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Standing Up, Talking Back: Stand-up Comedy, African Immigrants and Belonging in Canada

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Stand-up comedy offers African immigrants in Canada space for performing their identity as immigrants, negotiating belonging, resisting stereotypes, and utilising humour to hold a conversation with diverse audiences. Unlike other popular cultural forms such as music and film that require a hefty budget and large, technical production sets—often unavailable to many struggling immigrants—stand-up comedy provides an affordable artistic avenue as well as community interaction for immigrant practitioners. This paper examines stand-up comedy and how it has been utilised by African immigrants as a tool for social awareness, integration and coping with the attendant challenges of being a new arrival in a new country without losing their African identity using an African cultural lens to conduct performance analyses of two African-immigrant comics in Canada. The paper also explores how stand-up comedy functions as a form of resistance to the widely held and often repeated—yet unsubstantiated—image of the immigrant as a social liability.

Keywords: Immigration, stand-up comedy, resistance, belonging, Canada, Africa

Introduction

My mother, a strong and beautiful woman, believes in the power of the spoken word. To drive home her point of never underestimating the power of the spoken word, she always recites the Yoruba proverb: *Ti'takun ba p'enu po, won a ri Erin mu* (Literally: If Spiders can speak with one voice and collaborate, they will conquer an elephant). To my mother, the spoken word can accomplish seemingly impossible tasks, and when imbued with humour, joy will follow. That is why she is always full of stories, always singing and always relying on the verbal performance of her identity as a wife, teacher and mother to bring laughter and joy to her household.

It would appear that those words by my mother had been heard across the ocean in Canada, as the spoken word, the oral recital of poetry and performances on stage, became popular in the 1800s. For example, Pauline Johnson popularized poetry performance on stage with her indigenous props and evocations which gained her global fame in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Strong-Boag and Gerson 2000).

However, in the 1970s, a significant cultural shift in oral performance on stage occurred as, "Comedy replaced poetry as the main avant-garde verbal performance art with comedy clubs springing up in almost every city in the western world", establishing stand-up comedians as the new celebrities of the literary world and as social commentators (Davies 1993, xii). As a genre of humour, stand-up comedy took a giant leap in the realm of popular culture in the 1980s, moving from the comedy clubs to mainstream media including radio and television. Cable television producers, eager to meet the demand for more content began to tape comedy shows in clubs and transmit them through television, thus propelling the status of stand-up comedy as a form of popular culture (Auslander 2008).

A French language comedy festival for stand-up comedians, *Just for Laughs*, was established in Montreal in the summer of 1984, bringing together solely French-speaking comedians for a two-day festival of comedy and laughter. Due to the success of the event, it became a month-long festival two years later, with anglophone performers added to the bill to make it a truly Canadian event. Underscoring the importance of television at this time in the dissemination of humour to Canadian homes, the festival was taped for later broadcasting by both Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and Comedy Network, and would provide the platform for many African-immigrant comedians such as Boucar Diouf (Senegal), Fatima Dhowre (Somalia) and Arthur Simeon (Uganda) to launch their careers in stand-up comedy (Edinborough 1984).

For African immigrants in Canada, stand-up comedy opens up a new space for performing their identity as immigrants, negotiating belonging, and having a conversation through the medium of humour with diverse audiences. Unlike music and movies that require a hefty budget and large, technical production sets—often unavailable to a struggling immigrant—stand-up comedy provides an affordable outlet of artistic interaction for immigrant practitioners. After all, the requirements for a stand-up comedy set are quick wits, strong verbal content that is laced with humour, and a microphone. Of course, a vivacious personality also helps in delivering the laughs required to be successful on stage.

It is the spontaneity of stand-up comedy and the ability to create an instant "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) through shared laughter that transgresses social codes, especially among audience members, that makes it an important art form for our analysis of humour in the negotiation of belonging and community amongst African immigrants in Canada. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be on how stand-up comedy has been utilised by African immigrants in Canada as a tool for social awareness, integration, and coping with the attendant problems of being new arrivals in a new country.

I argue that stand-up comedy helps to challenge stereotypes while functioning as a form of resistance to the widely held and oft-repeated—if unsubstantiated—image of the immigrant as a social liability and lecherous opportunist; the idea that the immigrant is "lazy, indolent, lawless and untrustworthy" (Foster 1996, 23). It is also worth noting that the stand-up comedy scene is responsible for creating jobs and putting many aspiring immigrants on stage, thus affording them the opportunity to pursue comedy as a career as part of their active contributions to Canadian society. Many are developing an exceptional initiative to promote and perform in the highly competitive world of show business (Stebbins 1990).

Methodologically, I draw upon two comedians on the Canadian circuit who are from Sub-Saharan Africa, Boucar Diouf (Senegal) and Arthur Simeon (Uganda), as case studies. I analyse the influence of their African roots and elements of cultural memory in the way they tell jokes and deploy humour in negotiating their belonging in Canadian society and resistance to negative stereotypes. I have rendered some of the jokes in their original West African pidgin, while also drawing on samples from visiting comedians as a way of signaling the similarities in the form of humour used by both visiting African comedians and their resident Canadian counterparts.

Continental origins of African stand-up comedy in Canada

As a genre of comedy, standup appears to be the easiest to define. As the name implies, it involves a comic standing in front of a live audience and telling jokes in an attempt to elicit laughter amongst the audience members. After all, the only requirements are quick wits, strong verbal content laced with humour and a microphone. Of course, a vivacious personality also helps (Dean 2000). It is the spontaneity of this genre and the ability to create instant an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) through shared laughter that helps transgress social codes. A quick-witted comedian and his audience can become one entity very quickly.

When a performer stands in front of the audience, he brings them into the community by drawing on shared experiences to create jokes that will generate laughter. This laughter creates an "insider status" among the audience who "gets it," and leaves out all who do not. And, because the jokes by most stand-up comedians either draw directly from their immigrant experience or draw from their shared cultural memory, a community of shared laughter is created under the roof of the comedy club (Boskin 1986; Chiaro 1992). Speaking about the community created by jokes, Peter Kivy (2003) observes that:

> The joke, then, when it works, when we "get it," reminds us that we are "we"; that we are a group, a community. What community? Well, obviously, whatever community has fulfilled the conditions presupposed by the joke. And that community might be ethnic, national, professional, *cultural*, religious, whatever. But it would be a group within the human family and for that moment, isolated from it. (6, emphasis mine)

Thus an immigrant comedian and the audience members from similar backgrounds are members of a community. In African oral performances, every performer is considered a member of the community and only repeating what already belongs to the community as part of their jokes. And that is why the call-and-response narrative technique, that we will consider shortly, is popular among African standup comedians.

In order to be able to create that community of laughter with their audience, a comedian must be able to utilize stand-up in such a way that makes the audience part of the humour creation instead of simply its consumers. And, since call and response is a key performative part of African narrative tradition that brings in the audience into storytelling, then drawing the audience into a community as part of a standup routine is common. For us to be able to understand how an immigrant comedian is able to create a community with their audience in ways that are different from a Canadian-born comedian, we must look at the origin and characteristics of stand-up comedy in both cultures.

European orientedstand-up comedy in Canada and its American counterpart comes from the narrative monologues of theatre actors that preceded the actual theatre performance with a monologue designed to keep the audience entertained while the actors prepared. However, the monologue performers were mirroring the jugglers in the medieval carnival who juggled and told jokes at the same time to amuse the audience or perform magic before the big carnival parade started (Double 2005, 17-

18). With specific reference to stand-up comedy in North America, Mark Twain is often credited as the first stand-up comedian but in reality, Mark Twain was an after-dinner speaker at corporate events who used humour to distinguish his act and became famous for it (Gribben 1985, 48). However, the core element of Twain's performance remains steeped in monologue just like the theatre performers and one-liners that subverts well established social norms such as "why do today that which you can leave till tomorrow' (ibid).

In the African context, however, stand-up comedy is rooted in the oral narrative tradition, a practice shared by most cultures. The stories are embedded with humour to draw the audience in as the storyteller engages them in a dialogue. Mel Watkins (1994) states that verbal word play and witty storytelling contests can be specifically traced to a number of African groups, especially the Yoruba peoples of western Nigeria and the Ashanti peoples of Ghana. These contests, performed to an audience, would serve as a precursor to the development of jokes as standalone objects in African society (19). William Schechter (1970) also shares this belief in the oral roots of African folk humour by specifically providing the example of the satirical word play by Ashanti peoples of Ghana called *opo*.

The narratives upon which the humour is based are also not a *monologue*, like the European tradition, but a *dialogue* that engages the audience in the production of the humour. For instance, amongst the Yoruba peoples of western Nigeria, the call and response is not just part of music and song tradition, but equally an integral part of the storytelling tradition, which themselves have music and humour embedded in them for effect. Usually, before the storyteller engages in a longer narrative, they sets the tone by engaging in a game of riddles and jokes called *alo apamo*. Often this calls for the storyteller to use their whole body as a theatrical prop, part of an expressive form of humour that is closely related to a farce especially when their funny riddles are met with incorrect responses by members of the audience. Some members of the audience even get involved in humour production by testing the storytelling skills of the narrator with a deliberately incorrect answer, then insisting on the answer's correctness, thus elongating the narration of the joke – all to the amusement of their fellow audience. This is often referred to as *efe*.

Isidore Okpewho (1992, 159) suggests that this technique of call and response employed during the telling of jokes may be to get the audience mentally prepared for the longer narrative to follow or just to set the tone for the entertainment of the evening. What is clear is that the audience and the society are part of the production of humour as opposed to a monologue whereby only the comedian speaks to the audience and the only participation expected of the audience is their laughter.

Efe literal definition is 'joke' or 'humour' in Yoruba and looking at *efe* and its musical accompaniment amongst the Egbado clan, of the Yoruba nation, Michael Olatunji (2007) states that, "*Efe* (performances) which integrates masks and dance provides an ample opportunity for the performers to criticize, deride and ridicule any individual member or an organisation, of whatever status, in the community who had contravened the laws and ethics of that particular society" (27).

The corrective nature of stand-up from Africa is also emphasized by Olatunji. Oftentimes, the performers or storyteller will use the mannerism and idiosyncrasies of a particular member of the society and ask the audience members to decode. Once the audience correctly deciphers the individual that is being ridiculed, the storyteller pushes the burden of proof and knowledge to the audience members, thus avoiding any form of censorship (32).

It is from this oral tradition of storytelling and humour that African comedians who engage in stand-up comedy in Canada draw upon for their craft. And since it is a communal action that involves every member of the society in production of humour,

anyone, including musicians, can assume the personae of the comic and tell a narrative joke, as long as there is a willing audience to participate.

A notable example is a July 2018 performance by Afrobeat musician Femi Kuti in Toronto to a largely immigrant audience. Recapping one of the famous "Yabis" (ridicule) of the ruling class by his more established father and Afrobeat King, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the following dialogue ensued:

> Femi: As all of una plenty for here and una don run comot for home, na who pursue[1] una. (So many of you gathered here have run away from home – Nigeria – who chased you out?)
>
> Audience: Different Answers
>
> Femi: You, you say wetin? (What do you say?) (Pause) Well, I no know, but me I say Baba, if you say Gida, na you get your mouth. (I don't know about your answer but I will say Baba, if you say Gida, you own your mouth).

Here, Femi draws on the traditional *efe* performance genre to crack a joke before a musical performance with an audience effectively integrated into the humour production. The object of ridicule may be far removed from the performance space and never mentioned in full, but is implied. The Nigerian audience will identify the name of a former military president, General Babangida, that the artist chose to split in half, requesting the audience to complete the name. His story is also about their journey as immigrants which he lays squarely at the feet of the corrupt leader. The joke is definitely on the Nigerian ruling class, but is also a reminder to the immigrants of the decadent political leadership or the circumstances that literally forced them abroad or into exile as the case may be. Femi Kuti's performance therefore exemplifies the African oral performance as one that encompasses the narrative joke style, often mixed with music and audience participation, and therefore departing from the monologue that evolved into the American and European styles of stand-up today.

These joke styles, according to Elliot Oring (2009), heavily relies on the "punchline" by the comic. However, with the narrative joke technique, there are multiple punchlines, spread across the story and often relying on the audience for the humour to be enacted, something Oring describes as the "comic tale" (9).

From an African perspective, the "comic tale" is part of the larger story or folktale, and the story is incomplete without humour. Similarly, when the story is paired with jokes and audience participation, it distinguishes the stand-up performance of African comedians from that of their Canadian-born counterparts that rely heavily on monologue which strings together different, unrelated jokes with a "punchline" often with no input from the audience. Conversely, for the African comic, the stories are often folktales that belong to an entire community, it forms part of their cultural memory that they bring to the fore on the performance stage. The stand-up comedy of African-immigrant performers in Canada is intrinsically connected to their roots in Africa.

Therefore, the key difference between the European style of stand-up comedy and those from Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, is monologue as opposed to dialogue. Stand-up comedy in the western world is a monologue by one performer while the one practiced in Africa or based on cultures from Africa is characterised by dialogue, a conversation between the performer and his audience. In drawing this conclusion, I recognize that modern comedic expression in parts of Europe and Canada now have recorded laughter inserted, often referred to as "canned laughter." Yet, the mechanical insertion takes away from the kind of dialogic participation that

[1] I have translated the Nigerian Pidgin language that is used for the dialogue to make it more accessible, especially for people who are unfamiliar with the language.

African comedians draw from their audience, which is a remnant of the call and response tradition of African storytelling art.

Negotiating identity, finding place: The stand-up comedy of Boucar Diouf

Humour has the power to multiply, sending out multiple meanings and addressing different audiences at once. It is an effective method of creating "the dichotomies and contradictions that shape the lives" of marginalized groups while "overturning stereotypical assumptions about the group […] and [serves to] unite diverse groups by bringing them together in laughter" (Andrews 2011, 3-4). In negotiating their belonging in Canadian society, the immigrant comedian can call upon humour as a tool. Part of the performative negotiation process may involve the comedian embracing his position as an immigrant, and rather than feeling any hegemonic pressure, use it to their advantage just as oppressed groups in medieval times were able to during carnivals (Bakhtin, 1968).

Boucar Diouf represents the comedian who has been able to do this; perform the dual role of "playing the fool" and controlling the negotiation of his integration into his new society with comedy. His comedy has the unique capacity to address fellow immigrants, other marginalized groups in Canada and other members of society who do not fall into these categories while integrating them into a unified audience and community of laughter.

Born in Senegal, Diouf came to Canada in 1991 as a marine biologist for his graduate school education. He obtained his Ph.D and worked at the University of Quebec. According to him, science did not give him the opportunity to be able to fully represent his African identity and so he opted for comedy as a way to "be African" while trying to be the model immigrant in Canada.

Integration, racial tension and the immigrant experience form the core of Diouf's comedy routine and has impacted multiple audiences across French-speaking Canada, but resonates the most with his immigrant community. Diouf has been able to use his comedy to bring an alliance within the francophone African community in Quebec while fostering a connection with other marginalized groups, especially with the First Nations of Quebec. Yet his comedy cuts across the racial divide as he manages to appeal to settler audiences as well. Diouf calls his art the comedy of "interculturality" with the single aim of opening up spaces for communication. He once joked to a television audience while holding a coconut with a hat on:

> Coconuts are the best immigrants. They fall from a tree on their home islands and roll into the sea. Then the sea takes them far away to another island. Then they call to the crab to help them and then the crab comes and cuts them lose. The coconut is free because he gets help from the crabs and then he takes root in his new environment. Immigrants are like coconuts. There are things you bring with you and you can use them to take root, but you cannot say 'I will not change. I will change my surroundings instead. Well, home is too heavy to move, so better make use of the crabs you see and receive their help to flourish and take root in your new home (Diouf, 2016).

There is a play on Diouf's scientific and social side in the joke but the message of social cohesion as a path to social integration is not lost. He encourages fellow migrants to imitate the coconut and "get help from the crab," the people that are already in Canada, or specifically Quebec as that was the primary audience he was addressing. That is the only way that they can take "root' or be integrated into society by living harmoniously with its other members. While it is good to retain part of the culture from home, he reminds them of a salient reality: home is fixed in a place and they

cannot physically bring it with them. Identity, to Diouf, is not just about roots, but about everything else that makes up the person.

Is Diouf asking his fellow immigrant to abandon who they are? He answers: a coconut is still a coconut. Nothing can change a person. Nothing can take away the cultural identity of immigrants and they can still use their cultural identity to their advantage in taking root in Canada, to perform the multiple identities that the move to Canada has imposed. Diouf's statement aligns with Edward Said's (1993) idea that "no one is today purely one thing and labels… are only the starting point.' (8).

But the narrative joke has a message for non-immigrants as well. Diouf turns and with a big smile asks, "are you a good crab? Do we provide the needed help for the immigrant? The crab also gets food while helping the coconut out of his shell and this kind of assistance is what we are not seeing regularly for the immigrant". Like the crab, when immigrants are helped, society benefits. Immigration brings mutual benefit and humour is Diouf's vehicle for preaching that message.

To Diouf, communication is the link between his scientific and artistic sides. In science, he aims to communicate his research effectively to his peers and students, while he hopes to communicate the value of integrating everyone into a cohesive society through his comedy. "I want people to really appropriate this country and explore this country. Hatred of immigrants only limits the possibility of what we can achieve when we come together and embrace our diversity" (Diouf 2016).

For us to see how he accomplishes all of these multiple tasks with humour, let us focus on his performance set for the "Pour une raison X ou Y" (For an X or Y reason) tour of Quebec between 2016 and 2017.

The multiple function of Diouf's comedy set is often apparent from his props and appearance. He invokes the griot tradition from his home country, Senegal, by often coming on stage first in African attire, a beaded crown, necklace, and a talking drum. African royalty on stage may be the apt framing of Diouf. Some of his audience may find this amusing, no different from the way some members of the elite class during the Carnival found the dress-up of the peasants funny. The laughter of the elite usually reverberates on the sight of the poor peasants until the performances begin and the poor turn the jokes onto the elite in a clear case of subversion with humour (Bakhtin 1968, 203). Diouf does more than mere subversion though. In transplanting his cultural heritage to the Canadian stage, Diouf brings the cultural memory of his homeland as a mediator of the comedic conversation that is about to occur. It creates an instant community with Africans in the audience and invites non-Africans into the conversation as the performative conversation. The audience is invited to be the "crab," the one who helps the African and is imbued with the ability to look past the "clothes" or outer covering of the immigrant.

However, the joke switches in the performance when Diouf ditches the African attire and dons denim shirt and trousers. Is he abandoning his African roots so quickly? He answers:

> "My placenta is buried in Africa and it keeps calling me back. But that Boucar is no longer here. This is a new Boucar, a true Quebecer. This Boucar was born in Rimouski (Quebec). The Senegalese Boucar is no longer here. I can see many of you surprised but that is true. Even my son is confused. This show was conceived because of a question he asked me. He came to me one day after I disciplined him and asked me to go back to where I came from. I told him 'You know Anthony, it is not fair. I have lived here for 25 years and you have only lived here for 6 years, which is your entire life, why do you think you are more Quebecer than me? I am from here because I have stayed here for 25 years and that is longer than you have been alive. You go back to where you came from.' My son's eye grew wide and teary, as he begged. "Please papa, don't send me back." Then he suddenly stopped crying and said, 'where did I and other babies come from?" (For an X or Y reason, 2017)

Beyond the invocation of his African roots and the strong allusion to the family, Boucar's joke is one that places the immigrant experience in perspective. He has worked hard for more than 25 years in Quebec and his belonging is questioned by none other than his six- year-old son. Rather than be offended, Boucar's humour defuses the tension and helps him channel the rage into laughter that turns the joke on his son. By comparing the number of years that they have stayed on the land and then illogically asking his son to go back to where he came from (the womb), Diouf establishes a relationship with the land that affirms his belonging.[2] The land has been his home for longer than his home country and so he states that the denim-wearing Boucar, as opposed to the traditional African attire-wearing Boucar, was born in Rimouski, Quebec.

I find it fascinating that in his rebuttal of the denial of his right to the space he occupies, he neither called on race, family hierarchy (father to son) or social standing to affirm his belonging. Rather, humour became the tool that firmly integrates him without the use of violence. In doing so, Diuof buys into the conclusions of Elaine Scarry (1985) and Sussie Lindfield (2010).

The human body has been described by Elaine Scarry (1985, 12) as the "original site of reality" since the human functions of the body are one and the same for all humans. She further states that "what is remembered in the body is well remembered" (Ibid). Sussie Lindfield (2010) agrees with this notion and goes on to state that the body is "our primary truth" (5). As a scientist, with a bias for biology, Diouf echoes the conclusions of both scholars and uses the body as the unifying factor in bringing the immigrant and the host together in conversation; their bodily functions are one and the same. And he reminds them of this with another joke:

> "If you think you are too small to change anything, try sleeping in a tent with a Mosquito [Pause] The Dalai Lama said that, not my grandfather. My grandfather is more poetic than that. My grandfather would say 'it is when a mosquito lands on a man's testicles that he realizes all problems cannot be solved with violence towards a lesser being." (Audience applauds).

Diouf's audience consists of both white Canadians and African immigrants and he wants them all to embrace the immigrant – signified by the seemingly helpless and bothersome pest, mosquito – and so he uses the most sensitive part of the male body, the testicles to show that the immigrant and immigration are sensitive subjects that cannot be solved by violence. As every male also share testicles, he definitely touched a raw nerve, which speaks truth to the audience irrespective of their cultural or ethnic background. More like a call to engage in less aggressive forms of relationships in their interactions with the immigrant as they may end up, like any man who goes ahead and crush a mosquito on his testicles, hurting themselves more than the immigrant.

There is also the ironic contrast of culture. He contrasts how the Dalai Lama would tell the joke to how his grandfather would tell it and concludes that his grandfather is more poetic. Obviously, he is biased but with good reason. This is a reference to the folktale tradition of Africa that embraces the drum and song as part of storytelling art (Okpewho 1992, Finnegan 1970). As if to further his allusion to the body and its relationship to both the Dalai Lama and Africa, he got the audience involved in a call and response style song:

> **Boucar**: The Habit does not make the Monk
> **Audience**: But it hides the monk's box

The call and response folksong style is present amongst the Ashanti people of Ghana as part of the narrative humour contest, *Opo*, used as a satirical rebuke of the

[2] Indeed the idea of one's placenta being buried in Africa is part of a traditional cultural ritual in most parts of the African continent. It represents the strongest ties to one's natal roots.

ruling class. But outside of cultural memory, the body as the site of truth (Scarry 1985, 12-13) is used in the joke. Everyone is the same under the cloth and while the habit may not make a monk, it covers his nudity. The immigrant may not be seen as part of the society but performs a very important part. A naked Dalai Lama will be nothing to look at. Therefore, while his cloak, or habit may not make him a monk, it is a necessary part of what makes him a monk. Immigrants and immigration are an integral part of the society and must be accepted as such.

Diouf has used his comedy as a force for integration and the promotion of harmonious coexistence, both within immigrant communities, and Canadian society at-large. However, the humour of Diouf also deliberately connects immigrants with other marginalized groups. He especially succeeds in deliberately letting his humour interact with members of the First Nations in Canada. An affirmation of his fluid identity, one that easily changes from Senegalese to Canadian, which he reinforces on stage using humour.

One of his stand-up performance set is entitled "Magtogoek." Diouf explains that it is an Algonquin word that was the original name for the St. Lawrence River.

> "Magtogoek, the river is the main artery of Quebec, of Canada. If the artery dies, the man dies. We must protect our artery (marine life and water) to keep living as a nation. You know that there is fish in the river (St. Lawrence) called Beluga. It is a native Whale and it remains in the river. Other Whales and Dolphin migrate during the winter, but the Beluga never leaves. We need to cherish the Magtogoek. Maybe when we realise that water is the bitcoin of the future, we will take it serious[ly]."

Once again, we see the reference to the body in his symbolic use of the river as the artery that powers the country. He then uses a fish in the river, the Beluga, to represent resistance by indigenous peoples to any attempt to make them leave their ancestral lands. The immigrant shares some of this resistance, like the Whale that comes to share the river with the Beluga, and the Beluga is happy to share.

It should be recalled that the second function of stand-up comedy is humorous social commentary (Double 2005). Diouf decides to present commentary on environmental issues, which does not distinguish between citizens and immigrants, but affects everyone. His space, the harmonious habitat everyone shares, is being threatened by capitalist elements, the same elements that threaten immigrant integration strategies and he urges resistance against it, "before water is turned into a crypto currency, bitcoin."

Diouf combines science with humour in ways that work for him to achieve that harmonious relationship with his living ground and the people on it. As he had said, "humour allows him to still use his science, in ways that science did not allow him to use humour." Humour has social significance, one that fosters unity and he is making the best use of it. Humour has become his passport, one that allows him to perform any identity that he so desires without recourse to explanation. Little wonder that currently, Dr. Diouf sits on many immigration and settlement committees in Quebec, a testament to the power of stand-up comedy.

Speaking up as resistance: The comedy of Arthur Simeon

Born in Uganda in 1984, Arthur Simeon moved to Canada as a teenager. His quest for the Canadian dream of peace, order and good governance meant he had to try his hand at several menial jobs before settling on comedy his vehicle of choice to facilitate integration into Canadian society. He first performed at a comedy club in Toronto, *Yuk Yuk's*, and after establishing himself as a performer of note, Simeon was invited

as an English-speaking comedian to perform at *Just for Laughs* Comedy Festival in 2010. He cemented his position as a leading immigrant-Canadian comedian when he was invited the following year to headline a *Just For Laugh*s event in Halifax, Nova Scotia tagged *Funny as Hell.*

Unlike Boucar Diouf, Simeon's humour is more subversive, indeed, darker and more aggressive both in form and content. He is never afraid to take up elements of social inequality that he sees in the Canadian landscape and then use his jokes as resistance to widely held misconceptions and stereotypes about immigrants. His comedy sketch dwells more on the oppositional scripts of what the hosts imagine of the immigrant and what he knows to be the truth as an immigrant and yet, not transgressing to the point of deportation. Our examples are drawn from his performances at Yuk Yuk's in 2007 and *Just For Laughs* in 2017. Spreading our data over a decade helps confirm that the tone of the message has not changed despite the passage of time and reaffirms the need to constantly resist all forms of hegemony in Canada.

At the 2007 performance, Arthur Simeon takes on the widely held, even if unsubstantiated view that the Canadian government spends more on Africa than its own citizens at home, especially war veterans (Zilio 2016) with his introduction:

> Hello, my name is Arthur Simeon and yes I am an African, born and raised in Kampala, Uganda. And no, I am not the kid you have sponsored for the past 50 years, I am also looking for that kid.

He then goes on to tackle more stereotypes:

> I am happy to be in Canada although I must confess some of you ask stupid questions, not all of you, but some of you. The other day a girl walked up to me and asked 'so why are you here' and I replied "a bunch of you folks took my ancestors about 200 years ago and they never came back and so I came to join them, I just felt eh! There is something good going on up there.

Here, the "mimicry to mockery", that Bhabha (1994) highlights as being necessary for a subjugated human to perform the "ambivalent" identity required to subvert the power structure (87) is demonstrated by Simeon. Whoever asked the question was in the position of power, probably a white resident of Canada, and most like someone unhappy with Simeon's presence in Canada.

Rather than take offence, Simeon inserts himself into the entire history of Canada by drawing on the transatlantic slave trade to justify his presence. In so doing, he subverts the power narrative and resists any attempt to make him feel unwelcomed or as though he does not belong in Canada. However, he cushions the blow of his mockery, padding his transgression so as not to cause offence by adding: "I felt eh!, there is something good going on there."

By adopting the folksy Canadian expressive, "eh!", after every sentence he culturally positions himself as a "true" Canadian who belongs and not just as an immigrant. If the slaves are yet to return—and they never will—then he might as well come see what is good that is keeping them in Canada. Following Rick Ross (2006), Simeon, "laughed back at the empire" and its representative by blaming them for the transatlantic slave trade and as such being responsible for his presence as an immigrant. He also, in that sentence, effectively ties the entire slave trade to the colonial process by invoking the ancestry of his questioner to that of his experience. He inverted the question into a social commentary of why his presence need not bother anyone, yet remember, he already said the land is good.

Speaking further about his experience in Canada as an immigrant, Simeon tells the audience:

> Canada has the most beautiful women in the world because they are the most inquisitive in the world but guess what? I hate you. Why do you think I need to confirm your stereotype every time we meet? Is it true? Is it true you have animals in Africa? Yeah, like I will come out of my house to go to school and there will be this herd of elephants and zebras going by—well, let me help you. For every 'is it true question', the answer is 'it is'?

As an immigrant, is Arthur Simeon irritated that everyone wants to confirm their stories of stereotype? Perhaps not, however, he is using humour to buy back the dignity that he feels denied by the question. He even opens with a complimentary remark about Canadian women, whom he observes ask the most questions. The irony is that they are asking someone in Canada, seeking citizenship and performing all the legal requirements to attain that; someone trying to be Canadian or a new Canadian and yet the currency of his identity remains the country he comes from. From this irony comes the humour and comedy that Simeon now utilises to get his message across.

Sensing that some of his audience always generically labels every "Blackman" as "cool dude" he said:

> I guess you all thought I was a cool black dude until you heard me speak and you picked the accent. I mean, don't get me wrong, I also love black guys for their hip hop, D.J, rap and unemployment rate. However we Africans are the taxi drivers, the laundry men and the guys who hand out the freebies at Walmart, yep, that is the Africans.

It appears Simeon has made it his duty to break down stereotypes using the stand-up stage as his vehicle. Again, we see the stereotype that all Black people that are not involved in popular culture as rappers, musicians and DJ are unemployed. Now, he has extracted the African immigrant from that classification and points out the important work undertaken by African immigrants: "Taxi drivers", "Laundry men" and supermarket employees. No, he is not saying Africans are better than their fellow men, or other Black people. Rather he is using his medium, comedy, as a tool of resistance and protest, to draw attention to the often neglected roles immigrants play in society; something that often gets left out in right wing assaults on immigration. Simeon is direct and subversive and appears too eager to take on any misconception or stereotypes about his beloved homeland and continent. This is further demonstrated by the final joke that I want to consider in this section.

The final joke under consideration was performed by Simeon at the *Just For Laughs* Comedy Festival of 2017. This time, he takes on a booming industry that has been termed “voluntourism”. It is a phenomenon whereby young volunteers from western countries go to developing countries as volunteers to help out with whatever perceived deficiencies the country may lack. However, it appears the social media generation also brought about those who are just going for the adventure and spend time snapping pictures and posting on social media rather than the actual volunteering that they said they were going to perform. Taking on the pride with which some of the volunteers speak condescendingly to immigrants from the country they have just visited and by extension to the citizens of the country itself, Simeon narrates his experience:

> The toughest part of being an African is that everyone thinks that they are better than us. All of you think you are better than us. Yeah, the silence. Guess you are saying 'of course, everyone knows that. It’s easy being better than those who come from Africa.' That's not true. Don't get me wrong, some of you are better than us but not all of you. Let me explain. I joined a group conversation the other day, a girl noticed my accent and said, 'where are you from' and I happily told her 'I was born and raised in Kampala, Uganda', to which she eagerly replied “wow, coincidentally I was in Uganda three weeks ago.” And I asked her 'did you enjoy your visit to my lovely home country?' and she said, 'No, no, no, I wasn't there visiting, I was there helping out' (Pause). I was like, 'Did they call you or something or were you responding to some disaster ‘cause I didn't see it on the news.' She replied, 'you don't understand, I work at Lulu Lemon at the mall and I

> took 3 weeks out to help out', [Changing his tone to a more serious one] Now, here is the thing, I grew up in Uganda and I understand the expertise we need in so many areas of life such as medicine, engineering, nursing, maybe even Urban Planning, but this girl works at Lulu Lemon *at the mall*. Who in Africa is looking for tight yoga expertise? (*Loud laughter from audience*). Listen, I have lived in Canada long enough to know that if you work at the mall and you are over the age of 21, then you are a failure. Sorry. Why are you taking your lack of ambition and mediocrity to a place that is already saturated with its own problems? Please stay in your basement apartment here and stay the hell away from my people" (*Loud laughter and applause*)

The joke does not in any way paint Uganda or Africa at-large as places without problems. The problems are acknowledged. Simeon is concerned with adding to the problem by contributing nothing in the form of unrequired labour and then using it as a reason to boast and feel superior. The girl "went to help out" in Uganda, but she could do with some help herself in finding gainful employment. While her occupation as a fitness instructor may be fine for Canada, it adds no value in Uganda. The needs of average Ugandans are totally different. She may have gone thinking she was volunteering and helping, but she was simply a tourist who added no significant value to the space. A "voluntourist".

Simeon's comedy may contain his anger, and his jokes may just be verbal assaults on social inequalities, but he is able to use the medium of humour to mask the anger while getting his point across to his audience. In doing so, he confirms Jose Esteban Munoz's (1999) declaration that "comedy does not exist independent of rage." It is up to the comedian to make his rage work as comedic material and help the audience make use of what they are hearing.

Conclusion

Stand-up comedy sets out with one purpose: to make people laugh. African immigrants have found the medium to be a tool for social integration and resistance when necessary. They have found work in the genre and have used their presence in the artistic space as a means of galvanising themselves and their fellow immigrants to successfully navigate the challenges that lay on their path to belonging in Canadian society.

As Boucar Diouf and Arthur Simeon demonstrates, humour is a tool for speaking back to the centre from the margins, either in a subtle manner that encourages cohesion and harmonious relationship or through outright aggressive resistance. For these comedians, stand-up comedy opens up space for performing their identity as immigrants in negotiating belonging, resisting stereotypes and having a conversation using the medium of humour with diverse audiences. In the case of Boucar Diouf, stand-up comedy provides a tool to assert his fluid identity as African, Senegalese and Canadian, and to integrate with his new Quebec-home. As stated above, it is his exploits on stage that has made him a member of so many respectable immigration councils in Quebec. Stand-up comedy has given him the tool to complicate discourses that stereotype immigrants while still working towards harmonious relationships between immigrants and their host communities.

And while Diouf has been able to use his humour to integrate and communicate with his diverse audience, Arthur Simeon has utilized stand-up as a tool for social awareness, integration and coping with the attendant problems of being a new arrival in a new country who must deal with preconceived stereotypes of what an immigrant should look like. However, I argue that Simeon's stand-up comedy does more; it constitutes a form of resistance to the widely held and often repeated—if unsubstantiated—image of the immigrant as a social liability.

And as they call upon humour as a form of resistance and communication, African comedians bring on stage a part of their cultural heritage; something that is available

to them all year round and whenever they feel any form of subjugation. These oral traditions that give breathe to the performances of these comedians also dictates the manner and form of their jokes and while they have managed to show respect for their hosts, they still use humour to subvert the power structure and place themselves in a stronger position.

The famous words of the Marxist scholar, Antonio Gramsci (1971) rings true here. You cannot be subjugated without your consent. Using stand-up comedy, that consent is being denied by African immigrants to anyone who wants to dominate them as they negotiate their identity and belonging in Canada. Rather, like the spiders in my mother's proverb at the beginning of this article, they are upending power dynamics by speaking up with one voice and situating themselves at an advantageous position in discussions surrounding their rights in Canada. Even when oppressed, they refused to stay down. They are standing up on stage, talking back.

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