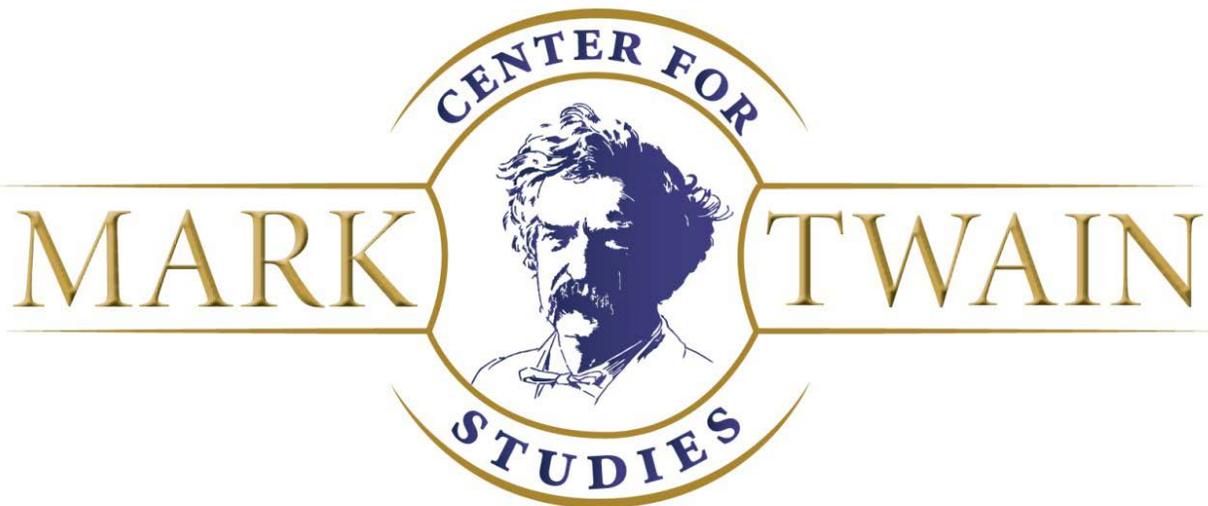
84 Marx, “The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature,” 3-4; George Santayana, “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” in *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana*, ed. Douglas L. Wilson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 37-64.

85 Marx, “The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature,” 3.

JUDITH YAROSS LEE, Distinguished Professor Emerita at Ohio University, studies American humor and other popular discourses in interdisciplinary historical contexts. Among the five books and sixty articles that she has published are *Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture* (2012), showing how Mark Twain pioneered contemporary practices in stand-up comedy and comic brand management, and *Garrison Keillor: A Voice of America* (1991), the first analysis of this major comic performer and writer. Current projects include *Seeing MAD: Essays on Mad Magazine's History and Legacy* (coedited with John Bird).

Lee, Judith Yaross. "American Humor and Matters of Empire."
Studies in American Humor 6, no.1 (2020): 8-43.

This article is used by permission of The Pennsylvania State University Press.



NOTES



NOTES



NOTES



Humor in America

A New Book Series from the
Pennsylvania State University Press

HUMOR IN AMERICA SERIES

Series Editors

Judith Yaross Lee

Tracy Wuster

From Benjamin Franklin to Mark Twain, Mel Brooks to Richard Pryor, *Our Gang* to *Inside Amy Schumer*, American humor has time and again proven itself to be more than mere entertainment: it has brought cultural norms and practices in America into sharp relief and, sometimes, successfully changed them. The Humor in America series considers humor as an expression that reflects key concerns of people in specific times and places.

The series engages the full range of the field, from literature, theater, and stand-up comedy to comics, radio, and other media in which humor addresses American experiences. With interdisciplinary research, historical and transnational approaches, and comparative scholarship that carefully examines contexts such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and region, books in the Humor in America series show how the artistic and cultural expression of humor both responds to and shapes American culture. The series will publish mainly authored volumes and will appeal to audiences that include scholars, students, and the intellectually curious general reader.

QUESTIONS OR SUBMISSIONS SHOULD BE
DIRECTED TO THE SERIES EDITORS:

Judith Yaross Lee is Distinguished Professor Emerita of Communication Studies at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, and the author, most recently, of *Twain's Brand: Humor in Contemporary American Culture*. She can be reached at leej@ohio.edu.

Tracy Wuster is Assistant Professor of Instruction in the Human Dimensions of Organizations Program at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the director of the Humor in American Project at UT and the executive director of the American Humor Studies Association. He is also the creator of the online publication *Humor in America* and the author of *Mark Twain, American Humorist*. He can be reached at wustert@gmail.com.

Initial inquiries should take the form of a three- to five-page proposal outlining the intent of the project, its scope and relation to other work on the topic, and the likely audience(s) for the book. Please also include a current CV. The editors note that although it is a logical fallacy to expect scholarship on humor to be funny, the best humor scholarship can be fun—and illuminate its exemplars' comic spirit—while also being intellectually rigorous and a pleasure to read.



STUDIES IN AMERICAN HUMOR



LAWRENCE HOWE, EDITOR

Studies in American Humor publishes articles on topics, themes, practices, practitioners, and media across the wide spectrum of American humor, past and present, for an audience made up primarily of scholars and students in the humanities, especially literary and cultural studies. The journal values new transnational and interdisciplinary approaches as well as traditional critical and historical humanities scholarship. *StAH* is the official journal of the American Humor Studies Association.

ISSN 0095-280x | E-ISSN 2333-9934
Biannual | Available in print or online

Current pricing:
[psupress.org/Journals/
jnls_AmericanHumor.html](https://psupress.org/Journals/jnls_AmericanHumor.html)

Submissions:
editorialmanager.com/sah

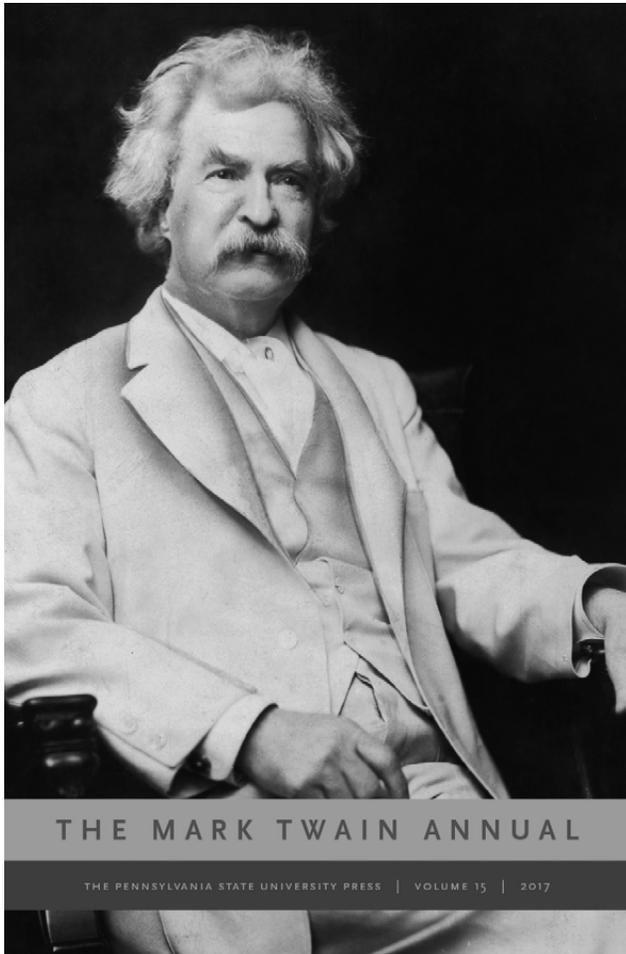
***Studies in American Humor* is currently accepting article submissions for general issues and for a special issue, "Black Comedy Matters," in 2022.**

PENN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

www.psupress.org
journals@psu.edu



THE MARK TWAIN ANNUAL



BEN CLICK, EDITOR

The Mark Twain Annual is the official publication of the Mark Twain Circle of America. The journal offers essays related to Mark Twain and those who surrounded him and serves as an outlet for new scholarship as well as new pedagogical approaches.

The Mark Twain Circle of America encourages interest in Mark Twain and fosters the formal presentation of ideas about the author and his work, as well as the informal exchange of information among Circle members.

ISSN 1553-0981 | E-ISSN 1756-2597
Annual | Available in print or online

Current pricing:

psupress.org/Journals/jnls_MTA.html

Submissions:

editorialmanager.com/mta



The Eighth Quarry Farm Symposium Celebrates the 150th Anniversary of *Roughing It*

The Mark Twain Annual will commemorate the sesquicentennial of *Roughing It* in 2022 with a special issue devoted to Mark Twain and the West. *The Annual* is seeking article-length submissions that examine Twain's relationship to all aspects of the American West.

This broad scope allows for critical examinations of Twain's work as:

- Western regionalist writing
- Twain and indigenous peoples
- Twain and immigrant populations
- Commentary on the American frontier
- Twain and domestic travel
- Twain's Western journalism
- The West as a shaping force on his development as an artist
- The circle of writers Twain encountered out West and their continued relationship
- Twain and contemporary Western writers

While Twain and the West has been the subject of numerous studies since the early twentieth century, this special issue seeks to explore what in recent years has become somewhat forgotten territory in Twain's fictive and nonfictive writings.

In addition to being published in *The Annual*, authors will have the opportunity to be part of the **Eighth Quarry Farm Weekend Symposium** program sponsored by the Center for Mark Twain Studies in Elmira, New York. The symposium will be held in October 2021, one year prior to publication of *The Annual*.

Those interested should submit a 150-word proposal to **Ben Click at baclick@smcm.edu** by March 31, 2021. Proposals will be accepted on a rolling basis. Final decisions will be made before July 1, 2021 when the symposium program needs to be finalized. Final manuscripts for publication in *The Annual* must be submitted by December 15, 2021. Selected essays should be 4,000-8,000 words in length, but longer essays of more than 8,000 words will also be considered.

The purpose of the symposium is to create an intimate atmosphere in which participants can discuss and ask questions of each other's works before publication. As a result, willingness to attend the symposium will be a consideration in final manuscript publication decisions.

The symposium will begin on Friday, October 1, 2021 with a dinner in Cowles Hall, less than 100 yards away from the historic Mark Twain Study, followed by the keynote address. The symposium will continue throughout the next day with presentations and discussions in the tranquil atmosphere of Quarry Farm, where breakfast, lunch, a cocktail hour, and dinner will also be served. Registrants will be invited back to Quarry Farm on Sunday morning to enjoy the autumnal breakfast and casual discussions.

DATES: Friday, October 1, 2021 to Sunday, October 3, 2021

HOUSING: Special rates at the Elmira Riverside Holiday Inn

COST: \$175 - Price includes five full meals, with beer/wine at dinners, and a conference program

NOTE: Due to the fragile nature of Quarry Farm, the symposium will be limited to 40 attendees

Attention Graduate Students: CMTS will waive all registration fees and provide free lodging for a select number of graduate students. If you are interested in this opportunity, contact **Joseph Lemak at jlemak@elmira.edu**.



"Suspended Orations"
Roughing It, Chpt 7. (1872)



QUARRY FARM FELLOWSHIPS

NOW ACCEPTING APPLICATIONS

Quarry Farm Fellowships are open to any scholar working in any field related to Mark Twain Studies at any career stage. This is a unique opportunity to work on academic or creative projects at Quarry Farm, Mark Twain's summer retreat where he penned *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and other iconic works.

Ten Quarry Farm Fellowships will be offered in 2021:

- Three one-month residencies, including housing at Quarry Farm and a \$1500 honorarium for each residency
- Six two-week residencies, including housing at Quarry Farm and a \$1000 honorarium for each residency
- At least one month-long and two two-week fellowships will be reserved for graduate students, contingent faculty, and faculty three or fewer years removed from completion of their Ph.D.
- At least one fellowship will be reserved for writers and artists working on creative projects



Applications are due November 30, 2020.
Visit MarkTwainStudies.org for more information.



Evening view from the Quarry Farm Porch

Special Thanks to the **Mark Twain Foundation** for its long-time commitment to the Center for Mark Twain Studies and resulting scholarship.

Staff of the Center for Mark Twain Studies

Dylan Crawford, Information Technology Liaison

Matthew Goldberg, Quarry Farm Preservation Intern

Dr. Joseph Lemak, Director

Dr. Charlie Mitchell, Professor of American History

Dr. Matt Seybold, Asst. Professor of American Literature and Mark Twain Studies

Nina Skinner, Administrative Assistant

Steve Webb, Quarry Farm Caretaker

The cover artwork and program formatting were designed by Jan Kather

