

HOW THE OTHER HALF LAUGHS

THE COMIC SENSIBILITY IN AMERICAN CULTURE, 1895-1920



JEAN LEE COLE

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INTRODUCTION

The Comic Sensibility

A great flow of simple gaiety and humor roared over the dam from which the floodgates of respectability had suddenly been released.

—Colton Waugh, *The Comics*¹

Consider two images (see figures 1 and 2). The first presents a family grimly engaged in a scene of tedious, menial labor. Mama and Papa face away from their children, who are likewise disengaged from both them and each other. The children, one in the foreground, one in the background, one fading into obscurity off the right side of the image, each stare blankly at the photographer's camera, but appear unaware that the others are doing so. They are all turned away from the windows, perhaps because they well know that their expectations of light, much less a view, will be frustrated by the brick wall only feet from the panes. A jumble of objects populates the room—a barrel, a hat, a mirror too high on the wall to be of use, random pieces of furniture and manufacturing equipment. The caption accompanying the image, “Bohemian Cigarmakers at Work in Their Tenement,” identifies this family as a group of laborers. We now realize that the oldest child in the foreground holds a tobacco leaf, perhaps in order to prepare it for his parents' workbench: not what you call child's play.

This image appears in chapter 12 of *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Jacob Riis's damning exposé of overcrowding and inhumane working conditions in Gilded-Age New York City. Lest the viewer misinterpret this image or its caption as a portrayal of honest thrift and industry, Riis explains in the accompanying text, “Men, women and children work together seven days in the week in these cheerless tenements to make a living for the family, from the break of day till



Figure 1. *Bohemian Cigarmakers at Work in Their Tenement*. Jacob A. (Jacob August) Riis (1849–1914) / Museum of the City of New York. 90.13.4.150 U

far into the night. Often the wife is the original cigarmaker from the old home, the husband having adopted her trade here as a matter of necessity, because, knowing no word of English, he could get no other work.” Unable to speak the language that would enable them to engage in more fruitful labor, they are virtually enslaved; Riis writes of the husband, “he has in nine years learned no syllable of English . . . In all that time he has been at work grubbing to earn bread.”²

Figure 2 also presents a domestic space, but to much different effect. Here, the dingy clutter of the cigarmaker’s flat has been replaced by a spare, clean room. In it, the family matriarch sits in a soft, cushioned chair. She is not working, but reading. Her children dote on her. They ask if they might bring her closer “by der window” so that she can have more light by which to see. “Dot iss plenty,” she says as she is pulled out of the frame. “Tank you.” This apparent solicitude, however, masks a more devious purpose: Mama is in fact made the butt of a joke, as her chair has been attached to a large spring that recoils when the children release her, causing her to crash into the wall of the flat. The joke is then turned on the children, as Mama spansks them in punishment. This early *Katzenjammer Kids* strip from 1902, drawn by Rudolph Dirks, makes the ethnic American household a site of slapstick comedy, mispronunciation and malapropism, cheeky insouciance—“I could die waltzing,” Fritz says to

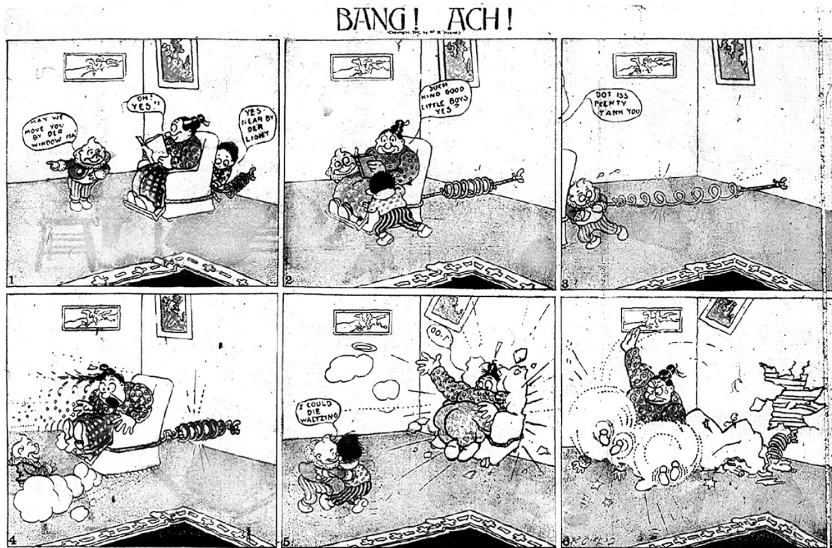


Figure 2. Rudolph Dirks, *The Katzenjammer Kids* ("Bang! Ach!"), *New York Journal*, January 19, 1902. Library of Congress.

Hans as they watch their mischief bear fruit—and corporeal violence. Yet even though the children are beaten at the end of the strip, they would return next week with another prank to play. Readers did not weep, for they knew that the boys' tears were fleeting.

Riis and Dirks depict similar people occupying similar spaces, but they do so in very different ways. Riis's representation is grittily, shockingly photographic, his prose poignant, verging on purple, as he explains how "a proud race" has been subjugated to "a slavery as real as any that ever disgraced the South."³ The cigarmakers are shown at their labors, unspeaking, unsmiling, emotionally blank. They appear to be, as Theodore Dreiser wrote of his German American heroine, Carrie Meeber, "waifs amid forces," passive and silent as they are crushed by the effects of urbanization and the weight of poverty. Throughout *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis underscores the fact that it is the environment, not the poor themselves, that is responsible for their misery: "In the tenements all the influences make for evil," he wrote; "they touch the family life with deadly moral contagion."⁴

Yet all was not evil in the tenements. While Dirks's *Katzenjammers* were certainly full of mischief, they also were full of fun. Throughout the new Sunday comic supplements, as well as in popular fiction and theater, advertising, and even painting, writers and artists did not just focus on the oppressions of urban life but also displayed its exuberant, streetwise whimsy. They showed that the

Other Half did not simply live, simply endure: they also laughed—at times, uproariously. They laughed at reality, and laughed within reality, engaging in what I describe as the comic sensibility. In referring to it as a *sensibility*, I am returning the word to its etymological origins, meaning that it is a visceral appeal to the senses, the sort of humor that is meant to be physically felt rather than intellectually appreciated. Rather than exhibiting the “*delicacy of imagination*” or calling forth the “finer emotions,” as Hume wrote of sensibility in the eighteenth century,⁵ the *comic sensibility* taps into the guttural, vulgar, violent, and excretory. Firmly rooted in ethnic and racial humor, in all of its different forms it combines the performative aspects of vaudeville, burlesque, and blackface minstrelsy, the verbal improvisations of dialect fiction, and a multivalent approach to caricature that originated in nineteenth-century comic weeklies such as *Puck* and *Judge*.

The comic sensibility is an interpretive framework that connects a performative act (a gesture, a grimace, a joke, a drawing) to a physiological response (laughter). The physiological convulsions of laughter, which are so often unbidden and sometimes irrepressible, are a byproduct of the comic sensibility; and comic strips, vaudeville, the joke, and comic forms of modernist theater, poetry, and art all seek to produce it. Yet laughter alone does not fully capture the comic sensibility. As Freud noted in his definition of tendentious humor—and as we see in a great deal of ethnic and racial caricature and dialect fiction—laughter can express hostility and cruelty as well as amusement. But as Daniel Wickberg notes in his aptly titled *The Senses of Humor*, the “subjective humor” that developed in the nineteenth century contrasted with the denigrating laughter at the deformed and marginalized described by Aristotle and Hobbes—what came to be known as the “superiority theory” of laughter—and also constituted a departure from the coldly intellectual display of wit that developed in the courts and coffeehouses of the eighteenth century. Instead, emerging from “a middle-class culture of benevolence, sensibility, and sympathy,” humor became associated not simply with bodily functions (the origin of the word “humor,” of course, coming from the bodily fluids that regulated human character, disposition, and behavior) or with intellect, but with feeling—in particular, common feeling.⁶ In this vein, Thomas Carlyle wrote of humor that “its essence is love,” a love that was fundamentally associated with a “wholesome,” embodied sensibility: “the playful teasing fondness of a mother to her child.”⁷ Epitomized by the genial humor of Artemis Ward, the shaggy dog story of Mark Twain, and the “smiling aspects of life” that William Dean Howells advocated as the ideal subject for realist writers, subjective humor could lay bare the commonly shared incongruities of lived experience, a “laughing with the other man,” as an *Atlantic Monthly* commentator put it in 1907, rather than a “laughing at him.”⁸

The comic sensibility is comic in the classical sense of undermining authority, using laughter as expressions of solidarity, commiseration, and communal empowerment. The laughter that I identify with the comic sensibility results from what Freud's predecessor and mentor Theodor Lipps called *emfühling* (in-feeling, often translated as empathy), and what philosopher Ted Cohen more recently has described as an attainment of "intimacy . . . the shared sense of those in a community."⁹ Thus the comic sensibility is a performative act producing a physiological rather than intellectual response and eliciting feelings of solidarity and community among the marginalized.

It may be difficult to see how a strip like this early *Katzenjammer Kids* example results in feelings of belonging, much less intimacy. The tendentious aspects of the strip, in contrast, are easily identified. We might laugh at slow-witted Mama for falling prey to Hans and Franz's trickery. We might also laugh at Hans and Franz as a result of the misspellings and mixed syntax of their German American dialect. The laughter, in both of these cases, responds to stereotypical traits of Germans. Yet we also laugh with Hans and Franz as they carry out their devious mischief. And we may laugh simply at the incongruity of seeing the crudely handwritten letterforms and primitive misspellings of "dot" and "iss" and "vas" in a national print publication.

This identification with transgression—in the sense of rebellion but also in the sense of trespass—is the source of comic solidarity in this strip. Rudolph Dirks, the creator of the *Katzenjammer Kids*, was himself a German immigrant, and his strip was an easily recognizable adaptation of the well-known *Max und Moritz* stories produced by caricaturist Wilhelm Busch for a mainstream American audience. Reflecting the demographics of much of the northeastern and midwestern United States, over 30 percent of New York City's entire population in 1890 was either an immigrant from a German-speaking country or descended from one, and tens of thousands of recent immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia also could understand rudimentary German, due to its close relationship to Yiddish.¹⁰ It seems clear, in retrospect, that the popularity of the *Katzenjammer Kids* may have been at least partly due to the audience's recognition of Dirks's crude "translation" of Busch's work into an urban American context, a translation that may have elicited equal portions of delight and dismay.¹¹

For Cohen, the power of much ethnic humor resides in the fact that the ethnic audience shares knowledge with the humorist and laughs with him even as they also laugh at themselves. The humorist, in this case, seeks not to express superiority over his audience, but rather offers his joke to establish a common bond, to establish empathy, or even a communal intimacy, by enabling the recognition of common knowledge and understanding. The empowerment

of the audience comes from the fact that they hold the power to laugh—or remain silent.¹² The power of laughter remains with the audience regardless of their position in society or their relation to the humorist.

In the case of the works I study here, the desire to create mass appeal in an era when the audience for mass culture was increasingly multiethnic and multi-racial meant that comic artists and writers had to make “the Other Half” laugh. I focus my investigation on the newspapers published by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer and mass-market magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *McClure’s*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and *Collier’s*. These periodicals revolutionized the practice of journalism and developed a huge mass readership. At the time, Matthew Arnold described the sensational, insistently topical style of the news media as the “New Journalism,” and mostly critical commentators inveighed against the “New Humor” emerging in the comic weeklies and the variety stage, which privileged the joke over the comic storyteller, slapstick violence over witty repartee. These “new” modes merged in the comic sensibility. Both the New Journalism and the New Humor displayed a breezy, urban (if not necessarily urbane) irreverence, full of ethnic dialect and comic caricature, and were packaged in eye-catching typography, vibrant color, and dynamic page design.

These publications shared many writers and artists, including Rudolph Dirks, George Luks, Rudolph Block, Richard Outcault, Theodore Dreiser, William Glackens, and George Herriman, many of whom came from immigrant and working-class backgrounds.¹³ In fact, some were hired specifically to help these publishers cultivate an ethnic, working-class audience. This loose confederacy of culture workers worked together, sometimes literally elbow to elbow, in the art rooms and news offices of the great newspapers and mass-market magazines. Although these publications competed fiercely with one another, the writers and artists they employed moved quite easily between them, often switching back and forth between rival publications or working for them simultaneously. Historians have generally focused on the intense competition between Hearst and Pulitzer, but the continuities between their publications may in fact be of greater significance. The people who worked for Hearst and Pulitzer not only worked together, but they also socialized with one another, attending the same parties and frequenting the same watering holes. Their interactions with one another within and across different social circles, occupations, and even city blocks enabled the development of the comic sensibility.

To illustrate the complex, layered, and multi-nodal interconnections between work, occupation, social setting, and familial bonds that knit together those who developed the comic sensibility in print and performance at the turn into the twentieth century, one might look at the associations that can be traced

from a single moment: the café scene depicted in William Glackens's painting, *At Mouquin's* (1905; see figure 3). The painting appears to depict a moment of introspection (or, at least, dissociation) in a very public setting, a sumptuously dressed young woman looking either bored or pained by her plump male companion. Even though the identity of the painting's central figure is unconfirmed—some speculate that she is Marie Grandjean, wife of Mouquin's owner Henri Mouquin; others believe her to be modeled on an actress, chorus girl, or prostitute—an astounding array of relationships can nevertheless be traced through this image, and especially, to the Café Mouquin itself.

The identity of the woman may be disputed, but that of her leering male companion is not: he is James B. Moore, bon vivant and owner of the Café Francis, just a few blocks away from Mouquin's, which also catered to the bohemian set in New York City from which so much comic energy irradiated. The figures reflected in the mirror behind the couple are also known: the woman, only the back of her head visible, is Edith Dimock Glackens, the painter's wife; and seated across from her, his face a blur but still recognizable, is Chas Fitzgerald, art critic of the *New York Evening Sun*, a stalwart promoter of Glackens and other members of The Eight, and eventually, the husband of Edith's sister Irene. Members of The Eight, including Robert Henri, John Sloan, George Luks, Everett Shinn, Arthur Davies, and Maurice Prendergast, also frequented Mouquin's, as did their wives and lovers. Several of these women, including May Wilson Preston (wife of painter James Preston and close friends of the Glackenses) and Florence Scovel Shinn, were artists and performers too; women were not simply artistic muses but propelled the development of the comic sensibility in their own right.

Mouquin's also attracted other artists, including George Bellows and Walt Kuhn; Kuhn, in turn, was employed as a cartoonist for the *New York World*, where George Luks (and William Glackens, briefly) had also worked as a cartoonist. At the time Glackens painted *At Mouquin's*, Kuhn, at the *World*, befriended Marjorie Organ, the only woman on the *New York Journal* comics staff; at the *Journal*, Organ met Rudolph Dirks, who originated the *Katzenjammer Kids* and worked for Rudolph Block, who edited the comics supplement and also published some one hundred stories as Bruno Lessing, featuring, at different points, illustrations by Glackens and Sloan. (Block would also be the longtime editor of George Herriman, who joined the *New York Journal* staff in 1910). Kuhn introduced Organ to the ideas and work of Robert Henri, and Dirks introduced her to Henri himself—at Mouquin's—in 1908; the two were married after a secret, whirlwind courtship the same year, after which Marjorie Organ Henri joined the social set of The Eight, including Edith Dimock Glackens and the Prestons. Kuhn, meanwhile, would eventually



Figure 3. William Glackens, *At Mouquin's* (1905), Art Institute of Chicago. Creative Commons CCo license.

organize the infamous Armory Show of 1913, where William Glackens served as head of the committee on American Art and where works by both Glackenses, Kuhn, Henri, Luks, Sloan, Everett Shinn, Prendergast, both Prestons, Bellows, Dirks, and other comic artists including Gus Mager, joined the works of European modernists including Pablo Picasso and Raoul Dufy.

About the Author



Photo by Lia Finkelstein

Jean Lee Cole is professor of English at Loyola University Maryland, where she teaches courses in American literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, book history and editing, and American visual culture. She is author of *The Literary Voices of Winnifred Eaton: Redefining Ethnicity and Authenticity* (Rutgers, 2002). She is also editor or coeditor of several books, including *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays* (with Charles Mitchell; Rutgers, 2008) and *Freedom's Witness: The Civil War Correspondence of Henry McNeal Turner* (West Virginia, 2013), and is editor of the scholarly journal *American Periodicals* and former president of the Research Society for American Periodicals.