



Honey, Hush!

AN ANTHOLOGY OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S HUMOR

EDITED BY DARYL CUMBER DANCE

FOREWORD BY NIKKI GIOVANNI

Honey, Hush!

AN ANTHOLOGY OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S
HUMOR

Edited by Daryl Cumber Dance

FOREWORD BY NIKKI GIOVANNI



W. W. NORTON & COMPANY
NEW YORK LONDON

Copyright © 1998 by Daryl Cumber Dance
Foreword copyright © 1998 by Nikki Giovanni

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all the copyright notices,
pages 665–73 constitute an extension of the copyright page.

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

The text of this book is composed in Bembo
with the display set in Stuyvesant Open
Composition and manufacturing by the Haddon Craftsmen, Inc.
Book design by Chris Welch

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Honey, hush! : an anthology of African American women's humor / edited
by Daryl Cumber Dance ; foreword by Nikki Giovanni.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-39304557-9

1. Afro-American wit and humor. 2. American wit and humor—
Women authors. I. Dance, Daryl Cumber.

PN6231.N5H66 1997

817.008'09287'08996073—dc21 97-6772

CIP

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10110
<http://www.wwnorton.com>

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., 10 Coptic Street, London WC1A 1PU

3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

Money, Hush!

OTHER WORKS BY DARYL CUMBER DANCE

Shuckin' and Jivin': Folklore from Contemporary Black Americans

Folklore from Contemporary Jamaicans

Fifty Caribbean Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical and Critical Sourcebook

Long Gone: The Mecklenburg Six and the Theme of Escape in Black Folklore

New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian Writers

Dedicated to the memory of three generations of supportive
women with whom I have shared love and laughter:

My grandmother, Sallie Brown Bell Brown (1875–1952),

My aunts, Emma Cumber Slade (1909–1960)
and Sarah Jacqueline Cumber Jenkins (1917–1991),

and

My dear friend, Clara Deese Lewis (1936–1994)

Foreword

EVEN NOW, HOORAY FOR THE BLACK WOMAN

Nikki Giovanni

I am a huge fan of the Black woman. I never hesitate to recommend her when times are bad or things go wrong. One of the reasons I personally like the word “Black” not as a description but as a sociological term is that we all can be Black women. In any given room everyone from blonde to redhead to silver-haired to bald can be a Black woman. Even a room full of men would benefit from saying once or twice a day to themselves, “I’m a Black woman; I can do anything.” Oh sure, you laugh, who would want to be a Black woman if they didn’t have to be? And that is my point exactly. If you could be anything at all without penalty or punishment why wouldn’t you want to be a Black woman?

We are the folk who took rotten peaches and made cobbler; we took pieces of leftover cloth and made quilts; we took the entrails of pigs and cleaned them and rinsed them in cold water until the water ran clear then

chopped up onions, shredded some red peppers, dropped a few fresh bay leafs and one large whole peeled potato in the pot to let it simmer over the open fire until we returned from the fields so that our families would have a hot meal at the end of the day. Every time something was taken away we took something else and made it work.

They took our language we made folk tales; they took our religion we took the Bible stories; they wouldn't let us waltz that was okay 'cause we could shimmy shimmy like my sister Kate. They withheld societal approval but we didn't care cause we looked to ourselves for our validation. And even now when Clarence Thomas lied on his sister whose only crime was to stay home and take care of the aunt who took care of them; when Bob Dole accepted medical help from the United States government as his due from his service as a soldier; when Newt Gingrich had his wife sign divorce papers favorable to him while she was receiving care for cancer; even now when the men who divorce and desert the women and children who have loved and served them well—we who understand the trials and tribulations of being women, let alone Black women, we find a way to laugh because we know that the only way to win this battle of life and liberty is with the pursuit of happiness. We find a way to get together with our green beans that need breaking or our dried beans that need picking through; our soaps for washing hair and hot combs for getting the kinks out; our files to smooth our fingernails or calluses on our feet and we talk about the world and how it won't defeat us. No way. 'Cause we start with that belly laugh and tears roll down our cheeks; we throw up our hands and all is right with the world.

Who wouldn't want to be a Black woman knowing nothing can defeat the indomitable spirit that is determined to love and laugh? Who can help but be a fan of the greatest, most wonderful creature on the planet. And when things are not going well with you, why not gather a few friends, fry a chicken or two and sit around a table saying: "I am a Black woman. I am the best thing on Earth." Then laughing your foolish head off. Yeah. We're wonderful. Honey, Hush!

Introduction

FUNNY

Sometimes laughter erupts
from deep volcanic soul space
surprising solemn moments like
blue crocuses in spring snow

—Nagueyalti Warren, from *Lodestar and Other Night Lights*

If there is any one thing that has brought African American women whole through the horrors of the middle passage, slavery, Jim Crow, Aunt Jemima, the welfare system, integration, the O.J. Simpson trial, and Newt Gingrich, it is our humor. If there is any one thing that has helped us to survive the broken promises, lies, betrayals, contempt, humiliations, and dehumization that have been our lot in this nation and often in our families, it is our humor. Humor has often been defined as “God’s aspirin to soothe the headache of reality.” The formula for humor is said to be tragedy plus time, or pain plus time. African American women may not have had much *time*—time to reflect and to achieve some distancing—but we have had our share of tragedy and pain, and often even in the *midst* of that pain, we have found the relieving balm of humor. Humor hasn’t been for us so much the cute, the whimsical, and the delightfully funny. Humor

for us has rather been a means of surviving as we struggled. We haven't been laughing so much because things tickle us. We laugh, as the old blues line declares, to keep from crying. We laugh to keep from dying. We laugh to keep from killing. We laugh to hide our pain, to walk gently around the wound too painful to actually touch. We laugh to shield our shame. We use our humor to speak the unspeakable, to mask the attack, to get a tricky subject on the table, to warn of lines not to be crossed, to strike out at enemies and the hateful acts of friends and family, to camouflage sensitivity, to tease, to compliment, to berate, to brag, to flirt, to speculate, to gossip, to educate, to correct the lies people tell on us, to bring about change. Ultimately we recognize, as Toni Morrison has written in *Jazz*, "that laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears."

The strength and creativity reflected in our humor is typical of a certain power that characterizes Black life in general—a power not only to cope and survive, but also to take the bitter lemons of our lives and make sweet lemonade. As Jessie Fauset has noted in her essay, "The Gift of Laughter," laughter has "its source in a wounded heart and in bleeding sensibilities. . . . The remarkable thing about this gift of [laughter] is that it has its rise . . . in the very woes which beset us." This is illustrated by numerous accounts in Patrice Gaines's *Laughing in the Dark*, including this brief summary of the banter among the women in her jail cell: "We went on like that for twenty minutes or so, talking shit, embellishing tales, joning, until we couldn't stand it anymore. Then we fell asleep, exhausted from our lies and our longings. We fell asleep contented too, in a way in which many of us had never been with our men. We gave each other laughter to help us through the night (117)."

As is obvious in Gaines's commentary, African American women's humor has been an *in-house* affair. There are a number of reasons that this humor was concealed from the public—especially the white public. One reason for this concealment was the requirement of "proper" behavior in the presence of whites. Thus raucous Negro behavior could not be allowed to offend the sensibilities of refined whites, especially white ladies. There is a popular old joke in the black community that Negroes in Southern towns were prohibited from laughing in the street. If they felt a laugh coming on, they had to rush and stick their heads into the laughing barrel marked "For colored" in order to protect whites from their loud, uproar-

ious, and corrupting behavior. But of course, as with the music, and the dancing, and the fashions, and the other kinds of “niggerish” behavior that were below the dignity of white folks, those who were touched were lost.

Another reason for the concealment of African American women’s humor is that it was not considered ladylike to tell jokes or even to laugh too loud publicly. The grandmother of Rita Dove’s protagonist in *Through the Ivory Gate* explains to her how a proper lady should laugh: “Hold your hand over your mouth . . . hold it straight and a little to the side, like you’re going to whisper something to someone next to you.” *Ladies* are supposed to be quiet and reserved. Jokes are something shared in *male* company, often too coarse for the sensitive and delicate ears of women. This was even more an issue for black women than for white women since African American women have always had to contend with white America’s derogatory image of them as laughing clowns, incapable of serious and tragic concerns. One wonders if this could possibly have anything to do with the popularity of an almost formulaic response to jokes, witty remarks, signifying comments and the like among black women, particularly Southern black women—“Honey, hush!” or “Hush yo’ fuss!” It really isn’t a suggestion that the person stop talking, but rather a friendly encouragement, a mild suggestion of playful disbelief, or a suggestion that one is telling truths that are prohibited.

Most of the public’s introduction to so-called “Negro humor” has come in literature, plays, and films presented from a white perspective, with black females being portrayed in the most obnoxious and demeaning stereotypical roles, usually as loud, raucous, clownish and bossy mammies and Aunt Jemimas, stupid coons, or rump-shaking, oversexed wenches and whores. These despicable images of black women were (along with equally reprehensible images of black males) integral in plantation school literature and were the central attraction of the popular minstrel and vaudeville stages. Originally all black roles in minstrels were played by white males in blackface. White women in blackface and black men (also in blackface) eventually were allowed to participate, but it was later that black women joined them on stage. Ironically Thelma and Marjorie White, the Caucasian stars in the first version of the musical comedy *Topsy and Eva* in 1920, were billed as “The White Sisters.” In the film version the popular white actress Mona Ray portrayed Topsy. To say that these and other white interpreta-

tions of black humor villified black men and women is an understatement, which can be verified by viewing *Ethnic Notions*, a documentary about racist stereotypes of blacks, produced by Marlon Riggs. Thus it was deemed necessary here as in other areas of their lives for black women to conceal their humor lest they lend credence to hated stereotypes perpetuated in white popular culture.

Despite all their efforts at concealment, I grew up believing that all black women were comediennes—at least of the “behind-the-closed-door” variety—for what I saw whenever the doors were safely closed was African American women laughing—laughing about their men, laughing about their hair, laughing about their white folk, laughing about their nation, laughing about their race. And even though much of this banter might be described as tragicomic, sarcastic, absurd or sick humor, their reflections and philosophizing and just plain bad-mouthing were always encased in hilarious jokes, witty proverbs, naughty blues, and in-your-face dozens that provoked raucous laughter in their gatherings. Now I knew that this comic image to which I was privy was rarely shared with the outside world, especially not the white world. Many of the most vocal of those provoking laughter would be the first to malign the “loud” black woman cracking jokes all the time and would whenever they were in public present the most sophisticated and reserved image imaginable.

Indeed this duality was first presented to me through my maternal grandmother and her friends. At church, on occasional trips to the city, even in the grocery store or the post office, they were as straightlaced as Queen Victoria herself. Soft-spoken, quiet, reserved, their public personae bore no similarity to the ladies whose repartee around the kitchen table or in their sun parlors or on their front porches so enthralled me. But upon their return to those private spaces, what a delight for me to witness their magical transformation and hear them laugh and joke and mimic everybody from the preacher to the President—big belly laughs, tears rolling down their cheeks, arms reaching out to slap a shoulder, screaming, “Pat, you know you lying,” or “Stop that, girl, before you have me rolling on the floor,” or “Lawd, help me before this woman makes me split my sides.” No obscene language or sexual innuendos entered these conversations, perhaps because even when they let their hair down in the privacy of their homes they were ever aware of their image as college-

educated descendants of Abraham¹ and wives of Harvard lawyers and respectable gentleman farmers, or perhaps it was just because they were aware of my presence on the edge of the porch or sneaking something out of the icebox or pretending I was reading on the living room sofa. They would, however, in this protected and private company, throw around that hated epithet that would never darken their conversation in public: “Nigger!”² And their ever-proper language would drift into a slight dialect despite their attacks on “those Niggers who sprinkle ‘aint’s’ throughout their speech or drop every ‘g’ as they murder the King’s English.”

When I remember being the fly on the wall during gatherings of my mother and her friends (which was a bit later in my life, when I was an adolescent and teen), their sessions were a bit more scurrilous, the language a bit more obscene, the subject matter often risqué. But their hen parties were always marked by a constant stream of comic tales, outrageous anecdotes, new jokes, naughty sayings, and comic retorts. And when my Aunt Geneva visited, there was screaming before she reached the front door and the play attacks began:

1. Abraham Brown, the legendary free black from whom most of the members of my community and church were descended, was a proud and prosperous landowner and an active participant in the life of the third oldest black church in the United States, which he helped to found, for which he donated the land, and which he represented in meetings of Virginia’s Dover Baptist Association from 1810 to 1823, rather an honor for a colored man of that day. His descendants, who include numerous prominent blacks, have always taken great pride in their distinguished forefather.

2. This term ranges in connotations from a term of endearment to a vilification, and it is used freely in conversations among many African Americans. Among upper-class blacks it tends more toward the pejorative. Blacks almost always consider “nigger” an offensive term when it is used by whites. Just how controversial the use of the term remains was suggested the day after I wrote the first draft of this chapter. The headline in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* for November 2, 1996 (three days before the election) reporting the debate between Senator John Warner and his challenger Mark Warner was “Black Aide’s Racial Slur Overshadows Debate.” In conversation with Paul Gillis, president of the Virginia State Conference of the NAACP, Senator John Warner’s African American aide had used the term “nigger,” as had, he contends, the NAACP official. However, the aide’s use of the term was the focus of the first question in the debate, and resulted in his immediate dismissal from Warner’s staff. The aide contended that he and the NAACP official had both used the term in a joking manner, and he (and other members of the NAACP who spoke about it afterward) regarded it as a discussion that should have remained between the blacks involved in the initial conversation.

“Girl, do I see a gray hair in your head?”

“Not unless my hairdresser wants to get her tail whipped, but what you doing signifying on me, your baby sister? I know I see a whole lotta gray hairs in your head, girl! Haven’t you ever met my friend, Lady Clairol?”

“Well, you know what they say, “Don’t pay any attention to the snow on the mountain, cause it’s still plenty fire in the furnace.”

“Honey, hush!”

And my mother’s friend, Mrs. Evelyn Cotman, was, I thought when I was growing up and *know* now beyond a shadow of a doubt, the most hilarious comedienne to be found anywhere. Everybody sought her out to hear her “lie.” Her comments, her responses, her gestures, her tales would literally have people rolling on the floor. Whatever I was doing, I would find some excuse to hang around when Aunt Geneva or Miss Evelyn was around—and even my efforts would be the cause of more humor:

“Chile, if you ever repeat what I said ’bout Ole Man———, I’ll whup yo’ ass good fo’ you.”

“Ronica, is this lil’ womanish gal gon’ sit here and hear us ole hens talk this trash?”

The friendly banter tinged with a few “colorful” (blue) words was, of course, a sign that I was being accepted as long as I remembered my place.

Similar scenarios continued through the years from my mother and her friends to my own generation, where humor has served to entertain, delight, heal, and create bonds for my friends and myself from elementary school through college and my adult life. And now I see myself in my daughter—a little shocked at the antics of some famous writer or doctor letting her hair down in a hen session, but trying to prove she’s woman enough to at least hang around the fringes. When I reflect on these sessions (which I rarely do—I simply enjoy them), I’m happy that my daughter and her peers are sharing this tradition which is an education in life, in being black women, in dealing with the world, in deflecting the threatening blows, in relating to men, and loving (or at least not hating) themselves as blackbrownbeigecreamdamnnearwhitewomen with straightcurlybushy-kinkylongdamnnearowntothewaistmediumshorthair and breasts and hips

of varied and sundry descriptions. I am happy that she is learning that laughter is not simply funny; it's serious medicine; it's righteous therapy. She who laughs . . . lasts.

Most African American women writers have been shaped by this “village” humor, though the earlier writers, fearful that they might reinforce stereotypes, were more restrained in revealing it than are their contemporary sisters. Still there are comic moments in many of the works of the early slave narrators, antebellum poets, and nineteenth-century novelists despite the fact that their primary tone is serious, tragic, and sentimental. Twentieth-century writers are much more freely reaching back to that traditional humor that has helped their mothers and their sisters to make it through the night, and are boldly and unabashedly using it to create a rich body of literature that frequently is characterized by its comic vein. The tone was set by Harlem Renaissance writer and personality Zora Neale Hurston, and continues with many of those established writers who have been on the scene for ten, twenty, thirty, forty, or more years, such as Dorothy West, Alice Childress, Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, Louise Meriwether, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Bambara, Ann Petry, Nikki Giovanni, Ntozake Shange, Gloria Naylor, and Carolyn Rodgers. And there are a whole host of more recent writers who promise us that we can continue to make it through the night. (Note that even their titles are often funny.) There are the hilarious essays in Bonnie Allen's *We Are Overcome* and Lisa Jones's *bulletproof diva*; there are the sometimes sidesplitting novels such as Tina McElroy Ansa's *Ugly Ways*, April Sinclair's *Coffee Will Make You Black* and *Ain't Gonna Be the Same Fool Twice*, Dori Sanders's *Her Own Place*, and Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*; there are the comic episodes in detective stories, such as Barbara Neely's *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* and Valerie Wilson Wesley's *Devils' Gonna Get Him*; there are the frequently uproarious autobiographies, such as Flo Kennedy's *Color Me Flo*, Bebe Moore Campbell's *Sweet Summer: Growing up with and without My Dad*, Jill Nelson's *Volunteer Slavery: My Authentic Negro Experience*, and the Delany Sister's *Having Our Say*; there are the humorous advice books that include Mother Love's *Listen Up, Girlfriends!* and Julia Boyd's *Girlfriend to Girlfriend: Everyday Wisdom and Affirmations from the Sister Circle*; and miscellaneous other works, such as Ruby Dee's *My One Good Nerve*—all represented in this anthology, along with a number of other previously unpublished talents.

Black female singers also traditionally introduced some humor into their acts; the routines and lyrics of artists such as Josephine Baker and Billie Holiday and all of the blues greats were often comic, as were the acts of vaudevillians such as Sweetie May of Stringbeans and Sweetie May and Susie of Butterbeans and Susie—but these performances were not considered appropriate for respectable audiences—a number of black people still regard blues and jazz and the like as sinful music and their performers as the disciples of the devil.

There were limited dramatic opportunities for those black actresses who at least appeared to play into the popular stereotypes of the comic mam-mies, coons, and jezebels, such as Hattie McDaniel, Louise Beavers, Ethel Waters, Josephine Baker, Butterfly McQueen, and Ernestine Wade (who played Sapphire on the *Amos n' Andy Show*). Many of these earlier comic actresses, forced into demeaning roles, nonetheless found ways to speak a dual tongue and to maintain some dignity and provide some depth to their performances, thereby rising above the stereotype and injecting some authentic and often ironic Negro humor into their characters. Offstage, they also humorously reflected on the irony of their situation. In response to those who attacked her for accepting roles as a maid, Hattie McDaniel is reported to have retorted, “I can either *play* a maid for two hundred dollars a day or work as a maid for two dollars!”

The opportunities for the development of comediennes has been even more difficult than those for actresses and writers because of attitudes toward women and humor as well as women performing in nightclubs. Notwithstanding these and other problems, a few brave female comediennes broke the ice, comics such as Moms Mabley, and later LaWanda Page and Flo Kennedy. Even current day comediennes still face a number of hostile audiences—male and female, black and white—who resent women dealing with and joking about issues that they find completely acceptable from male performers. Nonetheless a number of comics have found wide audiences and some are making big bucks—a group headed by Whoopi Goldberg and including Marsha Warfield, Kim Coles, Kim Wayans, Phyllis Stickney, and Hazelle.

But these writers, comic actresses, and stand-up comediennes are but the beneficiaries and transmitters of the tradition of African American women’s humor to the wider audience. The true creators, the authentic sources are to be found among the ordinary folk in the black communities where the

comic vision was planted and Jes Grew.³ And this vibrant folk tradition has been recorded by some collectors, including Zora Neale Hurston and myself.

Despite this rich history of humor in literature, on the stage, and in the folk tradition, African American women have been pretty much ignored in every kind of study of humor—American humor, women’s humor, African American humor. It’s not too much of an exaggeration to play on a previous observation and argue that insofar as treatments of humor are concerned, all the Americans are male WASPs, all the women are white, and all the African Americans are men. There are scores of studies of American humor; most barely mention either African American men or women; those that do often treat them as stereotypical objects of humor in white productions: Arthur Hudson’s two-volume *Humor of the Old Deep South* (1936), for example, has one chapter titled “Darkies,” with all of the selections taken from white authors—it apparently does not occur to him to look elsewhere for what he describes as “the authentic ‘corn field Negro.’” Stephen Gale’s 1988 *Encyclopedia of American Humorists*, which touts itself as “the most comprehensive and up-to-date reference text on American and Canadian humorists ever published” does not have one entry that I recognize as an African American woman.

There are scores of studies of varied aspects of American humor—sectional, thematic, etc.; here coverage of black women ranges from conspicuous absence in most to a paragraph or two in some (such as Ron Jenkins’s *Subversive Laughter*), to a rare reasonable inclusion such as that in Roy Blount’s *Book of Southern Humor*.

There are scores of treatments of women’s humor (and these are rather recent): most of them say nothing about black women, and others give them short shrift. For just a few examples, Regina Barreca’s *They Used to Call Me Snow White* gives one paragraph to black women; Gloria Kaufman and Mary Kay Blakely’s *Pulling Our Own Strings* includes two poems by Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez and a couple of brief selections from Flo Kennedy; Nancy Walker’s chapter on “The Humor of the Minority”

3. I play here on Ishmael Reed’s use of Jes Grew in *Mumbo Jumbo* (influenced by James Weldon Johnson in his *The Book of American Negro Poetry*) to refer to the manner in which powerful and persistent aspects of African culture just grow and cannot be destroyed through legislation, violence, scurrilous attacks, or assimilation. Jes Grew continues to spring up all over the place and to “infect”/vitalize the souls that it inhabits.