

Humor Investigation:

An Analysis of the Theoretical Humor Perspectives, Cultural Continuities and
Developmental Aspects Related to the Comedy of Whoopi Goldberg

J.R. Wudel

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INTRODUCTION:

Caryn Elaine Johnson's mother brought her into the world 1955. Caryn's mother raised her in the racially, and now gender, mixed Chelsea district of New York City. In school, her teachers often called her retarded, and she would later discover that she suffered from dyslexia. Young Caryn formed a passion for acting performing with a number of children's theater companies in New York City. By ninth grade, she quit school in pursuit of a Broadway career. She experienced frequent unemployment and developed a drug habit that forced her wander the streets of Manhattan in search of a fix. Caryn Elaine Johnson would one day take on the stage name Whoopi Goldberg.

At the age of 18, she started drug counseling and married her first husband, who happened to also be her counselor. At the age of 19 she decided to move west to San Diego with just her new daughter. In San Diego, Caryn lived on welfare and scrambled for whatever jobs she could get—including work as a bricklayer and a makeup artist for a mortician. During this time, she joined the fledgling San Diego Repertory Theater and honed her comedic talents with the improvisational troupe Spontaneous Combustion. She adopted the stage name Whoopi Goldberg at this point. She chose the first name "Whoopi" in reference to the comedic device, the whoopee cushion, and the acknowledgment of her own flatulence. She settled on the last name "Goldberg" after her mother warned her that she wouldn't be able to find work if it was "Cushone."

Whoopi next moved to Berkeley and began doing stand-up comedy. She developed her original character monologues that would become a one-woman show

entitled *Spook Show*. She eventually moved back to New York and began performing *Spook Show* off Broadway. In 1983, director Mike Nichols recognized Whoopi's show and helped her move it to Broadway a year later. With the move to Broadway the show's name was changed to *Whoopi*, but this didn't diminish the impact of Goldberg's character performances. On Broadway she achieved critical acclaim and national recognition through an HBO special and Grammy award. In 1985 she made her award winning screen debut in Stephen Spielberg's *The Color Purple*, thus launching the Hollywood career that still continues.

“[T]ough, slightly over-the-top, [and] lost” (Cook 66) describes Goldberg's best humor. Her original monologues and life experiences form the groundwork for the characters she portrays. As an actress, Goldberg employs comic irony, satire, sarcasm and the occasional slapstick humor to comment on race, culture, gender and politics. Author Sally Banes notes “So often comedy depends on the cruelty of poking fun at people; Goldberg's humor is partly amazing because it is built on empathy” (Banes 233).

HUMOR THEORY DISCUSSION:

The humor of Whoopi Goldberg best conforms to Aristotle's Theory that educated insolence forms the basis for humor. In the development of her characters, Goldberg explores her knowledge of how the world works. Formal education does not form the basis of this knowledge—rather her own life experiences as a child with dyslexia, drug addict, single mother, wage laborer and Hollywood hopeful.

Her comedy in *Spook Show* confronts the audience with her brand of educated insolence through the title of her performance. “Her program note instructs those who might be ignorant that “spook” is a verb and a noun with two meanings: a ghost and, in derogatory slang, a Negro” (Banes 233). Goldberg furthers her intent through *Spook Show*'s characters—“a junkie named Fontaine on a tour of Europe who meets up with the spirit of Anne Frank, a 13-year-old Valley Girl who aborts herself with a wire hanger, a crippled woman whose lover helps her discover a proud sense of physicality, and a winsome child who fantasizes that she'll grow up white and rich” (Banes 233).

In the drama *The Color Purple* Goldberg evokes humor in her character's moments of defiance. Celie, her character, spits in the glass of water she gives to her domineering father-in-law and coyly, and without assistance, stands by watching her husband ineptly work the stove to cook a meal for his lover. One dramatic scene, Celie's release of pent-up energy as she tells off the men and children who have been oppressing her while at the dining table over the holiday turkey, often elicits laughter and joy in the audience.

In the late 1980s Goldberg attempted political satire through a guest appearance on the puppet comedy *DC Follies*. Her appearance parodied her own life and beliefs rather than the political situation of the time. Goldberg presented a democratic voice that could unite Californians and Texans alike while giving Gorbachov a taste of street-wise justice. To combat the puppet of herself that Whoopi plays, parodies of Nixon and George Bush Senior, in puppet form, unleash their own Republican Whoopi puppet. Goldberg coins this puppet, “Yuppie Goldberg”. Yuppie Goldberg, complete with dreadlocks, acts as Goldberg’s evil twin sister, and the complete opposite of all her own beliefs—like helping the homeless and good jobs for good wages. In this satirical parody, Goldberg unites opposites—Yuppie Goldberg and her meet on the same grounds when confronted with sexism. They combine efforts to retaliate against the sexist remarks of a John F. Kennedy puppet and eventually become sisters.

CULTURAL ANALYSIS:

Whoopi Goldberg's comedy appeals to a broad array of cultures. On her path to mainstream success she personified national culture and ideals and tried to provoke unity between the races. Her comedy puts others at ease, diffuses her threatening nature and safely tells the truth.

Editor Pam Cook, in her introduction to the book *Women and Film*, acknowledges Goldberg's role "in focusing the aspirations of [her] national culture" and projecting the "national ideals" (Cook XV). Author Stephen Bourne, in his essay in the book *Women and Film*, likens Goldberg's Oscar-winning role in *Ghost*, and her relation to co-stars Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze, to the character of "mammy—a passive, one-dimensional, comical, non-threatening caricature of black womanhood" (Cook 30) as defined by classic character actress Hattie McDaniel. However, her performance transcends this stereotype. She plays a street-wise hustler that does not hesitate to put the Moore and Swayze characters in their place while helping them through the fantasy of their story. An awareness of Goldberg's talents were recognized before *Ghost* through "her incredibly accurate perception and portrayal of gesture and personal style of both whites and blacks" (Banes 233). Many of Goldberg's fans see her as "a black performer whose skin is an empty sign, like that of her white counterparts, that simply spells entertainment and does not carry with it the baggage of oppression or history" (Cook 67). Observation of her films reveal "a delightful break from our society's endless

negotiations on the subject of race, time out from which we can return refreshed for the next round” (Cook 67).

In Doctor Steve Linstead’s, exploration *Jokers Wild: the importance of humour in the maintenance of organizational culture*, he studied workers at a large manufacturer of prepared confectionary, cakes and pies and discovered that humor eases relations between workers and management and helps workers with a graduate level education, performing high school level tasks, feel useful. In the tradition of Linstead, Goldberg impacts cultural groups by easing the stress of social relations and healing cultural wounds. The roles that Goldberg plays, from *The Color Purple*, to *Ghost*, to *Sister Act*, often rely on self-deprecating humor. In these roles Goldberg puts others at ease and makes herself less threatening to the audience. Her attraction also lies in her abilities to make fun of social injustices such as female oppression in *The Color Purple* and racism and abortion in *Spook Show*.

Researchers, Weinberger and Potts, examined the differences between humor appreciated in the U.S. and that of the U.K. By looking at comic surface structure, believed to be different between cultures, they found that the United States favored sex, work mishaps and relationships, while the United Kingdom favored sex, relationships and men in drag—work mishaps in the U.S. and men in drag in the U.K create the only differences. Goldberg’s role in *Sister Act* portrays all characteristics liked by both countries. In *Sister Act*, Goldberg’s character, a Las Vegas diva, portrays sex and relationships by witnessing her lover’s involvement in a mob hit, and then hiding out amongst, and interacting with, a convent full of nuns. Work mishaps play into the

narrative through Goldberg's character's struggle to find a suitable job among the nun's list of chores, which run contrary to her responsibilities as a Vegas show girl. In order for her to hide in the convent she must dress and act like a nun—the only black nun among the other nuns—much like the man in drag popular in the U.K.

DEVELOPMENTAL ANALYSIS:

From the developmental perspective, people accept and understand Whoopi Goldberg's comedy. Those from pre-school age to adults, like her humor. As the voice of cartoon characters like Shenzi the Hyena in *The Lion King*, Mother Gooseberg in *Mother Goose: A Rappin' and Rymin' Special*, Ranger Margaret in *The Rugrats Movie* and Franny in *Racing Stripes*, Goldberg appeals to the apprehension and fondness for verbal slapstick of preschoolers and adolescents. Middle school aged children appreciate the life stories within her performances, while teens appreciate her dark humor. Adults appreciate Goldberg's sophistication in both cartoon form and live-action. Both men and women enjoy the sophistication of her humor. Her humor defies the norm by seldom recognizing the humor of working class women.

Professor Nancy Reincke in her journal essay "Antidote to Dominance: Women's Laughter as Counteraction," uses Freud's joke triangle, 1) male joker, 2) female object of the joke, and 3) male listener-voyeur, to analyze men and women's laughter with a reversal of the sexes in the triangle. As a result, women usually experience pleasure while men feel uncomfortable. Goldberg's humor often combines the division of sexes resulting in both men and women enjoying her comedy. In *The Color Purple*, Celie's jokes most often make fun of men. However, in the scene where she laughs at her husband's efforts to cook food, he exhibits a behavior usually reserved for the women.

Andrea Stuart, in the book *Women and Film*, notes that Goldberg avoids the traditional stereotypes of the mammy, or the tragic mulatto character, by playing asexual

and otherworldly characters. “In order to cross over [from stage to film], it seems that Goldberg has had to jettison the loaded sexual exoticism usually associated with the black female performer” (Cook 67). In her original work in *Spook Show*, she plays both male and female roles, and her work that follows appeals across the sex and gender barriers.

Brodzinsky, Barnet and Aiello researched the sex differences in humor appreciation by comparing male and female college students separated into four gender identity groups on the basis of Bern’s Sex Role Inventory: masculine, feminine, androgynous and undifferentiated. Their research indicated that males preferred sexual humor more than absurd humor while females appreciated the opposite, absurd humor over sexual and slapstick comedy. In one scene from the film *The Player*, Goldberg plays a police detective questioning the murderer Tim Robbins. In the middle of the conversation Goldberg’s character randomly asks another female cop if she knows where her tampons are. As the drama of the interrogation intensifies, Robbins’ character knocks over a pile on Goldberg’s desk and reveals a box of tampons. As the questioning continues, Goldberg’s character absentmindedly removes a tampon from the box and begins twirling in front of Robbins. This scene typifies Goldberg’s humor—blending the element of sex, as a result of the tampon, with the absurd, absentmindedly showing it in front of a man.

The gender results of the Brodzinsky, Barnet and Aiello research revealed that feminine females preferred absurd humor more than sexual humor, Masculine and Androgynous Females have more of an appreciation for sexual humor and all three male

genders, as well as masculine and androgynous females, showed greater appreciation of sexual humor which portrayed females, as opposed to males, as the sex object or brunt of the joke. Again, her work with *Spook Show* serves as the best example of her mainstream success as a result of her comedy's ability to appeal across gender differences. Fontaine meeting the ghost of Anne Frank is absurd, while Surfer Chick and Hospital Lady, the crippled woman whose lover helps her discover a proud sense of physicality, portray females as the brunt of the joke.

CONCLUSION:

The humor of Whoopi Goldberg intelligently depicts rude and disrespectful behavior as formed by her experiences and struggles as a child with dyslexia, drug addict, single mother, wage laborer and Hollywood hopeful. Her humor appeals to many cultures.

On her path to mainstream success she personified national culture and ideals and acted as a bridge between the races. She does this through her comedy's ability to put others at ease, diffuse her threatening nature and act as safe truth telling. Furthermore, the surface structure of her humor contains elements that appeal across cultural lines.

From the developmental perspective, many accept and understand Whoopi Goldberg's humor. Pre-school children to adults appreciate her comedy. Both men and women across the gender spectrum enjoy the sophistication of her humor. Her comedy defies the standard of ignoring the humor of working class women.

Some black Americans, like Spike Lee, accuse Goldberg of selling-out in her Hollywood career. Her response to Spike Lee exemplifies her comedy—she questioned, “How many black women do you see starring in Spike Lee films look like me?”

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