

Feature Article

“It’s Okay to Laugh, Right?”: Toward a Pedagogy of Racial Comedy in Multicultural Education

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While humor has long been documented as a useful teaching tool, it is almost entirely untheorized in terms of its potential for multicultural education. Specifically, the learning opportunities that racial comedic media offer in multicultural and anti-racist coursework is a particularly under-studied area, while research in this vein has great potential to positively affect pedagogies both within and beyond courses on critical multicultural education. In this article, two instructors, together with their students, examine the use of racial comedy as a teaching tool for multicultural education. The article begins by providing a brief overview of the literature on racial comedy and use of comedy in teaching, followed by a close look at salient characteristics of the teaching and learning environment of the course that allowed this work to emerge. The crux of the article centers on the identification and exploration of four themes, or *interpretive tensions*, animated by the class’ engagement with racial comedy, and thusly helps illuminate the possibilities and complexities of utilizing racial comedy for multicultural education: (1) insider humor carries questions about who holds permission to initiate racial jokes and who is allowed to laugh at them; (2) perceptions of comedic irresponsibility inspired discussion around delineating between critical race comedy versus overtly racist comedy, and the gray areas in between; (3) educative commentary ensconced within racial comedy, such as that of many Dave Chappelle sketches, revealed our concerns about viewers who, lacking historicity and knowledge of root contexts undergirding the comedy, would likely misinterpret the humorous scenarios and thusly have their own racist stereotypes reinforced; and (4), while parody is humorous because of its inherent ridiculousness, we found that parodic racial comedy may create the opportunity for a slightly uncomfortable self-check, where the viewer can process her or his own actions and responses (assuming that he or she is receptive to such thinking). In highlighting these interpretive tensions, this analysis offers guidance for instructors and facilitators embarking on this journey, and furthermore contributes to our understanding of the possible pedagogical benefits from using racial comedy more broadly.

Introduction

Our small group of undergraduate students trickled in to class on a chilly, overcast afternoon in late winter. Serena, the youngest of the group and a first-year student in a class of majority seniors, stood at the podium, already having uploaded the video she wanted to play. As both instructors took their seats, she started the video, knowing tacitly she had our permission to begin class this way. The song that played over the seminar room’s speakers was a parody of Lorde’s popular song, “Royals” (Yelich-O’Connor & Little, 2013). This imitation version, called “Typecast”, written and performed by Tess Paras (2014) and posted on her YouTube channel, features three young women of color auditioning for acting roles in a fictional new situation comedy television program¹. The video and lyrics tell their story of being regularly overlooked for feature character roles as they were instead cast for supporting roles fitting a narrow and troubling perception of women of their races. For instance, the lead singer, who is Asian begins, “I’m gonna play the White girl’s nerdy friend.” In agreement, the other women intone, “Of course. / Obviously.” One Black actress explains her situation, “I’m gonna play the White girl’s *other* friend...who is *sassy*.” And a third actress who is also Black contends, “Well, she can’t have two Black friends.” Others agree, murmuring, “Two Black friends?” / “It gets confusing.” She continues, “So I’m left out / I play the co-star nanny,” cradling a swaddled infant with her own hair tied back in a ponytail. Of course, this reference (like many others in the piece) is historically loaded. For instance, the “co-star nanny” image draws upon a long history of mythologized Black “Mammy” archetypes who are portrayed as maternal, opinionated, and generally nonthreatening to the White families who enslaved or employed them to care for their children (e.g., Thurber, 1992; Turner, 1994). Considering this, and other potentially injurious stereotypes, one may be curious as to the instructors’ intentions in allowing this video to be shared in the context of a course on multicultural education.

Our students—all young women, four who are White, one who is Black—gasp, snickered, and laughed out loud at various points while Serena played the video. “That’s awesome,” expressed Mell. “I don’t even know what to *do* with that,” proclaimed Rachel. “Wait, did you hear that?! Play it again,” urged Susie. The class had shared videos with us and one another since the beginning of the semester. Each of these unsolicited but welcome communiqué had two things in common: they were all forms of comedy, and they all included explicit and descriptive talk about race. In a class focused on learning about race, class, culture, marginalization, and power in communities and schools, the latter fact was perhaps not surprising. But the comedic genre, on the other hand, was certainly not something we, as the course instructors, had anticipated. As co-instructors, we became increasingly interested in our students’ perceptions of these videos in relation to the academic content of the course as well as their own growth as cultural and racial beings. We felt the need to understand the impact for our students of these popular clips relying on racial humor. As the semester developed, we wondered, *what does viewing and discussing these clips offer us, as teacher educators and multicultural scholars?* And, more urgently, *what does this do for our students?* This article explores the sources of critical race humor (Rossing, 2014) in the course, and examines

¹ Full video available here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSwhRZwFjfY>

considerations for utilizing such humor as a tool in multicultural education. Together with our students, we examined context-embedded themes that arose as a product of incorporating racial comedy videos into the undergraduate classroom (Fulmer, Makepeace, & Giarratano, 2014). Here, we draw attention to such themes as fruitful tensions that animated learning opportunities for our students.

In the sections below, we begin by providing a brief overview of the literature on racial comedy and use of comedy in teaching. Following this overview, we take a close look at the characteristics of our teaching and learning that contributed to the classroom community that allowed this work to emerge (for a more detailed analysis of the culture of our class, please see Makepeace & Fulmer, forthcoming). We then outline themes and questions that have arisen so far from our work-in-progress of racial comedy pedagogy. While we have seen evidence of the positive effects of using racial comedy video clips, sketches, songs, television programs, standup comic performances, and other media in our course on multicultural education, we carry forward a tentativeness that keeps us open to discovering possible constraints, flaws, and issues that could have negative impact on this emerging pedagogy. We explore these tensions, with the help of our five students in the main body of this paper for the purpose of articulating learning opportunities and pedagogical considerations for racial comedy pedagogy.

Literature on Racial Comedy as a Teaching Tool

The primary focus of this article is to explore our emerging theories on the questions outlined above, which stem from our Spring 2014 semester at Ithaca College teaching our undergraduate course: *Community and Culture in Education and Teaching*. It was in this setting that racial comedy media spontaneously emerged as a central feature of the seminar, and we offer our initial interpretations regarding the use of these works as a tool in our course. As others have shown—and as we have experienced firsthand—comedic media can be a critical resource for both exposing the persistence of racism, as well as urging public discourse toward imagining more racially just practices (e.g., Gilbert & Rossing, 2013; Rossing, 2014; Schulman, 1992).

Well known comedians such as Dave Chappelle, Richard Pryor, Jon Stewart, and Louis C.K. offer examples of the comedic world “calling attention to the troubles of racial culture” (Rossing, 2011, p. 423) in ways that may jolt viewers into productive conversations about “racial epiphanies” (Fulmer, 2012), thus vitalizing public discourses on these important topics. In recent decades, web outlets such as YouTube have created a venue for lesser known humorists, to also contribute to the formation of this *critical race comedy* (Rossing, 2014), including popular online videos such as the parody song “Typecast” (Paras, 2014), and once-obscure standup comic Aamer Rahman’s cunning and entertaining set about so-called “reverse racism” (Rahman, 2013). Surprisingly, the learning opportunities these racial comedic media offer for multicultural and anti-racist education is an understudied area, yet research in this vein may positively affect pedagogies both within and beyond courses on critical multicultural education.

Humor is recognized as a teaching tool in the collegiate classroom (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011; Garner, 2006; Pollio, 2012), and has been deemed beneficial in offering students a way to embrace difficult material (Garner, 2006).

However, at the same time, humor pedagogies remain largely untheorized with regards to their connection to critical multicultural teacher education. While in the last several years, work in the fields of communication and media studies has addressed popular culture’s obsession with racialized comedy (e.g., Bailey, 2012; Gilbert & Rossing, 2013; Rossing, 2011; Sienkiewicz & Marx, 2009; Thompson, 2009; Thornton, 2011), we are unaware of any scholarship to date that have offered teacher educators a framework or empirical basis for using humor in multicultural education for teachers and educators. In this analysis of our own teaching, we strive to begin the discussion but by no means encapsulate it. The initial findings from the present work serve to mobilize our ongoing research in articulating a critical race humor pedagogy for multicultural education. This section explores the ways in which we have utilized racial humor to cultivate critical multicultural perspectives in our undergraduate students. It features the voices of our students, who took active roles in the interpretation of data (as such, no pseudonyms have been used, as the students were consultants and contributors to this work).

As scholars have noted, racial humor can serve as an interpretive comedic experience from which audience members can learn. Rossing (2011), for example, has said “comic discourses on race provoke reactions that reveal important insights and understandings of this domain of racial knowledge construction” (p.434). In media as diverse as situational comedy television programs, stand-up comedy acts, advertisements, news satire, political cartoons, homemade viral videos, and pop music parodies, racialized humor has been observed to ignite a wide range of emotions in viewers. As this paper highlights, these modes can serve as teaching tools to engage media saturated college students in critical reflections on race.

Humor and laughter also unite people in significant ways, and furthermore can be a reliable means for gaining perspective on popular culture or social issues (Hall, Keeter, & Williamson, 1993). Though an in-depth discussion on broader practices surrounding humor in general and racial humor specifically is beyond the scope of this article, we look to Rossing’s (2014) recent contribution in which he identified *critical race humor* as a form of potentially transformative public discourse where racial truths and criticisms are “artistically angled” through humor (p. 17). Critical race humor, Rossing postulates, serves to investigate and challenge institutionalized power dynamics, systemic issues around devoicing and marginalization, and complicated cultural ideologies, by approaching these issues with the tools of humorous disarmament. In theorizing critical race humor through the stand-up performances of comedian Richard Pryor, Rossing asserts that Pryor’s work constituted a public pedagogy of educative race humor by exposing harsh realities of racism to wider audiences through a comedic vessel, and thereby urged the discourse on race in America towards a more just society. With this understanding of the power of critical race humor, we turn to our own teaching practices in order to examine the power and utility of critical race humor in multicultural education coursework.

The students in *Culture and Community in Schools and Teaching* in Spring 2014 brought our attention to the multimedia racial comedy content many of them regularly encountered outside of our class, including YouTube videos, a variety of stand up comedians, and clips of television programs like *The Chappelle Show*, *The Daily Show with John Stewart*, and *Tosh.O*. The culture we fostered within the course gave our students space to bring their own experiences around these

media from outside class—their own “life texts” (Gadsden, 2005) as we called them—into seminar discussions, creating a rehearsal space of sorts where they could explore their own interpretations and opinions of the comedy pieces, drawing upon scholarship we read to help refine and contextualize their understandings.

Context of the Course

Community and Culture in Education and Teaching is an undergraduate elective course within the Education Department at Ithaca College. Since it is at the 300 level, the course typically appeals to juniors and seniors, though there are not any prerequisites to enrollment. Historically, the course been taught by a recently retired faculty member, so last spring’s course marked the first time we—Ellie and Nia—taught the class together, as new faculty members to the college. We come from different racial and professional backgrounds—Nia is Black and has a background in school psychology, while Ellie is White and has a background in elementary teaching. As such, we share a strong commitment to preparing future educators and school personnel from a stance of critical multicultural education centered on social justice and anti-racist pedagogy.

The course was co-constructed with students, and we carved out time each session for determining upcoming discussion topics together. We planned for student voice to reside as a central feature: each lesson relied on topics that came from students or which stemmed from questions posed collectively as a group. Guided by readings relevant to developing culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010), classroom conversations were given space to generate from students’ everyday, ongoing exposure to racialized concepts, for instance in the media or in communication and interactions with friends, significant others, roommates, and family members. As instructors, we also aimed to bring in the real moments we experienced as professors, and this facet invited our students to share their own daily *life texts*, “the accumulation of events and circumstances that affect the daily lives of learners and the ways they think...” (Gadsden, 2005, p. 376). This illustrates how our own experiences were brought into the course as texts to be interpreted alongside those published works we drew upon from the course syllabus.

The community that developed in the course became one that welcomed informality and spontaneity. Course readings grounded us, but did not constrain us: we explored what came up in our lives as it related to race and racism. In this setting, early on, students began to contact us between classes with questions, stories, and, most relevant to this paper, links to videos clips featuring racial humor. Together, excited by the conversations in and out of class that these video clips inspired, we determined to study the possibilities for more formal multicultural learning that racial comedy may offer.

Racial Comedy’s Pedagogical Interpretive Tensions

Below follows a description and analysis of emergent themes and questions that inform our ongoing work to develop a racial comedy pedagogy; we refer to these as *interpretive tensions*. Through collective discernment, four central interpretive tensions were animated by the multimedia racial comedy in which we engaged: (1) insider humor carries questions about who has permission to initiate racial jokes and who is allowed to laugh at them; (2) perceptions of comedic irresponsibility

inspired discussion around delineating between critical race comedy versus overtly racist comedy, and the gray areas in between; (3) educative commentary ensconced within racial comedy, such as that of many Dave Chappelle sketches, revealed our concerns about viewers who, lacking historicity and knowledge of root contexts undergirding the comedy, would likely misinterpret the humorous scenarios and thusly have their own racist stereotypes reinforced; and (4), while parody is humorous because of its inherent ridiculousness, we found that parodic racial comedy may create the opportunity for a slightly uncomfortable self-check, where the viewer can process her or his own actions and responses (assuming that he or she is receptive to such thinking). It is our intention that, in highlighting these interpretive tensions, this analysis offers guidance for instructors and facilitators embarking on this journey, and furthermore contributes to our understanding of the possible pedagogical benefits from using racial comedy more broadly.

As illustrated above, discourse around life texts took center stage during much of the class, and these life texts included popular media our students encountered. We strove to develop classroom dynamics that opened a figurative clearing for students to explore in a safe space the comedic media in which they were routinely engaged: movies, videos, online articles, and so on. Embracing this space, students soon began sending us links to racial comedy media, most of which were semi-amateur videos or short clips of television programs that surfaced on their personal social media pages or had been emailed to them by friends. To us as instructors, it seemed as though humor helped shine a light on what the young women were learning through the lens of our course, and they craved the opportunity to do more with comedy by hearing our responses and those of their peers. We posit that comedy helped make the complex course content accessible in a way that is not dissimilar from what Rossing (2014) has found in the racial humor of Richard Pryor’s public pedagogy. Our five students—Serena, Rachel, Mell, Susie, and Sarah—wrote papers, posted on our course-linked webpage, and discussed openly in class their processes for reflecting upon racial comedy in the context of the class.

Insider Humor in The Boondocks

In her final paper, Serena identified insider racial humor “as a subversive way to educate [the] audience about current flaws in the society and powerful systems...” and suggested that it operates “by placing a voice of reason into [a] place populated by ignorant people.” She went on to discuss the consequences of racial comedy reinforcing “ignorant” ideas and the role of certain characters in shifting a general mindset that is “unhealthy and brainless.” Insider humor is within-group humor where a member of a racial/cultural group initiates comedy for other members of the same group. For example, insider humor is a form of communication from Black folks to Black folks. In this way it can be viewed as a directed, intra-group communication where the message is directed from within a certain cultural group for the same cultural group, usually to critique macrosystemic or structural issues and common collective responses to them. Thus, our classroom community regularly asked: *How does insider humor enhance multicultural understanding for outsiders? How is it different or the same for insiders?*

Serena also in her final paper drew upon an episode from *The Boondocks* television program to discuss the concept of insider presentation of issues relevant

to a Black experience for a Black audience. *The Boondocks*, a cartoon airing on Cartoon Network's *Adult Swim* late night programming block, was until recently produced by African American executive producer and head writer Aaron McGruder, who created the television show based on his popular Universal Press Syndicate comic strip of the same name (Bienenstock, 2014). Based in a Chicago suburb, the main characters are a family comprised of brothers Huey and Riley who are being raised by their grandfather. The character Huey is central to this episode, as he possesses a high level of racial consciousness and is considered an intellectual, activist, and radical thinker. As Serena explained, "[h]e sees through all schemes and lies, is good at analyzing his culture/society..."

Although each episode highlights social realities relevant to race and racism, Serena centered her analysis on one episode that "specifically talked about the stereotypes perpetuated within the African-American community." Serena described the Peabody Award winning episode, titled, "Return of the King," as:

set in an alternative reality where instead of being shot and killed in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wakes up from a coma in the year 2000 (find an excerpt of the episode here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5ER1LGsT7E>.) This episode is one of the few times that Huey wasn't the sole voice of reason; Dr. King works with Huey to educate the masses, and ends up delivering the powerful end message.

Serena went on to explain that, in her analysis, the purpose of the episode was to urge Black viewers to recognize that if Dr. King were alive today "he would not approve of the degrading way that some Black people act." Serena centered her paper on the assertion that messages in *The Boondocks* are geared towards a primarily Black audience with a goal of challenging dominant narratives within Black culture itself, from an insider role.

Serena argued that this episode of *The Boondocks* represents insider humor by encouraging social consciousness and inviting Black viewers' critical reflection. Such a stance, however, could be perceived to be dangerous reinforcement for a non-Black audience if not deconstructed and more fully understood. To this point, Serena identified that "it has African-Americans critiquing other African-Americans," a critique that could be misunderstood by outsiders, or moreover, perceived as permission to contribute to the racial criticism themselves. Serena recognized a brief yet striking scene that showcases a late night conversation between Dr. King and Huey in Huey's home:

Dr. King [was] flipping through the TV channels, witnessing hyper-sexualized hip-hop videos and a court case between Whitney Houston and Bobby Brown. Dr. King watches in disgust then utters, 'What happened to our people?' Huey responds, 'I think everyone was waiting for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to come back.' The scene only lasts a few seconds but it insinuates that the African-American people are in need of a leader to steer them in the right direction. Because of the context of this scene, the insider effect is more prevalent. Rather than having someone outside of the culture judging, possibly inciting anger, it happens between two African-Americans talking honestly about their own people. This is more likely to push audiences to believe that it is done out of an honest place."

Because of the show’s insider status as a program written and produced by an African American, Serena asserted that the message is thereby authentic and honest, without inciting acrimony from Black audience members. To conclude her analyses of the nature of this insider humor provided by *The Boondocks* episode, Serena illustrated that the ending scene does this more explicitly:

When Huey and Dr. King show up at their planned event to push people in a new and better direction, they are confronted with all of the negative portrayals of African-Americans: excessive drinking, fighting, inappropriately dressed females, powerful people in the church who seek nothing but money under the guise of their title. Dr. King takes this all in and decides that enough is enough, then gives a vulgar speech, almost similar to his “I Have a Dream” speech. In it, Dr. King calls his audience the N-word, insisting that they are all acting terribly and need to change. His repeated use of the word shocks the cartoon audience, and tells African-American viewers something powerful, “You all are acting the way the White masses have perceived [us] to be for so long, thus embodying the decades-old slur.

Serena went on to describe how “this is the strength of insider humor, [because] if any other race had done this in any other way” it would be problematic. In her conclusion that this insider critique offers “an underlying message that this isn’t being done with hate, but a suggestion from one African-American to the masses,” Serena has touched upon central tensions our group identified in insider racial comedy: who has the right to make jokes about these stereotypes, and when and how is it problematic? Moreover, what are the learning opportunities for outsiders viewing and discussing insider humor? Critiquing a group of people as in-group members provides an authenticity—or an honesty, as Serena puts it—to the critique which capitalizes on the opportunity to push for social change by urging Black viewers to review and reflect on the stereotypes “using the stage and the media to keep the Black consciousness alive” (Littleton, 2006, p. vii). In this way, examples of insider humor could prove to be extraordinarily supportive for students of color at predominantly White institutions. Oftentimes people who share a historically marginalized race are also expected by outsiders to share opinions or are expected by insiders to convey the image of their race overall. Insider humor “rocks the boat” among both insiders and outsiders. Serena brought the group’s attention to insider humor’s interpretive tensions, and as we further investigate a pedagogy for critical racial comedy, we carry with us the learning opportunity that such questions offer.

Comedic Irresponsibility in Tosh.O

A second tension forwarded by our co-analysis grew out of what we deemed perniciously *racist* comedy versus *critically racial* humor, and the vague range between these extremes. For instance, the class easily came to agreement that certain comics lack mindfulness about the impact of their own racial comedy, and this type of humor was deemed acidic and attacking in its overt racism. The tension here is in the delineation between *racist* versus *racial*, which, as others demonstrated, is not binary (Caliendo, McIlwain, & Karjala, 2003), but which inspires reactive conjecture and emotional responses nonetheless. The class

concluded that a central issue for racist humor within the realm of a pedagogy for racial comedy, is that one risks validating racist opinions or providing a venue for encouraging student-viewers to perpetuate racism by seeing it portrayed in media. The speculative conclusion is that racist comedy would be relatively useless in a pedagogy for racial comedy because of this inherent precariousness: showcasing racial comedy runs the danger of reinforcing stereotypes and/or providing validation for the expression of racist beliefs. Susie, one of the five White women in the course, wrote about this precarious complexity in her final paper, pointedly titled, “Racial Humor vs. Racist Humor.”

To break it down, I believe there are two types of comedy regarding race: racial humor and racist humor. Racial humor can be seen as funny but also can have an educational part to it. The comedian is trying to talk to his audience and bring their attention to an idea or situation; they are not *just* trying to get laughs. Racist humor, however, is offensive and it has no educational purpose. The comedian is just saying it for the “shock value.”

Susie continued her analysis of this comedic tension by calling into question the comedian and television host Daniel Tosh, a White male and host of Comedy Central’s program *Tosh.O*. The program includes a regular segment called “Is it Racist?” where Tosh shows an amateur video clip involving one or more persons of color, and then invites audience members to “decide if it’s racist.” One such segment, of which Susie writes about in her analysis, involved an outdoor watermelon eating contest where a Black woman is surrounded by White women aggressively cheering her on as she competes at eating the fruit. While Tosh acknowledged that, “Yes... that was a tad racist” afterwards, he subsequently does nothing constructive—or deconstructive—with this scenario in terms of acknowledging the profound racism from where this archaic stereotype developed, nor does he provide commentary on the dubious presence of this historically destructive image in contemporary culture. Susie stated, seemingly fuming, in her paper, “The only thing that Tosh is doing is perpetuating a stereotype. There is nothing educational about the entire two minute clip and could only be called offensive, which is why [this] is solely racist humor.” We agree with her assertion and tread further to argue that, considering the wide viewership and prime timeslot of *Tosh.O*, the content and commentary constitute irresponsibility. His humor exercises White privilege, and it is important to note that this not only perpetuates damaging perceptions of Black people, but may even offer an endorsement for preserving it. It is well known that watermelon imagery has an extensive history of promoting dehumanizing representations and animalistic portrayals of African Americans. And yet, here in *Tosh.O*, devoid of depth or interpretive lens, Tosh has showcased and then promptly side-stepped the entire conversation by invoking a modern day version of a centuries-old explicitly racist stereotype for comedic purposes, only to drop the topic without remark or criticality. Tosh’s White privilege is in full effect: the way he uses the stage of primetime cable is prejudicial and feckless.

While the group did not arrive at concrete criteria, such as a checklist or other way to assuredly determine whether humor is *racial* versus *racist*, they did draw our attention to the tension inherent in this topic. We are curious and hesitant to consider the use of explicitly racist humor as a component in a racial comedy pedagogy, but we offer this analysis as a launching point for further analysis. The

tension should be revisited for the cultivation of critical dialogue. Racist humor could be a powerful component of coursework, but its inclusion in this pedagogy must be carefully considered, as it has the potential to undermine our goals, and reinforcing overtly racist beliefs. And yet, perhaps the exercise of naming racist humor itself could be powerful for White students and students of color.

Just for Laughs? Ensconced Education in Chappelle’s Show

Among its features, racial comedy offers the potential for reflection on what we understand about our culture and other cultures, while it also helps us to understand where we are in terms of our own history/ies and our current condition/s as a cultural group. In her reflection on theoretical perspectives of laughter, Mary Beard (2014) highlights the role of laughter in our process of cultural identification in that “laughter has been a key marker of what we feel about other cultures, about our past and our views of the ‘progress of civilization’” (p. B9). Sarah, in her final paper for our class, drew upon Dave Chappelle’s sketch comedy program, *Chappelle’s Show*, to illustrate such a point and to query the educative goals of Chappelle’s jokes and the acumen (or lack thereof) of laughter emitted by his audiences. Sarah inquired about audience members’ understanding of their own laughter responses to Chappelle’s racial comedy. Particularly, she wondered about the damaging potential of reifying stereotypes and the possibility that White audiences misinterpret being granted permission to reappropriate Black culture through Chappelle’s incisive humor. In other words, *Chappelle’s Show*, recognized for its critical social commentary and cunning depth (Powell, 2006) could be misunderstood by those who do not possess knowledge of the historical and contemporary contexts from which the comedy emerges (and indeed, this is something upon which Chappelle himself is known to have deliberated [Bailey, 2012]). Chappelle’s program interrupted contemporary and historically-rooted racism by interrogating these issues through humor. As Sarah expressed in her paper, though she felt unfamiliar and awkward laughing at the program as a White person (an aspect of the tension of insider humor, as explored above), she nevertheless understood that Chappelle’s sketches “hold educational value,” because, “in that feeling of being uncomfortable, there is a teaching moment.”

Sarah’s analysis centered on a particular *Chappelle’s Show* sketch where Dave Chappelle portrayed an African American White supremacist who is blind and therefore unaware of the fact that he, himself, is Black². Set in the present-day deep American South, the sketch invites examination of contemporary sources and expressions of hatred in a time when many individuals believe that overt racism and the Ku Klux Klan are artifacts from the past (Cunningham, 2013). Secondly, the sketch contains many references to the character’s blindness, as well as the blindnesses of his own wife and childhood playmates from the “Wexler Home for the Blind,” which point to so-called colorblind presumptions regarding racial differences. A third theme addressed in the sketch is that of appropriation of Black culture, such as when Chappelle’s character Bigsby shouts from the passenger seat of his truck at a neighboring convertible full of White males listening to hip-hop

² View clip here, but be forewarned of use of the n-word: <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/7nnosh/chappelle-s-show--frontline---clayton-bigsby-pt--1---uncensored>

music. Bigsby, assuming the young men are Black because he cannot see them, wails at them to turn their music off, bellowing Black slurs after them. Fascinatingly, one of the White males in the convertible turns to his friends and enthusiastically asks, “Did that [Black] guy just call us *n****ers*? Yessss!” , apparently very pleased at earning this label from a Black person. This shocking moment calls forth Bailey’s (2012) assertion that the dominant culture possesses a “fetishistic desire to consume blackness” (p. 254), in artful commentary.

Blind White supremacist Clayton Bigsby makes regular speeches and even grants a television interview, all without knowledge of his own race. In one scene, Bigsby stands on stage at a Ku Klux Klan rally, spouting racial epithets while covered by a white hood, when the all-White audience cheers for him to remove the hood so that they may look upon his revered face. Bigsby does so, and seeing his race for the first time, the rally attendees gasp, bray and weep; they are shocked into disbelief and are unable to rationalize the fact that their leader is Black (in fact, one individual’s head grotesquely explodes). Such an outlandish premise amplifies racial stereotypes “while simultaneously revealing their prevalence in American society” (Bailey, 2012, p. 254). However, to an audience member who does not understand the pain and history from which this comedy emerges, he or she might perceive only the superficial silliness and miss the depth. Indeed, as Chappelle himself has been noted to disclose, Chappelle “felt he was reinforcing stereotypes instead of deconstructing them, which was not his intent” (Bailey, 2012, p. 254, citing Banjo, 2011; Carpio, 2008; and Haggins, 2007).

While writing her paper for our class, Sarah was for the first time learning about the historical contexts for critical race humor, and Chappelle’s comedy offered her insight into such critiques of dominant culture. Sarah aptly noted that some audience members likely missed the point of some of Chappelle’s piercing yet diverting sketches. She pointed out, “with the wrong audience members, these clips are more damaging than they are educational.” Striving to understand the contexts and depth from which Chappelle’s, and other critical race humorists’, comedy is derived, “brings to the surface the unexamined ordinariness of racism and racial matters in everyday life in ways that open spaces and create possibilities for challenging racial knowledge and practices” (Rossing, 2014, p. 17). Furthermore, as African American rhetoric scholar Constance Bailey reveals:

By conceding to the possibilities that Black comics are doing more than telling jokes, entertaining us, or are otherwise there for our consumption, we endow them with agency so that we can begin to consider ways that analyzing said performances yields new and insightful commentary about race, class, gender, sexuality and a host of other conditions...(2012, p. 254).

In these ways, we can see that Dave Chappelle’s comedy is profoundly more sagacious than a superficial interpretation would reveal. His comedy is rooted in an unambiguous source of historicity, ensconced within his satirical approach. Sarah’s paper pointed out, and we agree, that sketches like this one operate on a dangerous line that may mistakenly give audience members the opportunity to only superficially digest it. This episode was constructed to elicit thoughtful laughter, and yet, it can be argued that for many viewers the profundity was lost and instead the sketch inspired laughter without *substance*—laughter that, in

part, led Chappelle to walk away from his wildly successful show before its third season (Powell, 2006). Such educative commentary ensconced within racial comedy reveals an interpretive tension about viewers who, lacking historicity and knowledge of root contexts undergirding the comedy, may misinterpret the farce and thusly have their own racist stereotypes reinforced.

Parody as Anti-Model in The Office

The fourth pedagogical interpretive tension we identified in racial comedy stemmed from Rachel’s analysis of an early episode of the sitcom *The Office* as a location for learning about race and racism. Specifically, the episode “Diversity Day” led Rachel to insights about misguided and superficial forms of diversity education and the potential learning opportunity that exists in seeing embarrassing and injurious mistakes modeled in parody.

In “Diversity Day,”³ regularly nonplussed company manager Michael Scott facilitates a mandated multicultural sensitivity training session for the entire office. Through this exercise he demonstrates utter incompetence in mediating conversations around race while insisting on imparting his own body of unsound knowledge. Michael leads the group in an activity in which all staff members place index cards on their foreheads without looking at what is written on them. Each card carries the name of a race, religion, or ethnicity. Michael then demands that individuals act out the labels they see on their partner’s index card, charade-style, for the other partner to guess “their own” race, religion, or ethnicity. Rachel explained in her paper that Michael doesn’t realize that insisting that his employees actively perpetuate stereotypes exacerbates racial tensions in the office. She wrote:

His ignorance does not make what he is doing acceptable, but in a television show, it makes it funny. The comedy is in the disbelief you have when you watch him doing well-intentioned things (but being completely offensive and rude). His character is kind-hearted and he truly loves everybody he works with. He simply doesn’t understand that his actions and words are offensive. He has this obliviousness to his character that is hysterical yet also sad.

Rachel told us there’s something useful in the offensive ridiculousness of Michael’s character. Michael’s racist activity is so over the top, and through this, audience members connect with him and, we argue, learn from his errors. We proffer that, as a parodic buffoon, Michael Scott represents an anti-model from which White viewers can learn what *not* to do. The episode is funny because it is so obviously ridiculous, and at the same time the often-felt discomfort around diversity issues is made readily apparent and palatable. Rachel went on to explain, “This episode captures the discomfort so many White people display when racial issues are discussed. The writers are attempting to mock racial intolerance and ignorance but they are using this notion to educate people.” She further illustrated that Michael Scott represents a common person to whom many viewers can relate: someone who is well intentioned, though simultaneously wildly offensive. Rachel reiterated that the character’s preposterous behavior is so off the charts that it is comical, and thereby allows viewers to see him as an anti-model for cultural competency:

³ View an excerpt here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLp8pjqlwsc>

While everything Michael Scott is doing is racist and completely offensive, it is clear that he doesn't understand that. Although it seems awful, everything he does is well intentioned. This does not make what he does okay, but it makes it easier to laugh at, especially since it is so clear that what he is doing is extremely wrong and inappropriate. Since it is a television show and these are all actors, the audience should see how this is defying political correctness...

Rachel pointed to the notion that everything Michael is doing is very inappropriate and is, therefore, implicitly instructive to viewers about what they should avoid. The scene ends with the dramatic *smack!* of Kelly's hand across Michael's stunned face, as she, one of only a few employees of color, could take no more of his abhorrent behavior.

What, then, of the White office workers' roles? During the activity, their participation ranges from begrudgingly compliant to passively resistant; it is a person of color, Kelly, who puts a final stop to the reprehensible game. We expand upon Rachel's above claims to argue that herein lies a further learning opportunity for White viewers. The enduring silence of the clearly apprehensive White co-workers can be seen as an additional variation of the anti-model, but, we contend, one that is less readily visible and in no way parodic. White people too often take a backseat in addressing racial injustices, and research shows that in work, school, and social settings, they have been shown to remain closemouthed and reticent when racial issues are raised by other White people (Michael & Conger, 2009). The burden of addressing racial issues is most frequently placed upon people of color, and in this episode of *The Office*, we see this system upheld. The episode demonstrates passive, virtually silent White people who, for all intents and purposes, are complacent to the offensiveness. Although the White characters fall short in demonstrating what would be the ideal allied response, it provides the opportunity for instructors to brainstorm with students about possible responses they, or others might construct in similar situations. As Rachel put it, "It stops being funny and starts becoming illuminating." While this episode of *The Office* is immediately and casually humorous because of its inherent ridiculousness, an analysis of the parodic racial comedy within it creates the opportunity for a self-check, where viewers can process their own actions and responses. "Diversity Day" offers an explicit anti-model in Michael Scott's well intentioned buffoonery, but also offers an opportunity for analysis regarding alternative responses for White bystanders who can interrupt bigotry.

Conclusions and Ongoing Research

From our exploration of racial comedy media, we, together with our undergraduate students, have identified four core subject areas for further examination and research. These themes prompted teaching opportunities and learning conversations in our multicultural education course, and instructively contribute to an emerging pedagogy for racial comedy. To review, these interpretive tensions include (1) insider humor, which revealed questions about who has permission to initiate or laugh at racial jokes; (2) comedic irresponsibility, which drew our attention to tensions between critical race comedy versus racist comedy, and the areas betwixt; (3) critical race commentary embedded within racial

comedy, which brought up concerns about viewers who, lacking historicity and knowledge of root contexts undergirding the comedy, would likely misinterpret the humorous scenarios and thusly have their own racist stereotypes reinforced; (4) and the anti-models present in parodic racial comedy, which create opportunities for our students to self-check their own actions and conceive alternative responses. Importantly, the impact of these interpretive tensions is not fully known; they are motifs (and there may be others) that we carry with us as we seek to understand the possibilities and challenges of racial comedy pedagogy. In highlighting these themes, it is our goal to offer our insights as encouraging stimulus for instructors and facilitators who are—or may be interested in—embarking on this journey. Moreover, we hope this analysis contributes to a broader understanding of possible pedagogical innovations for using racial comedy in multicultural classrooms.

We envisage that students engaging in racial comedy pedagogy will learn to develop a critical lens for media to which they are regularly exposed in social networks and off-line friendships. The undergraduates with whom we work are routinely in contact with racial comedy through a variety of forms from email and social media, to casual conversation. A pedagogy such as the one we propose enables students to interpret and examine this genre of comedy through a socio-historical lens that cultivates conversations and processing outside of class.

This exploration of racial comedy pedagogy is the beginning of identifying one approach to carry real life processing into classroom learning about race. It carves itself away from academic or theoretical binds that often relegate multicultural learning to the theory of college classrooms or term-papers. We have experienced the impact of racial comedy as making multicultural education conversational and less stilted, and we’re beginning to develop a framework around this that, we feel, makes it widely accessible. A pedagogy for racial comedy is a blend of academic structure and the practical tools of daily navigation of racial realities. The two realms augment one another in a complementary way. In our forthcoming focus-group centered research, we expect to demonstrate the processing in which students engage with this material in an academic environment, and we expect the findings to contribute to our understanding of classroom-style dialogue and student responses to this material. We anticipate that this research will contribute to the generation of more fully refined racial comedy pedagogy. Through this accessible medium, students can develop the courage, critical tools, and faculty to engage in authentic deconstruction and work around race.

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