“(It) Shouldn’t Be Funny But You Can’t Help But Laugh”: Black Twitter, #TweetLikeThe1600s, and Black Humor Online

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Abstract
In May 2014, comedian Leslie Jones faced backlash after making a joke about slavery during an episode of Saturday Night Live. During the “Weekend Update” sketch of the show, Jones, a Black woman, emphasized that although she was single now, she would have been a hot commodity during slavery. She added that after being hooked up with “the best brother on the plantation” by her massa, she would be popping out “superbabies” every 9 months. Although the show is known for testing the limits of comedy and poking fun at everything, Jones was criticized for making light of such a serious topic. In early 2018, however, Black Twitter picked up right where Jones left off and slavery became a topic of amusement online. Using words, gifs, memes, and videos, users reimagined the lives of enslaved African Americans during the 1600s in a comical manner. This online exchange was marked by the #TweetLikeThe1600s hashtag and went in a series of directions. In what follows, I locate the hashtag in a longer tradition of Black humor as well as analyze subsequent discussions about who is allowed in on the joke. Beyond the jokes themselves, these smaller and supplementary discourses inform my engagement with the subject.

Keywords
Black Twitter, humor, social media

Black American humor began as a wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community.

—Glenda R. Carpio

In May 2014, comedian Leslie Jones faced backlash after making a joke about slavery during an episode of Saturday Night Live. During the “Weekend Update” sketch of the show, Jones, a Black woman, emphasized that although she was single now, she would’ve been a hot commodity during slavery. She added that after being hooked up with “the best brother on the plantation” by her massa, she would be popping out “superbabies” every 9 months. Although the show is known for testing the limits of comedy and poking fun at everything, Jones was criticized for making light of such a serious topic. In early 2018, however, Black Twitter picked up right where Jones left off and slavery became a topic of amusement online. Using words, gifs, memes, and videos, users reimagined the lives of enslaved African Americans during the 1600s in a comical manner. This online exchange was marked by the #TweetLikeThe1600s hashtag and went in a series of directions. In what follows, I locate the hashtag in a longer tradition of Black humor as well as analyze subsequent discussions about who is allowed in on the joke. Beyond the jokes themselves, these smaller and supplementary discourses inform my engagement with the subject.

“Black Twitter”
Prior to analyzing the contents of the hashtag and its implications, a general understanding of Black Twitter is necessary. I rely on scholarly discourse on Black Twitter to define it, though, as Sarah Florini (2014) states, “there is no ‘Black Twitter’. What does exist are millions of Black users on Twitter networking, connecting, and engaging with others

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who have similar concerns, experiences, tastes and cultural practices. Black people are not a monolith” (p. 3). My interest in defining the indefinable, however, has more to do with understanding what a phenomenon Black Twitter is. Andre Brock (2020) proposes that

Black Twitter is Twitter’s mediation of Black cultural identity, expressed through digital practices and informed by cultural discourses about Black everyday life… an online gathering (not quite a community) of Twitter users who identify as Black and employ Twitter features to perform Black discourses, share Black cultural commonplaces, and build social affinities. While there are a number of non-Black and people of color Twitter users who have been “invited to the cookout,” so to speak, participating in Black Twitter requires a deep knowledge of Black culture, commonplaces, and digital practices. (p. 82)

Taken together, Black Twitter refers to the substantial Black presence on Twitter which rejects any generalization of all Black users but allows them to be distinct from a generic user generally presumed to be White.

Black American interests and culture on Twitter are often directly associated with trending topics, a feature that highlights what many users are talking about, and hashtags, which serves as a feature to organize and filter tweets by topic. The latter especially plays a part in the discovery of Black Twitter. Brock (2012) posits that “Black Twitter hashtag domination of the Trending Topics allowed outsiders to view Black discourse that was (and still is) unconcerned with the mainstream gaze” (p. 534). The use of certain hashtags allows users to talk about the same things without following each other. Sanjay Sharma (2012) designates or introduces the use of what she calls “Blacktags.” Blacktags are distinct because “the tag itself and/or its associated content appears to connote ‘Black’ vernacular expression in the form of humor and social commentary. Blacktags take the form of concatenated American-English words and slang, expressive of everyday racialized interests and concerns” (Sharma, 2012, p. 51). Blacktags are specialized hashtags that speak to Black vernacular expressions and experiences. They are differentiated from mainstream hashtags which make them easier to find and deploy. The use of a Blacktag is just one of the ways that racialized identities can be performed and perceived on social media. Black identity performance can include corporeal signifiers relayed through user avatars, but these types of signifiers can be concealed or falsely presented. Online displays of affiliation with a community can be achieved through numerous means, one of which is signifyin’.

Sarah Florini (2014) posits that Black users perform their identity through displays of “cultural competence and other cultural modes of interaction such as ‘signifyin’” (p. 2). Signifyin’ has been a long practice in Black oral traditions and serves as a linguistic expression of Black identity on numerous levels. It represents various Black American oral traditions such as woofing, marking, playing the dozens, sounding, loud talking, and others. Online, it has a different function.

Signifyin’ serves as an interactional framework that allows Black Twitter users to align themselves with Black oral traditions, to index Black cultural practices, to enact Black subjectivities, and to communicate shared knowledge and experience. Signifyin’ generally involves elements of humor and displays of wit . . . Even at its most lighthearted, signifyin’ is a powerful resource for signaling racial identity, allowing Black Twitter users to perform their racial identities 140 characters at a time. (2014, p. 2)

As Florini states, the practice of signifyin’ enables Black users to perform their racial identity in addition to any corporeal signifiers that can be deciphered from their profile. Signifyin’ in tweets through word or gif choice allows other users to relate and display a degree of cultural competency that exists offline.

The use of specific hashtags, Black vernacular, and other Black cultural expressions via signifyin’ are tools that enable individual users to move from intimate community settings to a larger group. Meredith Clark (2014) argues that without this active participation leading to cultural conversations, Black Twitter would not be possible. Clark describes a six-stage process that sets Black Twitter in motion:

It requires: 1) self-selection by users who 2) identify as Black and/or are connected to issues of concern among Black communities. It moves from the individual level of personal communities to collective action among thematic nodes via the 3) performance of communicative acts that are 4) affirmed online and 5) re-affirmed offline, leading to 6) vindication of the network’s power through media coverage, attempted replication of the phenomenon within other demographic groups, and the creation of that hashtags serve as mediators of Black culture in the virtual and physical worlds. (p. 87)

Each stage feeds into the other and, Clark asserts, is not necessarily linear. This process highlights the role and agency of users who identify with or connect to the Black community and opt into Black Twitter, performing in a way that is additive to the larger community and moving beyond their intimate network. These online performances (the tweets and their content) are then affirmed both online and offline. Further vindication is also given by other outside forces (like this article). Overall, this process is important to understanding how users and their behavior become part of a collective.

It is also important to note that Black Twitter users are also aware of their participation in the larger network. Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2010) assert that generally, users on Twitter assume an imagined audience and navigate it as they tweet and engage with other users. Every mediated conversation and communicative act has a sense of audience and
on social media users can “write their audience into being” (p. 116). Marwick and boyd also argue that users carefully construct a self-image and maintain a sense of authenticity. The audience imagined or identified with is not essentializing though. They write that users write different tweets to target different people (e.g. audiences) rather than creating entirely separate, discrete audiences through the use of multiple identities or accounts, users address multiple audiences through a single account, conscious of potential overlap among their audiences. (p. 120)

Users can have an “ideal” audience in mind— one that shares their perspective and will appreciate what they have to say. Black twitter is one such audience. Those who, as Clark states, “self-select” tweet certain things with Black Twitter as their imagined audience, and when this active interaction is reciprocated, Black Twitter is reinforced and sustained. For the purposes of this article, this added context is crucial as it draws connections from individual jokes users made to the larger network known as Black Twitter under #TweetLikeThe1600s.

#TweetLikeThe1600s
#TweetLikeThe1600s (see Note 1) began trending at the very end of January 2018. Black Twitter users used the hashtag to joke about different things from running away from slave plantations to the illiteracy of enslaved African Americans. Retweeted 15.4k times, one user wrote, “When you try to escape on one of Massa horses but the horse is racist too #TweetLikeThe1600s.” A video also accompanied the tweet and in it, a White woman is seen riding a horse that suddenly flips back, throwing her on the ground and crushing her under their back (Figure 1). The horse’s behavior is not explained. Another tweeted, “Harriet Tubman: I only got one spot left . . . best dancer gets to come to the north” #TweetlikeThe1600s and attached was a 56-second video of two Black teenagers engaging in a playful dance battle (Figure 2). Another user wrote, “When you & the squad finally escape from the plantation 🎥 #Tweetlikethe1600s” (Figure 3). The tweet included a video of 15+ Black teenagers energetically dancing in a parking lot, one with a stereo held above his head. These users discuss thinking about, attempting, and successfully running away from their enslavement. One even mentions Harriet Tubman who successfully escaped slavery and is celebrated for going back and bringing back more enslaved people to freedom. Running away was a serious crime and very dangerous, but the text and accompanying videos provide comic relief on the subject.

Users also joked about potentially violent situations. One user tweeted, “When massa tell you to make him a drink and walks in on you poisoning him #tweetlike1600s,” including a gif of rapper Drake, looking flabbergasted and fumbling while pouring a canned drink into a styrofoam cup (Figure 4). Another wrote, “#tweetlike1600s Massa: do that little field dance for me Slave: I only got one spot left . . . best dancer gets to come to the north” with a gif of what appears to be an older Black woman in a long dress, headscarf, and heels dancing (Figure 5). These tweets insinuate threats of violence in retaliation to poisoning and refusal to comply with the demands of the master. Another user tweeted, “when the midwives deliver massa’s baby and it’s got some melanin to it #tweetlike1600s” with a gif of two Black girls looking shocked (Figure 6). This last tweet insinuates the potential sexual relationship between a Black male slave and the wife of his master which would’ve been taboo. Rather than indulging in the menacing reality of the situations, these users engage in a comedic tone. In addition, the retweets, comments, and likes suggest that there are others in on the joke.

Black Humor
In Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery, Glenda R. Carpio posits that historically, Black humor had to be cloaked in secrecy because it could be seen as transgressive by Whites. This humor could be punished by...
violence. Black humor still had to fall into the parameters of the social conditions where Whites assumed their superiority. Carpio argues that despite the life-threatening injunctions against black laughter, African American humor flourished, at first under the mask of allegory and increasingly in more direct forms. It developed a Janus-face identity: on the one hand, it was a fairly nonthreatening form that catered to whites' belief in inferiority of blacks but that usually masked aggression; on the other, it was a more assertive and acerbic humor that often targeted racial justice that was generally reserved for in-group interactions. For black Americans, humor often functioned as a way of affirming their humanity in the face of its violent denial. By most accounts, African American humor, like other humor that arises from oppression, has provided a balm, a release of anger and aggression, a way of coping with the painful consequences of racism. (Carpio, 2008, p. 5)

Given the context from which it emerged, African American humor is uniquely positioned, and, Carpio asserts, linked to three major theories of humor: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory. Relief theory was made popular by Freud and posits that humor is used to release pent-up aggression. Under the conditions of slavery, lynching, social segregation, and discrimination, African Americans could use tendentious jokes that masked aggression. Superiority theory assumes that individuals laugh at the misfortune of others. The Black cultural and oral tradition of signifyin’ discussed earlier fits this theory. The last theory, incongruity theory, suggests that individuals laugh when their expectations are somehow disturbed. This theory questions the way we usually see things and can push our buttons. For Carpio, this theory is important because it allows us to see beyond Black humor as solely a coping mechanism but that it “has been and continues to be both a bountiful source of creativity and pleasure and an energetic mode of social and political critique” (p. 7). All three theories position Black humor as one that serves as a means of managing and dealing with hidden aggression, interacts with a larger African American tradition, and unlocks a level of creativity useful for social critique.

Although Carpio’s analysis of Black humor focuses on literary work like Flight to Canada, plays, and the comedic performances of Richard Pryor and more contemporary...
comedians such as Dave Chappelle, what she underlines in each iteration of this rich comedic tradition is the prevalence of slavery as a theme. The institution of slavery is innately violent and wouldn’t initially seem to be a topic of amusement; however, it becomes a subject of humor through tragi-comedy where “laughter is disassociated from gaiety and is, instead a form of mourning” (p. 7). Carpio insists on the exploration of an eviscerating humor, one that is bawdy, brutal, horrific, and insurgent and that does not take as its subject the tragedy of slavery per se. Rather, it pillories the ideologies and practices that supported slavery and that, in different incarnations, continue to support racist practices. Yet, a moralizing discourse it is not. Debunking the all too familiar dichotomies of slavery—master and slave, oppressor and oppressed, enslavement and freedom—the humor that . . . exposes how racial conflict, and the obsessive ways that it colonizes American minds, can divest everyone albeit at different registers, of a sense of reality. (p. 7)

The claim that slavery can be symbolically redressed through Black humor depends on the time in which it’s being enacted, but the possibility for redress exists. On the Dave Chappelle show, for example, slavery is redressed in a skit called “The Time Haters—Great Misses.” During the skit, a quartet of time-traveling men dressed like pimps go back to the time of slavery. When asked by the slave owner why they were there, Chappelle responds that they came to call him a “cracker.” One pimp runs in fear of being a slave, but the others take time to talk back to the slave owner and make fun of his whip, which is no match for the gun that Chappelle flaunts. Chappelle, referencing George Jefferson of The Jeffersons television show, calls the slave owner a “honky” and later shoots him to free the slaves.¹⁰ This skit aired in the early 2000s, far removed from the antebellum period. Chappelle can incorporate humor that humiliates the slave owner in ways that actual enslaved people would not have
been able to. In addition, he incorporates humor from black comedians in 1970s to further the jokes.

Since the institution of slavery was legally disbanded, many moves have been made to address and cope with it. These included legal remedies such as reparations and grief over the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and other racist practices. These expressions of grief fueled the desire for radical social transformation in movements throughout the 20th century but, Carpio asserts, “grief need not always be expressed in traditional forms of lament” (p. 11). The Blues serves as an example of this tragicomic mode and Black humor is another. Carpio’s analysis helps me think through how Black humor has the potential to combine the “power of humor as cathartic release and politically incisive mode of critique with deep pathos” (p. 11).

Simon Weaver (2010), in his exploration of Black, African American, and Afro-Caribbean comedians in the United Kingdom and the United States, considers Black humor as a form of reverse humor. He defines reverse humor as a

Discourse or an element of a discourse whose etymology can be traced, often in a quite evident manner, to an earlier discourse that uses identical signs but which employs these signs for a reverse semantic effect. It is a discourse that is produced, situated and directed in clear opposition to the racist meaning of the earlier discourse. This reverse semantic focus or change of “direction” is created by a change in the social dynamics of the speaker, and the audience or reader, which amounts to a change of context. (p. 32)

Weaver, like Carpio, considers how Black humor redresses racist stereotypes in a manner that reverses the denotive meaning. Weaver concludes that this reverse comic discourse adds another semantic layer to the rhetorical structure of humor and can function as a form of resistance. The hashtag remains consistent with this interpretation of Black humor.

#TweetLikeThe1600s specifically engaged with slave stereotypes with a cathartic sense of humor similar to the Black comedic tradition. Jokes about the heroic runaway slave, the lascivious slave master/mistress, the Mandingo, the Jezebel/ Sapphire, as well as the Mammy and Uncle Tom figure rely on historical stereotypes about African Americans that emerged during and after slavery. In her analysis, Carpio states that Black humorists confront rather than avoid stereotypes and their legacy:

Through parody and caricature, and invoking the practices of conjure, these artists set stereotypes in disturbing motion. They inhabit the imaged, exaggerate them, and dislocate them from their habitual contexts. Certainly, the act of “appropriating a language of stereotypes in order to undermine the dominant order is an age old device employed by persecuted groups to subvert the status quo.” (Carpio, 2008, p. 13)

Through tweeting, these stereotypes are similarly conjured up, embodied, and set in motion. Racial stereotypes evoke a lot of emotions—shame, anger, desire and embarrassment—to name a few. Engaging with them is risky because of all these contradictory feelings, but the cathartic approach of humor allows emotions associated with the stereotypes to be released through laughter. Furthermore, the use of stereotypes by the groups they are supposed to represent can potentially subvert dominant modes of thinking. Laughing at the stereotypes defies the feelings of shame and grief that would be brought up in a different context.

What emerges from this kind of redress and catharsis, evident in both Simon and Carpio’s analysis, is a style of humor connected to what Joseph Boskin (1997) uses to describe the Black comedic tradition and calls “resistance humor.” Boskin writes that

Three and a half centuries of oppression produced a particular style of resistance humor that entwined defiance, cunning, inventiveness, and retaliation. Stories, anecdotes, jokes, and pranks record black counteractions to oppression and also provide insight into the character of the oppression itself. (p. 147)

Boskin’s analysis is, like Carpio’s, historical in scope and connects Black folklore with contemporary Black comedians who all engage in humor that addresses their inferior position in society through joking. This is an act of resistance to a dominant oppressive discourse that would only fuel feelings of anger. Corliss Outley et al. (2021), in their engagement with Black Twitter humor during the COVID-19 pandemic, position Black oral and written traditions as a means to direct rage at oppressive structures and the people, institutions, and events that maintain them. They argue that humor became a mode of resistance which “enabled Blacks to critique the racial caste system, and its subsequent oppression, as well as instill kinship ties and strengthen cultural identity” (p. 306). Humor in digital spaces does the same, continuing as a quotidian form of resistance that can destroy oppressive structures and social hierarchies.

It is not my intention to presume that Black Twitter users log on, take into consideration the large history of Black humor, and tweet accordingly, rather I locate #TweetLikeThe1600s as a manifestation and iteration of this comedic tradition. This move places it in conversation with historical examples of Black resistance humor and the Saturday Night Live (SNL) sketch included at the beginning of this article. The hashtag functions within the tragicomic mode, combining the harsh realities of slavery with a cathartic sense of humor. It does not make light of this past or reify the legacy of White supremacy—it laughs in the face of it. It deals with any anger and grief about slavery via the creative capabilities of Twitter. Each user, tweet, comment, retweet, and like coalesce to a comedic gesture that aligns with Black humor more broadly. Equally important, the connection between the tradition of Black comedy and #TweetLikeThe1600s indicates how who can laugh at the joke becomes an important part of the conversation.
Who’s Allowed to Laugh?

While much of the tweets under #TweetLikeThe1600s include the jokes themselves, some users engaged with the tweet to clarify who could and could not join in on the joke. One user wrote, “#TweetLikeThe1600s these jokes are only funny when BLACK people do them, do ya’ll hear me WHITE folks?”12 (Figure 7). Another user overtly stated that White people were not allowed to make jokes with the hashtag at all.13 The notion that there is a private joke being shared is critical to Black humor and enforces group boundaries. Carpio emphasizes that stereotype-derived humor was a staple of in-group interactions in many African American communities and that jokes of this kind lead to questions on who is allowed to tell the joke and who is allowed to laugh. In addition, Boskin (1997) maps the desegregation of clubs as a moment where, through the performance of Black comics, “jokes that would have been restricted to the inner confines of the Black community made their way to white ears” (p. 155), again carving out a distinction between jokes made inside a group that are then available to the mainstream.

Steven C. Dubin (1987) explores the potential humor of objects that depict African Americans in a stereotypical manner. He contends that there is a “necessity for those in an inferior position to use joking behavior to adjust to—not significantly alter—intolerable aspects of their lives that are structured socially” (Dubin 1987, p. 131). Thus, joking behavior safely occurs within and among the in-group which in this case would be African Americans. In the tweets described above, users respond to white users engaging with the tweet because, given their subject position, White users would be making jokes from the perspective of slave owners. The joking behavior between Whites and Blacks in #TweetLikeThe1600s does not fit Dubin’s (1987) framing. In the context of slavery, African Americans held the inferior social position and Whites the superior, so the joking does not have the same implications for safety or adjustment that it has when African Americans joke with each other. White users’ engagement with the hashtag cannot achieve the same kind of cathartic emotion embedded in the Black comedic tradition because they represent the dominant group reifying their dominance again.

This conversation on group boundaries was replicated when some users branched off from #TweetLikeThe1600s and created #TweetLikeTheHolocaust. Similar to the #TweetLikeThe1600s tweets and slavery, users joked about the holocaust: ovens and gas chambers in concentration camps, Hitler, and Jews hiding from the German police to evade capture. Users began to criticize those using the hashtag. One user tweeted, “Whole lot of definitely non-Jewish folks cracking jokes using #TweetLikeTheHolocaust. If you’re not Jewish, I really don’t see why you feel it’s ok to be saying any of this. It’s not your experience to joke about.”14 (Figure 8). Another stated that “The #TweetLikeThe1600s is fucked up but it’s ‘our’ history to laugh at. Y’all really reaching with this #TweetLikeTheHolocaust shit though,” emphasizing group boundaries by arguing that non-Jewish people had no right to crack jokes because it was not their experience.15 Another tweeted that they wouldn’t participate in #TweetLikeTheHolocaust because it wasn’t their history to joke about. The same user questioned how Black users could be upset at White users joking about slavery and not find fault in joking about the Holocaust themselves.16 Opposingly, one user claimed that because Black, homosexual, Polish, and other minority groups were also killed in the Holocaust, some non-Jewish users were justified in their engagement with the hashtag.17 These tweets highlight once again the policing of who is allowed to laugh and make jokes due to inclusion in the oppressed group involved. Those who are privileged and/or belong to an adjacent oppressed group can perhaps laugh but they cannot take part in joke-making at the expense of a group they do not belong to. Both hashtags and their subsequent discourses affirm the importance of group identification regarding jokes derived from stereotypes and the historical past.

Ironically, after receiving harsh criticism for the joke, Leslie Jones tweeted her response to critics, stating that they had missed the real joke and that she would “go harder and deeper.”18 As a Black comedian, Jones and her humor was misunderstood. Both Jones’ performance and #TweetLikeThe1600s demonstrate the tradition of Black comedy which redresses and reverses racial stereotypes—particularly in the context of
slavery. #TweetLikeThe1600s discusses slavery of the sixteenth century in 21st-century terms. Rather than performing their humor on a late-night comedy show, Black Twitter users did so with gifs, memes, videos, and texts on Twitter. Unknown to them, their joking behavior about slavery was befitting of a much broader Black comedic tradition throughout parts of the Black diaspora. The trending hashtag does not flesh out and critique slavery as other comedians may have, it instead humorously reimagines it in a manner detached from grief. This comedic expression and #TweetLikeTheHolocaust also outline how in-group humor differs from out-group humor. More contemporary examples of trending hashtags like #NiggerNavy, #WW3, and the discourse of late 2020 that Black people would gain superpowers on December 21st demonstrates that Black Twitter is an online space that fosters community through humor. The larger question surrounding the SNL incident and this hashtag study is whether a traumatic past can ever be funny. The fact that #TweetLikeThe1600s was trending means that some would say it can—at least on Twitter.

Author’s Note
I borrow my title from a tweet from a user who wrote, “When you know #tweetlike1600s shouldn’t be funny but you can’t help but laugh.”

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