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Contemporary Militant Black Humor

Daryl Cumber Dance
University of Richmond, ddance2@richmond.edu

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CONTEMPORARY MILITANT BLACK HUMOR

When LeRoi Jones was accused of making Lula (in The Dutchman) too crazy, extreme, and neurotic, he retaliated, "You remember America, don't you, where they have unsolved murders happening before your eyes on television? How crazy, extreme, neurotic, does that sound? Lula, for all her alleged insanity, just barely reflects the insanity of this hideous place." Remembering America, the young black militant writers of today express their bitterness and deep disillusionment with a vengeful, demonic, mad comedy that is bizarre, grotesque, perverse, terrible, sardonic, absurd, gross, obscene.

Witnessing the continued plight of their black brothers in America, noting the continued strength of racism in this country, and discouraged by the slowness and ineffectiveness of integration, they have become frustrated and completely disillusioned with the promise of American democracy. If Paul Laurence Dunbar might be said to reflect in some of his works the accommodationist views of the leading black spokesman of his times, Booker T. Washington; and if Langston Hughes might generally be viewed as advocating the thoughtful, rational methods of Martin Luther King and the N.A.A.C.P. with their disciplined social protest and their optimistic faith in America; then the contemporary militant writers may be seen as reflecting the views of such spokesmen as Malcolm X, Rap Brown, and Stokely Carmichael, who have lost faith in the Christian religion, the American dream, and rational appeals.

The disillusionment of the modern militant black writers has been noted by Larry Neal. He points out that these young black writers see the white world "as a dying creature, totally bereft of spirituality," as symbolized in the toast on Shine. They see no hopes for saving white America. Salvation for the black man lies rather in rejecting its symbols and values (including Christianity), in leaving it to complete its own destruction or in actually hastening that destruction. Symbolic and real murders of whites permeate militant black literature, and many of the black characters, like those of Richard Wright, can realize themselves only after destroying whites. The black hero here, like Stagolee, fights with a graveyard disposition—he doesn't mind dying. Oddly enough, in much militant black literature the scenes replete with the sound of machine guns and the flow of human blood are wildly comic as are many similarly grisly episodes in the Uncle Remus tales, the slave John tales, and the black "toasts," in which black militant humor has its origins. The laughs inspired in these works by the murders and humiliation of whites and Uncle Tom Negroes may not be funny to some, but to the militant young blacks they are extremely funny. And unlike much previous black literature, contemporary militant black humor, like the folk literature from which it springs, is intended only for the blacks—to awaken them to their heritage and a sense of self pride and to move them to revolution. Militant black literature is indeed literature with a purpose. The militant black writers concur unanimously with W. E. B. DuBois, who declared, "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda." They see their literary productions as weapons in the fight for liberation and as a means of reaffirming the black heritage. In the "Introduction" to The New Black Poetry, Clarence Major declares of black poets, "Our weapons are cultural, our poems," and he goes on to aver, "Black poets here are practically and magically involved in collective efforts to trigger real social change. We are mirrors here, and we know that anybody who has ultimate faith in the system is our enemy." LeRoi Jones has declared that art "is simple propaganda. The function of our art must be to restore our people to their traditional greatness." With more vehemence he has averred in his "Introduction" to Four Black Revolutionary Plays: "Unless you killing white people, killing the shit they've built, dont read this shit, you wont like it, and it sure wont like you." Again in "Black Art" he sardonically declares that poems are "bullshit" unless they are used as weapons to fight the white establishment and to destroy the Black integrationists. He calls for "dagger poems" to slay the Jewish exploiters and for poems to disarm and destroy the "cops."

Obviously, one of the favorite targets of attack in contemporary militant black lit-
erie is "Whitey" or "honky," who is seen as a symbol of evil, decay, impotence. In LeRoi Jones's "A Black Mass," a black magician creates a soulless, nasty, vomiting, unfeeling monster who screams, "I white. White. White. . . ."10 The beast is a sexless thing which contaminates people, turning them into itself by touching them. Then it kills the blacks. The narrator closes with the comment, "These beasts are still loose in the world."11 In his "Madheart" he creates Devil Lady, who wears a white devil mask and whom Negroes learn to emulate through television. In Jones's tragi-comic "Experimental Death Unit #1," the two accurately named white characters, Duff and Loco, spineless, repulsive weaklings called queers by the aging Negro whore after whom they shamelessly lust, are killed by black youths who march off with their heads. In "A School of Prayer" Jones declares that all are beautiful except whites, who are "full of, and made of shit."12 Calvin C. Hernton also lampoons the white man, whom he describes in "Elements of Grammar" as "the cock roach of civilization," a ludicrous being yelling about the superiority of whites as he walks around "With his little wee wee tucked under/ the folds of his flabby belly. . . ."13 Nikki Giovanni also suggests the impotence of the whites in her attack on the President when she writes, "... clouds have winged/ low since no-Dick was elected."14

Even God and Jesus Christ (the white Gods of the white man) are derided in many of these works. In Marvin B. Jackson's "Flowers for the Trashman," Joe says, "Jesus could've been a fag. . . . All them damn discsiple he had. . . . Bet ya old J. C. really had a gay time spreadin' the gospel."15 The prostitute in Jones's "Experimental Death Unit #1" affirms, "There's a God allright . . . . but diggit . . . he's a jive ass motherfucka'!"16 Don L. Lee wryly avers: Jesus saves--S & H Green Stamps,17 Jesus saves, Jesus saves--S & H Green Stamps.17

The object of even more violent attacks than the white man is the "oreo-negro," the dicty type. He is portrayed as a foolish imitator of whites who rejects his own culture and who is, like the white man whom he idolizes, cold, weak, impotent, and given to all kinds of sexual perversions. In LeRoi Jones's "Madheart" the "lost" mother and daughter wear red and blonde wigs, symbols of their type, and aspire to be like the white Devil Lady. They worship Tony Bennett, Beethoven, and Batman, having learned through television to reverse white symbols. Their repudiation of black things is so complete that the daughter declares, "If I have to have a niggerman, give me a faggot anyday."18 There is bitter humor in the treatment of these ridiculous "oreos." In one ludicrous scene the mother, appalled and confused by the young blacks' appreciation of and call to blackness, screams out, "Tony Bennett, help us please. Beethoven, Peter Gunn."19 Later the daughter puts her wig on, pulls it over her eyes and madly runs around screaming at the other blacks, "You jealous 'cause you ain't blonde like me."20

Unlike Jones's mother and daughter, Ron Milner's Dean sometimes embraces blackness. When the students at his black college begin demonstrating, he ritualistically washes off his white color, puts on black gloves, and an Afro wig, and then asks for his testicles:

Helen:21 What dear? (Looking.) /Italicized in the original/

Dean: Balls, Jane! Balls!

Helen: Oh, of course. Of course. Well. (Looking.) I don't think you have a pair left.22

Despite his masquerade, the Dean actually hates anything associated with the Negro and strives for all the goals common to the "oreo" or dicty type. In a ritualistic scene the black college students shout the words "Prestige," "Status," and "Security," at which he sniffs the air excitedly, pants like a hungry dog and finally becomes "he frantically." When they scream "White acceptance," he begins to "whimper and moan and squirm as a woman at the crest of lovemaking . . . /Italicized in the original/.23 The absurd reactions of this revolting, mechanical, Frankenstein-type monster are so repulsive that the students hide him from the audience. In another ludicrous scene Helen, still masquerading as the Dean's wife, is symbolically dressed in an outfit with one white side and one black side. She wears a white rubber mask and a blonde wig. Keeping her white side towards him, she and the Dean exchange compliments on how "white" the other looks. Anything white, even a white drink, excites this "oreo," who regards Tarzan as "one of my favorite fantasy figures."24

A similarly repulsive, mechanical type representative of the professional Negro is found in the attorney in Jones's "Great Goodness of Life," whom the author describes thus:

A bald-headed smiling house slave in a wrinkled dirty tuxedo crawls across the stage; he has a wire attached to his back leading off stage. A huge key in the side of his head. "We hear the motors animating his body groaning like tremendous weights. He grins, and slobberers, turning his head slowly from side to side. He grins. He makes little quivering sounds. /Italicized in the original/25

His client, Court Royal, is another typical "oreo" type, a postal employee who kills his own black son at the directions of a white
judge and then happily brags, "My soul is as white as snow."26

In "How Do You Do: A Nonsense Drama," Ed Bullins lampoons the ridiculous Negro dicty. His Roger Stereotype brags:

- I live in a hundred-thousand-dollar house, drive a nine-thousand-dollar car, am in debt for sixty thousand. I do well on ten thousand a year.27

And again:

- I pay fifty-two fifty for my shoes.
- I don't support my bastards. I drink forty per cent of the scotch imported in dis great country of my fantasies.
- I'll work for a white man when I works. A black woman can't do anything fo' me 'cept lead me to a white one. I hate myself.28

Later, his voice becoming progressively more effeminate, he brags about the whiskey he drinks and about the fact that he does not eat any "soul food," declaring, "I just don't think of it! . . . Oh Jesus! . . . It's all so unrefined."29

Welton Smith also levels vitriolic attacks on the "oreo-negroes" whom he characterizes as "blood suckin' punks" who have forced their women "to grow huge dicks."30 In another poem he accuses these foolish imitators of whites of not merely wanting a white woman but of actually wishing to be a white woman. He concludes, "turn white, you live motherfucker and ram the bomb up/your ass."31

Lanon A. Fenner, Jr., is equally as caustic in his attack on Negroes who act white. In "A Sweet Thing/ Last Thoughts" he bitterly attacks his insecure subject's flaunting of her straightened hair. She is, he writes, "a reflection of a reflection/ imitator of the east-side/ scenes Vogue-Bazarre Bullshit." All sense of her true identity has been destroyed by "Her diet of western bowel movement."32

Ruby Saunders's "Lawd, Dese Colored Chillum" is an example of one of the few less vehement humorous treatments of the "oreo-negro." She writes of a college-trained negro who sets out for his new job, attempting to impress the white man with his education and clothes, "a Brooks Brothers' suit" and "brand new" shoes:

- I practiced in the mirror
  - Knew just what to do
  - How to act like Charley
  - And speak like him too.

I left home early in the morning
time
Proud as I could be
Whitewashed
Grinning
9-to-5
Bluecollar
Job
Me.

A nappy-headed boy
Some son of a mother . . .

Said

"HEY BROTHER!"

Lawd, dese colored chillum won't let you be white for nothing.33

Very prominent among the "oreo-negroes" ridiculed in black militant literature are the non-violent race leaders. Of a race leader, whom she calls a "black white freak," Jayne Cortez shouts:

- bullshit bullshit bullshit
  - talkin' bullshit
  - as you learn from the devil how to exploit your brother and wear your sister's dress.34

Arthur Pfister bitterly attacks the non-violent race leaders as:

- siss/ied/need/weed/off/
  - keyed/weak/knead/Black-seed/needling/plead/deed
  - 'please-please-please'

Pfister continues by relating how these leaders prayed in church, picketed large stores, loved white whores, killed "ow-er minds" and were "bust/ing-out-bee-hinds."36

As in previous black literature an object of frequent ridicule is the minister. Joseph White's "The Leader" is a hilarious attack on Reverend Abraham Lincoln Brown, a conceited black leader, who is so pleased with his attainments that he is led to such ridiculous speeches as the following:

REV. BROWN: Mirror, mirror, on the wall am I not the most powerful black man of them all? There are other leaders whose names we know, but when Negroes want action (brief laugh), they know where to go (points to himself laughing uproariously, . . .)37

Despite his attainments in the Civil Rights field, Reverend Brown is much more devoted to the white woman than he is to Civil Rights. There is a hilarious scene in which his drunken white mistress, Cora, shocks some of his black visitors. Reverend Brown's assistant, Johnson P. Johnson, comments on the trouble Cora causes the movement, but Reverend Brown bluntly reminds him, " . . . this is my woman, and I care about her more than I care about all the Negroes in the world!"38 Immediately following this scene, Reverend Brown is interviewed by a reporter:

REPORTER: Reverend Brown, and is it also a fact that you have few or no interests outside of your total commitment to the civil rights movement?

REV. BROWN: (clears throat): Hmmm. Yes, that is an accurate statement . . . . I cannot indulge in the pleasantries.
of life while my brothers and sisters are being oppressed.39

Like Hughes's Elder William Jones ("Rock Church"),40 Reverend Brown is not satisfied with his present laurels. He decides to enhance his already glowing fame by setting himself ablaze as a means of dramatizing his dedication to the cause of Civil Rights. According to his plan, his aide, Johnson, is to start screaming and put the fire out before he gets burned. There follows a wildly comic scene in which the two of them go to the front of the White House, and Reverend Brown douses himself with gasoline, strikes a match, and says to his aide, "Okay, Johnson. Start screamin'."41 But it turns out that Johnson is another Brother Hicks ("Rock Church") and the faster the fire burns, and the more agonizingly the minister pleads for succor, the softer Johnson's "screams" for help become. By the time Reverend Brown is beyond help, a crowd forms--and then Johnson frantically screams and attempts to put the fire out. The Reverend Brown now dead, Johnson goes back to the office, looks in the mirror, and implores, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, noooooow who's the most powerful black man of them all?"42

Ben Caldwell's "Prayer Meeting or, The First Militant Minister" is an uproarious one-act drama concerning a burglar who breaks into the home of a conservative Negro minister. The minister returns home and prays, telling Cod he has been trying to keep his people from violence:

I tried to show them where it was really Brother Jackson's fault for provokin' that officer. There's a time for protest and a time for silence. They say the officer hit him a few times. Brother Jackson couldn't take a little beatin'.43

The burglar, disgusted with the minister's prayer, exclaims, "Aw, man, shut up and get up off your motherfuckin' knees!"44 The minister interprets this unlikely rebuke as a response from God, and the burglar, in hiding, capitalizes on the deception, reprimanding the minister for his conservatism. There is much humor in the minister's fear as he faces his "Lord" and even more in the unexpected responses of the "Lord."

When the minister defends his previous actions by saying he was trying to lead his people as the Lord had directed, the burglar-Lord replies:

Don't tell me what I said, DAMNIT! How in the hell you know I haven't changed my mind since then! How you know how I feel 'bout that violence-vengeance bullshit now? I haven't written anything since the Bible.45

The burglar goes on to direct the minister to lead his people in real protest. The minister responds, "This is a heavy burden you place upon my shoulders," to which the burglar, who is passing the minister's possessions out of the window, facetiously replies, "I feel like I'm takin' some of your burdens away."46

The Negro policeman, once an admired figure, becomes in black militant literature the most despicable of traitors. The general view of the black 'pigs' is expressed in Bobb Hamilton's sarcastic "Poem to a Nigger Cop" where he is described as a "Black skin in blue mask," who would kill his own mother in order to please Mr. Charlie. Like others of his type he has compromised his manhood to satisfy the white American whom he idolizes: he is a "big black no nuts nigger" who grins foolishly "While Mr. Charlie sticks his white/ Finger up /His/ ass" and rewards him for being a traitor to his people.47

There is a concerted effort in contemporary black literature to save the Negroes. In his poem "Reality" Herbert Lee Pitts warns the "Middle class coon" that "when 'The Man' talks about/ 'The Problem'/ he dam' sure just don't mean me!!!!!!!"48 And Don L. Lee writes in "The New Integrationist" that he seeks the integration of negroes with black people.49

The consensus regarding these "oreo-negroes" as portrayed in contemporary black literature is that if they cannot be saved (i.e., converted to blackness) they must be destroyed. Witnessing the antics of the foolish mother and daughter in "Madheart," Black Man declares "But this can't go, this stuff can't go. They'll die or help us, be black or white and dead. I'll save them or kill them."50 Ted Joans writes in similar fashion of Uncle Tom Tom, a Negro with a government grant who is welcomed and adored in the white world as a representative of the Negroes, but who is lacking in true blackness: "We must see that / Uncle Tom Tom / dies soon for the / white race."51 In Ron Milner's previously cited play, "The Monster," the black students finally hang the Dean, assured that whites will believe he killed himself; one of them comments, "In a way that's all he's been doing all these years."52 Don L. Lee offers the same kind of solution in his sardonic poem "The Traitor."

he wore
  a white
  shirt
  bow tie,
  smile
and the people called him doctor.
(honorary degrees from fisk, tenn. state a&i, morehouse &c.)

KA BOMMMM
KA BOMNM

blood
splattered
his whi
te
shirt
his face
dis-
figured
by shot
gun
pellets
§
his head
fell
against
his
black
cadillac
§
bent
his
"clergy"
sign
toward the
black earth
§
somebody said,
"deal baby . . . . . . . . . . . . . deal."53

In his effort to convert the "lost negro" and to develop a more positive sense of self within the blacks, the contemporary black writer effects a complete reversal of many of the usual white Western symbols and values. In his canon black is beautiful, and symbolizes warmth, fertility, and hope for the future. White is ugly and symbolizes foul bestiality, coldness, impotence, perversion, and death. Any attempts to emulate the "white devil," such as wearing a wig or processed hair, is an indication of a lost Negro. In these works the scared victims of lynchings and beatings are whites rather than blacks. Other symbols are reversed as well in individual works. As Larry Neal has noted, LeRoi Jones takes the previously hated symbol of a red-mouthed grinning field slave and uses it as the symbol of the revolutionary army in Jello. In this play Jones also converts Rochester, ordinarily a symbol of an Uncle Tom clown, into Ratfester, a revolutionary Nationalist.54 In Sam Greenlee's The Spook Who Sat by the Door, the militant leader of a black revolution calls himself Uncle Tom. Contemporary black humor is indeed a grim comment on American society. Though it has its roots in early black folklore and though it continues trends established by previous black writers, it lacks the positive aspects and optimism that frequently characterize black humor. There is no more laughing at oneself and one's shortcomings--the "oreo-negro" as an object of ridicule is consistently distinguished from the black brother--and there is no more gentle chiding of the white racist and the black dicty. The black militant's vicious laughter directed at the "white devil" and the Uncle Tom traitor seems no longer a laughter to keep from crying; but rather the militant, in his frenzied anger, seems often to be emitting his demonic belows to keep from killing. Laughter is for him a way of maintaining his sanity and making life possible in a mad, cruel world. Like his black brothers through the generations he has discovered that laughter is still a means of survival.

Daryl C. Dance
Virginia Commonwealth University

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FOOTNOTES

The toast is a long, rhyming narrative poem usually celebrating the exploits of one of the bad type heroes, such as Stagolee and Shine. For a further discussion of this popular form of black folklore see Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle; Abrahams, "The Toast: A Neglected Form of Folk Narrative," Folkslore in Action, ed. Horace P. Beck ( Philadelphia, 1962), pp. 1-11; and Labov et. al., A Study of the Non-Standard English of Negro and Puerto Rican Speakers in New York, Vol. II, "The Use of Language in the Speech Community," pp. 55-75.


LeRoi Jones, "Black (Art) Drama Is the Same as Black Life," Ebony, XXVI (February, 1971), 76.


Ibid., p. 39.

LeRoi Jones, "A School of Prayer," Black Magic Poetry 1961-1967 (New York, 1969), p. 121. It is pertinent to note that the jacket of this book, designed by Lawrence Ratzkin, pictures a horrid-looking white mummy with bright yellow hair and awful blue eyes whose body is pierced with numerous hat pins.


Marvin E. Jackson, Flowers for the Trashman, Black Fire, p. 556.

LeRoi Jones, "Experimental Death Unit #1," Four Black Revolutionary Plays, pp. 10-11.


LeRoi Jones, "Madheart," Four Black Revolutionary Plays, p. 76.

Ibid., p. 83.

Ibid., p. 86.

Helen, a black student, is masquerading as the Dean's wife Jane.


Ibid., pp. 430-431.

Ibid., p. 432.


Ibid., p. 63.


Ibid., p. 600.

Ibid., p. 602.