frames a prevailing American conception of freedom, then this mindset might be mined for something more than its form alone. From the comic vision, we might find a political ethics of eros and hubris that represents the field of force that Morrison calls home. In the next chapter we anchor this dream called home in the visionary pragmatism of Cornel West.

From

Irony in the Age of Empire

by Cynthia Willett

TWO

Laughing to Keep from Crying

CORNEL WEST, PRAGMATISM, AND PROGRESSIVE COMEDY

It isn't easy synthesizing the work of the master synthesizer, Cornel West. Cornel West's glimpse into life is as wide and deep as his roots in music and religion. His evangelical message of hope, the syncopated rhythms of unexpected joy against the unyielding absurd, have earned him the title of the blues man of philosophy, jazz king of thought. I may contort the vision of this jazz thinker, this blues preacher, beyond his comprehension, perhaps in the manner of white musicians who, as West remarks, divert the sublime rhythms of the jazz tradition into the easy lyricism of swing.[1] I can only defend myself by stealing a line from that wise councilor (played by West) in *Matrix Reloaded* (Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski, 2003): "Comprehension is not requisite for cooperation."[2] And in fact, as you shall see, comprehension turns out to be less important than cooperation in what I have to say.

Now it may sound as though I am mocking Cornel West's fine work, but in fact I take his work quite seriously. As author no less than scholar of wisdom literature, Cornel West struggles against the sweet truths that veil the dark ones. From a melancholic sojourn of thought emerges a voice

from the darkness that is as cathartic as it is reflective. West's predecessors in American thought have not always sounded the blue note. The forward-looking optimism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Dewey, men who set in motion the pragmatism that lies at the center of American thought, failed to give ample voice to the pathos that rumbles through the dream of a democratic social life.[3] West takes from these pragmatic thinkers the upbeat experimentalism, the faith in democracy, and the sanctity of the individual as motifs for his thought. Stripped of the tragic sense, however, pragmatism mocks those who know terror as well as love, friendship but also soul-wrenching despair—life's full range. An intricate balance of optimism with the pessimism that comes from a direct acquaintance with the absurd gives rise to a new pragmatism, not neopragmatism, but a prophetic pragmatism. This is a pragmatism whose vital elements of fallibilism, voluntarism, and experimentalism are remixed and recharged in the existential matrix of evangelical Christianity and improvisational jazz.[4] In fact, what Cornel West calls a prophetic pragmatism we might rename, just for fun, a pragmatism reloaded.

I do not mean to mock this vital new pragmatism. My intention is instead to acknowledge yet another source of wisdom in American culture. While much of West's work reflects on the tragic soulfulness that black music and religion bring to American philosophy, West insists that the existential matrix of black experience is as much comic as it is tragic. West explains in a recent response to his critics that his "devotion to fun—a word coined in modernity by Americans, is part of my California frontier humor. . . . [S]ome of the aims of professionalism in the academy are to tame the comic . . . and conceal the funk—even as we teach Lucian, Rabelais, Chekhov, Twain, Marx, Morrison, and I hope Richard Pryor."[5] The bluesy vein of black culture may strike the dominant cord of Cornel West's complex thought to date. "To be human is to suffer, shudder and struggle courageously in the face of inevitable death," he intones in a major introduction to his thought (*CWR*, xvi). And indeed "death, dread, despair, disease, and disappointment" are the reoccurring motifs of his tragicomic sensibility (e.g., *CWR*, 101). But what might we learn if we were to alter the dominant cord of prophetic pragmatism from the heavy spirit of evangelical Christianity and bluesy jazz to the funk of the down and low comedian Richard Pryor or Chris Rock? How might the comedian's encounter with the post-soul hip hop street-smart absurd bottom of American life augment or even complement West's bluesy Christian vision? Will we have set free yet a second variation of prophetic pragmatism, one perhaps less Christian and yet no less serious? A pragmatism, if you like, remixed and reloaded?

Let's begin with a more careful look at the tragic element in the tragicomic pragmatism of Cornel West.

The Tragic Element of the Tragicomic

Detached and disconnected from the existential womb of the tragicomic, philosophy may sound, as my students say, as vain and self-important as the monologue of a flat character. Perhaps this is an appropriate concern for that tradition of thought called pragmatism. The tragicomic voice that West encounters in black history modulates the blind optimism of those pragmatists naive to the arrogance of an emerging Anglo-Christian nation. West places pragmatist thinkers, including himself, in a larger tradition of romantic thought, from Jefferson and Rousseau in the eighteenth century, to Emerson and Marx in the nineteenth century, and Dewey and Gramsci in the twentieth. The romantic and revolutionary fervor of these thinkers "unleashed unprecedented human energies and powers, significantly transformed selves and societies and directed immense human desires . . . toward . . . ideals of . . . freedom," West observes (*CWR*, 153). These romantic thinkers diverge in orientation from their progressive counterparts in the Enlightenment. Their Promethean impulse would transgress the limits imposed by the claims of enlightened reason, self-interest, or the moderate virtues, and dare the risks of untempered thought and deed. In their more powerful moments, these thinkers partake of the evangelical fervor of common folk "out of control, overpowered by something bigger than themselves" (*CWR*, 91). For what is the soul if not a passion for something larger than the self? But while these poetic and political thinkers, these romantic revolutionaries, embrace a giddy sense of possibility that West does not entirely disavow, it is the dissonant rhythms and melancholic tones of black music and church rhetoric that give prophetic pragmatism its complex weave. "[T]his new kind of cultural criticism—we can call it prophetic pragmatism—must confront candidly the tragic sense," West writes (*CWR*, 150). Without the tragic sense born of the matrix of black music and religion, pragmatic thought lacks existential dimensionality. It lacks depth.

What does Cornel West mean by the tragic sense? It is the interplay of "tragic thought and romantic impulse" that captures for prophetic pragmatism the *agon* of "inescapable evils and transformable goods," Dr. West writes (*CWR*, 166). The tragic sense emerges through the struggle against evil. Some evil lies beyond all efforts of comprehension or control, yielding the sense of the absurd. It might seem as if the existential problem of evil would be central for any perspective on tragedy, but in fact it does not

figure into that classic work, Aristotle's *Poetics*. For an Aristotelian, tragic drama turns less on what a post-Nietzschean Christian might discern as evil than on a simple mistake (*hamartia*), an instance of bad luck, that brings about the downfall of the heroic protagonist. Fate and error, not radical evil, emerges at the center of Greek tragedy. There may have been more to the classical theater than an Aristotelian exegesis allows. It is difficult to encounter a play such as Euripides' *Medea* and not sense something more akin to evil than error of judgment or trick of fate. In any case, the tragic moment that interests West appears—at least at first—to be existential and not classical: "[T]he context of Greek tragedy—in which the action of ruling families generates pity and terror in the audience—is a society that shares a collective experience of common . . . meanings. The context of modern tragedy, on the other hand—in which ordinary individuals struggle against meaninglessness and nothingness—is a fragmented society with collapsing metaphysical meanings" (*CWR*, 165).

The theme of a fragmented society and the irrevocable sense of homelessness that such a society provokes joins with a second theme of moral struggle to give the existential contour to modern tragedy. The tragedy comes from the acknowledgment that struggle is doomed in a world where misery prevails. The moral choice to struggle against the absurd generates the heroism of the agent, be he or she "a person of rank or a retainer, a prince or a pauper," and bestows the cathartic element of the tragic sensibility, West explains (*CWR*, 165). Moral struggle humanizes, generating life-sustaining spirit, in the face of inevitable failure. This existential voice of tragedy reverberated through spirituals in the time of slavery, the blues in the midst of race riots and lynching, the sublime joy of freestyle jazz in the era of Jim and Jane Crow. It fades as the market mentality saturates the streets, struggle is reduced to Darwinian terms, and rewards mean only the material pleasures of bling bling. This contemporary fading of the tragic sense takes us to one of Cornel West's most controversial concerns.

In a culture stripped of visionary struggle, lacking any sense of an *agon* that is communal and spiritual, of a striving that expands the soul outward into expressive connection beyond the self, one finds a flat and pathetic type of desperation that West calls nihilism. Nihilism is the disease of our times. The failure to elevate struggle to moral terms " 'is to admit a strange and particular bankruptcy, which no rhetoric of tragedy can finally hide,' " West explains, drawing upon the words of Raymond Williams (*CWR*, 165). Moral bankruptcy hollows out the urban environment and yields life-defining decisions to external forces. The gangsters who rule the streets in violence claim to have no choice. The global elites

who ride roughshod over local communities likewise claim to have no choice. The refusal to take up moral struggle is the central manifestation of nihilism. Without moral struggle, the tragic sense is lost to the brute force of the absurd.

The tragic sense that West invokes echoes through European writers: "My Kierkegaardian attention to death, despair, and disappointment and my Chekhovian concern with icy incongruity and dark absurdity . . . may undercut my Emersonian sense of possibility," West writes (*CR*, 348). Nonetheless "black strivings in a twilight civilization" (to borrow the title of a key essay) inflect prophetic pragmatism with aims and ideals that belong more properly to the African diaspora in the New World than to Europe.[6] "John Coltrane's saxophone solos, . . . Billie Holiday's vocal leaps," and, above all, "Toni Morrison's dissonant novels" guide us through the tragedies and absurdities that define "black modes of being-in-the-world" (*CWR*, 102). Black striving as West understands it is not egocentric or Eurocentric. Such striving does not revolve around the right to own the self, nor does it revolve around the gaze of the other. It is not the search for autonomy or recognition. It is not contained by Anglo or European ideals of freedom. The ur-text of black culture is the "wrenching moan" for spiritual salvation in Coltrane's "A Love Supreme." It is the unanswered search for a sense of home in Morrison's narrative, *Beloved*. What then are these diaspora ideals?

We can discern these diaspora ideals through what is absent in our triumphant times. The United States has no rival power, and yet our culture, Dr. West observes, is nihilistic. American culture is nihilistic not because of the failure to find answers to the ultimate questions of right and wrong, or to conquer once and for all the problem of evil. West does not seek an absolute for a hard times. For what could give meaning to the death of a innocent child, he remarks, as he recalls Dostoevsky's existential reflections on life's absurdities (*CWR*, 92). "Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophical doctrine that there are no rational grounds" to comprehend our tragicomic lives; "it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness," West writes.[7] The cure for this disease of the spirit is a politics of faith and conversion in the context of a communal ethic of love. "Black bonds of affection, black networks of support, black ties of empathy and black harmonies of spiritual camaraderie provide the grounds for the fragile existential weaponry with which to combat the namelessness and invisibility of black existence," West insists (*CWR*, 108). Through the black church, these bonds "transformed a prevailing absurd situation into a persistent and present tragic one, a kind of 'Good Friday'

state of existence in which one is seemingly forever on the cross . . .—yet sustained . . . by hope against hope" (*CWR*, 427). Communal moral struggle sustains hope against hope that evil—social misery and sin, blind arrogance and blind fate—will be overcome.

These basic human drives for meaning and belonging are easily distorted by an Enlightenment politics of freedom. The Enlightenment thinkers opposed categories such as individual choice and rational autonomy to dogmatic authority, authoritarian traditions, and irrational passions (*CWR*, 93). Around the poles turn conceptions of negative and positive freedom. The underlying dichotomy of inner choice and external force, however formulated, does not speak to the more fundamental need among a diaspora people for a sense of home. West contrasts an authoritarian tradition, rightly attacked by the Enlightenment, with an "enabling tradition" that sustains vision beyond the myopic horizon of the self (*CWR*, 93). Rooted in these sustaining traditions are families and communities that answer to "basic desires for protection, association, and recognition . . . in the face of the horrors of nature, the terrors of history, and the cruelties of fate" (*CR*, 347). The highways and high-rises that tore through neighborhoods denounced as slums left urban America bereft of these sustaining bonds and protected suburbs designed not to know them. Negative and positive conceptions of freedom, freedom *from* and freedom *to*, divide liberals and communists, and may have defined the parameters of cold war ideology. But these parameters do not contain the goals of colonized and racially marked people. From these people, as Isaiah Berlin partly but incompletely explains, emerges the romantic search *for* status and honor that fuels nationalism (*EL*, 118–172). Securing the borders of a national homeland is for people in diaspora the highest form of freedom. Berlin's remarks on what he calls a third and hybrid concept of freedom did not receive much attention during the cold war era, when the ideology of individual choice was sharply set in relief against the command-and-control state-socialism. His casual observations on the rise of nationalism take on a new relevance in the wake of the cold war, as ideological confrontations between East and West yield to ethnic conflict in Europe and Africa, and racial tension and labor unrest smolders in the Americas. As long as unemployed or low-income blacks are treated less as a people than a problem for mainstream America, black nationalist movements in the United States will grow, Cornel West warns.

Yet West does not urge oppressed people to turn to nationalist movements. On the contrary, nationalist movements do not represent the vision of freedom that he has in mind. These predominantly male-led movements reclaim honor and solidify group identity through vindictive attacks on targeted enemies and the ridicule of those perceived as weak. These groups are too often misogynistic and homophobic (*CWR*, 525). West seeks a force of belonging that is cosmopolitan in spirit and inclusive in its rhetoric. He predicts that "[t]he progressive wing of the black elite will split into a vociferous (primarily male-led) black nationalist camp that opts for self-help at the lower and middle levels of the entrepreneurial sectors of the global economy and a visionary (disproportionately woman-led) radical democratic camp that works assiduously to keep alive a hope" (*CWR*, 117).

West is not a nationalist because he understands the more sustaining social bonds grow out of a freedom *of* belonging, a freedom *of*, we might say, achieved not through romantic quests for honor and revenge, but through libidinal pursuits of affection and spirituality. The reach of these bonds transcends the tribe. This is because this freedom of belonging emerges not through struggles that define who has status and who does not, who is in and who is out, in a zero-sum game. This freedom emerges through rituals of acknowledgment that seal friendships, marriages, and communities—in libidinal webs that open outward to all humanity.

Struggles for nationalism are told in the style of epic romance. The romance of nationalism serves not only as a movement for oppressed people. It can serve as well to veil the machinations of what neoconservatives term "liberal imperialism." The genre opposes good and evil in a structure too simple to capture life's drama. On the occasion of the Rodney King riot, West writes, "If we go down, we go down together. The Los Angeles upheaval forced us to see not only that we are not connected in ways we would like to be but also, in a more profound sense, that this failure to connect binds us even more tightly together" (*RM*, 8). Hatred, like love, is a form of passionate attachment, the stuff of tragedy and comedy. To open up a second variation of third freedom and another meaning of home requires a shift of genre. But then what genre of social movement, what tenor of social change, might give us insight into a drive for connection that is not confined by the romance of good and evil, the quest for honor and status, those odysseys that ground old patriarchal communities and new nationalist movements?

The theme of connection sounds more Greek than existential, and West has in fact been viewed as being as much a communitarian as an existentialist. In a significant departure from the standard existentialism of Sartre, West elevates the search for belonging to the highest form of freedom and the most authentic human drive. The absurd is not the metaphysical condition of human consciousness as it is in Sartre's conception of freedom. The African in Africa did not know the black experience of the absurd, not because she did not know freedom, but because she did not

know slavery. "The trauma of the slave voyage from Africa to the new world and the Euro-American attempt systematically to strip Africans of their languages, cultures and religions produced a black experience of the absurd" (*CWR*, 435). But if the ancient Greeks (perhaps as the Africans) centered their communities around male contests for honor and status, West aims to reorient communities around the more tender bonds of affection and spirituality. These bonds begin not in the competitive games of the public arena but in the poignant exchanges of the family, church, and neighborhood. Women-led parenting movements replace male-led nationalists as the visionaries in the struggle for social freedom (*CWR*, 321). "We have created rootless, dangling people with little link to the supportive networks—family, friends, school—that sustain some sense of purpose in life," West writes (*RM*, 9). Liberal philosophies fail to address these fundamental needs "because they tend to view people in egoistic and rationalist terms . . . [when people] are also hungry for identity, meaning, and self-worth" (*RM*, 20). The untempered assertion of Enlightenment conceptions of freedom can collide with, even violate, other conceptions of danger and freedom. For those who struggle daily with the absurd, autonomy understood as either choice or self-mastery does not suffice. Freedom from and freedom to are not enough. Freedom is coming home.

The hubristic assault on social bonds and the sense of homelessness that this assault yields is central to the tragic pathos expressed in Morrison's novels. For West, like Morrison, these social bonds resonate with but do not finally turn on a dialectic for recognition. Morrison's preeminence among African American writers in the context of West's prophetic pragmatism is evident in her remarks: "No African-American writer had ever done what I did . . . —which was to write without the White Gaze. . . . Ralph Ellison: *Invisible Man*. Invisible to whom? Not to me."[8] Hegel's slave seeks from the master the sense of honor and visibility, a search for status that fuels nationalistic struggle. West and Morrison counterpose a vision of home as Eros.

There is one significant difference between Morrison and West. The sense of the tragic in Morrison's novels is resolutely ethical. Evil may not be comprehensible, but it is human in its origin. Like Morrison, West attends to the "wanton destructiveness," the hubris, as the Greeks write, that we bring upon ourselves through a deadly combination of ignorance and arrogance (*RM*, 10). He shares with Morrison an ethical interest in the Greek language of hubris when he observes the thirst for vengeance and the drive for status and power that captivate gangster mentalities. West complicates the ethical reflections on evil, however, with metaphysical reflections that he finds echoed through the writings of Josiah Royce

(*CWR*, 175). Royce does not view the tragic primarily through the evil agency of human deeds, but as the "capricious irrationality of the world" (*CWR*, 180). " 'The temptation to do evil is indeed a necessity for spirituality. But one's own foolishness, one's ignorance, the cruel accidents of disease, the fatal misunderstandings that part friends and lovers, the chance mistakes that wreck nations:—these things we lament most bitterly, not because they are painful, but because they are farcical, distracting,—not foe-men worthy of the sword of the spirit, not yet mere pangs of our finitude that we can easily learn to face courageously. . . . No, these things do not make life merely painful to us; they make it hideously petty' " (quoted in *CWR*, 181). In Royce West finds a pessimism to correct those Enlightenment philosophers or American thinkers, W. E. B. Du Bois among them, who fail to confront fate's absurd brutality. Du Bois's stubborn rationalism, West observes, prevents him from facing the tragedy of his own child's death. Du Bois writes of this death by natural causes as though its meaning were significantly political, lamenting the loss of his own child as but an abstract symbol for the struggles of the Negro race (*CWR*, 92). The rationalist, West concludes, lacks the tragic sense.

"The painful laughter of blue notes and the terrifying way of the cross . . . constitute the indispensable elements of my Chekhovian Christian mode of thinking," West writes (*CR*, 347). We have not yet, however, found the laughter in the metaphysics of this blues philosopher. West indicates that we might find this laughter if we turn to Chekhov. However, in *The Three Sisters*, the tragicomic play that West takes as the key to Chekhov's work, it is the tragic element that dominates (*CWR*, 555). The play contains moments of compassion and struggle against the pending absurd, but these brief and unsustainable moments do not give much in the way of joy.

Through Royce we can identify a decidedly unromantic genre of the comic through the pure irony of farce. Farce, as the intractable irony of existence, as sheer caprice, accounts for the severe faith of Kierkegaard, the existentialist who holds great sway over West. Royce also prepares for West to incorporate into his tragic Christian sensibility Aristotle's classic reflections on the ironies of mistaken judgment and inscrutable fate. Tragedy is not always the result of blind arrogance or vicious intent. Vigilance against hubris and other human vices does not suffice to hold back the absurd. Spiritual struggle against blind fate and pure chance is also required. Perhaps the implication is that for the post-Freudian, post-Oedipal sensibility of West, drama is part tragedy and part farce. Farce adds shades of the buffoon to the noble tragic character.

Should we conclude then that the comic element that West weaves

into his pragmatism signals the farcical character of the absurd, the disorder of the real (*CWR*, 89)? Is the blind foolishness of the buffoon, the farce of fate, the sole element of "fun" that is proper to the comic, that necessary corrective for a pragmatism gone flat? What is the meaning of laughter in the post-soul street-smart urban culture of our postmodern times?

From the Tragicomic to the Comitragic in a Post-Soul Culture

"I would suggest that there are two organic intellectual traditions in African American life: the black Christian tradition of preaching and the black musical tradition of performance. Both . . . are oral, improvisational and histrionic. Both . . . possess precisely what literate forms of black intellectual activity lack: institutional matrices," West observes.[9] And elsewhere: "the prophetic utterance" of black Christianity resembles the "guttural cry and wrenching moan—enacted in Charlie Parker's bebop sound, Dinah Washington's cool voice, Richard Pryor's comic performances" (*CWR*, 16). Black Christianity, guttural cry, and Richard Pryor? Richard Pryor's humor may relieve black angst and sublimate black rage, but the strutting, cursing comedian is neither blues musician nor righteous preacher. Yet the complex racial history of American humor from Uncle Remus's trickster to the blackface buffoon through Pryor's stand-up comedy is sustained no less by matrices of black oral culture. Pryor of course is no slavish blackface buffoon.[10] On the contrary, Pryor's edgy artistry owes much to the tradition of the trickster, the ironic wit who renders evil absurd, the slave who outwits the master at the master's own game.

Pryor's 1970s tough urban humor laid the way for the contemporary multicultural talents of Chris Rock, Margaret Cho, and Paul Rodriguez, among others. But can his comic legacy mitigate if not mend, repair if not preempt, the urban nihilism that prophetic pragmatism discerns behind our wickedly triumphant times? Or does the lewd and ludic element of this licentious wit feed into the nihilistic despair that the jokes, rude insults, and deflating caricature seem to provoke?

Cornel West has weighed in against the proliferation of insult, and in particular the use of the N-word, within the African American community, in his own rap CD.[11] Comic theorists such as the great scholar Mikhail Bakhtin insist, however, that the *ironic* use of insult and bawdy jokes can be liberating and leveling against pretensions to superior status, creating the conditions for the egalitarian social bonds of the kind that West envisions.[12] In his 1978 performance at Long Beach, Pryor mocks "white dudes [who] get mad and [try their best to] cuss," but who just can't make it up to black standards: "[Y]ou all some funny mother fuckers when you

cuss. They be saying shit like 'Come on peckerhead. . . . Yea you fuckin' ain't right buddy'. . . . N[ ] be talkin' about buddy this [as he grabs his crotch]. . . . Even Andrew Young be grabbin' his dick as he's talkin' to the President" (*AC*, 167). This is thumbing your nose (so to speak) to power if ever there was. Is there cathartic value to ironic insult, ridicule, and crude jokes in comedians like Pryor? Or is any redemptive moral value lost in the stigma that the N-word reinvokes?

This is a tricky question. Comedy with a heavy moral lesson is humorless, plainly a contradiction in terms, as Northrop Frye has observed.[13] Comedy does not preach the *ought* of moral imperative; it captivates its audience with the *should* of libidinal fulfillment. Morally and spiritually rigorous characters, the characters not only of romance but also of romantic tragedy, are easy targets of the comic's jokes. Still, as Frye allows, libidinal fulfillment can be more or less ethical, and it is the more ethical that is relevant for West's larger project. When Pryor mocks proper white folks who don't know how to cuss, he does not simply put them down as, say, the suburban straight guy naive to tough urban realities. (The uncool white is the rustic, I suppose, of the postindustrial age; cf. *AC*, 172.) Irony reverses and disables the meaning of the insult, deconstructing the hierarchies of status and respectability that serious insult reinforces. The ironic insult signals solidarity not hierarchy, displacing stultifying social drives with libidinal drives for affection and expressive pleasure, the core values of progressive comedy.

If not properly moral, progressive comedy may be not only ethical but downright visionary. Tragedy binds the future in the irrevocable deeds of the past, while comedy opens the field of future possibilities (cf. *CWR*, 177). In situations that are mired in moral ambiguity, progressive comedy alleviates moral tension and diffuses reactive emotions of envy and guilt (and the self-righteous politics that these emotions sustain). In fact, contemporary comedians influenced by Pryor's artistry may on occasion have a more salutary effect than the high moral tone that West finds in the old-style rhetoric of the church. Old church rhetoric may speak effectively and forcefully for "the wretched of the earth," but this rhetoric assumes an uncompromising and elevated posture. It requires the class of the oppressed stand opposed to the class of oppressors as clearly as black is to white. The high moral tone is appropriate in struggles against slavery or legal apartheid, or in the class warfare of global capital: "Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other," Marx writes in the *Communist Manifesto*.[14] In a postmodern situation, however, where social identities yield conflicting advantages and disadvantages, the moral tone of revolutionary

tragic Christianity may not resonate—and may even sound arrogant and self-righteous. For the same reason, the expectation for the moral leadership, the epic vision, of a Martin Luther King or Malcolm X may be doomed to meet with disappointment. The post-soul generation of urban life may call for a different kind of leader with a different kind of bravado. One wonders: could it be the bravado of the urban comic wit?

Prophetic pragmatism "acknowledges human . . . conditionedness," West explains, and there are many versions: "My own version . . . is situated within the Christian tradition" (*CWR*, 170). West argues for the Christian version because "it holds at bay the sheer absurdity in life, without erasing or eliding the tragedy of life," and because "the culture of the wretched of the earth is deeply religious," as they are the prey of vicious forces (*CWR*, 171). On a different stage, Pryor mocks the predatory police and vicious dogs trained to hunt black men. These dogs can "catch the average white boy," but they can't outrun black men, he laughs: "By the time they catch a n[], they are too tired to do anything but maybe get petted or some shit like that" (*Richard Pryor—Live in Concert*). The ludic tone of progressive comedians shifts the focus of ethics from tragic empathy for the victims of hubristic white racial politics to the celebration of those who have the wit and luck to outrun enemies. And when outrun, these enemies look more like housepets. The trickster's humor diverts and domesticates the predatory drives that divide us into different species. Its seductive force transforms the predatory drives that Morrison depicts in a tragic vein into the more friendly pleasures that I like to call social eros.

Social eros names the spirit of American comedy that fosters pragmatic freedom (*AC*, 169). The social norms at the heart of laughter are more nuanced and extensive than our abstract moral and legal codes. Progressive laughter shakes up those norms that are absurd, revitalizing the erotic bonds that mold the social sphere. Three classic devices of the comedian correlate with the voluntarism, experimentalism, and fallibilism of a pragmatic progressive culture, liberating from the absurd those who laugh. The first device we have seen already in the wit of the trickster, the tricky slave in classical comedy, and the descendants of Uncle Remus in the United States (*AC*, 173, 174). The trickster, or what Aristotle identifies as the *eiron*, weaves plots to take back power from arrogant masters and staid social norms. Tricksters are not Kantians; they have been known to lie, and they otherwise bend moral codes to bring about the happy endings that everyone secretly desires. They are the thieves who steal from their bosses the emblems of status that prop up false claims to power. As I shall argue, contemporary trickster-style comedians influenced by Pryor,

Paul Rodriguez for example, construct scenarios that reverse social hierarchies. These scenarios enable audiences to reimagine and rekindle the possibilities of agency, augmenting what the old school pragmatist calls voluntarism. A second device of comedy revolves around something or someone out of its proper place. As we shall see, contemporary comedians such as Margaret Cho use the trope of displacement not only as a persistent category of Asian American experience but also as a catalyst for what the old school pragmatist terms social experimentalism. Third, the imperfect body and flawed character display in a comic vein what the traditional pragmatist calls fallibilism. This third comic device plays a central role in the bawdy humor of such black female comedians as Adele Givens.

Each of the three comic devices enables those who laugh to take back energy from blocking sources, giving rise to performances as cathartic and uplifting as church but *naturally* on very different terms. Pryor set the stage for the bawdy humor of contemporary comedy with his irreverent attitude toward the church in such performances as his 1971 *Live and Smokin'*. One skit has him hold up a cross in the face of a vampire, not because Pryor believes in the power of the cross, but because vampires are "allergic to bullshit."[15] I would be tempted to call comic theater the church of the body, but in fact it reaches far deeper into the core of identity, the libidinal core to be sure. As one of Cho's fans remarks after the performance, with a slight twinkle, "you make me want to be a better person."[16] Of course, we will have to return to the meaning of that twinkle.

Rodriguez, one of the original "Latin Kings of Comedy," exemplifies the use of humor as a force to outwit power. The relevant hierarchies may not allow for the determinant moral judgments that divide oppressor and oppressed. As Rodriguez remarks, prejudices among Chicanos ("more native than the native"), Mexican Americans (first generation who function in English), and Mexicanos (who just speak Spanish) rest uneasily alongside struggles against Anglos who see Latinos as the usurpers of their jobs.[17] Rodriguez tweaks morally self-righteous Anglos with routines in which he points out that the good jobs are not be found among the immigrants who take what Anglos refuse. He suggests that Anglos might stop their whining until they are ready "to strap on the leaf-blower" and start "mowing their own lawns" or nannying their "own kids" (NPR interview). Humor avoids the irritation of direct confrontation, adding sweet "sugar [to] the medicine," Rodriguez says. The sweet truths of comedy have the effect of displacing and redefining the rough if not brutal racial politics that West finds behind such tragedies as the Rodney King

uprising (NPR interview). Comedy is effective in circumstances where the high moral rhetoric of tragedy or epic romance risks polarization, miscommunication, and backlash.

How does the low comic tone accomplish what the high tragic tone of moral discourse cannot? Another of Rodriguez's comic routines gives us a clue. As host of one of Univision's most popular shows aired in Miami to Spanish-speaking audiences, Rodriguez constructs a skit that threatens to cross the line from playful social tweaking to punitive moral reprimand. In the weeks prior to the show, illegal immigrants had been severely beaten in Riverside by police. "If there is justice," Rodriguez muses, "these cops are going to go to jail." He continues, "[W]e might be the minority on the outside, but we are certainly the majority in the prisons"; this means that these cops "are going to become somebody's girlfriend" (NPR interview). Apparently, he was somewhat graphic about what kind of treatment Anglo cops could expect from their "boyfriends" in prison, and was fired in mid-show. Later he found out that most of the phone calls that came in during the show were positive.

A part of the humor of the skit comes from the perspective that accompanies the shift from minority to majority status in prison and the pleasure of the fantasized revenge of the Latinos against self-righteous, moralizing, and uptight Anglos. The simple reversal of power relationships enacted in the prison scene threatens to reestablish the tragic dynamic of honor and revenge that sustains oppressive social systems, if in different hands. The progressive, meliorating force of the humor resides in the very same use of the prison context, which serves to dissuade any easy assumption of superiority by Latinos. By casting the scene between Anglos and Latinos in the confines of prison, and alluding thereby to the heavy Latino presence in this low place, the routine avoids the simple and vindictive reversal of hierarchy, and recovers a degree of honor, paradoxically, through leveling the very social distinctions upon which status is based. The line between the humorous leveling of social distinctions and the vindictive recovery of honor and status is a thin one. It depends much, in this case, on how graphic the skit is. In Rodriguez's retelling of the story, the macho interest in reclaiming lost honor (with its dynamic of condemnation and revenge) is downplayed in favor of deconstructing claims to superiority altogether, replacing such claims with a change in perspective that fosters more the tender bonds of affiliation through humor. In progressive comedy, humor avoids the painful trials that establish honor and status and the hierarchical bonds upon which these trials are based. Chris Rock's retort that gays should be allowed in the military because he surely "doesn't want to fight" reminds us that not only military types, but moralists, militants, or anyone else claiming superior status (moral or otherwise) are comedy's most reliable targets (*Bigger and Blacker*, 1999).

If done well, the ironic use of insult, ridicule, or other forms of real or imagined abuse can render us immune from their more brutal effects in everyday life, leveling social distinctions and establishing friendships based on pleasure. But if the humorous reversal becomes too graphic, and the rhetoric of inclusion gives way to a rhetoric of exclusion, if the arrogant moral tone of good and evil blinds the audience to the humor of the absurd, progressive comedy collapses and we are left with the misunderstandings and violence of tragedy. In progressive comedy, the pleasure of laughter prevails over the drive to recover honor, and sweet happiness wins out over self-righteous claims to perfect justice.

Margaret Cho shares many of the same sentiments and humorous tactics as Rodriguez, while bringing into focus a second element of progressive, pragmatic comedy. Like Rodriguez, she finds that comic ridicule is usefully irreverent in staid, conformist, or oppressive cultures. It offers cathartic release from social tensions and punitive moral demands while avoiding direct confrontation, taking, as she remarks, the "sweet way around politics."[18] She compares her cathartic humor to the meditative practice (*tonglen*) of Tibetan Buddhism: the comedian "breathes in the suffering" of the world, and "breathes out joy"(NPR interview). While the cathartic powers might be somewhat mysterious, she is certain that humor liberates us from exhausting social expectations. Laughter exhales the poisonous social forces.

Bergson speaks of the comic butt of laughter as someone who is absent-minded, unaware, and generally not tuned in with social conventions.[19] The sting of ridicule serves as a prod for eccentrics, wayward individuals, and social misfits to heed social conventions. Cho's progressive humor turns Bergson's insight (as well as his politics) on its head. Laughter liberates the blind perpetrator of the prevailing social norms. It renders our relationships with one another less punitive and more fluid and alive, more attuned to social demands to be sure, but less respectful of conventions that block libidinal energy. Humor that avoids moral reprimand allows audiences to feel "comfortable," as Cho remarks (NPR interview), relaxing moral tension and diffusing the moral drives to condemn and punish. As laughter lets loose the reins of conventional moral judgment, audiences cast off rigid prejudices and punitive moral categories, and experience a revitalized libidinal energy flowing free.

If for Cho as for Rodriguez comedy avoids moral or political confrontation, preferring instead a sweet transformation of our social sensibilities, her queer Asian American sensibility brings into play a different

side of progressive comedy. The sly trickster sets up scenarios that threaten to reverse the power dynamic until the target yields to the leveling force of the humor. Cho draws on the humor of displacement. For the Asian American, the racist insinuation that one does not belong to the larger society is cause for perpetual irritation. As Cho explains, her personal failure to measure up to the expectations of gender identity and academic achievement in her own community could only compound the Asian American experience of not belonging, and of being the unassimilable minority (NPR interview with Cho). The experience of being a profilable person of color is like "dying a death of a thousand paper cuts a day," no major assaults, but innumerable minor ones (NPR interview with Cho). At the same time she makes it clear that those in mainstream culture who signal to Asian Americans that they are somehow out of place do not intend to be racist, hold no malice, and do not merit moral blame. Moral discourse is not appropriate, and its use can be socially harmful given the usual misunderstandings of a multicultural society. As Michele Norris remarks in her interview with Cho, the charge of racism is insulting to most people today, and yet social expectations are racially motivated and harmful, and need change. Cho's example is the way white people will come up to her as they will to any Asian American and ask, "Where are you from?" (NPR interview). They don't mean San Francisco, they mean Korea, and they blabber on about whatever Korean comes to mind. She invites her audience to imagine an Asian American walking up to some white person and saying "Hey, are you from France? . . . Well not recently but a couple hundred years ago? . . . I thought so. I love your fries!" The intent of the humor is to draw attention to subconscious racial motivations in social perceptions without the insults and accusations that moral discourse can provoke.

Bergson observed that one does not laugh at vice but at social incongruities, moral rigidity, and other flaws in social bearing that create dissonance in our communities (*L*, 150). Cho uses the humor of not belonging not to recover that sense of propriety that holds together a monocultural society but to set us free from rigid expectations of who does and does not belong. For a postmodernist comic, displacement becomes the norm. Cho opens her 2002 filmed performance in Seattle, *Notorious C.H.O. in Concert*, by praising the heroes and survivors of the tragic event of 9/11. This has been a "tragic time for our country. . . . I have been in New York a lot. . . . at ground zero. . . . I was there day after day giving blow jobs to tragic rescue workers . . . because we all have to do our part. You find out a lot about yourself in times of crisis. And I found out that I lost my gag reflex. I call that a triumph of the human spirit."

Later in the show she mimics a conversation where her Korean mother, trying to deal with suspicions about her daughter's sexual identity, allows that everyone is a "little bit" gay. Cho proceeds to mock marriage except for gays and lesbians. She is not against marriage, she explains, but the world is wrong to think that the single person is somehow "incomplete." The right of gays and lesbians to marriage is "not about romance; it's about equality; and having our relationships regarded in the same way with the same kind of reverence as straight people's relationships. . . . [A] government that would deny a gay man the right to a bridal registry is a fascist state." Progressive comedy augments our capacity for taking delight in social dissonance, surrenders our romantic dreams for the perfect fit, and fosters instead the lively experimentalism (as the pragmatist would say) of a vital democracy.

African American comedians, including *The Queens of Comedy* (dir. Steve Purcell, 2001) Miss Laura Hayes, Adele Givens, Sommore, and Mo'Nique, bring attention to a third element of progressive comedy and a corresponding element of pragmatism. This third comic element is more complex that what is understood reductively as an interest in the body and its polymorphously perverse appetites. Even a casual viewing of the work of black female comedians reveals that central to their comedy is mockery not just of European standards of beauty but of perfectionism of any kind. Images of anorexic white women are juxtaposed with images of fat black women who love their bodies, who love sex, and who love other fat women. Adele Givens opens her *Queens of Comedy* routine with a comic return to the kind of love-your-body sermon that Morrison had cast in a sacred setting in *Beloved:* "[A] flaw ain't shit but a unique identifying mark. . . . If you got a big belly, rub that motherfucker, love it. . . . [N]o matter how fucked up you are, somebody loves your ass."

Compare *Beloved*'s grandmother's sermon as an "unchurched preacher" who "accepts no title of honor before her name . . . allowing a small caress after it"; while the sacred context brings shades of meaning different from those of comedy, the convergence of these two visions is striking. "Let your mother hear you laugh," the old preacher calls out as she begins her sermon (*BE*, 87). On a different stage, Adele walks onstage repeating Miss Laura's introduction that she is a "fucking Lady," using the insult as other comedians use the N-word, not to mock herself or anyone else, but to mock all titles or claims of special status, as she urges the audience to turn that love they show her back around to themselves. And there is laughter. The leveling of titles clears the stage for characters who are flawed and fallible (as the pragmatists like to say) but libidinally rich, or so these comedians insist. If they inspire listeners to be better persons, it is not in the sense of more perfect creatures,

but in the sense of getting on with life not despite, but because of, those unique "identifying marks." We could call that a triumph of the human spirit.

The Third Freedom: Comedy and the Politics of the Family

Since the end of the cold war, ethnic tensions and religious extremism have replaced the moral-laden ideologies of communism and capitalism as the major cause of global unrest. Over the same time period, West's prophetic pragmatism has evolved from a revolutionary socialism toward a progressive politics of large-scale, market-friendly reform (cf. *CR*, 357). If Marxism takes as its focus the emasculation of the working class, and the black nationalist, the emasculation of the race, progressive reform extends its reach to the multifaceted concerns of the working family. The concerns of families join together those of diverse racial and class backgrounds, allowing West to construct concrete policy proposals (for public education, parental leave, childcare, child health care, higher wages, a shorter work week, and a shifting of the tax burden away from income and toward consumption) that he regards as of, if not universal interest, at least widespread public appeal. The interest in families, neighborhoods, and communities has always been important for prophetic pragmatism, but only recently have the concerns of families served to anchor the entire political project. *The War against Parents*, co-authored with Sylvia Ann Hewlett in 1998, declares that "in our market-driven society . . . parenting has become a countercultural activity of the first order."[20] Collaborative work with Roberto Unger published the same year argues that "[s]ocial supports for children can serve as the front line in the development of social rights for everyone" (*CWR*, 321).

The shift toward working families allows West to develop a politics of belonging as a cosmopolitan and communitarian rather than an ethnic or nationalist preoccupation, avoiding the pitfalls of Berlin's third freedom. If liberalism grounds cosmopolitanism in the rights of the autonomous individual, prophetic pragmatism grounds global justice in local webs of erotically charged caring. The other-regarding care that the child learns from the devoted parent in what West describes as the "most powerful of human attachments" is the emotive stuff that builds neighborhoods, trade unions, and civil associations; and it does cross ethnic and national borders (*WP*, xiv; cf. *CR*, 24). The web promotes the existential moorings that liberalism neglects, that consumer capitalism threatens, and that nationalism and extreme religion provide with a vengeance (cf. *CWR*, 375–76).

In *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989) West had characterized

"the praxis of prophetic pragmatism [as] tragic action with revolutionary intent" (cited in *CWR*, 167). His post-'89 turn from revolutionary socialism toward a progressive politics of the family is accompanied by, if I am not mistaken, greater attention toward the comic. West subtitles his afterword to Yancy's *Critical Reader* (2001) "Philosophy and the Funk of Life," gives it an epigram from Chekhov, "To hell with the philosophy of the great men of the world! All great wise men are as despotic as generals," and returns several times in the essay to his interest in the comic. A reference to Chekhov has always served as a balance to his Christianity. West now points specifically to the comic as what the Christian viewpoint lacks. The "Christian viewpoint . . . lacks a strong sense of the comic and the body," he remarks after insisting upon the inadequacy of Jesus as a model for life: "Jesus . . . is for me neither an ethical model (his sense of the comic is too weak), a political model (his failure to condemn slavery or include women in his first-order group of disciples), nor a familial model (his relative lack of eros for intimate or significant others or even philia for relatives)" (*CR*, 353). Given the recent turn to a politics of the family, this inadequacy is striking.

Several years earlier in the introduction to *The Cornel West Reader*, West had written that the sacrificing love of Jesus "puts a premium on death and courage. To be human is to suffer, shudder and struggle courageously in the face of inevitable death. To think deeply and live wisely as a human being is to meditate on and prepare for death" (*CWR*, xvi). West has not yet published extensively on the comic, but one would think that by implication comedy would turn us from death's inevitability to life's mundane duration, taking its pleasure in ever new beginnings. If pragmatic comedy constructs webs of eros, it might also, to borrow phrases from Stanley Cavell's analysis of 1930s and '40s screwball comedy, train us to avoid sacrifice, self-denial, and other ascetic virtues, acknowledging our libidinal drives instead.[21]

If so, then the comic may turn out to be just what West needs to bring existential depth to his politics of the family, while avoiding the charges of his liberal and feminist critics, who view him as nostalgic for the patriarchal Christian family of the 1950s. West claims that his views of the family do not fall neatly into either '50s-style conservativism or post-'50s-style liberalism. He believes that liberals are right to reject the patriarchal structure of the 1950s, but not the nuclear family and its values of discipline, sacrifice, and service. He is critical of the countercultural rebellions from the 1960s, which encourage self-fulfillment at the expense of service to the family and community. As he explains, "narcissistic individualism ran smack into the art and practice of parenting" (*WP*, 134). He insists

that "the kind of democratic feminism Hewlett and I promote is hard to discern and detect on the current ideological spectrum" (*CR*, 359).

Still the Christian rhetoric of servitude and sacrifice continues to confuse feminists and liberals despite their expressed agreement with his concrete proposals.[22] In *Beloved*, Morrison's character Sethe attempts to explain to Paul D the life-giving joy she found when she escaped with her children to freedom. She describes this joy in terms not of sacrifice but of selfishness: "It was a kind of selfishness . . . I was big. . . . And deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide" (*BE*, 162). This well-known passage of the novel concludes that "to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, that was freedom" (*BE*, 162). West's appeal to the virtues of sacrifice may not subjugate women to patriarchal control, but it doesn't sound like the battle cry for liberation that we might desire.

Moreover, it is not clear how West's call for reasserting as the social norm the nuclear family does not relegate gay and other intimate social relationships to the Down-Low or other secret zones of the abnormal, and the family to the secure but boring surface of a libidinally repressed and (hetero)sexually overcharged culture.

His aim, West assures us in his response to Iris Young, is not to return to the repressive family of the 1950s, but also not to give in to the "libertarian feminism that elevates autonomy and choice over social responsibility and commitment" (*CR*, 359). This type of feminism turns choice into a fetish and plays right into the invisible hands of consumer capitalism. The parent movement escapes the one-dimensionality of left and right, West insists. Perhaps the project would do better with the kind of rhetoric that we find not in old church Christianity but in new school comedy.

Ironically, the values of self-denial that West finds in Christianity may root the conventional American family in the work values of Protestant capitalism that according to Niall Ferguson are not in the end pro-family at all. Ferguson explains: "It was almost a century ago that the German sociologist Max Weber . . . argued that modern capitalism was 'born from the spirit of Christian asceticism' in its specifically Protestant form. . . . [T]he experience of Western Europe in the past quarter century offers an unexpected confirmation of it. To put it bluntly, we are witnessing the decline and fall of the Protestant work ethic in Europe. . . . [I]n the pious industrious United States, the Protestant work ethic [may be] alive and well . . . [but] Northern Europe's declines in working hours coincide almost exactly with steep declines in religious observance."[23] The lower

rate of productivity in Europe compared to the United States suits economies that depend less on high rates of consumption and allow more time for families and holidays. Meanwhile in the Atlanta of Maynard Jackson, the old black church of the civil rights era that preaches common cause through service and sacrifice threatens to give way to new church sermons on personal excellence more congenial to the demands of black-owned business than to the family, neighborhood, and community.

The new comedy club scene in cites like Atlanta may in fact be taking over the old church function of relieving angst and rage, but one might wonder if the bawdy jokes do anything more than stimulate the materialism and narcissism of nihilistic capitalism. West's own brief remarks about comedy focus on Chekhov and his "icy incongruities," not contemporary comedy. Surprisingly, the contemporary club scene may be just the place to find the concerns of family responsibility spelled out in an existential frame.[24] The fact that this same bawdy pro-family comedy is, as Richard Pryor's vampire routine reminds us, just about as far from the religious right as you can get suggests an escape from the one-dimensionality of left-right politics. In *Bigger and Blacker* (HBO, dir. Keith Truesdell, 1999), Chris Rock mocks mothers who abandon their children for a good time ("What the fuck are you doing in the Club at 2 in the fucking morning on a Wednesday night? . . . Is it your Birthday? . . . Go take care of those kids before they rob me in 10 years") or who think they can raise children without men: "You can do it without a man but that don't mean it's to be done. Shoot you can drive a car with your feet if you want to. That don't make it a good fuckin' idea." Of course, some of those women in the club are actually there working a second job to support their families, and others are there for some well-deserved time off. And even while Rock chides irresponsible parents, and emphasizes like West the importance of the father, he denounces sexists, applauds women who enjoy their bodies and their sexuality, and avoids entangling the ethical language of responsibility with the religious language of self-sacrifice. Along with *The Bill Cosby Show*, Chris Rock's family routines avoid some of the polarizing, moralizing, stigmatizing dichotomies perpetuated by the old church rhetoric of sacrifice in a new church age.

Critics accuse *The Bill Cosby Show* of returning to the *Father Knows Best* nostalgia for the patriarchal family because the show centers around the father.[25] The emphasis that black comedians give to the father, however, serves as an important counterweight to the effects of slavery, welfare, unemployment, and the prison industry on black families. Each of these social policies targets the role of the father in the black family. *The Bill Cosby Show* may focus episodes around the father and his point of

view, but Bill Cosby does not replay the moral role of the stern father of white suburbia circa 1950s. Typically he asserts moral authority only after deflationary humor that reveals that he is not after all better or worse than any one else in the family.

Those comedians who rewrite the language of the family in terms of the pleasure of relationships promote a sense of belonging that avoids the fetishization of choice no less than the ascetic language of sacrifice and service.[26] The family becomes a place of self-fulfillment, not self-less love, a shift that suits a society in which women have reproductive choices, and do not risk their lives in birth, nor men in war—in other words, in a society where servitude and sacrifice are no longer the expectations of citizenship and multiple forms of family-style relationships proliferate. Postmodern feminists might valorize, as does Iris Young, the anonymity in the city over bigoted communities and the right to ground household relationships in choice rather than traditional family structures.[27] But West might also rightly point out that white anonymity and choice, like black invisibility, deny the depth of the drive to belong. Here we do have a choice: we can join struggles for ethnic and racial identity, or we can cultivate these romantic drives in a more comic vein, and redirect the drive for attachment toward the dissonance of families and communities that know how to laugh.

"The interesting question," West writes, "is the relationship between the ethical and the erotic. . . . [T]he erotic without the ethical can become just thoroughly licentious in the most flat hedonistic sense. But the erotic fused with the ethical means there is respect for the other, and that respect for the other also means being attentive to needs of the other given their erotic energies. These kind of issues seem to me fundamental ones because, of course, they affect every relationship. I mean, even in friendships that are nonsexual, there's an erotic dimension" (*CWR*, 13). Here West is beginning to sound a bit like Margaret Cho's mother, the person, Cho claims, who gave her a sense of humor (NPR interview). We all have friends that we like just a little too much, Cho's mother remarks. Everyone is just a little bit gay. In a nod to the gays and lesbians, we might avoid old church rhetoric and devote ourselves instead to the sweet force that builds friendships, families, and communities. Of course, as the Freudians will remind us, we are hardly ever clear about the meaning of this powerful libidinal force. But then whoever would ever think that comprehension is required for cooperation.

The next chapter will search for this libidinal force of solidarity in the bleak satire of Spike Lee. Only through the sometimes bitter irony of satire can we recuperate a sense of authentic existence through our social bonds.

THREE

Authenticity in an Age of Satire

Ellison, Sartre, Bergson, and Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*

Could an age riddled by the ironies of postmodern skepticism find a way of grasping anew the ethics of authenticity? In classic existential terms, authenticity entails recuperating a sense of oneself from the threat of absorption into social roles.[1] After the demise of the 1960s social movements, and the rise of linguistic philosophy, the call for authenticity sounds sentimental and suspect, and in part for good reason. In a highly media-saturated, status-conscious, and techno-powered age it hardly seems possible to extract personal identities from the impact of images or the distracting clamor for status and gain. Nor as social creatures could we conceive of identities uninformed by these social forces and the gendered, ethnic, racialized character they lend us. In life as in theater, we are characters with histories and social identities more deeply than we are bare existential subjects. If character emerges through social meanings, these meanings are problematic less because they insist upon receptivity to unauthored sources than because they are often distorted through stereotypical images with degrading histories. The question is how can we reclaim authenticity at a time when the existential slogan of returning to oneself appears more