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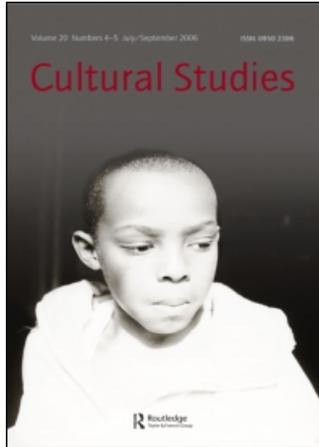
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NEOLIBERALISM, NOSTALGIA, RACE POLITICS, AND THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SPHERE

The case of the Tom Joyner Morning Show

I done got my feet caught up in the sweet flypaper of life.
Langston Hughes, 1955

April 24, 2005: Katy Hogan, owner of the radical Chicago coffeeshouse Heartland Café, at speak-out against the Iraq war, Evanston, Illinois: 'And let's choose independent radio, and not Clear Channel buying everything up and assaulting our brains!'

February 1, 2005, Tom Joyner Morning Show, aired on WVAZ in Chicago, a station owned by Clear Channel. Tom Joyner talks about a woman who lost both her husband and son in the Iraq war, and Bush's recent advocacy of an increased death benefit and extending troops' stay. J. Anthony Brown: Now, I went to trade school, and this is not hard to figure out.

Joyner: Yeah.

J. Anthony Brown: Bring'em home!

Sybil Wilkes: You'll save more money that way.

March 7, 2005. The Joyner crew comment on Martha Stewart's release from prison:

J. Anthony Brown: *Mandela* didn't get this much press!

Tom Joyner: When he got out of jail, after 27 years . . . And it was 5 months . . .

J. Anthony Brown: You'd think nobody white has ever *been* in jail, man.

March 21, 2005.

Tom Joyner: So this is the 2nd anniversary of the invasion of Iraq.

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Sybil Wilkes: Almost 2000 deaths later, we're celebrating the 2nd anniversary. (sarcastically) Mission accomplished!

Tom Joyner: (reference to the Terry Schiavo case) And what about the President running back to Washington to save one woman from dying? – when 2000 people have died in Iraq?

J. Anthony Brown: White people always want to save things. Save the rat, save the gnat, but don't save the n-word.

Sybil: This is also the party that wanted states' rights but now they want to make it a federal issue.

Later in the same show, in a discussion of the high school student who massacred teachers and classmates in Red Lake, Minnesota:

Tom Joyner: Do you think they're gonna get the same kind of attention as Columbine?

Sybil and J. Anthony Brown: No, uh uh!

Tom Joyner: Because it's an Indian reservation.

J. Anthony Brown: And poor.

Tom Joyner: I'm just sayin'.

(March 30, 2005) Tom Joyner reports that the US military is having trouble recruiting blacks into the military . .

Ms Dupre: (sardonically) Wha-a-t?

Sybil: (up and down the intonational contour) Oh, really?

Tom Joyner: Yeah, that's what I said. [pause] (falsetto) Is you *crazy*?

All: laughter

Introduction: the black elephant in the living room

These two introductory texts are linked in both space and time. The first is an exclamatory ending to a speech at a small antiwar rally in a college town just north of Chicago, while the second is transcribed from broadcasts, contemporaneous to the rally, on a syndicated commercial drive-time black radio show. The Tom Joyner Morning Show, with eight million nationwide listeners, has a complete lock on the adult black listening public in the Chicago metropolitan area.¹ Reading these texts together illustrates clearly the ongoing race- and class-segregation of US media. Ms Hogan, although a long-term Chicago progressive activist, is unaware of the militantly antiwar and progressive politics of this locally Clear Channel-sponsored show – a show to which it is likely that most of her black neighbors and co-workers listen regularly.² This is not to criticize the admirable Ms Hogan, but to use the coincidence of her commentary as a metonym for large-scale white American popular and scholarly ignorance of this decade-old black elephant in the national living room.

No one would claim, in our post-civil rights era, that black Americans are unrepresented in the United States public sphere. But that representation is highly selective, foregrounding upper status/celebrity and impoverished or criminal individuals, eliding the broad working/middle-class that is the bulk of the nation's black population (di Leonardo 2005). Media and cultural studies, as well, mirror this selective misrepresentation: thus the invisible elephant of the TJMS, seemingly operating within what we thought were obsolete Jim Crow conventions. What are the implications of its mainstream invisibility – of this 'hidden in plain sight' phenomenon – for a critical scholarship of race politics in American public culture – and more importantly, for ongoing racially patterned inequality and political shift in the neoliberal/neoconservative United States?

In what follows, I lay out the development of the show, its shifting conventions, its personnel, politics – particularly with reference to New Right 'family values' crusades – and its interactive phone-in audience. As well, I focus on the ways in which the show intersected with the 2004 presidential election and Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. In the process, I bring a number of separate scholarly projects in communication with one another: US-based communications studies, black cultural studies, the anthropological scholarship on global radio, and media-attentive US journalism. I foreground class, age, and genre elisions in mainstream media, communication studies, and Afro-American scholars' attention to contemporary black American public culture. That is, I try to explain and contextualize American mainstream media's insistent coverage of far less popular national radio phenomena and Afro-American cultural productions while nearly entirely ignoring the TJMS; political-economic media scholars' parallel failure to notice this progressive radio giant in their own backyards as they narrate the overall downward spiral of US media news reporting concurrent with the rise of neoliberalism; as well as cultural studies scholars' obsession with the allures of rap and hip hop and thus relative neglect of both the TJMS and the older, working-class black audiences who are its base. Here, United States-based communications and cultural studies scholars would benefit from anthropology of radio scholars' holistic attention to both production and audience reception of radio in a variety of global sites.

Finally, I plumb the multiple uses of nostalgia across the TJMS/cultural studies landscape: the Joyner crew's middle-aged and defensive 'back in the day' narratives and musical choices, and journalists' and progressive media scholars' nostalgic evocations of radical political media in the 1960s and 1970s, evocations that blind them to the present-day progressive black elephant in our national living room. The Tom Joyner Morning Show thus functions as an optic through which to reframe our current analyses of race, class, gender/sexuality, age, politics, media: to offer a more empirically accurate and racially integrated accounting of the contemporary neoliberal American public sphere

– one that makes visible the largely invisible working adult black population and its politics, and one that genuinely attends to and explains white America's bizarrely inconsistent contemporary 'love and theft' of black American culture (Lott 1993).

TJMS and black radio history

December 15, 2005. Tom Joyner, pretending to be George W. Bush: So, they havin' the election! In Iraq! [in his own voice] And then we gonna . . . come home?

[Crew demurs with catcalls] . . . I wish I could've been a fly on the wall when Colin Powell was watching Bush . . . and you know he was cussin'.

J. Anthony Brown pretends to be Powell: That short mother- sawed-off little country . . .

Sybil: Yes, and he is a soldier, and you know he knows the words.

Tom Joyner is a North Carolina-born, Dallas-based disk jockey with a long history in the radio industry both as performer and station owner (Joyner 1995). He earned the sobriquet 'Fly Jock' in the early 1990s, when he managed to work as a DJ in both Chicago and Dallas, simultaneously, by flying between the two cities three days a week (Williams 1998, p. 133). He syndicated his eponymous show in 1994, as a weekday, drive-time show presenting 'music, news and information, guests from politics and entertainment, and an assortment of entertainment segments that include open telephone lines, humorous advice, and commentaries by Tavis Smiley' (Brooks & Daniels 2000, p. 9). The show grew extraordinarily rapidly, to an audience of five million by 1998, topping seven million by 2001, jumping to eight million by 2004–05 (Smith 1998, Themba 2001, Anderson Forest 2004).

This audience is more than double Don Imus's, comparable to Howard Stern's, and more than half Rush Limbaugh's (Moloney 2005, Kiley 2005). And yet it barely registers with the mainstream media that so compulsively cover these three disk jockeys, as well as many others with even smaller audiences. Since its founding, for example, the TJMS has garnered only 13 mentions in *The New York Times*, most of them *en passant*. In contrast, Howard Stern, with the same size (pre-satellite radio) audience, over the same time period, was deemed worthy of 501 *New York Times* stories, most of them full-length. TJMS was owned by and syndicated through ABC Radio Network until Joyner bought it through his Reach Media Company in 2003, and in 2004 signed a collaboration agreement with the black-owned media conglomerate Radio One (Williams 2004).

TJMS is now syndicated in 115 markets, and represented most strongly in the US black belt: across the South, the black-settled Southeast and Southwest, throughout the Midwest and the Eastern Seaboard (Conan 2005). While it appears on black stations across the intermountain West and in Washington State, it has only one current outlet in California, and had a short-lived tenure in New York City (Bachman 2003). Nevertheless, the Joyner crew's ubiquity on TV One cable reruns of the TJMS Sky Shows since 2004 (Larson 2004), a syndicated weekly television show, *The Tom Joyner Show*, begun in the autumn of 2005, and a popular website, blackamericaweb.com, which streams the TJMS live every weekday, ensure that the show is, as political scientist Melissa Harris-Lacewell has declared, 'the single most recognizable forum of black talk in black America today' (2004, p. 237).

WVAZ-Chicago commercial, late 1990s. Older black man with Delta-inflected voice states matter-of-factly: 'I don't like . . . that rap'.

Like the hundreds of black stations appealing to adult working-class audiences on which it appears, the Joyner show features 'old-school' music, that is, 1960s–80s soul, combined with contemporary black pop, neosoul, some gospel, and hip hop, but rarely rap. That is, Alicia Keys, Angie Stone, India Arie, Kindred, Gerald Levert, and maybe Usher, but no Eminem, Missy Elliot, Lil Kim, or Kanye West. And certainly no 50 Cent! (They joke about him, but never play him.) Aside from Joyner, the show includes a cast of a half-dozen other middle-aged comics with particular schticks. Among them are Sybil Wilkes, as we have seen, who plays both straight woman and 'the schoolmarm' (my term, not theirs) – the most well-informed and politically progressive member of the crew. Then there are Myra J, who has a regular feature, 'Tips for the Single Mom', and plays a saucy, heterosexually active but simultaneously respectable and hard-working single mother; Ms Dupre, the older New Orleans-bred psychic who offers up 'your lucky numbers' once a week; the redoubtable J. Anthony Brown, whom some readers may have seen in the role of the corrupt Morris Brown College band conductor in the film 'Drumline,' who plays a working-class clown with a taste for white women; and Melvin, who plays a very queeny older gay Southern man and has a regular call-in feature, 'Melvin's Love Line'.

The show broadcasts from a wide variety of cities all over the United States, and frequently holds live 'sky shows', with musical guests, for which people wait on line, sometimes overnight, to get in. And the crew often broadcasts from HBC (historically black college) campuses, usually incorporating the award of a corporate-funded scholarship to that school into their program format. Like most popular music radio shows, they run series of call-in contests, with rewards ranging from money to chances to compete for automobiles or vacations. But unlike most such shows, they also do community

service programming, as when they bring medical experts on-air to discuss specifically black health issues like sickle cell anemia and diabetes, and celebrate 'Take a loved one to the doctor day'.

The Tom Joyner Morning Show builds on long traditions of black comedy, music, and political commentary – going back to minstrel shows, juke joints, and political demonstrations – and specifically builds on black American radio history. The Joyner crew have reanimated the 1950s role that radio historian William Barlow labels 'audio tricksters': 'They talked a steady stream of street 'jive', using strange-sounding words, some of which were of their own making' (1990, p. 215). Barlow documents the late-1960s decline in black radio news and public affairs programming, as part of the capitalist restructuring process of industrial growth (with payola scandals offering the excuse for 'reform', see also Douglas 1999, pp. 248–51). Station and conglomerate owners wrested control, program by program, from these local audio tricksters and their white brethren, through the invention of 'Top Forty Radio:' '[T]he top forty soul format effectively ended the black disk jockeys' control over the content of their own programs, just as it had ended the white disk jockeys' reign over rock-formatted stations' (1990, p. 223, see also Douglas 1999, pp. 250–53). But this decline and fall narrative is only one element of the larger and complex whole of postwar radio history.

Post-1950s radio programming history includes not only commercial and independent public radio, not only the rise of the FM band (see Douglas 1999, pp. 256–83), but the recent growth and then decline of public college radio stations – coincident with the infusion of and then cutbacks in federal funding – as well as various local programming trends and controversies. With reference to black-oriented programming alone, three post-civil rights shifts are noteworthy. First, the rise of black-owned stations in the 1970s – in New York, Washington, DC, and Chicago, for example – functioned to curb the top forty format through re-invigorating the ranks of local black disk jockeys interested in public affairs programming (Barlow 1990, p. 228, Douglas 1999, p. 234ff). But the Reagan revolution of the 1980s, with its associated deregulation of the airwaves, political witch-hunts, funding cutbacks, and corporate mergers, led to a large-scale depoliticization of black (and all American) radio, and the uncoincidental invention of 'Quiet Storm' programming.

Quiet Storm, so labeled after Smokey Robinson's popular slow ballad, was invented by WHUR (Howard University) disk jockey Melvin Lindsay. The format melded 'popular black love ballads with mellow instrumental jazz' (Barlow 1990, p. 230, Neal 1999, pp. 128–29), and was associated with the collapse of radical political radio into a highly commercialized, entirely uncontroversial (but very aesthetically pleasing) product – at precisely the historical moment in which non-affluent black Americans were beginning to be widely stigmatized as members of the feckless, innately criminal 'underclass'

(di Leonardo 1998, pp. 112–34). Finally, the late-1980s rise of hip hop and rap exploded onto radio waves across the 1990s, reworking pre-existing programming formats and constituting a potent youth crossover genre (Barlow 1999, p. 283, Neal 1999, pp. 135–72) (Rap’s ‘dirty little secret’ is that the majority of its consumers are white teenage boys [Kitwana 2005].)

Joyner’s golden decade, TJMS politics

Senator Barack Obama, in a spot played repeatedly on Chicago’s V103, spring 2005: Now I have to admit, I’m makin’ a confession here, that between the 3 stations, I probably listen to V103 a little more! Because I’m over 40!

We have now come full circle to the founding of the TJMS in 1994, midway through Clinton’s first presidential term. With the rise and establishment of rap/hip hop, black radio audience musical preferences were newly fractured by generation. The TJMS thus exploited the recently established ‘urban adult’ radio format, ‘which targets African American adults with a musical mix of classic soul and R&B hits from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s’ (Barlow 1999, p. 259) – essentially a daytime version of Quiet Storm programming. In other words, Joyner and his crew appealed to the working adult black population, which has an extraordinarily high commitment to radio listening, on and off the job, steady income, and significant power over household spending – of great interest to advertisers – and a distaste for what it perceives as low-status, a-rhythmic kids’ music (Arbitron 2005, pp. 3,6, 71–75).³

As we have seen, the show grew extremely rapidly, taking over multiple regional markets. But this capitalist growth process – parallel to the way in which the rise of, say, chain bookstores or coffeehouses has killed thousands of independent businesses – threatened locally-produced black radio programs, many of them already stressed by federal cutbacks in public and college radio funding. Local black press covered the subsequent controversies. In Philadelphia, for example, early in the show’s growth history, *The Philadelphia Tribune* mourned the loss of the local Kevin Gardner show on WDAS to the TJMS, and quoted loyal listeners lamenting that ‘WDAS has lost its connection to the Black community’ (McClain 1996).

In order to provide a sense of place-based news and commentary, Tom Joyner tapes personal ‘feeds’ to local news, traffic, and weather announcers in black stations playing their syndicated show (Burroughs 2001, p. 207), and also tapes announcements of local disk jockeys’ shows. In Chicago, for example, WVVAZ listeners periodically hear Tom Joyner saying, ‘What’s up with that news, Wanda?’ – and WVVAZ’s Wanda Wells gives a quick summary of

international, national, and local headlines of particular interest to black Americans. TJMS's peripatetic sky shows, as well, held all over the United States, with local audiences and local businesses presenting scholarship checks to students attending local black colleges, help to build place-based allegiance (Brooks & Daniels 2002, pp. 20–22). Finally, the call-in feature, 'Express Yourself', plays on regional understandings and loyalties, and enhances what Susan Douglas describes as disk jockeys' sometime role as 'privileged conduits within their listeners' imagined communities' (1999, p. 230):

November 4, 2004 (post-Kerry presidential election loss call-ins)
 Woman caller from Ohio: Say, you been doggin' us for two days, you got to stop.
 J Anthony Brown: We didn't get one call from Ohio all those years we dogged Florida!
 March 14, 2005 Express Yourself question: What jammin' food did your momma used to make when you were low on food?
 Woman caller: Hey Tom, lemme tell you from a Alabama homegirl. Sauerkraut and neckbones!
 Another caller: Bread and gravy!
 Tom Joyner: Don't you need meat for gravy?
 Myra J: Where are you from?
 J Anthony Brown: I'm gonna take your country card, man.
 October 18, 2005 Express Yourself
 Male caller: This is Jeff from Buffalo, NY. I want to know if J. heard what happened to OJ Simpson at the Buffalo Bills game. Two white girls came up and threw beer all over him!
 J Anthony Brown: They wouldn't have been able to do that in the dark of night!

While I have labeled the TJMS show's politics as 'progressive', and offered examples of on-air repartee in evidence of that interpretation, an account of Tom Joyner's actual political evolution, of other scholars' evaluations of the show's politics, and a broader narrative of the contemporary political landscape within which the TJMS is operating are now in order. Surprisingly, in his self-published 1995 autobiography, Joyner made it clear that he was then a black conservative who had both voted for Reagan and benefited greatly through friendship with Reagan's FCC Chair Mark Fowler (1995, p. 45).⁴ Joyner's two key intertwining narratives in *Clearing the Air* are a Horatio Alger bootstraps life story – his parents did indeed start out as tenant farmers, and he did indeed work extremely hard to achieve success – and a classic New Right hatred of government bureaucracy as purely incompetent and exploitative of ordinary Americans through the extraction of taxes: 'What justification do they give you, the public, every time they take more bread off

your table in the form of taxes to fund their pet projects? . . . Congress is parasite and a huge boil on the butt of humanity' (1995, p. 68).

Joyner went so far as to praise Rush Limbaugh – 'I can subscribe to about sixty or seventy percent of the opinions that I hear from Rush' (1995, p. 145) – and to endorse the Reaganite vision of social programs as killing self-reliance: 'Generations of people have come to see welfare as a way of life' (1995, p. 147). Joyner's vision of criminal justice, freedom of speech, and rap music fit cozily within the Reagan White House mold (1995, pp. 150–56).

And yet simultaneously Joyner noted ongoing US racism and the need to combat it, and his own early stunts as a black radio disk jockey underlined those realities. While working at KKBA in Dallas in the early 1970s, for example, Joyner responded to local police targeting only black neighborhoods for radar gun speed traps by encouraging listeners to 'drop a dime on the man' – to call the radio station with up-to-the-minute news of precisely where police had set up speed traps: 'You call me, you tell me where the radar is and whatever I'm doing, I'm stopping . . . And I'm going to announce where the radar is' (Williams 1998, p. 139).

In an extension of this early radio activism – but now focusing exclusively on the private sector – in the first handful of years of the TJMS, Joyner, with Tavis Smiley, launched a series of campaigns, using the might of their large radio audience, aimed at preventing US businesses from taking black consumers for granted. In 1999, for example, they asked listeners to send in their CompUSA receipts, 'charging that the largest US computer retailer failed to sufficiently advertise in the black community' (Harris-Blackwell 2004, p. 243). ABC Radio threatened to pull the TJMS, but backed down, as did CompUSA: after a ten-week campaign, the corporation's chief executive apologized on-air, and promised to hire a black-owned advertising agency (Burroughs 2001, pp. 213–15).

This and other campaigns, such as the successful 1997 effort to prevent the auction house Christies from selling American slave memorabilia (chains and shackles), while they had a policy of refusing to sell Holocaust items (Burroughs 2001, p. 212), took a page from Jesse Jackson's signature protest politics (Reed 1986). That is, in a conservatizing, post-civil rights era, instead of working for classic civil rights goals – pressuring the state to provide and enforce equal access and economic opportunity – minority activists tended instead to focus on affecting individual corporations' policies with regard to race. This incremental, consumer-oriented approach can have only very limited results. At the same time, of course, even this level of activism contradicted Joyner's earlier stated conservative politics.

And meanwhile, over the late 1990s and into the new millennium, the show was gaining listeners and corporate sponsorship at a fast clip, and simultaneously moving rapidly to the left, mirroring the politics of its target audience. (I cannot assess the relative weight of the Clinton presidency and

general US political shift from the right to the center in this period, Sybil Wilke's and other program staffs' political influence, or sheer commercial pragmatism in causing this political sea-change.) The TJMS engaged in multiple voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns, and worked actively for the Democrats in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential races, and they were early activists on the 2006 midterm elections Congressional triumph:

(January 31, 2006), discussion of new Supreme Court

Sybil: All of these cases are going to change . . . a woman's right to choose.

Tom Joyner: When we had the election . . . everyone was saying Bush will stack the courts.

Sybil: And now this is coming to pass!

Tom Joyner: And you think they stole the election, you aint seen nothin' yet! . . . So what can we do?

Sybil: We can [work on the Congressional elections in November] and get Congress back!

The Democratic Party is clearly aware of the show's huge audience and influence: both Clintons have appeared on the show multiple times, as has Ted Kennedy, and as did Al Gore, Joe Lieberman, John Kerry and John Edwards, and Senator Barack Obama, during their campaigns. And yet all of this very public politicking took and takes place without any notice in the mainstream press – although the show has been mentioned repeatedly on business pages as a growing media giant with ever-increasing corporate sponsorship (See, e.g., Smith 1998, White 1999, Bachman 2002, Forest 2004).

Insofar as a small handful of scholars and journalists have noted the TJMS and its politics, they have tended to define those politics as black nationalist (See Burroughs 2001, p. 215, Brooks & Daniels 2002, Harris-Lacewell 2004, pp. 241–43, Curtis 2005, p. 3). While the show is certainly designed for an exclusively black audience, and includes community self-help elements, 'nationalist' is a catch-all political label for historically specific formations which can shade left or right (Robinson 2001). No commentator to date seems to have read Joyner's self-published 1995 autobiography with its clear and much-repeated New Rightist political line, and therefore there is no analysis of his liberal political shift. But contemporary US politics, since the social-movement 1970s, are also more complex than the left/right binary. In particular, New Rightists newly defined a constellation of issues in terms of 'family values', which have taken on key salience in American politics.

Sociologist Stephen Steinberg, in *Turning Back*, has traced the key ideological shift that allowed our modern American family values rhetoric to blossom, back all the way to a Lyndon Johnson speech at Howard University in 1965. The speech, which was written partly by Daniel Patrick Moynihan,

simultaneously called for affirmative action to remedy past discrimination, while also subtly making use of Moynihan's now-notorious report on the black family to blame black Americans for their own oppression through referring to 'the breakdown of Negro family structure' (Steinberg 1995, pp. 107–36).

Thus began the long march, through both the public sphere and the academy, of the association of American racial minority status with 'faulty' female-headed families, and with the neat substitution of family structure for endemic structural discrimination as the cause of black and brown poverty – part of late anthropologist Oscar Lewis's 'culture of poverty'. That core counter-empirical claim was joined, from the Jimmy Carter era forward, by a rising political critique of 'big government' and thus a tendency to look to families to perform basic public functions in the wake of state abrogation of responsibility (di Leonardo 1998, pp. 112–27).

With the neoconservative triumph of Reagan's 1980 election, racist backlash against civil rights and misogynist backlash against the second wave of the women's movement found welcome in the White House, and Reagan's synergistic and delusional claims that black 'welfare queens' were draining the public purse through massive fraud actually became reflexive common sense for millions of Americans. The huge social program cutbacks of the Reagan years, particularly in social support and public housing, produced skyrocketing minority poverty rates, which were then explained through use of newly refurbished Culture of Poverty ideology (di Leonardo 1998, pp. 269–71).

Thus the stage was set for Vice President Dan Quayle's 1992 election-year attack on the network television show 'Murphy Brown', whose eponymous white, professional-class heroine became pregnant and gave birth to a baby outside of wedlock. The airwaves and the centrist to neoconservative press were filled with assertions that black American women had 'contaminated' white women, and the modern usage of family values was set. While Clinton won the election, as sociologist Judith Stacey has shown, he soon assimilated to communitarian elements in the Democratic Party on both women's and gay rights, and as an avatar of neoliberalism, he had never stood strongly for minority economic justice (as opposed to nominal civil rights) in the first place, and moved to 'end welfare as we know it' in 1996 (Stacey 1997).

It was only necessary for the religious right, over the course of the 1990s, to respond hysterically to the efforts of some gay Americans to marry and to adopt children for the full contemporary flavor of the term to be developed. 'Family values' now refers most generally to the belief that only white heterosexual married couples, in which the woman does not work outside the home during children's minority years, are capable of rearing children properly. It functions secondarily as an implicit slur against all Americans not living in such households (Stacey 1997). And, as we can see from the evolutionary trajectory of the term, it simultaneously indexes our neo-liberal era with its associated evacuation of all non-military governmental

responsibilities, and thus the fetishization of ‘the family’ as the institution responsible for care of those made vulnerable by youth, age, disability, illness or unemployment. The most recent transmogrification of the term was some pollsters’ claim that Bush won in November 2004 because of ‘moral values’ voters – which translates as family values plus overt rightist religiosity (Seelye 2004).

The Joyner crew, beyond their black civil rights and anti-Bush, antiwar stance, articulate widely shared black American *dissent* from family values ideology, most particularly by the broad liberal working-class that is both the show’s audience base – the modal listener is a clerical or service worker – and the majority of the nation’s black population (see Kinder and Winter 2001).⁵ The crew’s politics are seamlessly woven into their comedy, and laden with frequent references to celebrity culture – particularly black celebrities.

(January 24th, 2005) Myra J, in ‘Tips for the Single Mom’, says she wants to celebrate American Idol winner Fantasia’s new popular song, ‘Here’s to All My Baby Mamas’, and has some suggestions for new songs for her: (Fantasia is widely known to be a single mother.)

Myra J: I can do anything, includin’ forget about you
 All my designer bags are filled with diapers
 He bought groceries, I think I’m in love
 I’m goin’ to get my tubes tied
 The babysitter only stays til midnite, what we gon do?
 The only thing you’re getting out of this house is your kids
 I go to school, I go to work, I do skwirk.

Thus Myra J’s version of ‘infotainment’ is simultaneously hilarious and laden with pragmatic, pro-single mother politics. This vision of hard-working, responsible but sassy single mothers is worlds removed from Reagan’s welfare queens. And, like many other black comics, Myra J humorously assumes the necessity of parental strictness:

(April 25, 2005) This is high school prom time. Single moms, what are you gonna do? Your child wants to stay all night at the hotel where the prom is. Is your answer:

- A. Can I go?
- B. Maybe in your afterlife, or
- C. Who’s payin’?

Sybil: I’m torn between A and B.

Myra J: Sybil, you have obviously not been around kids for awhile. The correct answer is B.

While the TJMS normalizes single motherhood, and has a regular feature, ‘The Thursday Morning Mom’, they also honor ‘Real Fathers, Real Men’ –

male devotion to and sacrifice for children who are not always biologically theirs (which may also be true of the Thursday Morning Moms). In all these endeavors, the show works from the premise of women's and gay equality – but this stance is played out through comic interaction, rather than as political manifesto. Here are a few segments dealing with homosexuality:

(April 5, 2006) Express Yourself

Robert: I'm stuck in a love triangle, baby. Me and this guy, we've been kicking it for the last 15 years, the kids call me Uncle Bob and his wife thinks I'm his brother.

Tom Joyner: Same sex, same rules. And the rule is that you don't mess with married!

Sybil: You just greedy!

(same day) Tom Joyner: Ms Dupree knows how to tell you might be a little homophobic . . .

Ms Dupree: If you put your 'Brokeback Mountain' DVD in your 'Girls Gone Wild' DVD case!

And reflecting equal rights by gender:

(February 25, 2005) After an airing of the latest segment of the show's mock-soap opera, 'It's Your World', in which a woman character tells her male lover that she is 'seeing other people', and refuses to tell him how many. She declares at the closing, 'A woman needs a little mystery'.

J. Anthony Brown: She's seein' other people? They're writin' him soft!

Myra J, to J. Anthony Brown: Oh get a tissue out, you little man-person!

Sybil: (falsetto) Ninny ninny ninny!

(July 28, 2005) Tom Joyner says that Boy Scouts waited for President Bush three hours in the hot sun, and that many fell out [fainted] – even adults. 'I hate to admit this, Sybil, but women are smarter. You would not find Girl Scouts waiting for the President three hours in the hot sun. No, uh uh'.

Sybil: *Hol-la!*

The TJMS's progressive take on gender and sexuality, so fundamentally counter to the mainstream press's vision of a black-majority world of misogynist rappers and homophobic preachers – and of, for example, radio scholar Susan Douglas's vision of the new talk radio phenomenon as fundamentally encoding male *ressentiment* of post-feminist female social power (Douglas 1999, p. 289) – is of a piece with their larger social democratic politics and working-class minority optic on both domestic and international issues:

(May 20, 2005) [With reference to the short-lived tempest about the Mexican stamp with a racist caricature] Tom Joyner: You know Bush is in the White House, on the phone to Fox . . . saying, go ahead, keep the mess goin' on, I can use it, the last thing I need is blacks and Latinos gettin' together.

Melvin: Can you spell *diversion*?

(October 12, 2005) Myra J., 'Tips for the Single Mom':

Single moms, you know that sometimes we hold onto things much longer than we should. You've got to know whether to dunk it or junk it!

- Any medication you've had since Clinton was in the White House . . .
- If your hairline has receded further than the US economy, let the bangs go. Your opportunity to wear bangs has expired!
- If your child's grades are lower than Bush's approval ratings, time for them to let go of fun. Fun for them has expired!

The show's combination of a pragmatic anti-neoliberal left-liberalism, incorporating antiwar dissent, matter-of-fact support for single-parent households, big-government social programs, broad religious and sexual tolerance, and heavy civil rights focus mirrors the politics of the bulk of the black electorate, and gives the lie to widespread misrepresentations by mainstream press and many scholars. In fact, black radio shows in general allow the expression of much more unbridled political dissent than do white ones. The locally famous Herb Kent's Sunday 'Love Dusties' show on WVAZ in Chicago, for example, usually skirts political controversy. But on February 5, 2006, Herb asked listeners 'What does President Bush have in his pockets?' giving rise to an instant avalanche of mordant political wit:

Marsha: His Vice President and a list of how he can continue to screw America.

Donald: Slave plantation receipts.

Maurice: Bin Laden's address.

Marva: An extra bunch of marbles for the ones he's constantly losing.

Angie: I b'lieve I'd find a fifth of Jack Daniels.

Rose: We'd find a pipe, some syringes and a can of dog food. Cause he has to be on doped-up dog food cause of what he's doing to us!

With respect to the overt religiosity of contemporary 'moral values' rhetoric, the Joyner Show crew broadly identify as Christian, but also send up black Christian hypocrisy and extreme evangelicism:

(May 3, 2005) Female Sunday schoolteacher caller announces that she's now teaching children that the Second Coming is close.

J. Anthony Brown: How close? I heard that 53 years ago, is it any closer now?

Brown also frequently inhabits the comic character of ‘Reverend Richard Adenoids the 3rd:’

(May 2, 2005) [in comic black ministerial voice] The church announcements for today. We have free tickets for the play, ‘Dark-Skinned Women Who Act Siddity’. Anyway! (crew catcalls) Free tickets for ‘The Blacker the Berry, the Bigger the Butt’. (laughter and protest) Old men with earlobes the size of a ham will meet in room . . . Anyway! There will be a combined meeting of the tall women who look like Chuck Berry and the gay men who look like Richard Simmons. (howls from crew) Anyway!

The middle-aged, somewhat coarse but still respectable working-class pragmatism of the TJMS – and, of course, all the show’s comics are now wealthy, but they *invoke and celebrate* working-classness on a daily basis – simultaneously lacks the sex appeal, the aura, of the rap world with its youth, misogyny, overt indecency, and claims to wealthy criminality, that both attract and repel different white American populations – and that have provided grist for the hard-working mills of hundreds of cultural studies dissertations and books. Thus the show flies under the radar of the white American ‘love and theft’ of black American culture so well analyzed by Eric Lott (1993): the comics are neither young nor hip nor nasty enough to garner widespread white fascination. And then, they are so boringly politically progressive, exactly like most black Americans. The impetus in the mainstream – and even progressive – press, since the Reagan years, has been to find and highlight ‘man bites dog’ stories about black American politics: pieces on individual black conservatives or rightist black ministers (see, e.g., Banerjee 2005, 2006, Blumenthal 2005). And the show’s commercialism – its widespread corporate shilling, its deep immersion in entertainment journalism, and its lack of overt left identification render it impure in the eyes of many progressives – or would, if they were even aware of it.⁶ *The Nation*, for example, published an entire special issue on US radio in May 2005 without a single piece on any race-minority stations or shows.

This lack of awareness was most grotesquely obvious in the 2004 presidential election period. The entire show was mobilized for months, first in voter registration drives, and then in pull-out-the-stops get out the vote efforts in the Southern black belt and in northern and western cities. Kerry and Edwards appeared multiple times, and the crew replayed segments of both presidential and vice-presidential debates, mixed extraordinarily cleverly with 1960s and 1970s antiwar soul music. The morning after the first Kerry/Bush debate, they had made a tape loop of Bush’s ums and uhs, and let it run, interspersed with clips of Kerry in eloquent attack mode, over Edwin Starr’s 1970 hit, ‘War! What is it good for? Absolutely nothing’. After the vice presidential debate, Joyner’s show-ending mix first staged Cheney making

domestic economic claims and then Edwards riposting with facts, ending with his punchline, 'I don't think the country can handle four more years', with the Bee Gees' 'Jive Talking' playing in the background. They finished with Stevie Wonder's version of Dylan's 'Blowing in the Wind', with a voice-over of Cheney's endless claims to experience and Edwards flashing back that 'there's a bright light now flickering and the president and vice president don't see it. John Kerry and I believe we can do better'. After the second presidential debate, the crew played segments from Kerry's assertions about the importance of civil rights and Bush's failures in that domain, with the Chilites' 'For God's sake, Give More Power to the People' running behind him. They segued into Bush's set of claims about his civil rights record over Cameo's 'You talkin' out the side of your neck, you gonna get what's comin' to you yet'. They ended with Kerry's peroration on his civil rights plans, laid over Curtis Mayfield's beautiful falsetto in 'Keep On Pushin'.

During the period when a number of states allowed early voting, the crew expanded and fanned out, broadcasting simultaneously from multiple polling sites, each with long lines of black voters.

(October 22, 2005) Tricky, in Houston, expounds on Republican dirty tricks to slow down the black vote, sending men spraying pesticide and using leaf blowers around the line: 'That's all you got? We had dogs and hoses!'

Ms Dupre, in Las Vegas with a giant crowd, reports that a white guy showed up with a baseball bat: [with great sarcasm] 'He thought something was amiss'.

J. Anthony Brown, in Nashville: We been dogged one time, we aint gonna be dogged no more!

On October 29, the crew ran a sky show in which they marched – with Michael Moore! – from the Jackie Gleason Theater in Miami to the voting booth – and were yet again ignored by mainstream and all progressive media. On election day, the TJMS crew continued to report on Republican dirty tricks. Voters called in from Lansing, Michigan to report that they were getting phone calls claiming that Kerry would legalize gay marriage. The actress Carrie Washington, from Florida, reported on calls to black voters there stating that 'today is Republican voting, tomorrow Democratic voting', or that 'you can vote from your home'. The crew distilled tension and outrage into high humor:

J. Anthony Brown: It is not true that people with weaves can't vote! It's not true that men over 300 pounds can't vote. Weave your fat behind to the polls! . . . They tryin', man. You gotta give 'em credit. They got every kind of tricks.

Tom: But we've got so many people.

J. Anthony Brown: We got more people than they got tricks!

Well, J. Anthony Brown was wrong on that one. After Kerry conceded the election, most US news sources turned on a dime, becoming instantly self-flagellating – Have we been too liberal? – and pandering – Oh, the intriguing virtues of ‘moral values’ voters! But the TJMS was irredentist, solid, a breath of fresh progressive air after the craven witterings of *The New York Times* et al:

(November 3, 2004) Tom Joyner: We all of us are sittin’ here lookin’ like John Kerry. We all got long faces. I’m playing Negro spirituals.

Woman caller from Alabama: (outraged and disbelieving) What happened?

Joyner crew: Everything always happens in Alabama. We did our thing, they did theirs. We outnumbered.

Woman caller: How come they claim 98% of the vote is counted when some people couldn’t vote til 3:56AM?

J. Anthony Brown: Listen, we looking for something, but you aint got nothin’.

Tom: The forecast in the next four years for black people is pretty grim. Social services, gone. Medical care, gone. We’ve got to step up and do for ourselves. . . . Meanwhile, how does the rest of the world look at us? All I’ve seen is Tony Blair . . . But the rest of the world: they hate us. All you have to do is go out of the country – that’s some scary stuff.

J. Anthony Brown: There’s a letter for each year: H-E-L-L.

Caller: I just wonder if George W. Bush really won, or if some trickery can be suspected?

J. Anthony Brown: Hmmm, let’s see, is the government involved in trickery?

Caller: You know, you need to really get on Virginia. You know they supported Bush big-time! All these people in trailer parks with no teeth . . . they don’t care that Bush hurt them as long as he don’t help us!

Among his many comic resources, J. Anthony Brown is known for writing new lyrics to black popular music, or, in the TJMS parlance, ‘murdering another hit’. Usually his humor turns on the wars between the sexes or popular cultural absurdities, but not on the day after the election, when he slyly pulled off a trickster lament with a ‘police state’ sting in its tail.

J. Anthony Brown: This is so tough . . . First of all, I did not know who was going to win the election. So I was all set to sing ‘Hit the Road, Bush’ (as in Ray Charles’ hit, ‘Hit the Road, Jack’) . . . [so he rewrote his song]:

I take the jokes back, aint talkin’ ‘bout you no more, no more, no more, no more!

[repeat] You’re ok!

Oh you won the election with your voting machine, you the baddest cowboy I ever seen
 And you got the I-R-S, I don't wanna start no mess
 Oh maybe, oh maybe, gonna watch what I say
 Zip my lip up when I'm onstage
 I've seen what you do, and it's understood
 You got plenty of money, and it's all good

Let me give the last prescient post-election word to the Joyner listeners:

Woman caller, November 4: We might as well have the KKK, with Bush in office.

Sybil: Ma'am, we haven't seen the KKK in the last four years, what makes you think we'll get them now?

Caller: I'm sayin', *we might as well*.

Tom Joyner: If you work with this lady in the office, don't get *into* it!

Black Katrina

The key importance of the Joyner Show, and its simultaneous mainstream media invisibility, became even more apparent in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. On August 29th, the US airwaves were filled with warnings of Hurricane Katrina's onslaught. But mainstream media were not yet connecting the hurricane's potential damage to the American war in Iraq and Afghanistan and its costs, much less to the corrupt practices of the Bush White House. On the TJMS, though, the commentary was pointed and prescient:

Tom Joyner: . . . 30 billion estimated in claims for Hurricane Katrina. I just want to know, Sybil, how much is the war in Iraq costing?

Sybil Wilkes: Oh my goodness, I don't know.

Tom Joyner: I'm just askin', why can't all that money go towards saving people's lives in the path of the hurricane?

Later in the show, Joyner and Wilkes commented on Cindy Sheehan's summer-long demonstration against the Iraq war and efforts to force President Bush to meet with her.

Tom Joyner: Martin Sheen – the President on the 'West Wing' – he went to visit the lady on the lawn?

Sybil: Not only him, but Al Sharpton . . . he told her, at least you've got the acting President of the US.

Tom Joyner: Go 'head, girl. You stay *on* it.

On the same morning's broadcast, the Joyner crew addressed the global political economy of oil and hemispheric relations, snidely linking in (using rapper Kool Moe D's phrase) the recent scandal of a notorious American fundamentalist's call for the assassination of a freely elected Latin American president.

Tom Joyner: So Jesse Jackson is in Venezuela, talkin' with President Chávez – and this man has just said he wants to help poor Americans with their heating oil – and they say this winter is going to be the worst . . .
 Sybil: How you like me *now*, Pat Robertson?

On successive days, though, as Katrina decimated New Orleans and brought the entire Gulf Coast region to a halt, the Joyner crew abandoned all other news to focus on the outrage of federal failure to protect New Orleans and to evacuate the overwhelmingly black and poor population left behind. But they also began organizing their own relief efforts as well as articulating a critique of mass media coverage of the disaster.

(September 6) Tom Joyner: Turn the TV *off*, will you?

Sybil: Stop watching it! It's like crack!

Tom Joyner: I know, and I'm getting depressed watching it. And they don't have but five pictures . . . Here's what we've come up with. The families who've taken in families can't get any form of relief. So we're gonna help the people who're trying to help the people who have no hope.

Joyner went on to explain that they had made a decision to give out prepaid credit cards to individuals who registered through any church (they did not have to be church members) because of tax law restrictions. The crew pledged \$80,000, and solicited donations from its working-class black audience. Only three days later, they had amassed \$580,000, and less than two weeks after that, they had raised \$1.5 million, had already sent out 500 credit cards, and had another 300 ready to go in the mail.

Meanwhile, after the first shock of the disaster faded, Americans began to realize the multiple institutions destroyed by the hurricane and federal relief failures, and US colleges moved to enroll evacuee students and to give displaced professors temporary positions. But the first wave of relief went out only to Tulane, a predominantly white school. But there are three predominantly black colleges in New Orleans – Xavier, Dillard, and Southern – and, unlike white-majority America, the Joyner crew were alive to that fact, and had already moved by September 9 to ante up \$1 million of their own money to give out \$1000 scholarships to 1,000 displaced students from those three schools. By October 4, they had disbursed \$1.3 million, and by October 17, \$2.4 million.

Thus the crew literally put their money where their mouths were, and their anti-Bush coverage and jokes gained in heft and bite.

(September 15, 2005) Tom Joyner: It's happening, just like we said – it's happening. Our people are still homeless . . . and we're getting stories about people missing pets – like these *dolphins*.

Woman caller, same day: What's on my mind is President Bush says he cares about the people hurt by Katrina, but he's awarding contracts to his cronies like Halliburton and says he won't make them pay the prevailing wage!

Ms Dupre, a New Orleans resident whose home had been destroyed, to a live Las Vegas, Nevada sky show audience on September 23:

Ms Dupre: You know the new thing – we no longer say CP [colored people's] time – it's officially FEMA time!

Tom Joyner: It's not CP time, it's

Vast, laughing, noisy crowd: FEMA TIME!

It is an old cliché that disasters bring to light underlying social processes, expose inequalities about which the general public has become complacent. And certainly we saw, in the wake of Katrina, a short-lived wave of press coverage of black poverty and social vulnerability in New Orleans, and in the US in general (see, e.g., Gonzalez 2005, Lewis 2005, Remnick 2005). Myself familiar with black New Orleans (my elderly mother-in-law spent decades running the reading and testing labs at Xavier), I was startled, for example, to find the social characteristics of the lower Ninth Ward, the most devastated New Orleans neighborhood, thrust into national consciousness. (But the journalists all missed the now doubly-ironic street kids' rhyme, 'I'm from the Nine, and I don't mind dyin'.)

Desperately seeking heart-warming stories amid the horror and gloom, the American press also reported extensively on local and national disaster relief efforts, from bake sales to benefit concerts to Red Cross organizing. But missing from this vast wave of coverage was, beyond a couple of references on the black-run afternoon National Public Radio show, any acknowledgement of the impressive relief launched by the Joyner crew, much less their magnificently unbridled daily reportage on and critique of the Bush White House.⁷

(September 12) Tavis Smiley, Tom Joyner, and, J. Anthony Brown get into the mix:

Tavis: If we gon' clean up public housing, let's start with the White House!

Tom: How many black Christians think that God did this to New Orleans because there's so much sin there?

Tavis: Hey Tom, Bourbon Street is only so long, how about Pennsylvania Avenue?

J. Anthony Brown, mimicking Bush's New Orleans photo-op: I've got my sleeves rolled up, lookin' like I'm workin', wavin' at nobody . . .

Tom: And black people, do me a favor, DON'T let him take his picture with you . . . and I won't be mad at [black New Orleans mayor] Ray Nagin if he just elbows him in the throat.

J. Anthony Brown: Come on, Nagin! You the closest one!

Not only did the press miss the mordant wit of these well-known commentators (imagine the flurry of attention had Jon Stewart done a white version of this diatribe on 'The Daily Show'), they entirely failed to register the fact that this wildly popular show was, in the weeks following the disaster, broadcasting daily the voices of evacuees, and of those who were aiding them. The 'imagined community of the air' was operating at full force, just beneath white American radar.

Caller, September 14: Ms Dupre, can you tell me what the difference is between them shoving us in the Superdome and them shoving us in the boat back in Africa?

Houston caller, same day: She complains that U-Haul's rates are too high, that they are exploiting evacuees, so as a U-Haul employee she is discounting their rentals: 'I'd lose my job behind it, but I just can't do it'.

Sybil: I commend your efforts, ma'am. Good luck to you.

Woman caller, October 4: I was calling to thank you for what you've done for Katrina victims. Our father was the one who was trapped in his attic for 18 days, and the day he was found, we received a check from you for the other evacuees, and we were able to use a portion of it to reunite him with us . . . It is just a blessing.

Because of the *entre nous* character of the show, listeners felt free to call in to complain, with all the wit of Langston Hughes's characters, about the inevitable misery ensuing from taking in evacuee friends and relatives:

Male caller, October 5, 2005: This is Vaughn, I got two hurricane victims stayin' with me 'bout a month, they holdin' out on me, how do I get them politely not to eat my food?

J. Anthony Brown: What's the one thing that they ate that really set you off?

Caller: Bacon! It's history!

Sybil: You know, you are gonna have to have your bacon at work.

Ms Dupre: [fake hysteria] Hide the bacon! Hide the bacon!

J. Anthony Brown: Put it in a book. You know they aint readin'!

Tom Joyner, same day: All right, FEMA claims they'll have people out of shelters and into temporary shelter by October 15.

J. Anthony Brown: Yeah, right.

Sybil: [sardonic] Well, they are not known for their timeliness.

All: wild laughter

Male caller, same day: I'm a disgruntled police officer from New Orleans . . . Those of us who were here from Day One, we've had to scrounge, just like everybody else, to provide for our families . . . My wife had to take my kids to another state . . . we've been paid, but no overtime.

Tom Joyner: Well, God bless you, man . . . we know it's a struggle for you to try to take care of your family and the city at the same time.

The show is so universally well-known among black Americans that it even served as a local town hall during the crisis. On September 13, after an evacuee woman in Shreveport called in, claiming destitution and lack of local support, another Shreveport woman called in to counter her, having recognized her voice and circumstances: 'I guess she don't think holy people listen to you in the morning'. This woman's church had given the first caller extensive help already, and she was outraged at her dissemblance: 'You know what? God don't like ugly'.

And six months after the crisis, the TJMS and its listeners continued the radical Katrina conversation:

(February 21, 2006) Express Yourself: I'm a good religious person, but if I weren't:

Myra J: I'd run down to Florida and get all those FEMA trailers, and I'd drive them to the Gulf Coast, and I'd say, Here ya'll, [falsetto] Free! Free!

New Orleans woman, relocated to Athens, Georgia: First I'd whup Bush's ass, then I'd take him back to New Orleans to my parents' neighborhood where a BARGE is sitting where my parents' house was.

Invisible black boomers

TJMS humor is a complex stew of old vaudeville, street dozens and barbershop conventions, over-the-top moves from Showtime at the Apollo, the edgy explicitness on race pioneered by Richard Pryor and others, and latterly by Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle.⁸ The TJMS crew add, as we have seen, brilliant improvisation in back-and-forth vignettes with their callers, and an explicit focus on middle age. Adolph Reed has written compellingly in critique of post-Civil Rights era 'Romancing Jim Crow:' the proliferation of memoirs by well-off blacks, in a variety of artistic genres, looking back nostalgically on their more 'authentic', often Southern, middle-class small-town pasts, ignoring the far harsher realities for those who were beneath them on the

class ladder (Reed 2000). The TJMS crew are more broadly class-neutral American baby boomers. They sedulously note the passing of civil rights, musical, and sports pioneers. They sadly note the devolution of the 1960s–70s progressive political scene. And while they do engage endlessly in ‘old school’ or ‘back in the day’ nostalgia, mostly they’re just plain pissed off with the indignities of middle age in a culture in love with youth, and are inclined to push back, hard.

May 23, 2005 [Case of the school bus driver retaliating against kids on the bus who’d been hitting him] Tom Joyner: They keep showin’ it over and over and we just love it! That bus driver!

J. Anthony Brown: Oh man, there’s two kinds of people, the old and the scared. They will snap!

Tom Joyner: This old man, he gets it straight, baby!

J. Anthony Brown: Sometimes you just have to choke a child!

Tom Joyner: Now ya’ll can write . . . all you want, you can call, but that’s how we feel!

J. Anthony Brown: Kids, don’t mess with old people, ok?

(October 12, 2005) [Discussion of Eminem’s claim of work exhaustion]

Tom Joyner: And Eminem is *tired*? He wants to take a break?

J. Anthony Brown: Man, the O’Jays are still out there . . . the last time they had a break, they opened for Alexander the Great!

Ms Dupre: They rolled out in a chariot!

(April 29, 2005, Sky Show in St. Louis) A heavy funk song plays, to loud cheering. At the end, it becomes clear the Myra J has been dancing on the stage:

Myra J: I still got it?

J. Anthony Brown: You still got it, Myra!

Myra J.: It aint as glittery as it was, though.

J. Anthony Brown: Teach the babies!

Class, race and language, and classed, raced language, are clearly central to the TJMS crew’s connection to their audience, and to their humor. The crew vary in tone and grammar, with Sybil the most ‘correct’, and Ms Dupre’s heavy New Orleans diction perhaps the most ‘ethnic’, but all code-switch between ‘standard’ and ‘black’ English regularly, often within single sentences. The message is that their audience, for their own social and economic sakes, should be able to do so as well – and the crew, like other black radio DJs whom I follow, are never behindhand in correcting callers’ English, sometimes with the witty cruelty of the hook at Amateur Night at the Apollo.

(September 30, 2005) Melvin’s Love Line

Myron from Shreveport: I’m 29, I’m going to voc-tech . .

Melvin: Let me guess! Heating and cooling? [yes] Yes, you sound like a

man full of freons!

Myron: I just can't find the right woman.

Melvin: Sybil, meet Myron. Myron, meet Sybil.

Sybil: Myron, I need some references.

J. Anthony Brown: And she don't do trade school, 'cause I've already tried.

Melvin: Tell me this, do you have a gold grill?

Myron: I have one gold teeth.

Loud dial tone.

Crew, yelling: That was it, one gold teeth. He said the bad word, and Sybil hung up on him.

Sybil: [defensively] It was just reflex!

Sometimes the sharp comic timing between naïf callers and the Joyner crew is so extraordinary that the listening scholar suspects collusion:

(March 3, 2006) Melvin's Love Line

Obviously middle-aged, country Southern, man] This is Le Roy [Sybil starts laughing uproariously]. [He continues with total sincerity]: And I want to know what do I do to keep my sugar-wooger Mabel?

Entire crew lost in wild laughter and chants of sugar-wooger

Jay Anthony Brown: This is OLD SCHOOL. This is an old school problem. Sybil, you don't know nothin' about it.

.....

Melvin: [simultaneously sincere and over-the-top]: Sugar-wooger *loves* you. You don't have to do nothin'.

Le Roy: But it's hard out there.

Tom, Jay, and Melvin instantly sing, in unison, to the tune from 'Hustle & Flow': 'Cause it's hard out here for a sugar-wooger'.

All fall out

And sometimes Southern callers display such wonderfully antiquated language and unique imaginations that the crew can only marvel:

(April 26, 2005) Question: What would you do if it was your last 24 hours?

Woman caller: First I'd sit down with my loved ones and pray for a few hours. . . Then I'd commence to robbin' banks and side-swipin' cars.

Sybil: Side-swipin' cars!

J. Anthony Brown: You committin' crimes they don't do anymore!

Sybil: What is this, Ma Barker?

And sometimes the caller simply has the last witty word.

(May 16, 2005) Tom Joyner: Today's Express Yourself is, Tell us about repo [repossession] . . . tell us about when your stuff was repo'd!

Male caller: I *am* the repo man. I've seen it all. . .

[Crew starts teasing about women offering sexual favors to keep their cars; caller demurs]

J. Anthony Brown: But tell me this, what if she's Halle Berry fine?

Caller: I can't put all that fineness on the electric bill.

TJMS whiteness studies

February 8, 2005 Tom Joyner: To our Caucasian listeners, I *feel* for you during black history month.

As we have seen, the TJMS crew assume their audience is largely black, largely working-class/middle-class. And, in the long tradition of black comedy, they also assume that their audience will enjoy send-ups of stereotyped white people. Aside from lacking style, white people, from the TJMS perspective, are reckless and thrill-seeking, thoughtless about their own safety and comfort – unlike black Americans, who, given their daily experience of discrimination and tough urban living, are assumed to be pragmatic and prudent – streetwise.

(May 18, 2005) Ms Dupre's lucky numbers: Count the number of white couples you see walkin' down the street holdin' hands. . . You don't see many black couples . . . the reason is, a black man has to be ready to defend himself at all times!

The notion of white foolhardiness fuels endless TJMS jokes, every summer, about white idiocy in swimming in shark-infested waters.

(June 27, 2005) Tom Joyner: So the big news today is a shark attack off the coast of Florida . . .

Sybil: Yes, they say a surfer found her. . . there are some 30 attacks a year . . .

Tom Joyner: How many black people? J. Anthony Brown: One or none. Black people don't do that! If your ankles get wet . . .

Myra J: I'm screamin'!

Tom Joyner: Black people just wade in the water, they don't go in!

(June 29, 2005) Tom Joyner: In case you haven't heard, white people, the beach is open!

J. Anthony Brown: [megaphone voice] Back in the water, white people first!

Tom Joyner: And the beach is back open?
 J. Anthony Brown: Eat'em while they're hot!

The crew, of course, also report on and somehow eke humor from white racism.

(April 25, 2005) Express Yourself: What did you do to mess up that good-a job?

Male caller, Tallahassee: I was shift supervisor at a recycling plant, and one of the guys dropped the n-word on me. I picked him up and put him through a table.

J. Anthony Brown: One question, were you acting like the n-word? [wild laughter]

(June 16, 2005) They report that Tiger Woods says he's disappointed that he's the only African-American in the US Open.

J. Anthony Brown: What about Vijay?

Sybil: He's Fijian.

J.: Oh yeah? But late at night –

Tom Joyner: They're stoppin' him too!

J.: [mimicking Vijay and cops] I'm Fijian! Oh yeah?

Tom Joyner: He'd better hope they're rollin' tape!

And, like other black DJs, the crew recognize 'blue-eyed soul' – white musicians and singers whom they deem to have sufficient skills. Here is J. Anthony Brown managing to combine recognition of blue-eyed soul with a comic turn on the superiority of middle age:

(April 25, 2005) They discuss a recent Michael MacDonald [founder of Doobie Brothers band] performance, and J. says that he was trying to explain who MacDonald is 'to a young guy' . . . I said, he is our Eminem. . . He came widdit, man! [all laugh]

A final key element of the show's sly humor, also part of a long black American tradition memorialized by Flip Wilson in the early 1970s, is the comic rhetorical 'blackening' of non-blacks, or the 'street-blackening' of high-status Afro-Americans. Individuals 'going colored' then speak unwelcome or hidden truths, or display the unrecognized parallels between black and white institutions. The crew, for example, taking a cue from Toni Morrison's claim that Bill Clinton was 'our first black President', regularly have J. Anthony Brown do a slightly tweaked Clinton imitation:

(January 28, 2005) Tom Joyner: [slowly, with satisfaction] Our black President.

J. Anthony Brown: [thickly Southern] Yes ah am.

Tom Joyner: He's representin'.

J.: [with real curiosity] What'd I say?

Tom Joyner: He said that if you spent a fraction of what we're spending on Iraq we could solve all the problems here.

After the death of Pope John Paul, and with the installation of Pope Benedict, the crew took a page from Virginia Woolf's Depression-era era critique, in *Three Guineas*, of high-status male ritual peacocking, underlining the parallels between Catholic and rock/rap star (and their own) ritual:

(April 25, 2005) Tom Joyner: Playa, did you see the new Pope's installation? What a sky show! J. Anthony Brown: He came wid it!

Tom: He blinged up.

Sybil: [describes the details of the Pope's installation in the tone of the New York Times]

J. Anthony Brown: He was blingin', man.

The Joyner crew's most extraordinary example of comic blackening, though, came in the run-up to the American invasion of Iraq, when then-Secretary of State Colin Powell gave his notorious testimony to the United Nations, claiming massive US and UK intelligence evidence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. While mainstream newspaper and television reporters at the time treated Powell's testimony largely uncritically, the Joyner crew were entirely unpersuaded. On February 6th, 2003, they assumed that he was dutifully lying for the White House, and imagined for him instead an epiphany, a moment of truth, in which he 'went colored', stopped in the middle of the speech, and announced to United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, 'Brother Kofi, I aint got nothin', I can't front ya'll', kicking over his chair as he stalked out.

How you like me *now*, Jon Stewart?

Discussion: inequality, politics, and the American public sphere under neoliberalism

My argument so far might be glossed as a tale of two media Americas: the mainstream [white] media and those minority phenomena to which they attend; and the growth of popular minority media – like the TJMS, but also, for example, Spanish-language radio – which are nevertheless ignored, unrepresented in the larger public sphere. But I would like now to engage with another tale of two, the tale of two literatures – the political economy of US media, and black cultural studies – and the ways in which neither body of scholarship accounts for the TJMS.

Radical media scholars for some time have been documenting the public-sphere sequelae of the Reagan-era deregulation of American media, and the

cherry on the poison cake – the Telecommunications Act of 1996. We have more and more concentrated ownership, cross-industry (newspapers, television, radio stations, the internet) empire-building, and the decline of hard news reporting with the rise of infotainment across all media (McChesney 2004, Herman & Chomsky 1988). As William Greider writes: ‘The corporate concentration of media ownership has put a deadening blanket over the usual cacophony of democracy, with dissenting voices screened for acceptability by young and often witless TV producers’ (Greider 2005). In addition, the FCC’s 1987 abandonment of its historical Fairness Doctrine, in conjunction with heavily funded New Right organizing since the late 1970s, led to a national hard right turn as new media barons (e.g., Rupert Murdoch and the Fox empire) enforced the conservative line in the newsroom (Douglas 1999, p. 299, McChesney 2004, pp. 98–132).

Turning to radio, political-economic scholars narrate a variant of this larger tale of decline and fall (Douglas 1999, Barlow 1999, McChesney 2004). Despite radio’s highly commercial-capitalist history, many commentators appreciate its past vivacity and cultural pluralism. Susan Douglas notes that 1920s stations’ relationship to jazz began ‘radio’s century-long role in marrying youthful white rebellion to African-American culture’ and interprets 1930s radio as ‘a site of class tensions and the pull between homogeneity and diversity’ (1999, pp. 90, 103). Like many other middle-aged scholars (including myself), she has a particularly romantic vision of the rise of rock and roll as black crossover music in the 1950s–60s, and of the short-lived ‘underground, progressive’ FM radio movement of the 1960s–70s (2000, pp. 270–80).

But by the end of the 1970s, with rising deregulation and corporate concentration, political-economic media scholars see a devolution into the ‘assembly line’ production of radio shows, with ‘stale, derivative’ popular music (Douglas 1999, p. 278, McChesney 2004, p. 197), nearly exclusively right-wing talk radio and a politically cowed and partially commercialized National Public Radio. There is no room in their narratives for the feisty, original, politically progressive and yet highly commercial TJMS – or for the irony that the show’s nationwide syndicated success literally was enabled by FCC deregulation.

Much black cultural studies scholarship, however, is the perfect obverse to this narrative: it has a tendency to focus on the 1980s-forward rise of rap and hip hop (with a specifically feminist component on female artists), often incorporating hopes for the progressive political potential of a youth ‘hip hop nation’ (e.g., Rose 1994, Boyd 1995, Neal 1999, 2002, 2003, Watkins 2005). Mark Anthony Neal, for example, writes that ‘hip-hop artists have reclaimed the critical possibilities of popular culture, by using popular culture and the marketplace as a forum to stimulate a broad discussion and critique about critical issues that most affect their constituencies’ (1999, p. 161). While many scholars engage with rap and hip-hop’s intersection with American political economy, their overwhelming focus is on the celebratory analysis of the

production of music, lyrics, and video. We see very little work on contemporary *reception* of Afro-American cultural production, on local radio stations, on the natures of black and other audiences, and their apprehensions and uses of particular media. The landmark Jhally & Lewis (1992) study of the 'Cosby Show', Robin Coleman's edited collection, *Say It Loud!* (2002), and Catherine Squires' (1999) historical study of the Chicago AM radio station WVON (Voice of the Negro), for example, are notable for their uncommon focus on varying black audiences and their readings of and reactions to particular Afro-American cultural productions. The only black cultural studies reference I have found to the TJMS to date is Mark Anthony Neal's short discussion of the show as a 'digitized chitlin' circuit' (2003, p. 140).

The small and relatively recent anthropology of radio literature, perhaps because of its very recency and the discipline's ethnographic tradition, transcends both of these other literature's partial visions in its considerations of the functions and meanings of radio in a variety of global sites. Deborah Spitulnik's (1997) work on radio in Zambia, Dorothea Schultz's (1999) on talk radio in urban Mali, and Alan O'Connor's (2002) on public radio in Ecuador and Bolivia, for example, all consider variations and patterns in the politics of production, reception, and ethnic and language differences in these media. They also consider radio's role in 'the imagination of a moral public' (Schultz), and the ways in which 'radio recyclings' are part of constantly reconstructed speech communities (Spitulnik) – both clearly modes of analysis applicable to the TJMS.

In the end, then, the solution to the conundrum of the TJMS's 'hidden in plain sight' status involves mainstream media's failure to represent the working-class majority of black Americans, and their interests and politics, through both its hyper-representation of whites, and its selective hall of mirrors focus on youth, celebrity, either great poverty or great wealth, and culturally transgressive behavior among non-whites. These media failures are themselves the sequelae not only of the constantly shifting white American love and theft of black American culture, but also of a quarter-century of neoliberal deregulation of American media, with its associated centralization of ownership and rightward shift, its simultaneous race, class, language, and age fragmentation of media outlets, its increasingly profit-driven cultural products, and the privatization and political repression of public radio and television.

Meanwhile, media scholars, whether of political-economic or cultural studies bent, have reflected mainstream media misrepresentations of contemporary radio in their obsessions with, on the one hand, right-wing or libertarian white talk radio, and on the other, the production of youth rap and hip-hop. A 'culture and political economy' ethnographic approach to contemporary American radio allows us to 'discover' and analyze this phenomenon of the black elephant in the national living room.

Epilogue

(June 27, 2005) J. Anthony Brown, as the Reverend Richard Adenoids III: Lost line in the Last Supper: One of the disciples said, I may be out of line, but I sure would love a devilled egg.

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Notes

- 1 All transcriptions are by the author, done contemporaneously with broadcasts. Ellipses indicate gaps in transcription. The TJMS does archive a small portion of each show on its website, blackamerica.com, but rarely the spontaneous political conversations that constitute the bulk of the broadcast material in this study.
- 2 Clear Channel is a corporate media giant made possible by the deregulations of the 1980s and 1990s (see fn 4), and does indeed have a policy of rightist political interference with its affiliate stations. See McChesney (2004, pp. 279–80).
- 3 Arbitron's *Black Radio Today 2005* report identifies the Urban Adult Contemporary audience as fundamentally middle-aged – only 4% teenagers – and working-class – 70% are high school grads or have some college (2005, pp. 71, 75). At 9.5 million, this audience is second only to the rap/hip hop Urban Contemporary audience, which clocks in at 11 million, 19% of whom are black teens (2005, p. 75).
- 4 Susan Douglas makes it clear that Fowler, as FCC Chair, reigned over the demise of the federal government's efforts to prevent oligopoly in radio station ownership, as well as its efforts to maintain the provision of public programming and opposing political views (1999, pp. 295–97).
- 5 Re majority black working-classness, see Zweig (2000, pp. 32–33). My evaluation of the class status of the TJMS audience is based both on

- Arbitron's 2005 study of varying black radio audiences, and my own decade-long observation of TJMS callers. Re black American political orientation, aside from Kinder & Winter (2001), see CNN's exit polling after the Bush/Kerry presidential race (2004). Black American status determined a reported vote for Kerry by a greater margin than any other identity category – including gender, income, education, union membership, and ideology – except Democratic Party affiliation.
- 6 I discuss the issue of the TJMS and the real limits of political critique in commercial media in a neoliberal age in two other pieces. See 'Whose Homeland?: The New Imperialism, Neoliberalism, and the American Public Sphere', in Jeff Maskovsky and Ida Susser, eds., *Rethinking America: The Imperial Homeland in the 21st Century*. New York: Paradigm Press, under review; and 'The Neoliberalization of Minds, Space and Bodies: Rising Global Inequality and the Shifting American Public Sphere', in Jane Collins, Micaela di Leonardo, and Brett Williams, eds., *New Landscapes of Global Inequality*. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, under review.
- 7 See Perry (2005), Applebome (2005), Dobrzynski (2005). The latter piece mentions Joyner only *en passant*. Perry, in *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, covers a number of black charity efforts whose fund-raising results are pitiful compared to the TJMS numbers, but never mentions Joyner. Only Curtis (2005), in *Slate*, actually notes that the TJMS was 'the voice of Hurricane Katrina', but then identifies it as black-nationalist and 'altruistic', entirely missing its progressive politics.
- 8 See Watkins (1994) for an historical review of the development of black American humor.

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