Anti-racist Critique Through Racial Stereotype Humour
What Could Go Wrong?
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Abstract: This article discusses the persistent deployment of racial stereotypes in contemporary stand-up comedy and its potential hegemonic or counter-hegemonic effects. It asks whether racial stereotypes should be avoided or condemned altogether, considering the risks of interpretative ambiguity and offensiveness, or, alternatively, whether there are specific performative strategies and conditions that might make racial stereotype humour a powerful weapon in the anti-racist toolbox. As regards the first, several critiques are considered and it is shown that racial stereotype humour, and its reception, may harbour multiple, subtle forms of racism. In terms of defences, racial stereotype humour’s role of discharging stubborn psycho-affective investments is highlighted, as well as its function as ‘subversive play’. The article further pays special attention to aspects of audience reception (such as issues of missed subtlety and ‘clever’ laughter) and the importance of the comic’s racial positionality in performing racial stereotypes.

Keywords: anti-racism, humour, politics of representation, post-racialism, race, racism, self-mockery, stand-up comedy

Welcome to the Minefield that is Race Humour

In today’s supposedly enlightened era, with great strides being made in the fight against racism driven by global anti-racist campaigns such as Black Lives Matter, it might be curious, not to say troubling, that racial stereotypes are still so commonly deployed in comic
practices. While Raul Pérèz considers racial stereotypes to be the ‘currency of comedy’ today (2013: 499) Rebecca Krefting observes how minstrelsy is still ‘commonly invoke[d]’ by mainstream comics to ‘deal with racial . . . difference’ (2014: 228). Think of stand-up comedians performing the behaviour attributed to a racial group in an exaggerated, tongue-in-cheek way. In most such instances, both the performance and the audience’s laughter seem somehow exempted from the usual censorship of the particular stereotypes. Also, oftentimes a subversive, transformative potential is ascribed to such performances whether by the comedians themselves, their audiences, critics or scholars. This seems to constitute a somewhat paradoxical process whereby racial stereotypes are thought to be disarmed or challenged through their very performance.

A key question of this article is whether there are any grounds for the exceptional status awarded to racial stereotype humour, as well as its alleged anti-racist effects. And if so, whether there are any specific requirements and conditions – for instance, with regard to the comic procedures applied, the composition of the audience or the positionality of the comic – that are key to producing such an effect or, inversely, might prevent or even reverse it. Considering the interdisciplinary nature of this problematic, I borrow from diverse scholarly fields in tackling these questions including critical humour studies, the philosophy of humour, psychoanalytic theory and critical race theory. Although mainly theoretical in its focus, the article takes stand-up comedy – as, arguably, the most popular and influence form of contemporary comedy – as its main practical reference, occasionally offering examples to support or illustrate key claims.

The article consists of three parts. In the first part, I discuss a number of general arguments for and against the acceptability and critical potential of racial stereotype humour. I look into criticisms of the way in which race humour is often used today to circumvent the ban on public expressions of racial stereotypes, which often leads to pleas for disallowing race humour. In search of a more nuanced position, I elaborate on how race humour can function as a vehicle for discharging the psycho-affective investments in racist stereotypes, and as a form of subversive play. In reference to some humour theorists’ assertion of an inherent link between stereotyping and comedy, the article’s question is rephrased in terms of determining how racial stereotype humour can be used as a tool
for ‘good’, anti-racist purposes. I point to the complexity of this problem, indicating the multiple parameters involved. I end by considering the possible harmful effects of deploying humour to serious, painful issues like race and racism, while, inversely, listing some unique benefits of a comic sensibility for anti-racist activism.

The second part addresses the audience reception of racial stereotype humour, which is always a risky affair considering the sensitive subject matter. A key problem here is that the comic enactment of racial stereotypes, however critically intended, always creates both racist and anti-racist meanings. The stereotypes might thus always be uncritically enjoyed by the audience, with the comic having to prevent such misreadings and ensure the desired, critical reading. In this regard, I examine two possible, opposing performative strategies. Even when the racial stereotype humour’s subversive intent is picked up by the audience, however, I argue that different subtle instances of racism might be at play. Finally, I look at how, regardless of the reasons, an audience’s laughter may be experienced as hurtful by those stereotyped in the humour.

In the third part, I examine the racial positionality of the comedian as another complicating factor in racial stereotype humour’s hegemonic or counter-hegemonic effect. I particularly look at instances in which comics from minority groups engage in self-stereotyping humour, and the key role of the racial composition of the audience for an anti-racist potential. I distinguish between the scenario in which the audience predominantly consists of people from the dominant majority, and one in which it consists of people from the same minority as the comic. I also argue that comedians from racial minorities are often burdened by opposite expectations from mainstream and non-mainstream audiences alike, restricting the range of their comedy and forcing them into complex negotiations between the different demands.

**Racism is on the Ropes, Long Live Racial Stereotype Humour!**

*Getting Away with Race-based Humour in Post-racial Times*

From the outset, one may ask why comedians should be allowed to ‘get away’ with race-based humour at all? With racism today more
than ever on the defensive, why not simply condemn such humour as retrogressive and plead for zero-tolerance? In line with this, highly critical analyses have been conducted on the extraordinary leeway given to contemporary stand-up comedians in performing race-based humour (Pérèz 2013; Hudson 2013; Santa Ana 2009). The so-called post-racial era often serves here as the broader context of analysis. This denotes an era in which straightforward racism is generally regarded as unacceptable and is suppressed from the public realm. The prefix ‘post’ in the term, however, does not so much indicate an overcoming of racism, but a new, more subtle mode of racism.² In the contemporary US context, Raul Pérèz (2013) has argued that stand-up comedy occupies a problematic, paradoxical position in this post-racial order. While subjected to the prevailing ‘norms of polite [post]racial discourse’ (Pérèz 2013: 488) stand-up simultaneously finds clever ways to circumvent and transgress these norms. Pérèz here refers to the advice given for performing race-based humour at a number of stand-up academies. To his dismay, he observes how students are not instructed to altogether ‘avoid overt racist expressions’ (Pérèz 2013: 483) but are taught specific ‘rhetorical performance strategies’ (478) to engender a humorous effect while avoiding offence and perceptions of a racist intent.

Pérèz notes how particularly elaborate strategies are recommended to white comedians, as members of the population group that has historically subjected other groups to racist treatment. They are for instance advised to start by expressing ‘apparent empathy’ (Pérèz 2013: 485) with those at the receiving end of racism, to engage in ‘negative self-presentation’ before ‘negative other-presentation’ (490) – thus creating ‘a sense of fair play’ (490) by ‘desuperiorising’ oneself and showing vulnerability – and to clearly delineate their comic performance of racist behaviour from their personal stance by ‘creating characters or mimicking dialects’ (Pérèz 2013: 485). Such techniques are meant to signal that despite the comedy’s blatantly racist content, neither the performer nor the performance is genuinely racist. Instead, it must create the ‘impression’ (Pérèz 2013: 492) of being merely a ‘comedic/ironic spectacle’ (485) not to be taken literally, with the comedian ‘only “playing with racism”’ (492).

Pérèz’s assessment of such performative and rhetorical devices is quite damaging, regarding it as a case of racism being ‘hidden
in plain sight’, with comedians managing to appear non-racist ‘even as they say racist things’ (2013: 479). In addition to Pérèz’s denominations of ‘masked’ and ‘palatable’ racism, Gary Younge’s (2018) notion of ‘deniable racism’ is also applicable here, involving a ‘plausible balance between how racist [something] actually is . . . and how racist it can appear to be’. In similar vein, Pérèz argues that white comedians are highly creative in finding ways to exempt themselves from, and even openly defy, the post-racial constraints on public racial discourse, while seemingly adhering to the latter. Stand-up comedy is thus found to be at the forefront of a new, ‘post-post-racial’ phase of racism in which there is a return to earlier, overt forms of racism. According to Pérèz, such developments should be denounced in no uncertain terms, and it is implied that rather than managing the perception of race humour, the latter should not be tolerated in the first place.³

*Without Public Race Humour, Racism Might be Worse*

Such a categorical condemnation of public race humour sends out a powerful, anti-racist message. It should be noted that the race comedy that Pérèz focuses on is mainly geared towards entertainment and not so much towards engendering a critical, anti-racist effect, which might explain the hard stance. For some, such a distinction might ultimately make little difference as it may be argued, for instance, that the mere fact of creating a possible avenue for enjoying racist stereotypes in public offsets any potential critical effects. There are, however, some valid arguments against adopting a harsh, prohibitive stance towards race humour.

First off, forcing racist stereotypes to retreat to the private realm can create important adverse effects for the fight against racism. The stubborn nature of racial stereotypes can be attributed to a great extent to being taboo subjects that offer an illegal, obscene enjoyment that Slavoj Žižek (1989: Chapter 1; 1994: Chapter 3) regards as central to the hold of ideology – in this context, racial ideology – on individuals and groups. This hold can only be expected to tighten if racial stereotypes are banned from comic practices, with stereotypes becoming all the more invested with the special affective quality of precious secrets – the proverbial forbidden fruits that guarantee an individual’s racial identity and maintain an arcane bond between members of a racial group.
By teasing racial stereotypes out of the sphere of illicitness, allowing them to be vented in a controlled way and setting, stand-up comedy could fulfil a key role in sabotaging this wicked psychological mechanism and lessening their spell. Allowing the audience to ‘laugh out’ their racial prejudices might then be a vital, first step to disinvesting them of their obscure, affective power. In line with ‘release’ theories of humour (Morreall 2009: 15–23) laughter can be seen to function here as a psychosomatic form of purging, with the audience relieving itself from the pressures of repressed racist views through their open expression by comedians who facilitate a kind of Aristotelian catharsis (Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus 1965: 39). This should not be taken as a plea to open the floodgates for public race humour and lift all constraints in this regard. Rather, it serves as a caution against a harsh, indiscriminate ban on race humour and the counterproductive side-effects of forcing it to go underground, allowing racial stereotypes to fester in society away from public scrutiny and exert their toxic influence.

Racial Stereotype Humour as a Sine Qua Non of Anti-racist Comedy?

The above argument is focused not so much on humour’s potential to critique the content of racist stereotypes but on its ability to discharge the affective energy with which they are invested through laughter as a psychosomatic process. Such a function could be performed by race humour that is not explicitly aimed at undermining racial stereotypes. Among theorists that defend more consciously anti-racist forms of humour, other arguments have been levelled against the simple avoidance of race-based humour.

Elise DeCamp (2017: 327), for one, has pointed out that in order to critique racial stereotypes through humour, they need to be brought up first. She also argues more generally that ‘stereotyping in some form . . . is bound up in the enterprise of stand-up comedy’ (DeCamp 2017: 326) because stereotypes ‘provide . . . the essential familiarity [comics] must offer to their audiences in a joke’s premise for the punch line to make sense’ (331). In similar vein, Rebecca Krefting considers it to be the first rule of successful comedy to ‘draw from comic frames familiar to most or all of the audience’ (2014: 202). Considering the continuing prevalence of racist stereotypes despite increasing public censure in post-racial
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conditions, comedians might have little choice to draw upon the ‘shared knowledge’ of ‘circulating’ (Krefting 2014: 202) racial stereotypes in attempting to undermine them. Given the nature of humour and its subject in case of critical race humour, it might thus be impracticable, unproductive even, to avoid enacting stereotypes. On the contrary, they may have to be front and centre.

The question then shifts from whether race-based humour should be at all condoned in the post-racial age, to how to practise it in a responsible, critical way. Identifying this as the key challenge, DeCamp proposes to view racial stereotypes as ‘tools’ or ‘implements’ (2017: 327) to be used in anti-racist humour. Such a utilitarian-pragmatic deployment, however, is all but a straightforward operation with unambiguously successful results and without risks, the most important of which will be addressed in what follows.

On the production side, the following factors are commonly identified in humour studies as key to racial stereotype humour’s anti-racist effect: the comedian’s intentions or aims, the content of the humour, the performative and rhetorical strategies, and the comedian’s racial positionality. On the reception side, important elements include the setting or context, the racial composition of the audience, its cultural literacy, its general dispositions and outlooks, as well as prior experience with racial difference. The many elements at play, their different weightings in different scenarios, and the feedback between the elements, makes the counter-hegemonic use of racial stereotypes in humour an extremely complex equation.

In fact, it may prove impossible to have the counter-hegemonic effects of racial stereotype humour, without also unleashing its hegemonic effects, however minimally, as will be elaborated further. This makes the critique of racism through humour an always messy and risky affair, with some factors – especially those related to audience reception – being ultimately beyond the comedian’s control. As DeCamp puts it, the risks of critical race humour may be ‘mitigated if not completely avoided’ (2017: 336) and require a tough ‘negotiation’ (226) between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic aspects and effects.

Such a negotiated approach will always remain problematic from a zero-tolerance/zero-risk approach that eliminates any potential misfiring of racial stereotype humour by abstaining from it altogether and condemn racial stereotypes in uncertain terms.
Of course, this is then no longer a case of undermining racism through humour, since there is nothing specifically comic about such a hard-line approach, the point being that race is far too serious to be made into the subject matter of comedy, however critically intended. Again, such a position is vulnerable to the so-called zero-risk bias, whereby the desire for total risk avoidance might eclipse the possibility of alternative approaches that may offer greater risk reduction. As previously argued, zero-tolerance stances, although seemingly most appropriate, may allow racist sentiments to fester in society’s underbelly beyond public scrutiny, while comedy can play a crucial role in bringing such sentiments out in the open.

_Humour as Subversive Play_

It is now necessary to consider more specifically how humorous renderings of racial stereotypes may engender a subversive effect. This concerns the status of comedy as a discourse and practice, as well as the common comic operations applied to racial stereotypes. As regards the first, John Morreall has used the terms ‘disengaged play’ (2009: 93) and ‘playful disengagement’ (91) to define the general mode of humour. He stresses that race-based humour rarely consists of the ‘straightforward assertion’ of racist stereotypes (Morreall 2009: 107). If it were so, it would most likely fail as humour, its success being restricted to those who find the racist stereotypes funny in themselves. In humour, on the contrary, one plays with racial differences and stereotypes using an array of comic techniques such as exaggeration, infantilism, irony, over-literalness, ridicule, absurdity and caricature (Berger 1995: 54–55).

By applying such procedures, commonly perceived racial features are presented in an unfamiliar, weird and absurd way, creating a distance between the subject and the stereotypical racial features that the subject usually, and often unconsciously, subscribes to. The usual hold of such features on the subject is thereby loosened, enabling a more critical appraisal of racial stereotypes. The stereotypes thus appear as what they fundamentally are, outrageous generalisations designed to denigrate and establish a relation of domination and superiority towards particular groups through exaggeration, simplification and reductionism.

Comic renditions of stereotypical racial features thus confront the audience with the stupidity, absurdity or, as one of the dominant
humour theories has it (Morreall 2009: 9–15; McDonald 2012: Chapter 5) the *incongruity* of its deeply engrained racial prejudices in a playful way. The ensuing laughter is then also self-laughter, caused by the realisation of having once subscribed to such absurd views of the Other. In line with the trope of self-laughter in humour studies (Gordon 2010; Alfano 2019: Chapter 9) this can be seen to contribute to dismantling racial stereotypes.

An important precondition for the subversive play with racial stereotypes is that both the comedian and the audience are given a certain leeway. As Morreall (2009) argues, humour is characterised by a high degree of disengagement from cognitive and practical concerns. Understood as a playful, aesthetic activity, humour requires the bracketing of the truth value, moral significance or practical implications of the content of the humour. Morreall (2009: 105) takes this element of comic licence to be ‘known . . . by tellers and audience alike’, and also to be indicated by comedians through emitting ‘play signals’. Deborah Tannen similarly argues that the interpretation of ‘actions and behaviours’ ‘in a humorous context’ are ‘shaped’ by the ‘“metamessage” of play’ (Pérèz 484, cited in Tannen 2005: 32). In this regard, Morreall further argues that if the playful intent and mode of a comic performance are not apparent and racist stereotypes are simply asserted, this will most likely not be tolerated.

**The Harmfulness and Usefulness of Unseriousness for Anti-racist Purposes**

Racial stereotype humour is thereby not simply exempted from any critique from an anti-racist perspective. And indeed, the ‘merely playing with racism’ is often used as a get-out-of-jail-free card by comedians. Even though Morreall identifies playfulness and disengagement as key features of humour, he does not therefore preclude that in certain instances it might produce objectionable and harmful humour. Specifically in relation to serious, painful and sensitive subjects such as race and racism, humour’s cognitive and moral-practical disengagement becomes a liability.

As regards the moral-practical disengagement, Morreall argues that humorous renderings of racial stereotypes may trivialise their damaging impact, leading to a lack of ‘compassion’ (Morreall 2009: 103–105) for those subjected to racial stereotypes. Or again,
it can ‘promote insensitivity, callousness, or cruelty toward those being laughed about’ (Morreall 2009: 104) making them feel that they do not ‘matter’ (103). As such, racial stereotype humour can delegitimise the anti-racist struggle (Morreall 2009: 102), eroding the need to undertake action against racism. The negative effects of humour’s cognitive disengagement in the case of race humour are defined by Morreall mainly in terms of furthering racial prejudice. The key problem here is not so much the inaccuracy or falseness of comic assertions about a racial group as such since, as already established, the latter are not to be taken as ‘truth-claim[s]’ (Morreall 2009: 106). Rather, humour may contribute to prejudice by promoting a general atmosphere of an ‘indifferen[ce] to the truth’ (Morreall 2009: 106) in which racial stereotypes thrive.

For Morreall, in sum, the potentially detrimental effects of race-based humour are due to its being ‘disengaged cognitively and practically from the stereotypes in what they are saying’ and by not ‘car[ing] about the harm that circulating those stereotypes may cause’ (2009: 106). This potential harm is attributed – again – not so much to how racial stereotype humour ‘present[s] characters with exaggerated degrees of undesirable traits’ as such, but to its disregard for the fact that such characters ‘represent groups that some people believe actually have those traits’ (Morreall 2009: 106). Racial stereotype humour might thus have serious, real-life consequences for the stereotyped groups in question. In this regard, Noëll Carroll (2019) has suggested a key criterion for gauging the acceptability of race humour, namely, whether it can reasonably be expected to produce anxiety among the targeted groups about the jokes spilling over into reality and leading to actual threats or detrimental effects. A racist joke thus becomes problematic if it ‘portends harm’ (Carroll 2019) to those at the butt of it. Morreall (2009: 108) similarly emphasises the ‘harm . . . stereotypes are likely to do’ in the real world as a key criterion for assessing racial stereotype humour.\(^4\) Otto Santa Ana’s (2009) critical analysis of Jay Leno’s humour on Mexican immigrants can be taken as a case in point here. Leno’s presentation of mostly negative stereotypes of these groups could have an actual impact as its influence on perceptions among the US’s white population – Leno’s main audience – might lead to the adoption of tougher anti-immigration policies, adding to the already precarious living and working conditions of immigrants.
One may argue then that the seriousness of racial issues demands an equally serious treatment, involving straightforward communication and strong condemnation. And yet, from an activist perspective, reservations have been expressed towards such restrictions on the range of communicative modes in anti-racist struggles. Jonathan Rossing (2013) argues that a ‘comic sensibility’ should form a ‘necessary’ (60) and ‘integral’ (59) attribute of ‘the performance of activism, wherever the site’ (70). Apart from offering a welcome reprieve from the often ‘austere’, ‘funereal’ (Rossing 2013: 59) and ‘too strident’ (69) character of activist modes of engagement, Rossing identifies many other beneficial effects of humour in the fight against racism (see also Chattoo 2019). He for instance considers humour’s ability to create awareness of ‘the subtle ways racism influences identity, social relations, and opportunities’ (Rossing 2013: 61) as an important advantage over forms of ‘direct protest’. Humour could also be seen to help activists in challenging residual racist beliefs in an indirect, playful, entertaining and less confrontational or moralising way. Or again, to help soften the blow of harsh, critical messages, making the latter a less bitter pill to swallow. Still, as Rossing (2013: 70) emphasises in reference to the work of comic Dick Gregory, the challenge is to achieve an effective ‘balance between seriousness and levity’.

**For They Do Not Know Why They Laugh**

*The Problem of Polysemy and Missed Subtlety*

The comic enactment of racial stereotypes, even if critically intended, comes with a set of dangers and risks in terms of audience reception. First off, the performance’s subversive intent might not or insufficiently be registered by a part or even the majority of the audience and, as such, misfire. Among those that hold the stereotypes it could ‘garner . . . laughs for the wrong reasons’, as Krefting (2014: 215) puts it, resulting in an uncritical, racist enjoyment. Inversely, among those at the receiving end, the performance can lead to feeling hurt or offended, not only by the staged stereotypes, but also by the enjoyment of other audience members, which might add insult to injury.5

The probability of such misreadings can be attributed to the specific features of humour as a mode of resistance, which does
not involve a direct mode of communication and relies on being ambiguous, vague and open to interpretation. Moreover, humour is also economical, adopting quick scripts, frames and heuristics, and leaving out key information that audiences must fill in themselves. It is thus not surprising that critical racial stereotype humour risks being mistaken for, or is seen to be equivalent to, stereotypes.

More specific to racial stereotype humour, scholars have pointed to the latter’s irreducibly polysemic nature. This is attributed to the already mentioned fact that in attempting to subvert racial stereotypes, the latter have to be enacted in some way or form, thereby inevitably creating the possibility of critical and uncritical readings. In exploring how humour can function as a form of anti-racist resistance, Simon Weaver has addressed this feature and the ensuing risks in much depth. He has coined the term ‘reverse humour’ for forms of comedy that ‘employ the sign-systems of . . . racism but develop or seek to develop a reverse semantic effect’ (Weaver 2010: 31). While acknowledging the potential efficacy of reverse humour, Weaver is aware that ‘paradoxically, [it] also contain[s] a polysemic element that can, at times reproduce racism’ (2010: 31). This is attributed to reverse humour’s ‘prior reliance on the sign-systems of earlier racism’ which makes that the latter’s ‘potential to re-emerge, gain purchase and act rhetorically’ can never be eliminated, distorting the ‘preferred [anti-racist] meaning of the text’ or the comedian’s subversive intentions (Weaver 2010: 33).

The risk of unwanted racist meanings is thus identified as a structural, ineradicable feature of reverse humour, compromising its use for anti-racist purposes. There are, however, ways to minimise the danger of racist readings while, inversely, ensuring the likelihood of a critical, anti-racist interpretation.6 Weaver thus compares the rhetorical techniques deployed in the reverse humour practice of four black stand-up comedians, and their mixed success in this regard. One of his findings is that for reverse humour to be successful, ‘it needs to be situated in a specific relationship to racism, in which mockery rather than affirmation of the dichotomy becomes the most obvious meaning’ (2010: 38). He offers the example here of a common comic strategy in which racist stereotypes of one group (e.g. regarding their assumedly inferior linguistic abilities, education levels, cultural habits, etc.) are applied to the group that holds the stereotypes, and vice versa. Weaver (2010: 40) argues
that instead of a subversive effect, such a simple reversal ‘could also support the earlier stereotype’, the comic effect being caused, on the one hand, by donning one group with all the properties of the assumedly ‘“lesser” racial group or culture’ and, on the other, by the perceived absurdity of renderings of the allegedly inferior racial group as highly educated and civilised. Instead of ridiculing ‘the absurdity in the original stereotype’ (Weaver 2010: 40) the underlying racist hierarchy is thus confirmed instead.

Minimising or Maximising Ambiguity?

One solution to racial stereotype humour’s inherent polysemy and the related interpretative risks proposed by Elise DeCamp (2017: 336) is to ‘explicitly inform . . . ’ the audience about the subversive intention by giving ‘early clues’ for instance. Properly framing a performance as anti-racist from the get-go could thus ensure the audience’s ‘conscious reflection’ (DeCamp 2017: 336) on the staged racial stereotypes, increasing the likelihood of a critical effect. One could refer here to black comedian Richard Pryor who, as Krefting (2014: 199) puts it, took ‘a pointed and direct approach to writing comic material that leaves little room for ambiguity as to [his] . . . commitment to confronting racism’. It might, however, not always be desirable that the audience is immediately or completely informed about a comic performance’s intentions or aims. The performance could thereby lose its tension and surprise element, making it appear as a cudgel, with the comedian force-feeding a moral lesson to the audience.

In order to avoid this, one might consider some genre-specific properties of stand-up, specifically the possibility of a direct, spontaneous interaction between the comedian and the audience. It is therefore not crucially important that a racial stereotype joke is interpreted correctly at once. On the contrary, the comedian may deliberately heighten its ambiguity instead of minimising it – as often advised by humour theorists – in order to provoke ‘undesirable’, racist reactions to which the comedian can then improvise responses. Krefting (2014: 217) refers to a particular instance during a show by Kristen Key in which the latter calls audience members to account for their laughter by retorting, ‘You guys liked that one didn’t you . . . ? You racist bastards’. While communicating her own, real stance towards racism, Key makes audience members
conscious and uncomfortable about their knee-jerk responses and residual racist attitudes. Not immediately disclosing one’s anti-racist intentions might thus help in catching an audience unawares. In contrast, if an audience is forewarned, it might censor its spontaneous laughing response to racial stereotypes. Based on a layered psychological account of the persistence of racist stereotypes, it is entirely possible that people who regard themselves as non-racist hold racist attitudes without being aware of it. While commonly being suppressed, such attitudes can manifest themselves in unguarded moments, such as in spontaneous laughter at racial stereotype humour. Using Sigmund Freud’s (1991) meta-psychological distinctions, one could speak here of ‘id laughter’, with unconscious racist attitudes temporarily breaching the ego’s defence mechanisms. By initially keeping an audience in the dark about one’s intentions, a comic’s staging of racial stereotypes may provoke such breaches, thereby creating awareness among the audience of a remaining, hidden investment in such stereotypes.

A deliberately subtle performance of racial stereotypes might thus gauge an audience’s stance toward race, surveying how many audience members, when faced with equally plausible racist and anti-racist interpretations of a joke, opt for the latter. In the scenario in which no one laughs or, on the contrary even, audience members express their dismay at the comedian’s perceived racism, the comedian could then applaud such reactions by saying, for instance, ‘You found this joke to be offensive? Full marks for you!’ Such a performative strategy might surely appear as counterintuitive, counterproductive and even disingenuous to some anti-racist comedians because one provokes the very racist enjoyment one aims to eliminate.

‘Clever’ Laughter as Deniable Racism

Even if a comic act’s critical intention is correctly registered, further critical questions can be asked about its anti-racist effect. A straightforward response that takes the staged stereotypes at face value is overridden here by an appropriate, ironic appreciation that picks up on the subversive deployment of comic strategies. The audience might thus come to the following understanding: ‘I get it, the comic wants us to reflect on the absurdity of our racist
stereotypes by offering an over-the-top version of them’. Conceptually, such a response could be analysed in terms of the ‘content’ and ‘form’ of humour, with the first referring to the particular racial stereotype that forms the premise of the joke, the second to the rhetorical or performative procedures applied to the content for comic effect. Two main audience reception scenarios are possible then. In a first scenario, the laughter is caused principally by the content, the staged stereotype being taken as an actual, accurate feature of the racial group in question that is found to be laughable. In a second scenario, the laughter is not elicited by the stereotype as such, which is correctly recognised and condemned as a racist falsehood. Rather, it is the joke’s logical structure that evokes laughter, and its cleverness in ridiculing the simplistic nature of the racial stereotype and, by extension, those who take it to be true. While the laughter in the first scenario would indeed be racist, the laughter in the second scenario arguably is not.

Such a neat distinction can be problematised, however. In reference to Sigmund Freud’s claim that people might deceive themselves with regard to why they laugh (1905: 92, 117) Michael Billig (2005: 25) has argued that laughter at the cleverness of comic renditions of racial stereotypes might be partially motivated by more base, unacknowledged racist motivations in line with superiority theories of humour (Morreall 2009: 4–9; McDonald 2012: Chapter 4). In relation to the question as to whether a joke’s funniness is due to its ‘direct content’ or its ‘purely formal aspect’, Slavoj Žižek (2014: 35) similarly questions whether the latter aspect can be the exclusive source of comic enjoyment. He seriously doubts whether the ‘form [can] do its work alone’ and suggests that jokes actually ‘need “a little piece of reality” in the sense of some contingent positive content related to “dirty” topics’ (Žižek 2014: 35) such as sex and violence, or, one might add, race.

People might thus believe that they laugh with a racial stereotype joke solely because of its formal qualities yet their laughter might be motivated, at least in part and unbeknownst to them, by an obscene enjoyment of the stereotype that forms the joke’s content. Giving a different meaning to Slavoj Žižek’s notion of ‘reflexive racism’ (1999) one could argue that the self-reflexive understanding that one is not laughing at the racial stereotype but only at its clever comical rendering, can function as an elaborate strategy to dissimulate one’s
racial prejudice. An appropriate, ironical-critical mode of appreciation of race humour could thus serve as an intellectualist smoke-screen, a sophisticated excuse for enjoying one’s racial unconscious under the guise of postmodern, hipster sophistication.

There is also another way in which supposedly appropriate, clever readings of racial stereotype humour might function as a subtle form of racism. From the perspective of those ‘who get it’, only the simple-minded are probably thought to be genuinely aroused by comic stagings of racial stereotypes. Outraged members of the stereotyped group might be reproached then for not having a sense of humour or a too basic one, for lacking the skills and sensibility to appreciate the subtleties, complexities or ironies of the joke. If expressed by members of the group that historically held the stereotypes, the latter’s arrogations of a supposedly more refined and intelligent sense of humour become a sign of cultural ‘distinction’ within an implicit racial hierarchy, and thus a form of cultural racism. To be sure, an audience’s lack of the ‘cultural capital or literacy necessary to read the intended satire’ (DeCamp 2017: 340) is often identified as a risk factor for the misfiring of racial stereotype humour, but usually in relation to audience members from the group that historically held the stereotypes, causing the latter to take racial stereotype humour as a confirmation of their racist prejudice. In case of audience members of the stereotyped group, however, expressions of outrage at sophisticated forms of racial stereotype humour should not be taken as equally inappropriate, unfortunate responses indicative of a lacking cultural capital. As many humour scholars (Morreall 2009; Billig 2005; Rossing 2013) have argued, outrage can be a completely legitimate and morally necessary response to race humour.

Finally, one should note that those subjected to the comically enacted racial stereotypes here find themselves in a situation that is common for oppressed people generally, being presented with no good option so that whatever they choose, they are blameworthy. As Lewis Gordon once put it, ‘they cannot win’ no matter what they do or how they respond. In the present context, if the stereotyped express their dismay at racial stereotype humour they can be faulted for misreading its critical intent and undermining anti-racist efforts for their benefit. In contrast, if they do laugh at such humour, they can be found to be complicit with their own oppression by validating the very stereotypes against themselves.
The Hurtfulness of Other People’s Laughter

If it is difficult for comedians to gauge the reasons behind the audience’s laughter at racial stereotype humour, and if even audience members themselves may be deluded in this regard, this also holds for those at the receiving end of such humour. They cannot know for sure whether audience members, especially those from the group that has historically held the stereotypes, laugh for the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ reasons. Indeed, since it is nearly impossible to distinguish between genuine and ironic laughter, such a distinction might be regarded as irrelevant because both are experienced as equally insulting, humiliating and insensitive by the stereotyped groups. One may thus grant that humorous stagings of racial stereotypes engender different types of anti-racist effects on those who hold such stereotypes. However, if those stereotyped – whom these stagings are ultimately supposed to benefit – feel like being subjected to these stereotypes once more, the ‘treatment’ might be found to be worse than the ‘disease’. The subversive potential of comic enactments of, for instance, black racial stereotypes on white audiences must thus be carefully weighed against the potential pain caused to black audiences.

In performing racial stereotype humour, several humour theorists therefore advise comedians to adopt as a guiding principle, ‘to cause as little harm as possible’ (Krefting 2014: 228) or again, ‘to not cause unnecessary suffering’ (Morreall 2009: 105). Krefting (2014), for instance, argues that the use of racial terms must be well-considered with regard to its possible offensive effect, and is only acceptable when it clearly serves an anti-racist purpose. A comic’s oversight in this regard can be taken as symptomatic of a lack of empathy or engagement with the racially stereotyped, communicating an arrogance, recklessness even, according to which their perspective and feelings do not have to be considered in combating these very stereotypes, and that one can proceed unilaterally in this. The anticipation of offensiveness to the recipients of racism is especially indispensable when performing for audiences that do not exclusively consist of the target group of the racially prejudiced. It here becomes necessary to cater for widely diverse racial sensibilities and positionalities and devise performative strategies that put this diversity to work in combating racism.
What if the Other Mocks His/Her Own Oppressed Racial Group?

In the reception of racial stereotype humour, the comic’s perceived or constructed racial identity and his/her ‘position in the “racial hierarchy”’ (Pérèz 2013: 487) also plays a key role. While white comedians, for instance, are commonly criticised for being insufficiently sensitive when enacting stereotypes of marginalised racial groups, such a requirement is applied far more leniently to comedians from such groups. A comic performance’s anti-racist effect is thus not only determined by how racial stereotypes are depicted, the comedian’s intentions or the composition of the audience, but also by the performer’s identity and positionality.

Outsource your Racism!

Studies on the intersections of humour and race devote a lot of attention to performances of racial stereotypes by comics from the stereotyped group. In such cases, one might assume that the anti-racist intent is less in doubt. Still, one cannot exclude the possibility that comedians might have unwittingly internalised some of the racist prejudices against their own racial group. Mundane or opportunistic motives may more likely be at play, however. For instance, black comedians oftentimes have little choice but to pander to white, racially biased audiences for their livelihood or to achieve success. Such audience or industry pressures are dependent on the prevalence of racism in society and the more this is so, the less choice for performers of oppressed racial groups not to engage in self-caricaturing humour.

This is not to say that minority comedians simply resign themselves to such pressures. In this regard, Simon Weaver offers some interesting insights into the history of reverse humour in the US context. While black comedians often had to perform their own racist stereotypes, most notoriously in minstrelsy plays, ‘to be allowed to perform at all’ (Weaver 2010: 36) they devised clever, covert ways to simultaneously resist and undermine such self-stereotyping. Through the use of hyperbole, for instance, black performers rendered the gross exaggerations of black people in white stereotypes in an even more exaggerated way, to the point of ridicule. Weaver cites Robert Cantwell (1992: 171) in this regard, stating
that they ‘parodied the parody itself’ and, as such, ‘rose above the stereotype’. Black entertainers thereby subtly signalled that they ‘were performing these roles, not embracing them as representative behaviour’ (Sotiropoulos 2006: 9). They hereby catered to two audiences, the one racist and white, the other mainly black but also including a minority of self-critical whites, offering subversive meanings to the latter groups. In line with the already discussed problematic of polysemy in reverse humour, such performances were characterised by a high degree of ambiguity as they ‘both critiqued and conformed to stereotypes’ (Weaver 2010: 36). This ambivalence was a necessary concession for black comics in order to be able to critique racism at all.

Oddly enough, in today’s ‘post-racial’ era, the pressure on minority comedians to enact their own stereotypes has not dissipated that much. In his research on how differently raced stand-up comedians are instructed to perform race-based humour, Pérèz observed a notable ‘double standard’ (2013: 494). White comedians were advised to tread very carefully and deploy elaborate performative strategies, some of which were mentioned earlier. In contrast, comics from racial minorities were ‘allowed to engage . . . more freely’ in racial discourse and were even ‘encouraged to do so in ways that reproduced racial stereotypes’ (Pérèz 2013: 494), especially of their own minority group, through self-deprecatory humour for instance. According to Pérèz, the underlying rule was that ‘non-whites who engage in self-deprecation cannot be racist’ (2013: 495). Or again, that ‘reproducing stereotypical racist imagery was tolerable when . . . performed by a “perceived” member of that group, even when deliberately misrepresenting reality’ (Pérèz 2013: 496). Inversely, in line with what Pérèz considers to be the ‘polite’, post-racial discourse, it was regarded as problematic for ‘[m]embers higher in the racial hierarchy [to] freely mock . . . those lower [placed]’ (2013: 488). Again, such restrictions were lifted for comics from the latter group.

Rebecca Krefting expresses similar concerns about the encouragement towards comics of racial minorities – by the comedy industry and mainstream audiences alike – to use their ‘otherness for comedic fodder’ (2014: 201) in today’s politically correct era. Also in the contemporary US context, she observes, on the one hand, a great desire among white population groups for ‘eating the
“Other” (Krefting 2014: 216) and, on the other, an awareness that jokes about racial minorities are ‘not supposed to’ be ‘liked’ or ‘told’ by themselves (202). Hence, it is expected of black comedians, for instance, ‘to call attention to their race and to perform in concert with their expectations about what being Black looks and sounds like’ (Krefting 2014: 215).

Appropriating a term coined by Kobena Mercer (1990) minority comedians are thus saddled with a ‘burden of representation’ or, rather, in this case, misrepresentation, that is, an obligation to stage false, stereotypical representations of their perceived racial community. One can also speak here of a process of outsourced racism or racism by proxy. The latter’s perverse logic is expressed well by Krefting when she says that racial stereotypes are ‘put . . . in the mouth of the very race . . . targeted and suddenly . . . become perfectly acceptable in public, if not desirable’ (2014: 202). Krefting here refers to an audience member confiding to a minority comic in relation to the latter’s self-deprecating humour, that he was ‘“saying everything that you are thinking but don’t want to say”’ (2014: 201). The fact that a comedian expounds stereotypes about its own oppressed racial group is thus taken as confirmation of their truth (Krefting 2014; 202). The majority audience’s perception of minority comedians’ authenticity and authority with regard to their own racial group further lends credence to the accuracy of the staged stereotypes.

**Self-mockery as a Tool for Minority Empowerment**

The racial composition of the audience, however, greatly influences the political status and effect of self-stereotyping humour by minority comedians. Elise DeCamp has argued that if performed for an audience consisting of members of the same racial group as the comic, such humour can function as a mode of ‘cultural celebration’ (2017: 333) and enhance group pride and cohesion. This, in turn, could play an instrumental role in ‘solidify[ing] [group] membership, [and] direct . . . [the group] toward a common socio-political purpose’ (DeCamp 2017: 327). Depending on the racial positionality of the comic and audience, self-stereotyping humour can thus play an important role in a racial minority’s fight against its oppression.

This might appear somewhat puzzling, perhaps, considering that if the same stereotypes would be mocked by a performer from a
majority group, this would most likely be experienced as offensive and evoke outrage among the minority community. Or, it would require elaborate performative strategies to pre-empt such responses. Inversely, from the perspective of a minority group, it would be equally problematic for a comedian from its own group to perform self-deprecating humour in front of an audience made up predominantly of members from the majority group. In the latter scenario, Krefting argues that self-stereotyping humour risks becoming a ‘racialised spectacle’ (2014: 218). In contrast, if a group’s racial stereotypes are ‘exchanged intraracially’ (Krefting 2014: 218) in ‘a shared space of community members’ (219) she argues, in line with DeCamp, that self-stereotyping humour can serve multiple functions in a minority’s fight against racial discrimination. Such functions include serving as ‘a conduit for creating community’ and ‘build[ing] cultural citizenship’ (Krefting 2014: 218) and as a means of auto-critique.

Over and above the two, previously considered, scenarios in which audiences consist of either majority or minority groups, there is also a third possibility in which the audience is made up of a mixture of both groups. In multi-racial societies such a scenario might be prevalent, making considerations of the comic’s racial positionality even more complex. Some comics’ peculiar racial positionality gives them an advantage in this regard. The extraordinary leeway given to stand-up comedian Trevor Noah in broaching racial issues in his native South Africa and, later, in the US is a case in point. Although often regarded as a black African, Noah is of mixed, Swiss–Xhosa, descent, being uniquely positioned between not only black and white population groups in South Africa, but also the so-called ‘coloured’ community, considered to be a separate racial grouping. Noah consciously exploits this singular positionality in his comedy and the willingness of differently raced audiences to cut him a lot of slack in comically rendering their racial stereotypes can be attributed to Noah’s intermediate position between black, white and coloured communities, belonging to neither one of them and all of them at the same time.

Self-stereotyping Humour and its Discontents

Despite the aforementioned empowering uses of self-stereotyping humour for marginalised racial groups, many comedians from these
groups have become increasingly uncomfortable with performing this kind of humour. Rebecca Krefting has identified different reasons for this such as feelings of disingenuity because of misrepresenting one’s lived experience, a sense of turning oneself into a joke, and concerns over ‘the potential damage wreaked by perpetuating . . . untruths’ (Krefting 2014: 196). In general, it is believed that self-caricaturing does not lead to ‘issues of race . . . [being] . . . substantively addressed . . . or exposed’ (Krefting 2014: 228). In line with what I earlier called outsourced racism, self-caricaturing comedy is seen to ‘often invite . . . audiences to participate in racist, homophobic, or xenophobic thinking’ (Krefting 2014: 201). Similarly observing a growing unease with self-stereotyping humour, Pérez notes a desire among minority comics to defy mainstream audiences’ expectations and relieve themselves of the aforementioned burden of (mis)representation. He cites a black comedian who expresses the desire to ‘get away from stereotypical black humour’ and to be regarded as ‘a comic who happens to be black’ rather than a ‘black comedian’ (Pérez 2013: 496–497).

Krefting (2014) observes how some comedians from minority groups – such as Hari Kondabolu – have switched to what she calls ‘charged’ humour. The latter is an activist form of comedy that aims ‘to edify and illumine social inequalities’ (Krefting 2014: 225), including issues of racial discrimination and inequality. Adopting a charged approach to stand-up does not, however, necessarily relieve minority comedians from the aforementioned burden of representation. In Mercer’s original sense, this burden refers to the expectation, obligation even, towards artists from marginalised minorities (specifically from black, Afro-Caribbean communities in Great Britain) to address the many challenges faced by such minorities, racism being an important one, in their work. In the US context, the status of the movie director Spike Lee is exemplary of this. Lee is almost always referred to as a black director making highly political films about the racial injustices faced by black people rather than, say, a director making films about the human condition.

Negotiating the Multiple Burdens of Comic Minority Representation

As white audiences become increasingly aware of the gravity of racial injustices and their complicity in the latter, black comedians
might become burdened in a different way, however. They might now be expected to challenge whites for their residual racist attitudes and give them a hard time about their enduring racial privilege. This specific burden is thus the exact opposite of the aforementioned one exerted by mainstream audiences, yet what remains the same is that black comics are typecast and pigeonholed into a constraining, stereotypical role. Specifically, it can be seen to perpetuate a particular cliché of the black activist, perpetually agitated and angry at the world, and finding evidence of racism everywhere. Of course, it is one thing if comedians of a racial minority choose to fight their marginalisation in their work. It is another, if such a role is imposed on them by the majority group, or if their work is regarded exclusively from such a perspective, discarding other aspects unrelated to their minority status or racial identity.

Minority comedians thus get caught between contrary expectations, once again confirming the predicament of oppressed people of being faced with undesirable options. As Pérez puts it, non-white comics are mostly forced to negotiate the ‘tension . . . between performing to the audience’s “expectations” . . . and the desire to “get away” from racial stereotypes’ (2013: 497). With regard to such negotiation, some comics can be seen to make a virtue out of a necessity. Analysing performances by Kondabolu, Krefting observes a kind of Trojan Horse approach in which minstrelsy, as an extreme form of self-stereotyping humour, is used as ‘a strategy to draw laughter’, after which, ‘while appearing harmless, [the comic] slip[s] in something subversive’ (2014: 203). Although advocating charged comedy, Krefting thus does not exclude self-stereotyping humour but, rather, proposes to integrate and repurpose it to perform specific functions. Minstrelsy and charged humour are here performed ‘side by side’ in a hybrid comic practice – one could speak of a form of critical entertainment – the first to elicit laughter, the second to indicate that one does not ‘actually believe’ in the humorously enacted stereotypes (Krefting 2014: 218).

Finally, one can point to another perverse effect of the great leeway given to comics at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. This leeway does not only extend to offering stereotypical renditions of their own racial group, but also to groups marginalised or oppressed in other ways, in terms of their sexuality, gender or ethnicity for instance. The underlying rationale seems to be that since racial
discrimination is still the most harsh form of oppression, its recipients may engage more freely in deprecatory humour of other, arguably lesser oppressed groups since they know best what it means to be oppressed. And further, that if they think it is okay to stereotype another discriminated group, considering their first-hand experience in being treated even worse, this must be acceptable, otherwise they would not do so.

Comics of racially oppressed minorities are thus often encouraged or emboldened to engage in problematic xenophobic or genderphobic humour. Think, for example, of comedian Richard Pryor who utilised his personal experiences to raise consciousness about systemic racism against black males in the US. At the same time, however, and sometimes within the same joke, he often uses his position of power vis-à-vis Chinese immigrants to perpetuate negative stereotypes of these groups. A similar argument could be made regarding Dave Chappelle’s humour on transgender people. Issues of positionality are complicated here by issues of intersectionality. As a minority comic, one can be severely oppressed and disempowered in one way, say in terms of being black in a white, racist society, whilst, inversely, being relatively empowered as a heterosexual male for instance, and be complicit in perpetuating the oppression of women or queer persons. Writing about the ‘entangled, contradictory nature of South African comedy’ (157) Grace Musila (2014) notes similar problematic positionings on the ‘interface between gender, sexuality and race’ (156). She refers to a joke by black, male comic Loyiso Gola suggesting the probable rape of female streakers in South African soccer games by the players. Musila argues that in the context of the country’s high incidence of sexual and gender violence, such a joke, rather than critiquing such violence, ‘appear[s] to signal an implicit celebration of a particular, mythologised virulent black masculinity whose sexuality is daring uncontrollable, almost desirable’ (2014: 157-158).

**Conclusion**

In this article I have discussed several key critiques, defences, trouble spots and quandaries concerning racial stereotype humour
and its potential subversive, anti-racist effects. It must be clear that ensuring such effects is an extremely complex operation, involving many interlaced factors, as well as tricky negotiations for comedians, with little guarantees in terms of avoiding harm or offence. Considering the viciousness of racism, however, such risks should be embraced as coming with the territory, and the high stakes are sure to keep comedians deploying racial stereotypes on their toes.

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Notes

1. The article’s use of the term ‘racial stereotype humour’ might require some elucidation and motivation, particularly the qualification of stereotype humour as ‘racial’ rather than ‘racist’. The adjective ‘racial’ is used in cases in which racial-cultural differences between groups are evoked without the (explicit) intent to assert a hierarchy between racial groups. The adjective ‘racist’ is used in instances where, as Paul Pérez (2013: 482) summarises an argument by Simon Weaver, one ‘draws on dichotomous stereotypes of race and/or seeks to inferiorise an ethnic or racial minority’. Since this article examines instances in which comedians stage racist stereotypes with a subversive intent, the racial/racist distinction is more complicated as the content might be ‘racist’ yet the intent anti-racist. I shall therefore sometimes use the terms ‘race humour’ and ‘race-based humour’ to indicate that race forms the subject matter of a comic performance, still apart from the latter’s critical or uncritical aim.

2. Post-racism is often associated with a shift from biological conceptions of race towards cultural conceptions (Pérez 2013; Weaver 2010) involving a translation of previous racial distinctions into cultural differences within an implicit hierarchy. Post-racism has also been characterised as a ‘colour-blind racism’ (Burke 2018), a paradoxical formation in which the assertion that race or skin colour is no longer relevant in today’s world – or should not be allowed to matter anymore – perversely serves to deny the enduring, detrimental effects of centuries of racism. In relation to such a form of ideological denial, Mark McPhail (2004: 397) also speaks of an ‘unwillingness’ to ‘name’ racism, while Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) identifies the inability to view oneself as racist as characteristic of post-racism, speaking of a ‘racism without racists’.

3. In the context of post-apartheid South Africa, Peter Hudson (2013) has identified and criticised the similarly dubious role played by comic practices in the furtherance of racism in more subtle, covert ways. He argues that after the end of apartheid, the country’s white inhabitants have largely repressed their colonialist identities and attitudes, which are now regarded as either morally unacceptable or as something to be censored. Despite this, Hudson points out that what he calls the white-colonial unconscious is still permitted to express itself in the sphere of comedy, which has hence become a privileged site for the guiltless enjoyment of racist sentiments. Hudson specifically refers to political-satirical works by cartoonist Jonathan Shapiro (aka Zapiro) that contain caricatured representations of black South Africans.

4. As a counterpoint one could refer to Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo’s (1991) work on the semantic script theory of jokes as self-contained, pure fictions that never extend beyond the joke-world, and are thus ultimately inert and causally inefficacious in the socio-political realm. Note that Morreall also relativises the harmful potential of race humour, claiming that ‘When one group hates another, they express their feelings in more direct and damaging ways than by telling jokes’ (2009: 99). This implies that racial jokes are neither the most damaging, nor the obvious, predominant way of expressing racial hatred. In this sense, one could argue that one should really be concerned about the threat posed by persistent racist sentiments if there is no race humour.

5. Although not from the field of stand-up comedy, one may refer here to the popular 1970s television show *Archie Bunker*, in which racist stereotypes were often voiced through the central character of the same name. While some picked up on an element of exaggeration in the portrayal of Archie Bunker, turning him into a somewhat despicable character, others embraced him as a mouthpiece for their
racist views. The show could thereby have aided in the perpetuation of racist ideology through the ambiguous, rather than outrage-inducing messages about racial stereotypes.
6. The comics in question are Richard Pryor, Reginald D. Hunter, Lenny Henry and Chris Rock.
7. Krefting herself is rather critical of Key’s particular response, saying that she shifts responsibility for her race jokes to the audience.
8. This might explain why racist jokes are often of inferior quality. Their humorous potential is mostly conditional on the prior acceptance of the laughable nature of a real or imagined feature of the racial Other, rather than any intrinsic, formal feature of the joke itself.
9. This response was in relation to performances by a fake stand-up comedian persona described by Krefting (2014: 201) as ‘an exaggerated minstrel character’ of South-Asian origin, played by Hari Kondabolu in his 2008 mockumentary Manoj.

References


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