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*Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict* (review)

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to work. They live outside society because of their immoral rejection of the work ethic. By the revolutionary era, however, elites see these poor Americans as a dangerous class of criminals, threatening the political and economic order with their thieving and squatting and general refusal to obey the law. In the antebellum period, both pro and anti-slavery supporters describe poor whites in the South as different, a group apart from other free white people. Abolitionists, however, believe the monstrous system of slavery causes their depravity. Pro-slavery Southerners believe that difference is innate, the result of biological inferiority. From Reconstruction through the 1920s, these once sectional and political ideas about the physical differences between middle-class and poor whites grew and spread with the rise of scientific thought and social Darwinism. Eugenacists, in particular, tried to make the case that poor whites were genetically and thus racially distinct. From the early 1900s through 1915, however, a group of medical reformers countered these ideas by arguing that the differences in the bodies and especially the skin of poor whites were the result of disease, especially hookworm, and not inherent biological difference.

Wray, a sociologist, provides neither the texture and detail of social history nor the close readings of texts and visual images of cultural studies scholars. Much of the historical work here, with the exception of the chapter on the hookworm crusade, is a survey of work down by previous scholars. Wray's desire instead is to make a theoretical contribution, to provide an example of the usefulness of boundary theory for whiteness studies. White, he argues, is a social, not a racial category. His study of the contradictions of the category white trash, he suggests, provide some guidelines for constructing a "unified theory of social differentiation—a way of bringing together class, race, gender, and sex analysis into a single frame" (143).

University of Virginia

Grace Elizabeth Hale

CRACKING UP: American Humor in a Time of Conflict. By Paul Lewis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2006.

In *Cracking Up*, Paul Lewis attempts to characterize American humor in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In this respect, the work resembles Joseph Boskin's 1997 work *Rebellious Laughter*. Boskin's work, however, presented a more historical perspective. Lewis's book is focused on particular issues which are laid out in the book's four major chapters. The first of these is "Killing Jokes"—jokes that "invite us to be amused by images of bodily mutilation, vulnerability, and victimization" (24). The archetypal examples are those made by Freddy Kruger in *The Nightmare on Elm Street* series of films. The second chapter deals with the "positive humor movement"—the antithesis of killing jokes—that promotes laughter and comedy as a means of physical and spiritual healing as well as a benefit in everyday workplace interaction. The third chapter examines joking in public culture and addresses the issue of humor and political correctness. The fourth chapter is concerned with humor in political discourse, and the extent to which humor is capable of establishing, enhancing, or subverting a serious political message.

*Cracking Up* is written in a lively style, and Lewis leads readers to a consideration of some topics not previously examined by humor scholars (e.g., horror films developed as a comic genre; the change in George W. Bush jokes after 9/11). Nevertheless, Lewis begins with the question of whether humor is good or bad, and proceeds to investigate each of the above topics with an eye for humor's destructive, or at least negative, potential. Lewis sees the killing jokes of Freddy Kruger and Batman's Joker as emerging from nihilistic defeatism and ontological insecurity (40, 47). The jokes allow audiences to distance themselves from humanity and to reduce their anxieties about the future.

Since Lewis weaves the cinematic humor into concerns about current social problems, it is no surprise that the Columbine high school massacre or the behavior of prison guards at Abu Ghraib are brought into connection with killing jokes. I need stronger evidence, however, to convince me that Freddy Kruger's humorous asides are implicated in—or even index—criminal assault, torture, or serial murder in the late twentieth century. Brutality and cruelty are age-old, and they do not demand a cinematic fashion to account for them. Cruel laughter is equally old, and one need only read the Bible or Icelandic sagas to glimpse the grim situations in which laughter is elicited. One is at a loss to know why these killing jokes emerge in the 1980's at the point when threats of world disaster were probably ebbing (as opposed to the height of the nuclear arms race), or what one should make of Harry Graham's *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* (1898) in the absence, presumably, of such a sense of impending world disaster. Lewis might have interviewed some teen audience members about the horror films that they consumed and at which they laughed. Fieldwork is not something that professors of literature normally undertake, but Lewis did attend several humor conferences in his effort to understand the positive humor movement, so he might have made a similar effort in gauging the reception of these films.

Lewis is also suspicious—and rightly so—of the positive humor movement, because it is predicated on therapeutic functions for which there is no substantial scientific evidence, and because introducing comedy into desperate situations—clowning in hospitals, for example—may employ rote humor strategies that are indifferent to the sensibilities of people in desperate situations.

When it comes to the role of political and cultural discourse, Lewis is a bit more equivocal in his evaluation. Perhaps, he concedes, Cornell University was too harsh in its response to those students who circulated “75 Reasons Women (Bitches) Should Not Have Freedom of Speech” on the Internet, but might not that tasteless joke list still engender genuine sexist opinion and encourage anti-female behavior (125)? Don't humorous images in advertising encourage all kinds of negative behaviors: drinking, smoking, overeating (146)? When Jay Leno eschews principled satire and goes merely for the joke, does he not divert attention from critical social and political issues (201)? Might not humor designed to reduce stress in the workplace mask the structural causes of that very same stress (100)? When George Bush makes fun of himself, doesn't he hide his disastrous policy decisions behind a guise of amiability and good will (170)? Doesn't Rush Limbaugh conceal illogic and misinformation beneath a veneer of humorous banter (168)?

Of course humor can have negative effects. Anything can, including the best of intentions. Asking whether humor is basically good or bad, however, seems like asking whether language, or music, or art are basically good or bad. What can one say? Sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad, sometimes it's neither. Often the question is simply irrelevant. Furthermore such evaluations beg the frame of reference within which one is operating. Lewis is certainly aware that some of his own positive assessments of particular humorous expressions are at odds with the assessments of others who are more sensitive about the subjects of the jests.

Lewis is concerned with morality, responsibility, and justice—which probably makes him a better colleague than investment advisor. He worries about the direction this country is taking, but he focuses on the wrong issue. Humor is the least of our problems. A “racist” joke (by no means a clearly-defined category) told by someone who is not a racist is less problematical in the overall scheme of things than a perfectly innocent joke told by a genuine racist. And when a racist joke is told by a genuine racist, there are more things

to worry about than the joke itself. It is the serious opinions and the actions informed by these opinions that should be the objects of concern.

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Elliott Oring

AMERICAN ICONS: An Encyclopedia of the People, Places, and Things That Have Shaped Our Culture. Edited by Dennis R. Hall and Susan Grove Hall. 3 vols. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 2006.

It is hard to dislike a trio of volumes with shiny, high-school-textbook covers adorned with images of Oprah, the Alamo, and the Babe. And the announced goal of the editors was to provide essays on American icons for browsers in public libraries, students writing term papers, and scholars of popular culture. The first two groups may well benefit from the big type, the plethora of photos, and the generally reader-friendly format of the project. But the scholarly community will not be so pleased, I fear.

The problems are several. In the 20-plus essays I sampled—they ran the gamut from Mickey Mouse and Crayola Crayons to Elvis and Whistler's *Mother*—the writing was easy to follow but lacking in depth or a sense of the inherent complexity of the subjects. The lists of sources skirted texts that treat the objects of inquiry as problematic: the references were, in most cases, the first things a "Google" search would be liable to turn up, albeit not the studies that most professional historians of a given topic would find challenging and significant.

The more serious problem, however, is the icons chosen for inclusion. Why Coney Island—and not Disneyland? Johnny Cash without the Grand Ole Opry? The Kodak Camera and not the Polaroid, the Xerox machine, etc.? The Dollar Bill and not currency and philatelic design in general? Tara without *Gone With the Wind*?

It is this decision to select narrow categories and to avoid contextual issues that limits the usefulness of *American Icons*. I found myself thinking of Howard Lamar's admirable *The Reader's Encyclopedia of the American West* (Harper & Row, 1977), a volume I still consult regularly. And every time I do, I find myself lost in one of its lengthy, informative, and literate essays, chockfull of all the specific "icons" a reader could ever desire along with what were, for the date, remarkably detailed bibliographies. Is today's library user so witless (or myopic) that a densely printed book—a *real* book—is somehow unattractive? Another more recent example of a fine reference work on American culture is the one-volume *Encyclopedia of American Folk Art* (ed. Gerald C. Wertkin) published by Routledge in 2004. The margins are wider, the typography more legible, but like the Lamar book, it is well written, well researched, and manages to retain a firm grip on the sweep of cultural history while sparing no pains to get the details straight.

In the end, I can't imagine why *American Icons* would be a welcome addition to a library given its hit-or-miss list of topics and disinterest in relating one theme to another—or to the nature of American culture. It's a great pity, though. The cover photo of Oprah hugging Elmo is a genuine icon!

University of Minnesota

Karal Ann Marling

THE NEEDLE'S EYE: Women and Work in the Age of Revolution. By Marla R. Miller. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 2006.

In *The Needle's Eye* Marla R. Miller has rescued for a twenty-first century audience New England needlework and needleworkers in the generations before, during, and after the American Revolution. Her account offers a broad perspective, viewing needlework as