

COMEDY AND COMMUNITY

In their highly insightful study, *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein theorize how the socializing function of humor constructs what they term “communities of laughter” (13). They fuse Stanley Fish’s concept of an interpretive community with Benedict Anderson’s notion of imagined communities to assert that,

Laughter . . . presupposes shared worlds, shared codes, and shared values.

Therefore, it is characterized by both subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. . . .

Laughter relies upon a ‘shared matrix of references’ (Slemon: 165) as a prerequisite. . . . During processes of identification, laughter that is shared by in-group members wields cohesive powers. The laughter outside the community strengthens the ties within. (13)

This power of humor to construct community is what I seek to examine in the comic writings of African-Italian author, Kossi Komla-Ebri. A practicing physician and prolific writer, Komla-Ebri came to Italy from Togo in 1974 at age 20. He completed medical studies in Bologna in 1982 and moved with his wife—who is a native Italian—and their two children to Como, where he practices medicine at the Ospedale Fatebenefratelli di Erba. Very involved politically with issues affecting migrants, in May 2001 Komla-Ebri became the first African-Italian to run for Parliament. He is now co-director of *El Ghibli*, an online journal dedicated to higher diffusion of literature by migrant authors in Italy. His own prolific literary production spans multiple genres. He has written lyric poetry, journal articles, and fiction. His most recent publication is a novella, *La Sposa degli dei* (Milan: Edizioni dell’Arco Marna, 2005). He has won several

literary awards for his short stories, now collected in a volume and published with the title *All'incrocio dei sentieri* (Bologna: EMI, 2003). In addition, he has also written a novel, *Neyla* (Milan: Edizioni dell'Arco Marna, 2002) which is the first novel by an African-Italian writer to be translated into English and published in the United States.

This paper concentrates on Komla-Ebri's two short volumes of anecdotes, *Imbarazzismi: quotidiani imbarazzi in bianco e nero* (Milan: Edizioni dell'Arco Marna, 2002) and *Nuovi Imbarazzismi: quotidiani imbarazzi in bianco e nero . . . e a colori* (Milan: Edizioni dell'Arco Marna, 2004) which recount in a comic key the daily embarrassing collisions between native Italians and African immigrants as both attempt to negotiate the new multi-ethnic terrain of contemporary Italian culture. These dozens of anecdotes, which are both personal experiences and those of friends, aim mainly at unraveling the notion of stereotypes. Not only does he seek to subvert the negative stereotypes that Italians hold of Africans, he interrogates the stereotypes that typified native Italians inside and outside of Italy. By making the person who holds a racist assumption the butt of his comic stories, the author uses humor as a means of revealing and subverting Orientalist discourses about Otherness. Simultaneously, by demonstrating his own cultural authority, he can construct a "community of laughter" with his audience, in which people who laugh together can be brought to see together.

Komla-Ebri's humor plays specifically with the idea of the constructed-ness of a community. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the author views community as a construct in the Foucauldian sense. Komla-Ebri uses humor to show how well he understands Italian culture, but continually highlights his own—and all

migrants'-- exclusion from that culture. His humor continually raises the questions, "What does it mean to be Italian?" and more importantly, "Who gets to be Italian?"

However, Komla-Ebri does not employ comedy exclusively with the idea of building a community of readers who reject the racism inherent in their culture. His humor is ironic, highly self-aware, and often ambiguous. He values humor's disruptive and transgressive qualities as well as its ability to forge group cohesion. His anecdotes also show how humor can be a means to resist victimization. Furthermore, his anecdotes examine not only the racism inherent in all cultures, but inherent in language itself. He asks us all to examine our own assumptions and to evaluate our own level of understanding, open-mindedness and, above all, to have the grace to be embarrassed by the misconceptions under which we operate.¹

Given the ability of stereotypes to create and enforce group boundaries, both consciously and unconsciously, Komla-Ebri focuses his humor on subverting those stereotypes in order to realign the cultural parameters (??Social boundaries?).² Komla-Ebri's humor always turns on the situational irony, on the incongruity between the

¹ For the purposes of this study, I will employ both the term, "humor" and the more general term, "comic," interchangeably and in their broadest definition of that which is laughable. A psychological justification of those things which elicit laughter and why would be beyond the scope of this paper, and would not facilitate an analysis of Komla-Ebri's use of the comic as cultural criticism. I am aware of the scholarly tradition which distinguishes between "humor" and "comedy" (usually the distinction is pursued in terms of "cause" and "effect," i.e. what causes laughter vs. what are the effects of laughter, thus humor is associated with the cause, and comedy with the effect), and which seeks to distinguish between those two terms in terms of genre, intent, or the relation of object and subject. A history of the overarching philosophical and psychological definitions of humor has been ably outlined by John Morreall, in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987.

² For an extensive sociological analysis of the uses of stereotyping in humor, see Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor Around the World*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996.

migrant's reality and the perceptions that Italians have of migrants. His humor is not conciliatory or necessarily cathartic, but it is highly self-aware evidenced in how the author sustains two continuous dialogues: one between the characters in the anecdotes, and one between himself and the reader. This double dialogue renders ambiguous the typical and essential distinction between audience and object of the humor, and that ambiguity also makes the tone of the humor extremely variable. By presenting stereotypes with their errors and limitations, the author offers two frames of reference, and requires the readers to simultaneously see from two opposed perspectives and to navigate the resulting gap in cultural knowledge (Erichsen 32-33). Meanwhile, the author positions himself so as to see both sides and understand both cultural codes, thus enabling him to decry the limits of both. In a story entitled "When in Rome, or Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," the author attempts to explain to his friend Daouda the norms in Italy for inviting guests:

Here you can't just drop by at dinnertime if you're not invited, you'll find yourself sitting alone on the couch with a magazine and having a conversation with the T.V. because they didn't defrost a steak for you.

If you do get invited, then you have to bring flowers for the lady of the house, or a box of chocolates, pastries for the children, and a bottle of wine or liquor for the husband.

I hope my friend understood.

An Italian friend later confided in me, “The trouble with Africans is that if you invite one, not only do they come empty-handed, there’s the greater risk that they’ll bring along . . . a friend.”³ (*Imbarazzissimi* 61)

The ellipses before the concluding word, “friend,” suggests that the author calls into question how genuine the usage of “friend” is in Italian culture when a simple act of sharing a meal together comes packaged with mainly unfriendly restrictions. Thus under the pen of Komla-Ebri, the juncture of African and Italian cultures becomes a humorous disjuncture where he directly confronts the stereotype of Africans who are ignorant of Italian norms, and operate in group terms. But he also shows that their social mistakes are not as inconsiderate as the cold refusal by Italians to open their homes and culture to others. He rewrites the stereotype of the warm, hospital Italians (“*italiani brava gente*”) and his emphasis on his Italian friend’s irritation with Africans coming to dinner without bringing anything with them makes allusion to and subtly criticizes the belief held in wider society that immigrants come to Italy economically and culturally “empty-handed.”

Komla-Ebri capitalizes on stereotypes of Italians to write his own migrant identity into Italian culture, both to show how Italianized he has become, and to laugh at that Italianization. John Lowe has theorized that, in minority humor, the issues, experiences, or characteristics which the humorist employs in a self-deprecating manner are those elements which represent barriers to integration, or elements which represent what is not allowed by the dominant culture (450). **TRANSITION**

Komla-Ebri also increases his own authority and the legitimacy of his laughter by showing how culturally literate he is. Reichl and Stein, “If we do not share the requisite

³ All translations from the original are mine.

cultural references, a joke or pun might be lost on us. . . . postcolonial literatures . . . speak not only to local but also to international readerships, which often find cues in the texts that enable access to their comic potential. Laughter and humor are therefore test cases, not for cultural belonging, but for transcultural competence” (14). Recounting a trip to the United States to speak at a conference on migration literature, Komla-Ebri describes his experience with American coffee. His reactions echo the quintessential response that Italians have to being forced, out of desperation and politeness, to imbibe what is by Italian standards, absolutely undrinkable:

We noticed with shock that the coffee cup was gigantic, like everything else in that country. But what left us utterly open-mouthed was that everything came along with a straw. . . .

Well, you know how it is, when in Rome.

We resigned ourselves to the torture of consuming the boiling slop in that manner.

But I couldn't help asking my friend Jim: “Why do you drink your coffee through a straw?”

“You know, I was watching you . . . here we just use the straw to stir the coffee, to dissolve the sugar!”

“Ah!” (*Nuovi Imbarazzismi* 37)

Komla-Ebri connects with his Italian audience in his disgust with American coffee and discomfort with the strangeness of this other culture. At the same time the author is laughing at Italian culinary elitism (and giving Italians a way to laugh at the same) by making himself--and hence Italians--the butt of the joke. But this is also a subtle relativizing of Italian culture. The little straw in the enormous coffee cup

demarcates multiple borders by revealing all cultures as Other. The audience cannot laugh *unsympathetically* at the African-Italian's faux pas in America without condemning itself. The sympathy Komla-Ebri evokes carries with it an obligation of understanding.

This committed sympathy that the author is able to create in his audience is facilitated by his ability to "speak" popular Italian culture. This cultural fluency increases the efficacy of his humor and the legitimacy of his criticisms. The background fabric as well as the punchline in many anecdotes relies on the author's extensive experience with Italian culture, evident in his allusions to popular culture. He relates a story of his wife's friends who, just after her marriage to Komla-Ebri, wondered aloud to her, "But what will your children be like?" Komla-Ebri responds, "Perhaps the friend from Milan feared that our children would look like zebra-striped Juventus," a clear allusion to the heated rivalry between the soccer teams of Turin (Juventus) and Milan (*Imbarazzismi* 63). Komla-Ebri's reaction seems dismissive, but accomplishes two things: first, it cultural shorthand, he shows that he understands Italy because he understands about the soccer teams, thus establishing his own authority within Italian culture. Second, the comparison between their children and soccer rivalries suggests the skewed values in culture that takes games, but not racism, seriously.

A further manifestation of his cultural fluency is that Komla-Ebri lampoons Italian institutions that Italians themselves lampoon. The author recounts his surprise when he was finally granted Italian citizenship and then told that he was required to complete a year of military service (*Nuovi Imbarazzismi* 5-6). Not only were his attempts futile to convince the authorities that he was a pacifist, Komla-Ebri enumerates the myriad absurdities of his military entrance exam: his own discomfort in being

surrounded by recruits half his age, the psychological exam asking questions such as, “Have you ever heard a voice whispering, ‘Go and save your country?’” and that he was ordered to retake his I.Q. test because his score was too high, and he must therefore have guessed at the answers. Textually, the author galvanizes his position in Italian culture by laughing at the military ineptitudes that Italians also mock. While this story is ostensibly about Komla-Ebri’s becoming a citizen, his recounting of it shows how Italian institutions simultaneously exclude him (the military does not recognize his skills or even his age), but they would include him only to use him. TRANSITION

Werner Sollors asserts, “. . . in all cases the community of laughter itself is an ethnicizing phenomenon, as we develop a sense of we-ness in laughing with others” (132). But this is a “We” that is created precisely by the humor evoked by the folly of practices in the creation of ethnicity. We laugh “with others” at the cultural practices that create the lines between a community and its “others.” Such a communal creation is necessarily problematic, and Komla-Ebri’s humor itself suggests a kind of meta-awareness of the invisible exclusions inherent in the constructions of sameness. Komla-Ebri targets “we-ness” by targeting the humor of ethnicity. He opens the space of humor to show where its ethnicizing power works along stereotypical lines, and makes us uncomfortable with that humor for that very reason.

Komla-Ebri also interrogates the suppositions implicit in the very definition of cultural belonging by writing himself and other migrants into Italian culture and foregrounding their contributions by way of work to a culture which largely defines even nationhood in terms of worker’s contributions. Many of the author’s stories are about his African friends who are employed professionals in Italy, but remain invisible even in the

world of work because of their skin color: his friend the physical therapist has a client whose housekeeper won't let him in the door for an appointment because he is black, his friend the head nurse is ignored by patients' relatives because they assume she must just be in the hospital to clean, clients come to the office where his friend works as a journalist, but leave immediately saying, "No one is in." Or if they are visible, it is only in stereotypical terms: his friend on vacation is asked by other guests to carry their bags, while another friend vacationing at the beach is approached and asked if he has any bracelets for sale. In addition to rewriting the stereotype of Africans as unskilled (and unwelcome) labor, these stories carry a political punch: bearing in mind that the Italian constitution defines the nation as a republic based on work, then those who have contributed their labor have contributed to the nation. As the unnamed interlocutor asks in the concluding story of *Nuovi Imbarazzismi*,

Explain to me why a 14-year-old kid, just because he was born in Italy, calls me "extracomunitario," I, who have lived in Italy for over 30 years, I work, pay taxes, have eaten pounds of spaghetti and pizza, I have endured all the festivals of Sanremo, strikes, government collapses, long lines, I have rooted for the Azzurri, I even have Italian citizenship, married an Italian and have Italian children? Could it be because I am black?" (71)

In addition to asking how one cannot be a part of that to which one has contributed daily, the speaker uses internationally recognizable icons of Italian culture—soccer, cuisine, music—to suggest that somehow, even though the migrant has absorbed Italian culture, he still feels that Italian culture has not absorbed him, and to question how that is. Both of these questions interrogate the suppositions of belonging to a polis, a

community, a nation and a national identity, an ethnicity. So, the irony which requires audience complicity becomes, in Komla-Ebri's writings, self-critical, much as Romantic irony. And the laughter which promotes the formation of the self-critical community questions the very constructions of community. Similarly, Komla-Ebri's humor is, itself, based in reversals and inversions. TRANSITION

Textually, for Komla-Ebri, confronting stereotypes is highly self-aware, evident in his use of differing versions of the same trope. For those anecdotes in which he feels the moment of realization did not occur for all of the parties involved, he will conclude the story with the same formula, "And an angel passed by overhead" then inserting a stereotype that Italians hold of Africans.

Matteo, a young man of African origin, and his adoptive father, an Italian, had just finished attending Christmas mass

An elderly woman leaving the church put a 2 Euro coin in [Matteo's] hand and said, "Merry Christmas!"

Shocked, Matteo stared at the coin with a furrowed brow. Then, with an amused smile, he slipped it into his pocket.

A black angel with two enormous eyes and a bloated stomach and spindly hair resignedly stroked his bulging ribs and counted them while whistling 'White Christmas.'" (*Nuovi Imbarazzismi* 49)

The superficial charity that doesn't really address Africa's needs or the European relation to Africa's current economic state is typified in the two Euro coin. The image of the passing angel suggests a moment of faux revelation, for the character who should be embarrassed is the one who misses the entire point. However, the author's portrayal of

the elderly woman is sympathetic, as is the portrayal of Matteo's reaction. Both parties do display a kind of charity (Matteo by accepting, she by attempting). These sympathetic portrayals make it clear that Komla-Ebri does not condemn Italians, certainly not individually. He condemns the misguided thinking that creates encounters like the one between Matteo and the elderly woman, encounters that are the antithesis of a real exchange.

Komla-Ebri frequently relates stories of adopted African children and the resultant misunderstandings by Italians: people assume his wife adopted their own children and praise her for adopting two, people suppose his African friend is the babysitter rather than the father of his own lighter-skinned children, people believe any darker-skinned child is adopted, and best of all, when Komla-Ebri and his wife are considering adopting a child, he goes to the government agency for minors to ask about the paper work, and the government workers there assume that he himself is seeking to be adopted.

Adoption serves as a complicated metaphor for cultural integration. Adopted children will obviously grow up Italian, rarely knowing their culture of origin. Paradox—Italians invited them into the country, adopted children not “migrants” in the same way (obviously, infants did not choose to come to Italy), but still excluded from complete integration into society that invited them. Given that children, particularly infants, symbolize perfect innocence, their innocence and vulnerability stand as the moral yardstick against which all ethical choices must be judged (Marcus 278).⁴ TRANSITION

⁴ Currently, lawmakers, sociologists, and schools in Italy now include in the category “second generation migrants” all foreign children adopted by Italian parents, and the children of one Italian parent and one non-native Italian parent as well as the children

In his essay, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” Friedrich Nietzsche claims that words and language disclose not the essential truth about an object, but instead only the relation of the object to humans.⁵ That all language is “anthropomorphic,”⁶ bound up with and composed of human relationships and, conversely, that it sets the bounds of human reality is made painfully manifest in Komla-Ebri’s *Imbarazzismi* and *Nuovi Imbarazzismi*. For the author, stereotypical misconceptions are deeply embedded in a language. His texts display a constant theme of the limits of language, or rather, how people’s language and inability to use language perpetuate racism. This has two main narrative manifestations: first, the absurdity of Italians’ immediate assumption that any person of color cannot speak Italian, and so they revert to a kind of pidgin, gestural language to communicate with highly educated people, and second, the racism inherent in the language itself, which is embarrassing for people, and which they can’t seem to maneuver around because they, the native Italians, do not know how to use their own language adequately. TRANSITION

born in Italy to migrant parents, and the children or adolescents raised in foreign countries who migrate to Italy to join their families. Because of the obvious differences between these groups, some sociologists prefer to refer to narrow the distinctions by distinguishing “1 1/2 generation,” “1 1/4 generation” and “1 3/4 generation,” based on the percentage of the child’s formative years that are spent in Italy (Giorgio Bioatti, “Luoghi comuni: sono i figli degli immigrati il futuro in mezzo a noi,” *La Stampa*, January 8, 2005, p. 6-7.)

⁵ “The ‘thing in itself’ . . . is also quite incomprehensible to the creator of language He designates only the relations of things to men, and for their expression calls to his help the most daring metaphors.” Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Falsity in Their Extramoral Sense,” in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Reinhold Grimm and Caroline Molina y Vedia, *The German Library: Vol. 48*, Volkmar Sander, General Ed. (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 90.

⁶ One of Nietzsche’s characterizations of truth, which he sees as fundamentally tropic, because of the nature of language: “What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding” *Ibid*, p. 92.

For example, one day as he is traveling by train, another passenger keeps attempting to start conversation with author, who just wants to read (*Imbarazzismi* 7). The other passenger keeps talking to the author in grossly oversimplified Italian, and in the inappropriately familiar “tu” form, “You talk my language? You from Africa? Where Africa?” When the author finally tells him, “Togo,” the passenger, who obviously doesn’t know where or what Togo is, tells him, “No, now Italian we say, ‘Congo,’ you from Congo” (8). The irony of the other passenger’s mistake highlights that his ignorance of geography is surpassed only by his ignorance as to how to respond to the most immediate of cultural differences: location. Komla-Ebri highlights that this man, like many Italians, assumes that any person of color does not understand or speak Italian, and yet, ironically, it is the native speaker who does not know how to listen to his own language. TRANSITION

Komla-Ebri recounts how an Eritrean friend of his was waiting for a bus, and another person at the stop begins to talk with her. After a twenty minute conversation, the native Italian gentleman asks, “So do you speak Italian?” (*Nuovi Imbarazzismi* 17). This question suggests a kind of practical deafness. Since an African who can speak Italian defies the popular conception of how an Italian speaker (i.e., “native Italian,” to stereotypical notions) should look, the interlocutor can only leave the limits of language by retreating into a self-imposed “deafness.” This person’s linguistic understanding is unable to process the new relational information, and so must leave understanding altogether. The gentleman cannot understand any difference for which he has no cultural or linguistic reference.

Similarly, even sincere attempts to acknowledge difference are hampered by linguistic shortcomings. Komla-Ebri's friend returns from Kenya and goes to an elegant Italian hotel, where she is greeted by a hotel worker with "Jambo jambo!" She looks surprised. But the worker, who looks still more surprised, asks, "Don't you speak Swahili?" "No," the woman replies, "Don't you speak Ewe?" (*Nuovi Imbarazzismi* 45). The case of the hotel worker collapsing all of the hundreds African languages into one, parallels the essentializing perceptions that Italians have of Africans.

It is not always deficiencies in Italians' understanding of African language which results in communication breakdown and exposure of latent racism, but simply a deficiency in available, nonracist terminology in Italian. One day at the hospital while he was behind a screen putting a cast on a patient, another patient arrived. Komla-Ebri sent the nurse to the new patient and overheard their conversation.

Patient: "Isn't the doctor in? The one . . . that was here before?"

Nurse: "Which doctor?"

Patient: "The one, um, with, um, the one with, um, the glasses."

Nurse: "Most of them do wear glasses."

Patient: "All right then! The one that's, I mean, the one that's, I mean, the one that's, oh, he's the, um, he's the . . . the little . . . little blackie!"

Nurse: "You must mean Dr. Ebri; he's with a patient. Please wait here."

The author concludes by observing sardonically, "Defining anyone in my weight class a 'little blackie' is truly a euphemism." (*Imbarazzismi* 47) Here the author spoofs that fact that it is a native Italian who is reduced to stuttering semi-silence and inaccurate, approximate, inadequate language when confronted with the inability to find a non-racist

term. By calling the patient's awkward, unwilling but inescapably patronizing insult a "euphemism," the author highlights the fact that the patient's actual appellation was indeed racist. The patient's embarrassment extends to all who find that their vocabulary is inadequate to the task of navigating contemporary cultural waters. Komla-Ebri further suggests that the racist term is only an extension of the speaker's racist perceptions and ideas. The native speaker's inability to speak Italian runs parallel to his or her inability to understand Italian, both the language and the new cultural reality, of what it is to be "Italian."

Komla-Ebri highlights these limits, and the limiting mentality behind them in his story of the mayor of a large, Northern Italian city who uses the offensive term "Vu' cumpra'" to define Senegalese street vendors (*Imbarazzismi* 51). When criticized by someone in the audience for using that racist term, an inhabitant of that city defended the mayor, claiming that there really could not be any problem, because "vu' cumpra'" was a term of everyday use. A friend of the author, a Senegalese journalist, was asked his opinion of this exchange, and replied, "You can tell the mayor that he is an idiot! After all "Idiot" is term of everyday use" (51).

By turning the tables on the mayor's insult, the author points out that the limits of language are merely an extension of the limits of cultural elasticity. Komla-Ebri uses humor to both challenge and even expand these limits. His texts reveals a profound faith in the transformative power of humor. His is a daily choice to react to insults with humor rather than hostility. He clearly sees comedy as a corrective, a cure, but not in terms of a one-time pill, but more a like a long-term diet regime or life-style change. The author is

hardly calling for a superficial political correctness that exists only on the verbal level, but rather an honest examination of systemic racism that pervades the body like a disease.

In a 1999 interview, the author stated, “Sometimes I say that this society is no longer capable of laughing. . . laughing means opening up your soul. It means creating an opening. It means a space through which someone else can enter inside of you. It’s a risk. So you laugh only with someone you trust” (Pedroni 401). Kossi Komla-Ebri’s humor is not, “an aggression against another; it is a destabilization of the subject” (Reyes 2). His use of the comic “allows for a politics of pleasure in which laughter acts as a . . . provocation toward self-awareness” (Reyes 9). To the question, “What does it mean to be Italian in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural Italy?” Komla-Ebri responds, “It means to be citizens of the world” (*Imbarazzismi* 63).

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