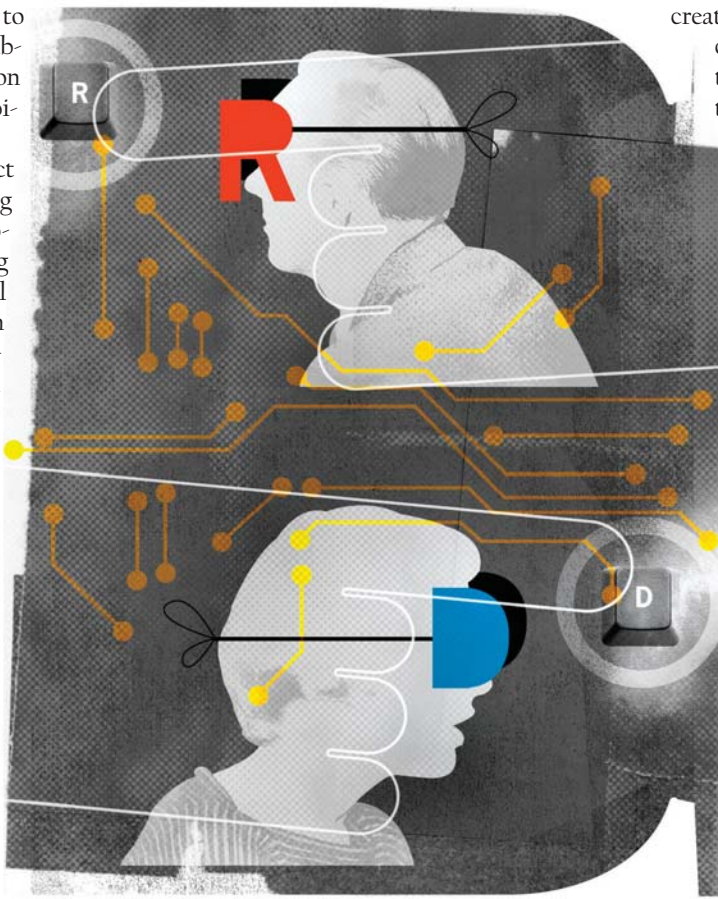


some conservatives were open to same-sex civil unions. Post-deliberation, the diversity of views on all three issues dropped precipitously.

Sunstein found a similar effect within juries, and even among federal judges on courts of appeals panels. When comparing the voting records of judicial appointees, the split between Democratic- or Republican-appointed judges increased from 10 percent on mixed panels to 30 percent on panels consisting exclusively of single-party appointees.

These findings suggest, he says, that free speech is not enough to ensure a healthy democracy. Important as well are “unchosen serendipitous, sometimes disliked encounters with diverse ideas and topics,” as well as “shared communications experiences that unify people across differences.” Public spaces such as city parks and sidewalks provide the “architecture of serendipity” that fosters chance encounters with a “teeming diversity” of ideas. Newspapers, magazines, television, and radio—which Sunstein calls the “great general-interest intermediaries”—played a similar role in the twentieth century. “If you are reading a daily newspaper, not online, the real thing,” he says, “chances are your eyes will come across a photo-



graph or a headline that will attract your interest, produce curiosity, make you read maybe a paragraph, and eventually an article and conceivably change your life”—the sort of thing your Google News feed filters out.

The shared “general-interest intermediaries” not only exposed readers to diverse topics and points of view, but

created “a shared experience, a social glue,” Sunstein believes. In their absence, the current system of self-sorting—only 2 percent of Daily Kos readers, for example, are self-identified Republicans—diminishes the serendipity that alerts us to “the occasional, maybe infrequent legitimacy of the concerns of our fellow citizens.”

Yet the “new technologies here are more opportunity than threat,” Sunstein suggests, “and what is limiting the realization of the opportunity is the absence of relevant ideals in the minds of the people who are using and developing and innovating [these] technologies.” For a partial solution to the problem, he says, Americans must “recover our constitutional aspirations as citizens and as providers of information.” While not denying market pressures—“the information we receive is a product of what information we demand”—Sunstein advises seeing the notion of the “daily me” as “a kind of science-fiction story rather than as a utopian ideal.” And, he says, we should create twenty-first-century equivalents of the kinds of public spaces and institutions where diverse people will congregate.

—JONATHAN SHAW

#### SUBVERTING STEREOTYPES

## Laughing at Slavery

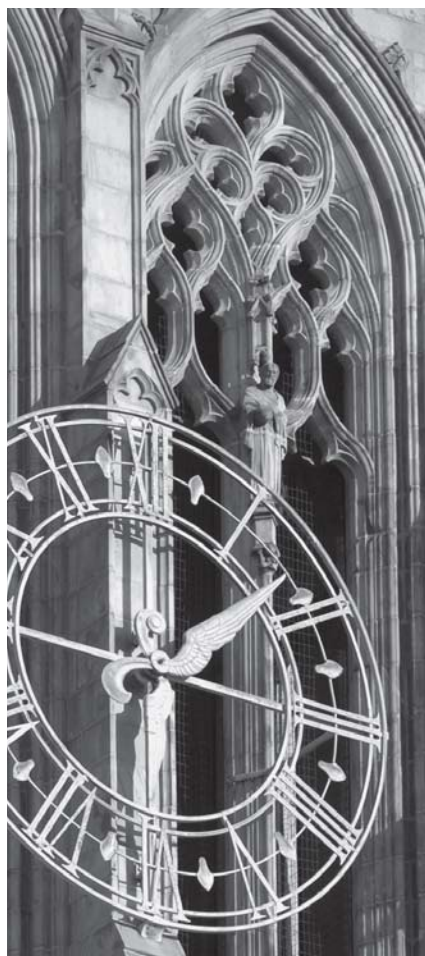
IN HIS 1997 book *Rock This!* the black comedian Chris Rock sends up the “Uncle Tom” stereotype of a subservient African American who kowtows to the majority culture. Rock affectionately describes his gay uncle, whose name is Tom. “We call him Aunt Tom,” he writes, adding, “I love my Aunt Tom. I know that if I was in a fight, Aunt Tom would take off his pumps and whip some ass.”

This example appears in *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*, a new book by Glenda Carpio, associate professor of African and African American studies and of English. The book—six years in the making—describes how slavery has provided both a backdrop and a wellspring of raw material for much African-American humor.

Some of the book’s examples are hilarious, others disturbing, but the analysis is

dead serious throughout. “I don’t treat humor lightly, though I enjoy it,” Carpio says. She shows how black comedians, artists, and writers have “conjured” slavery-based stereotypes and themes, resurrecting images, characters, and events from the past to re-examine them in the present, often through the lens of comic imagination, to transform deep suffering into cathartic laughter and insight.

The comedian Dave Chappelle, for example, once played the slave Kunta Kinte in a parody of the 1977 miniseries *Roots* during an episode of his *Chappelle’s Show* (formerly on Comedy Central). “[A]s Kunta, he receives interminable lashes for refusing his new, slave name,” Carpio



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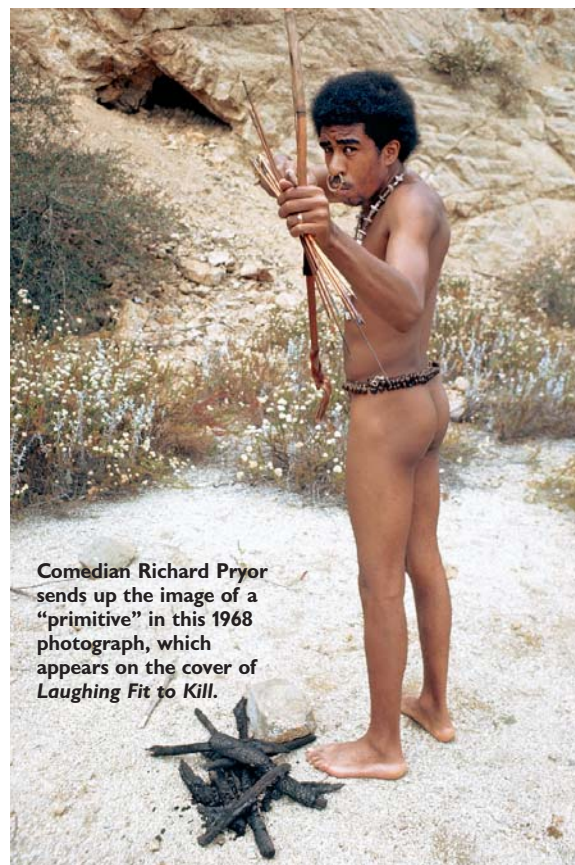
writes. "But just as the lashing begins to become unbearable, Chappelle's Kunta suddenly frees himself from the post to which he is tied, runs to the overseer, and proceeds to beat him. 'What did I tell you about getting out of hand!' yells Chappelle, turning his back to reveal the thick padding that protected him from the lashes all along.

"Chappelle employs classic post-modern techniques to measure the distance from his subject," the passage continues. "Not only are his scenes representations of representations, but they also flaunt their seams, thus bringing attention to the process of making fiction while commenting on the overt familiarity of the scenes they parody."

Besides discussing modern comic artists such as Chappelle and Richard Pryor, Carpio ranges back to seminal black fiction writers like William Wells Brown (1814-1884) and Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932). *Laughing Fit to Kill* also conducts probing analyses of several major figures, including modern painter Robert Colescott, visual artist Kara Walker, novelist Ishmael Reed, and dramatist Suzan-Lori Parks, who, in 2002, became the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama, for her play *Topdog/Underdog*. "I wanted to make the connection between high and low, polite and popular culture," Carpio explains, "to show how the legacy of slavery is treated from both ends."

She also writes to "critique the knee-jerk reaction we have to stereotypes, that they are simply bad," Carpio says. "They're also seductive. Artists invite us to examine why stereotypes persist, and to consider the power they have. We protest against them, but something is keeping them alive. The conjuring artist says, 'I'm going to bring these things fully alive in front of you, and make them bigger and louder and get you to ask what it is that drives these stereotypes.' The major ideology of slavery—that the human body is a commodity—persists in the marketability of racial stereotypes now."

Even a figure with the gravitas of Frederick Douglass "was a really good mimic," Carpio says. "In his lectures, he could imitate the slaveholders and the mockery they made of basic human institutions like marriage and family—fathering chil-



Comedian Richard Pryor sends up the image of a "primitive" in this 1968 photograph, which appears on the cover of *Laughing Fit to Kill*.

dren they would then own." Douglass eventually gave up such burlesques in the years just before the Civil War.

In 2005, Chappelle made a very different renunciation, but one that may have drawn on similar principles. His show had been a huge commercial success: the DVD of its first season sold more than three million copies, setting a record for a television program. Yet Chappelle turned down a \$50-million offer from Comedy Central to write and perform two more seasons. "He was worried that the audiences were not laughing in a critical way—that they were just consuming these stereotypes, not thinking about them," Carpio explains. "Sometimes people don't get the humor—that's a huge risk that artists who trade in stereotypes take. I'm interested in artists who take those risks."

"People see African-American humor as a folk expression," she continues. "They don't see it as an art form. Scholars might use sophisticated analytic tools to study the humor of, say, Samuel Beckett, but they drop all those tools when they turn to black humor. The notion is that black humor is not creative, it's just folk stories handed down. I wanted to take a sophisticated approach to the artistry of black humor."

—CRAIG LAMBERT

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