

## Book review

**Tucker, Terrence T. (2018) *Furiously Funny: Comic Rage from Ralph Ellison to Chris Rock*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida.**

Terrence T. Tucker's *Furiously Funny* offers a concise fresh perspective on black rage. Thinking through what it means and has historically meant to be doing comedy as an African American, it focuses on the concept of *comic rage*, which the author defines as an "African American cultural expression that utilises oral tradition to simultaneously convey humour and militancy" (p. 2). This well-researched and carefully argued poignant study is arranged into six core chapters that explore this concept chronologically in various works of various forms, from Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) to the works of Chris Rock, excluding a meticulous introductory chapter (which contains a comprehensive chapter outline with helpful summaries of each section's individual focuses) and conclusion. Dr. Terrence T. Tucker – presently an associate professor of English and coordinator of African American Literature at the University of Memphis – seems to have delved into the topic of humour for the first time with an essay published in *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity After Civil Rights* (2014). This work was followed by a chapter in *A Literary History of Mississippi*, titled 'Humour, fantasy, and myth: Dramatic marginalised voices and Mississippi America' (2017) where he, amongst other things, explores the power of humour in Beth Henley's plays, claiming that it constitutes "an effective weapon to reconceptualise old, stale debates" and "confronts the absurdity found in the contradictions between American democratic promise and the practice of racism and sexism that frequently governs the most intimate parts of the citizens' lives" (Tucker 2017: 218). Similarly, in *Furiously Funny* Tucker argues that as a fusion of African American humour and African American rage expressed through political activism, comic rage "re-vision[s] constructions of blackness by challenging previous perceptions and exploring the complexities and contradictions of race on both sides of the colour line" (p. 3).

Tucker asserts that the importance of this synthesis – which results in a form that is just as significant for African American expression as jazz and blues – lies in its ability to "[confront] both blacks and whites", not only through subverting the image and ideas of "black bourgeoisie", but also poking fun at those "misguided" whites that tolerate those stereotypes in the mainstream (p. 4). He establishes the importance of satire as the genre of the works explored in his study, emphasising its symbiotic relationship with comic rage as it historically "impacted perception of comedy that initiated the development of comic rage" (p. 6). Comic rage seems, for Tucker, to be a kind of *evolved* subgenre, perhaps even superior to satire itself – at least for the purposes of the African American author/performer – as it is not as limiting, does not have an escapist quality, and plays with those kinds of "uncomfortable truths" (p. 7) that satire tends to overlook: all key qualities necessary for expressing black rage.

In a chapter of his book *Punchlines* (2005) focusing on the ethnic stand-up comedy of Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor, Leon Rappoport concludes that "[w]hat [Bruce's

and Pryor's] critics did not realise was that by openly confronting and ridiculing stereotypes and slurs rather than denying them, Lenny and Richard were deflating them, draining the emotional poison out of them, and allowing laughter to enter where before there had only been aggression or anger" (Rappoport 2005: 80). This, to some degree, clashes with Tucker's insistence that rage is the central motif of Pryor's routines as "his inclusion of a broad range of emotions that move his comic routines beyond entertainment" (p. 2). In other words, comic rage is not supposed to be escapist, so there is no need for any draining of poison. With this in mind, it is important to mention that, as Tucker points out himself (p. 8), the discourse surrounding African American expressions of rage has been heavily dominated by discussions about fear surrounded black rage and the issues connected to the white reception of black rage. In that respect, taking a step back and recontextualising artistic expressions, black rage in a concise manner seems to be sorely needed. This book fits perfectly into that gap in the discussion as it brings a fresh perspective into the discourse by highlighting an aspect of African American rage that has perhaps always been overlooked, misinterpreted, and misunderstood by the white gaze and, at the same time, pointing out the critique of de-politicisation (and simultaneous de-angryfication) of black culture represented by artists like Cosby (p. 14).

Tucker reacts to the state of the African American humour scholarship by addressing other academic's use of Kristeva's (1982) concept of *abjection* (e.g. John Limon's 2000 study *Stand-Up Comedy in Theory, or Abjection in America*). He asserts that what is actually in the core of acts created by artists like Richard Pryor is the identification of the black audiences with the rage of the artist and the catharsis that comes from the puncturing of the mainstream perception of blackness built up by artists like Cosby: "I do not see works of comic rage [...] as suffering abjection which could cast them aside, but as abjections that break down and recast the traditional American/Western narrative about blackness" (p. 17). Aside from this, Tucker claims to be in conversation with two recent publications dealing with African American comedy – *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* (2007) by Bambi Haggins, which deals with the mainstreamisation of black persona humour, and *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humour in the Fictions of Slavery* (2008) by Glenda Carpio, which focuses on the treatment of the topic of slavery by African American comedians – seeing them both as works that touch on something that *Furiously Funny* can help put into explicit terms and contextualise:

In recent decades comedic rage has become significant as African American authors and artists have sought not merely to respond to stereotypes and oppression but to recast altogether the discourse on history, entertainment, literature, and nation (p. 19).

The first chapter of the study puts on display the particular expression of black rage in Ellison's (1952) *Invisible Man*, which is a work that Tucker sees as ground-breaking in that it expresses black rage in a constructive way within the genre of literature. Tucker sees Ellison's particular use of comic rage as specific to his times and his generation, which was "deeply connected to the integrationist nonviolent segment of the civil rights movement" (p. 68).

Having established the change in the status quo that was made possible by Ellison's work, the study's focus shifts to explore expressions of comic rage in the genre of stand-up comedy – specifically to the comic rage of the late 1950s and early 1960s centred around the figures of Dick Gregory, Moms Mabley, and Redd Foxx. Gregory is seen as

the person who “unleashed comic rage in the mainstream” (p. 111), parallel to Ellison’s literary expression of comic rage earlier in the 1950s. Tucker sees Gregory’s work as revolutionary as it enabled black artists to express criticism of the society “in front of whites” (p. 112) and helped establish an outlet for a different kind of black rage than the rage that was being expressed outside the clubs and venues at the time. The slightly awkward jump from a literary analysis to an analysis of stand-up is “softened” by emphasising the connection between the two artists. Ellison and Gregory’s work opened the doors for more African American comic artists to lean even more into expressions of comic rage in the following decade between the years 1966 and 1976.

Tucker’s third chapter focuses on the Black Arts and Black Power Movements of that time – zooming in on the topic of militancy and circling back to literary expression that enveloped this militancy with humour. The two works examined in this chapter are Douglas Turner Ward’s (1966) play *Day of Absence* and Ishmael Reed’s (1976) novel *Flight to Canada*. Tucker indicates that Ward and Reed’s works are somewhat at odds with the expression of militancy coming from the Black Arts and Black Power movement. While sharing the same “impetus and ideals”, the comic rage of the works is able to critique black movements through humour as well as “challenge traditional forms” (p. 152), which persists beyond the 1970s to the topic of the following chapter.

The fourth chapter concentrates on the role of The New Black Aesthetic (NBA) as a space for the flourishing of comic rage, analysing George C. Wolfe’s 1986 play *The Coloured Museum* and Paul Betty’s 1996 novel *The White Boy Shuffle*. Tucker cites the NBA’s “commitment to parodying blacks and whites” (p. 194) as an important aspect that nurtured comic rage in the 1980s and 1990s. He also mentions the role of rap and the African American tradition of wordplay and signifying features of comic rage at this point (p. 195).

With the following chapter we shift to yet another form of expression when Tucker expands his examination of black rage to include the role of film. Focusing on the 1987 film *Hollywood Shuffle* and the 2000 film *Bamboozled*, he praises the medium’s ability to maintain the existence of expressions of comic rage in popular culture as these two films go beyond satire to show “how personal relationships and ideas about race are impacted by simplistic and problematic images continually shaped by racist assumptions based on old stereotypes” (p. 226).

Finally, in the sixth chapter Tucker arrives to what is perhaps the most important figure of the study – Richard Pryor – and his followers, Whoopi Goldberg and Chris Rock. Pryor is posed as the ultimate representative of comic rage, which is also based on the obvious power of his influence that Tucker traces in the works of Goldberg and Rock. Rock is then seen as Pryor’s natural successor, so to speak, as his performances continue to cultivate the seeds of comic rage introduced by Ellis in the 1950s. As opposed to other artists of the same era, Rock does not hold back: “Unlike [Eddie] Murphy and [Dave] Chappelle, Rock’s rage is ever present, whether aimed at blacks, whites, the government, or celebrities” (p. 243). At the same time, his work fulfils the promise of comic rage in that it offers a kind of comedy that “provides white audience with a perspective that they are often unfamiliar with, in a manner that does not alienate them”, while at the same time it appeals to African Americans, as it “provides the rhetoric necessary for a community seeking to effectively express dissatisfaction with racial inequality” (pp. 250-251).

On the whole, *Furiously Funny* is not only a well-written and apt book but also an important one as it provides both African American and humour studies scholars with clearer framework of African American humour by highlighting an important aspect of

it that has been overlooked or perhaps misinterpreted until now. It examines the complex relationship between rage and comedy and what it means in the context of African American culture and history as well as the future of African American expression and interracial relationships. While the author's "bouncing" from one form of expression to another (i.e. from a novel to stand-up to a play to a novel to film) can be slightly disorienting, Tucker makes sure to explain why and how these different works are "bound together" through comic rage and how they had influenced one another. That said, it could be an interesting project to go even deeper into an examination of African American rage in each particular form and really think through how comic rage works within each form specifically and whether there are any differences in how they affect the audience.

It might also be interesting to think about the possibility of further intersectionality of comic rage. While Tucker addresses the intersection of race and gender (as well as some aspects of female sexuality) in his discussions of Jackie "Moms" Mabley and Whoopi Goldberg's comedy, there is potential for more. Of course, the topic of intersectionality in stand-up is not new. For example, Dumas (2016: 369) asserts that, in cases where the artists have been multiply marginalised,

performers rarely speak as one or other identities potentially relevant for our analysis. Instead, we see them as always already coming with a multiplicative identity that contributes to their voice, restricting as well as enabling new modes of critiquing emergent, intersecting nodes of power.

If comic rage aims to employ both humour and militancy to challenge established norms and criticise social injustice to the African American community, then it makes sense that it should also work for African Americans who have been marginalised several times over for different reasons. For instance, African American transgender comedians or African American disabled female comedians might be feeling rage in a number of different contexts reacting to a number of different abuses and oppressions (some perhaps even from within the African American community itself). The work of Flame Monroe comes to mind here, but it would need to be examined in detail to determine whether it falls into the category of comic rage before one might pursue its role in the intersectional potential of the form.

From the perspective of humour studies, the merit of *Furiously Funny* lies in its careful re-evaluation of the genre of satire and what it means to the African American community. It can be said that Tucker's comic rage is a specific, evolved version of satire, a non-traditional form that synthesises comedy and rage in a way that allows them to balance each other out: "[W]hile humour prevents rage from becoming consumptive, nihilistic, or destructive, the presence of rage rejects perceptions that humour should only serve as entertainment" (p. 255). Ultimately, *Furiously Funny* succeeds at what it sets out to do – at demonstrating that comic rage is an important (if not the most complex and poignant) part of the African American cultural response to the effects of white supremacy.

**Tereza Walsbergerová**  
Masaryk University, Czech Republic  
[twalsbergerova@mail.muni.cz](mailto:twalsbergerova@mail.muni.cz)

## References

- Beatty, P. (1996). *The White Boy Shuffle*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Carpio, G. (2008). *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dumas, N. W. (2016). ‘‘This guy says I should talk like that all the time’’: Challenging intersecting ideologies of language and gender in an American Stuttering English comedienne's stand-up routine.’ *Language in Society* 45 (3), pp. 353-374.
- Ellison, R. (1995). *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International.
- Haggins, B. (2007). *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-soul America*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press.
- Kristeva, J. & Roudiez, L. (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University.
- Maus, D. & Donahue, J. (2014). *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity After Civil Rights*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Limon, J. (2000). *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rappoport, L. (2005). *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor*. Westport, Conn: Praeger Publishers.
- Reed, I. (2018). *Flight to Canada*. UK: Penguin Classics.
- Tucker, T. T. (2017). ‘Humor, fantasy, and myth: Dramatic marginalized voices and Mississippi America’, in Watkins, L. (ed.), *A literary History of Mississippi*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. 211-227.
- Ward, D. (1994). *Happy Ending; And, Day of Absence: Two Plays*. New York: Dramatists Play Service.
- Wolfe, G. (1988). *The Colored Museum*. New York: Grove Press.