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The Hurtline and the Colorline: Race and Racism in American Stand-up Comedy from Civil Rights to Color-Blindness

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in Sociology

by

Raúl Pérez

Dissertation Committee:
Professor David John Frank, Chair
Professor Ann Hironaka, Co-Chair
Professor Belinda Robnett-Olsen
Assistant Professor Jacob Avery

2015

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my loving and talented partner, Linda. Without your love, support, enthusiasm and patience this project would never be finished. And to our beautiful son Lucca, who burst into our lives full of spirit, curiosity and personality.

To my parents and siblings and my many families who so often and unknowingly replenished my heart and soul: The Pérez's, Leyva's, Sandoval's and Nguyen's.

To my friends Dr. Chuck O'Connell, Dr. Fernando Chirino and Dr. Dennis Lopez for their continued encouragement, guidance and inspiration.

And to the campus service workers for allowing me the opportunity to be a part of their struggle in recognition of their dignity and worth. Sí se pudo!

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Hurtline and the Colorline: Race and Racism in American Stand-up Comedy from Civil Rights to Color-Blindness

By

Raúl Pérez

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor David John Frank, Chair

In this dissertation, I examine race and racism in U.S. stand-up comedy, with particular attention to discursive and demographic shifts from the civil rights era to the present. I situate an examination of race-talk in stand-up comedy within the broader literature on post-civil rights racial discourse in the U.S., which contends that offensive public race-talk is on the decline. I argue comedians occupy a critical and central role in the matter of racial speech, but that sociologists have largely sidelined them in favor of more "serious" matters. Moreover, humor scholars have largely ignored the race question and today emphasize a celebratory rather than critical analysis of humor. I contend popular cultural industries like comedy are important yet understudied cultural-fields that bridge academic and public debates about the limits of offensive discourse in a free speech society. Here, I analyze how racial ridicule has been contested and regulated by organized publics and private entities during and after the civil rights movement, how racial/ethnic comedy has changed as a result of such contestation, how racial insults are now deployed strategically by humorists, as well as how the demographic trends of elite comedians have changed from the civil rights era to the present. I use case studies of performers and

discourse analysis of performances, recordings, and oral histories to examine the shift between pre-civil rights and post-civil rights race based comedy. Using participant observation in a comedy school, I map the strategic nature of racial discourse in contemporary stand-up comedy. Finally, I examine the racial and gender demography of the Grammy Award for Comedy over the last 5 decades. One overarching conclusion of my dissertation is that the intersection of race and comedy offers a fertile field for sociological analysis.

INTRODUCTION

My first attempt to take humor seriously was as an undergraduate student at the University of California, Irvine. I had recently transferred as a sociology major from a local community college. I was enthralled with the study of social behavior and I began to notice sociology everywhere I looked. I was possessed by the "sociological imagination" (Mills 1959). To be honest, as a transfer student entering an elite university I was intimidated and anxious about the college experience. I imagined students there were equally enchanted with ideas and passionate about their studies. That they took social problems seriously and wanted to change the world! I made a point to live in the dorms during undergrad as I wanted the full college experience. It was in these living quarters that I first took serious notice of "joking relationships" (Fine 1976, 1983; Radcliffe-Brown 1940) and connected them to broader sociological issues of racial inequality (Billig 2001). Here, I was quite surprised to see students on various occasions freely sharing racist jokes. "What do black kids get for Christmas? Your bike" or "How long does it take a black woman to take a shit? 9 months." I was shocked not by the casual racism in the jokes themselves, as I had heard similar jokes before, but by the context in which they were being shared: among college students and in the absence of black students, as the black student population on our campus hovered between 1-2%. The use of such jokes among students seemed even more absurd to me given the regular emphasis on "respect for diversity" on our campus. So I thought, "here is an interesting sociological phenomenon." I was curious to learn what others had to say about the phenomenon of racist jokes in society. However, while I did find some key and intriguing studies and arguments, I realized that the sociological literature in this area was

rather thin. I decided to focus my attention on this issue in an honors thesis, which naturally led me to graduate school.

Just before I began my PhD in fall of 2007, I learned about another troubling incident concerning racism in humor. A video emerged of comedian Michael Richards ("Kramer" from the television series *Seinfeld*) verbally abusing a black audience member in a Hollywood comedy club: "50 years ago we'd have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass! (scattered laughs, cheers, and oohh's from the audience)… throw his ass out (pointing at the audience member) he's a nigger!"(audience gasps) (TMZ 2006). Richards soon delivered a national *mea culpa* for his racist commentary at the Laugh Factory comedy club (Farhi 2006). "I'm a performer. I push the envelope," Richards told David Letterman, host of the *The Late Show* on CBS, during his national public apology. "I'm not a racist that's what's so insane about this," Richards pleaded (Von Meistersinger 2006). It was this and other humor controversies, such as the global protests over the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in 2005, that allowed me to view humor and comedy as an arena of power relations and inequalities at play.

Over the last seven years, I have sought to examine the social norms governing public racial discourse in general and racial humor in particular. I wanted to have a fuller grasp of why certain performances were deemed offensive and repulsive, while others succeed in making controversial and offensive discourse entertaining. The more I pondered the Richards controversy, the more I felt something fundamental was revealed about the relationship between racism and humor in contemporary U.S. society, and about the shifting norms of public and private racial discourse in a post-civil rights and ostensibly "post-racial" era. I realized that the comedian occupied a critical and central role in this social phenomenon and transformation, but

that sociologists had largely ignored their contributions, experiences, and controversies in favor of more “serious” matters.

Before undergoing a sociological examination of stand-up comedy, I was under the impression that comedians could say whatever they wanted on stage. That somehow, by virtue of being a comedian, these individuals had license to say the most absurd, shocking, and offensive things that most of us could not imagine saying outside our circle of most trusted friends. The more outrageous their jokes and observations, the more hilarious. In fact, some of my fondest memories of my early teenage years are of sitting around the television with friends and watching comedians share their views of the world. I still recall the reaction from my friends in high school when we heard Chris Rock talk about “having your asshole eaten with jelly or syrup” or about his distinction between “black people and niggas.” Such comments were shocking and entertaining because we understood, consciously or not, that we could not make similar observations in most other contexts. That is, I believed the realm of the comical lay outside the boundaries of conventional social norms and discourse.

The more I took race and humor seriously, the more I sought to understand it historically and sociologically. I began to notice a series of patterns, shifts and controversies. I learned that although the “humorous” attempts to transgress societal norms and conventions, it is also governed by social forces and social norms. That although humorists can use jokes to breach societal taboos to “speak the unspeakable,” there are unspoken social rules for how comedy works. An important subset of these rules and rituals in the world of comedy, I find, correspond to larger social and historical changes in race relations and racial inequality.

It was not until I enrolled in a comedy school to do fieldwork for my Masters thesis in 2008 that I began to get a grip on the rules and rituals that govern comic and serious discourse.

Here, the metaphor of the "hurtline" was used by the instructors to delineate the boundaries that distinguish "humor" from "pain." On one side of the "hurtline" lay the realm of the "funny" where comics could draw on their experience and imagination to make just about any idea or incident comical. On the other side was the historical and continued reality of inequality, exploitation and oppression in its many manifestations, but key within this site was the problem of racism and racist discourse. The Michael Richards incident was still fresh in our collective memories and served to reinforce this point. Students were routinely instructed to approach the "hurtline" with caution and to never cross it. However, the exact boundaries were never made explicit and I soon realized that the line was placed at different intervals according to the racial/ethnic identity of the performer. That is, the "hurtline" was different for whites and non-whites. And because "who gets the laugh, and who gets the pain" has long been a source of conflict in U.S. race relations, I perceived the "hurtline" as operating parallel to the "colorline."

It is worth acknowledging that humor is multifaceted and polysemic (Weaver 2011). That is, humor can be used to entertain, critique, and cause pain. Yet, today the scholarly and popular attention on humor tends to focus on the "positive" nature of humor, as in the medical, educational, social, and psychological benefits of humor and laughter (Billig 2005). However, because I am interested in issues of power and inequality, my approach to the study of humor and race is more critical than celebratory (Billig 2005; Lockyer and Pickering 2005; Pérez 2013, 2014). I am interested in understating how larger cultural and structural issues of racism and racial inequality are manifested in an arena largely perceived as unserious and amusing. Moreover, studies that seek to examine racial inequality in this arena tend to focus largely on historical examples in the pre-civil rights era, such as the phenomenon of blackface minstrelsy (Boskin 1986; Lott 2013; Rogin 1998), or celebrate the comedian and comic traditions that

attempt to use racial humor to critique and subvert racism (Epstein 2001; Gillota 2013; Haggins 2007; Rossing 2011, 2012, 2014). While such works are insightful and important, my approach has been to examine racism and racial inequality *within* comedy by focusing on key aspects of its historical development, social practices, and awarding process. Moreover, I noticed that an "apartheid of knowledge" (Bernal and Villalpando 2002) has taken root where scholarship tends to remain or is legitimated within the boundaries of particular disciplines or subfields, rather than being in conversation across fields. Here, I operate at a critical juncture in an effort to simultaneously ground my work on race and humor as a sociological endeavor while making use of and speaking to an interdisciplinary audience in order take a critical analysis of humor seriously and broadly.

This dissertation is a continuation of a lifelong interest in humor and comedy and its capacity to both "heal" and "wound," and a more recent fascination with a sociological examination of humor. Thus far, I have worked to provide a sociological examination of racial humor and its consequences in a post-civil rights and "free speech" society. In the chapters that follow, I employ ethnography, discourse analysis, archival research, and time series analysis to examine the cultural shifts in *how* racial comedy is performed in a post civil rights society, as well as *who* participates and is awarded. My research shows that humor and comedy are important and strategic sites to analyze how frank and explicit race-talk has been contested and regulated by organized publics and private entities, how racial/ethnic humor has changed over time, and how otherwise objectionable race-talk is currently deployed by humorists. I contend cultural industries like comedy are important, yet understudied, cultural-fields that bridge academic and public debates about the limits of offensive discourse in contemporary U.S. society and beyond.

In the first part of my dissertation, I make use of archival research to investigate the recent historical transformation of racial discourse in stand up comedy by examining the contestation of comedians during the civil rights period. In Chapter 1, I detail a case study of the rise and fall of comedian Bill Dana during the 1960s. Dana became a national celebrity for his Latino minstrel character "José Jiménez," a dim-witted and buffoonish Latino immigrant, at a time when blackface minstrelsy was contested as a legitimate form of entertainment. His rise to fame resulted in a television series, Grammy Award nominations, and a featured performance at the inaugural ball of President John F. Kennedy in 1961. By 1968, however, Dana faced protests from Chicano civil rights groups who viewed the character as a racist depiction of Latinos. The protests resulted in Dana publicly denouncing his character in 1970. I contend that this and similar incidents worked to demarcate the boundary of pre-civil rights and post-civil rights racial humor, where racial ridicule by whites came to be seen as unacceptable public discourse following this kind of contestation during and after the Civil Rights Movement.

In Chapter 2, I contrast the rise and demise of Dana and his Latino minstrel character with the success and popularity of 1960s insult comedian Don Rickles, to illustrate the emerging norms around public race-talk in comedy during and after the civil rights era. By departing from conventional pre-civil rights era racial humor (e.g., blackface, brownface) and employing a new set of techniques to distance himself from racism, Rickles largely escaped the public scrutiny and protest faced by Dana and other comedians and comedies during this period. That is, while Rickles' contemporaries typically ridiculed one racial/ethnic minority throughout their career in pre-civil rights racial comedy, Rickles *diversified* the targets of his ridicule during and after the civil rights era. Such a discursive shift in comedy did not occur in a political and cultural vacuum. Rather, I contend Rickles (among others) strategically re-articulated civil-rights

discourse of “racial equality” and “equal opportunity” by becoming “equal opportunity offenders,” the notion that all targets are fair targets, in order to deny racist intent by rhetorically positioning racial ridicule and insult as fair-play and “just a joke.” I contend this approach was an early contribution to “post-racial” discourse and ideology as well as an early alternative to “political correctness.” That is, this discursive strategy framed and targeted racism as a thing of the past in order to make use of offensive racial stereotypes deliberately and unapologetically.

Therefore, *how* something is uttered on a comedy stage is just as, if not more, important than *what*. Using participant observation, I set out to map the rules and rituals of public racial discourse in stand-up comedy to situate these *practices* within a larger and evolving socio-cultural and historical context. Chapter 3 is a participant observation study of a comedy school where I analyze the strategies comedians use to make offensive race-talk palatable today. In contrast to race scholars who contend that overt and explicit race-talk is generally avoided or minimized in public in the current period, I find that comedians learn and use strategies to rhetorically circumvent these norms of public race-talk to maximize overt and explicit racial discourse in comedy. My findings have important sociological implications for the study of how people talk and think about race relations and racial discourse, in an increasingly diverse society, where offensive race-talk in public is largely disavowed today. First, I contend racial comedy in a “post-racial” society can be cathartic, as comedians reveal in public what an audience only shares or thinks in private. Second, I contend racial comedy can reinforce ostensible post-racial ideology, namely the notion that race and racism have declined in significance, by trivializing racism and racial discrimination. Finally, I contend the perceived levity of racial humor works to isolate racism and racial discrimination to the realm of “the serious,” and denies the possibility that today racism and discrimination can be practiced as something fun or entertaining.

Finally, while comedians continue to be the most celebrated and influential producers of humor in contemporary American society (Boskin 1997; Gillota 2013; Mintz 1985), in Chapter 4 I analyze diversity in stand-up comedy over the last five decades by tracking the demographic trends of winners and nominees in the Grammy Award's "best comedy Album" prize from 1959-2015. This is the longest running and most consistent award given to comedians from the civil rights era to the present. Using five year moving averages, I measure the cultural impact of the civil rights movement on this award by analyzing the race and gender trends of exclusion and inclusion from the civil rights movement to the present. Therefore, the Grammy Award serves as a useful cultural indicator to measure the question of racial and gender inclusion and diversity in this culture industry. The core interest in this paper is an examination of the race/ethnicity trends and I include gender trends for comparative purposes. This study will be useful to further our understanding of the impact of the civil rights movement on the diversity within cultural industries since the civil rights era (English 2005), as well as highlight the ongoing trends toward racial exclusion and re-segregation in the entertainment industry today (Hunt and Ramon 2015).

Chapter 1

Brownface Minstrelsy: 'José Jiménez,' the Civil Rights Movement, and the Legacy of Racist Comedy

In this chapter, I examine US comedian Bill Dana, of Hungarian-Jewish descent, and his Latino minstrel character, 'José Jiménez', during the civil rights period. By situating Dana and Jiménez within the social and political context of Latinos in the US during the 1960s, I argue Dana's comedy continued the tradition of racial ridicule at a time when blackface minstrelsy was increasingly unpopular: a result of contestation by African American civil rights groups. Analyzing primary sources (oral histories, news articles, and audio/visual media), I examine the initial popularity of José Jiménez in the early 1960s, the mechanisms used to ridicule Latinos, the role of media in constructing narratives of non-racism and acceptance by Latinos, and the resulting contestation of the character by Chicano/Latino media activists and civil rights organizations. I conclude that public racial ridicule of Latinos has not been constrained as some have suggested, but that it has changed since the civil rights era.

Pat Harrington: Many people do not realize that every year courses are given to prospective Santa Clauses to teach them how to act and speak. What is your name sir and what course do you teach?

Bill Dana (Thick Latino immigrant accent): My nay… José Jiménez (audience laughs) I… I to tai to sany clau (audience laughs)… I teash to sany clau (audience laughs)… I to sany clause (audience laughs)… I teash sany clau to eh-speak! (full audience laughter)[i].

Bill Dana as José Jiménez, *The Steve Allen Show* 1959

Introduction

This scene launched comedian Bill Dana, born William Szathmary of Hungarian-Jewish descent, into the national spotlight and played a key role in advancing his career as one of the most prominent US comedians of the 1960s. From Grammy Award nominations and a television series, *The Bill Dana Show* (1963–1964), to performing at the John F Kennedy Inauguration Ball and an induction into the Astronauts Hall of Fame, Dana and his character 'José Jiménez' skyrocketed to fame and plummeted to obscurity like no other performer of his generation. By 1970 Dana declared José Jiménez 'dead' in front of thousands at the Los Angeles Sports Arena in California. A character like José Jiménez does not occur in a vacuum, but resonates with, or is shunned by, an audience as a result of social and historical forces.

José's inability to meet Anglo expectations was generally the source of his humor. According to Ramírez-Berg (2002), such shortcomings by non-Anglo and other marginalized characters is standard Hollywood narrative-form in which the stereotyped 'other' is juxtaposed against a WASP archetype or hero. Take the scene above. In the video José Jiménez appears as a small beardless man, with dark eyes, short dark hair, in an oversized Santa Claus outfit struggling to speak English. He is stuttering, starting and stopping, along with showing a range of facial expressions and eye work that conveys a sense that speaking English is difficult for José, a bumbling non-native and non-fluent speaker. This image clashes instantly with that of 'Old St. Nick,' a big, rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed white man, with white hair and a flowing white beard. To the tune of Bing Crosby's *White Christmas*, his big belly and jolliness convey a sense of abundance and happiness and is a symbolic archetype of Anglo American prosperity.

This stark incongruity, between an Anglo American ideal and the inability of José Jiménez to fulfill it, is one source of humor in this scene. Another is the exchange with

Harrington, a hyper-articulate, well dressed/groomed WASP-male interlocutor. A confident Harrington carries the monologue while quickly expressing a rehearsed nervousness and anxiety as José begins to speak, rapidly shifting gaze between Dana and audience. The audience is laughing and chuckling at José's gaffes throughout this exercise, with the biggest laugh following the surprise that José's job is to instruct other prospective Santas to speak and presumably interact with Anglo families.

In this paper I argue the comedic portrayals of José Jiménez by Dana continued the tradition of blackface minstrelsy in the US at a time when blackface minstrelsy was contested as a popular form of entertainment (Boskin 1986). It would not be until the late 1960s that pressure on Dana came from Chicano organizations to challenge media (mis)representation of Latinos. These efforts by Chicano media activists were part of the growing contestation by organized communities of color against the 'dominant grammar' (and humor) of racial domination of the pre-civil-rights era (Bonilla-Silva 2012).

Analyzing the intersections between the 'biography and history' (Mills 1959) of Dana, his character, and the civil rights movement offers significant insight into the social and political unraveling of an era of overt white supremacy and racism from a perspective that remains largely unexplored: racist Latino comedy. In assessing the rise and demise of José Jiménez from a 'racial formation perspective' (Omi and Winant 1994) and a 'white racial frame' (Feagin 2010), I examine Dana's minstrel comedy as one which contributed to the racialization of Latinos in a way that was similar to, and distinct from, blackface minstrelsy.

Comedy and racialization

A standard approach to study jokes begins with an overview of three theories of humor: superiority, incongruity, and relief. Traditionally viewed as mutually exclusive, the emerging trend suggests these theories work best together, as neither holds a comprehensive analysis of the function and rhetorical power of humor (Billig 2005; Weaver 2011a). A brief overview of these theories is useful to examine the relationship between comedy and racialization.

The *superiority* theory suggests laughter stems from a sense of superiority over an object of ridicule. To laugh in unison *at* an object is to perceive it as inferior. This theory is apparent in blackface minstrelsy where the point of such ridicule was to demarcate whites as superior and blacks as inferior. Next, the *incongruity* theory suggests humor results from perceiving unusual or incongruent elements and drawing a symbolic relation between them. A common technique present in blackface minstrelsy, also apparent in Dana's comedy, was to juxtapose the object of ridicule in an incongruent way, such as by projecting an adult male as child-like by dressing him in oversized clothing, or by pairing buffoonery against intelligence. Finally, the *relief* theory suggests humor helps relieve cognitive and/or social tensions around unacceptable or taboo discourse. That is, humor allows the expression of otherwise unacceptable ideas or behavior (e.g. racist jokes; sexist jokes) that may be readily censured in serious discourse. The denial of seriousness in offensive jokes is often accompanied by 'face-saving' shock absorbers like 'it was just a joke!' (Berger 1993; Billig 2005; Morreall 2009; Weaver 2011a). These theories have also been used to describe humor as a distinct form of rhetorical communication (Billig 2005; Meyer 2000; Weaver 2011a).

A second approach to comedy and racialization is to observe the rhetorical capacity of humor to create solidarity and division at micro and macro levels (Barron 1950; Ford and Ferguson 2004; Middleton and Moland 1959). Jokes help maintain in-group identity against a

stereotyped and immutable 'other' (Davies 1990) through the ways explained above. I borrow Ramirez-Berg's definition of 'stereotyping' as a rhetorical and discursive process which consists of 'making judgments and assigning negative qualities to other individuals or groups' (Ramirez-Berg 2002:14). By stereotyping the 'other,' comically and otherwise, the dominant in-group ascribes a set of rigid characteristics and behaviors that: 1) homogenizes and dehumanizes the "other" (THEY are lazy, stupid, dirty, immoral, etc.); and 2) reinforces an ethnocentric in-group identity (WE are industrious, intelligent, hygienic, moral, etc.). The repetition and circulation of the stereotype works to normalize it (Ramirez-Berg 2002: 14). Jokes facilitate this process as they are often viewed as 'non-serious' (Billig 2005).

This function of humor has received some attention in the arena of ethnic/racial 'relations' (Burma 1946; Picca and Feagin 2007; Weaver 2011a, 2011b). For instance, Park et al. (2006) suggest racial stereotypes in comedy are strengthened when they are unchallenged and adhere to conventional racial narratives. As Picca and Feagin observe, jokes about a '"cheapskate black American" or "very lazy Jew" […] do not make sense within the conventional racist framing' of blacks and Jews in American society. That is, such depictions deviate from the stereotype. Racist jokes resonate 'because there is a shared racist framing to support them' (Picca and Feagin 2007: 249). Mass media facilitates this process at the macro level (Park et al. 2006; Ramírez-Berg 2002). From this perspective, I view race comedy as a mechanism that links 'racial projects' (Omi and Winant 1994) at the micro and macro levels to preserve and propagate a 'white racial frame' (Feagin 2010).

A critical approach to stereotyping takes the position that racist stereotypes are not merely a cognitive function of categorizing individuals and groups, but that racial stereotyping is part of a socio-political process that has facilitated the exploitation and marginalization of 'non-

whites' (Ramirez-Berg 2002). However, racial stereotypes have not gone uncontested, as groups have mobilized to challenge ethnic/racial ridicule over the last century by staging protests, boycotts and other campaigns to challenge the ridicule of ethnic/racial minorities outside the Anglo-American ideal (Boskin 1986; Kibler 2009).

One of the enduring caveats to the 'serious' study of humor is the issue of *polysemicity*, as humor is prone to more than one meaning or interpretation (Weaver 2011a). A joke can provoke laughter, anger or any combination thereof. That is, Dana's humor can be seen as racist and/or 'just a joke.' It is possible to analyze Dana solely on comedic grounds, or to minimize Dana's character as a racist depiction. However, to deny José Jiménez as a contribution to the racialization of Latinos ignores the broader socio-political struggle over meaning and (mis)representation which helped render the character a national celebrity and a racist caricature. While one reading of José is possibly an underdog story, a 'little brown foreign guy' against all odds, a dominant reading suggests the story of José Jiménez is a continuation of the legacy of racist ridicule, the national sense of humor of the pre-civil-rights U.S.

The legacy of blackface minstrelsy

Before drawing links between Dana's comedy and blackface minstrelsy, it is important to highlight the significance of blackface minstrelsy as a mechanism of racialization that served to uplift and unite a fragmented white working class, while displacing the misery and horror of slavery and racial domination.

Blackface minstrelsy was the national sense of humor for over a century, from pre-Civil-War to the civil-rights era, and was the dominant form of entertainment in the U.S. (Boskin 1986; Lott 1993). It was commonly featured in presidential inaugurations and enjoyed by sitting

presidents, including John Tyler, Andrew Jackson, and Abraham Lincoln (Roediger 1991; Saxton 1998). Urban, northern, middle-class, white performers like Thomas D Rice and Dan Emmet popularized the genre by bringing 'authentic' plantation life to the stage in northern cities (Lhamon 2000; Roediger 1991; Saxton 1975). Buffoonish and inarticulate characters like Jim Crow, Tambo and Bones, and Sambo were projected as genuine portrayals of African Americans. The 'authenticity' of these portrayals was preserved by performers blackening up their faces, often with the ash from burnt corks or grease paint, while engaging in 'Negro dialect, song and dance.' Other characters included Zip Coon, the northern dandy prone to malapropisms and other speech problems which ridiculed northern blacks as unassimilable and unfit for freedom and city life (Roediger 1991; Sotiropoulos 2006).

Although blackface was a comprehensive form of entertainment that included music, song and dance, acrobatics, and other kinds of performance (Lhamon 2000; Sotiropoulos 2006), a central feature to blackface was the 'racist pleasure' and laughter it provoked from a predominantly white male audience (Lott 1993). Lott describes the 'triangulated' discourse of racist pleasure in early blackface as one 'in which blackface comic and white spectator shared jokes about an absent third party […] the joker personifying the person being joked about' (Lott 1993: 142). As Sotiropoulos (2006) explains:

> An interlocutor sat in the center and bantered with the endmen (Tambo and Bones). The endmen played the roles of comedic buffoons and mocked the interlocutor's pomposity in speech laden with malapropisms; in turn the interlocutor corrected the endmen's ignorance, thus allowing for multiple jokes to be made at the expense of African Americans. (21)

Another common technique was for performers to wear ill-fitting clothing for comedic effect. This strategy, suggests Lott (1993), worked to infantilize blacks and project them as child-like to the audience. 'This is the sense in which "the African, a 'child in intellect'"… might become an object of screaming fun and games' (143). The rhetorical impact of blackface was to reassure whites that blacks were inferior, ill-equipped for civilization, and content with slavery. As a discourse, blackface was a form of 'embodied racism.' As Weaver observes, embodied racism 'focuses on the corporeality of the "other", with the cognitive, behavioural, and cultural characteristics of the "other" being ascribed to this racial corporeality' (Weaver 2011a: 47).

As a 'white racial frame' (Feagin 2010), blackface was a lens that crystallized notions of a racial hierarchy and the politics of slavery during the expansion of American capitalism in the 19th and early 20th century (Saxton 1975). It played a key role in the formation of a 'white working class', before and after the Civil War era, by '[achieving] a common symbolic language – a unity – that could not be realized by racist crowds, by political parties or by labor unions' (Roediger 1991: 127). Blackface provided a 'psychological wage' for working-class whites; the notion that although they were also exploited by white capitalists, at least they were not 'niggers' (Lott 1993; Roediger 1991). While there is evidence of ironic and subversive meaning by blacks in blackface that was readily enjoyed by black audiences (Lhahmon 2000; Sampson 1980; Sotiropoulos 2006), to survive and succeed during this period, 'black artists had to participate in self-caricature' and 'perpetuate vile stereotypes' (Boskin and Dorinson 1985: 93).

This legacy of black racial ridicule persisted in American popular entertainment onto radio and television and played a crucial role in shaping racial ideologies in the US from the pre-Civil-War to the pre-civil-rights era and beyond (Lott 1993; Sotiropoulos 2006). However, by the late 1950s, blackface was increasingly challenged. Popular comedy shows, like *Amos 'n' Andy,* a

radio/television show in the blackface tradition, were contested as racist media representations by African American activists and civil rights groups (Boskin 1986).

José Jiménez and Latino minstrelsy

Campaigns against ethnic/racial ridicule were common during the first half of the 20th century. Kibler (2009) illustrates the organized efforts by Irish, Jewish and African American communities to 'censor' the ridicule of their respective communities. However, at a time when Irish and Jewish Americans were 'becoming white' (Brodkin 1998; Ignatiev 2008) and blackface minstrelsy was increasingly unpopular (Boskin 1986), the ridicule of Latinos via José Jiménez was becoming a national sensation. In contrast to 'embodied racism' in blackface, the ridicule of Latinos can be viewed as a form of 'culturally racist humour' which 'draws on themes of nationalism, boundary crossing… [and] focuses on the "other" as an immigrant' (Weaver 2011a: 54).

Latinos, Mexicans in particular, have been part of the Anglo public imagination since the late 1800s. Gonzalez (2004), for instance, maps the discourse of 'the Mexican Problem' by Anglo American writers who depicted Mexico as possessing a great source of natural wealth under the custody of a 'dysfunctional' and 'backwards' culture (Gonzalez 2004: 93). In *The Mexican as He is,* Beals (1921) described Mexicans as follows:

> José has inherited most of the evil traits of two races, and a few of the better traits except in latent form […] At present he is a child in thought and action, a savage in civilization. (544)

This theme of 'child-like' and 'unfit for civilization' parallels the depiction of African Americans among Anglo writers and blackface minstrel shows. Similar to African Americans,

popular entertainment was a vehicle to distribute these notions of Latinos to an amalgamating white public.

According to Ramírez-Berg (2002), US cinema has relied on six recurring Latino stereotypes: *el bandido*, the harlot, the male buffoon, the female clown, the Latin lover, and the dark lady (Ramírez-Berg 2002: 66. [emphasis in original]). Ramírez-Berg notes that anti-Latino stereotypes like the bandit and the inarticulate buffoon have been in circulation since the early 20th century in films like Broncho Billy and the Greaser (1914). These stereotypes of Latinos and other non-whites, he contends, were intended to uphold the dominant Hollywood narrative-form, or the 'white racial frame' (Feagin 2010), in which the 'WASP male hero' must protect the Anglo status quo from danger. This includes the inherent threat posed by people of color who deviate physically and culturally from 'the established WASP norm' (Ramírez-Berg 2002: 67). Dehumanizing stereotypes in US film and mass media, comic and otherwise, contribute to the ideological discourse of 'otherness,' which supports the exploitation and mistreatment of non-whites (Ramírez-Berg 2002: 4).

For example, by the time José Jiménez became a national celebrity, the solicitation and deportation of Mexican laborers was a recurring cycle during the first half of the 20th century. The dictatorship of seven-term President Porfirio Díaz until 1911 encouraged the influx of US capital and the privatization of Mexican land and resources, which displaced much of the Mexican peasantry. This facilitated the migration of Mexican laborers to US farms, as growers relied on cheap and disposable labor, and resulted in 'revolving' immigration flows (Gonzalez 2005). The US government, along with American growers, devised two complementary solutions to this 'immigration problem.'

One was the *Bracero Program*, a guest worker program initiated in 1942 that imported Mexican laborers on temporary visas to fill 'labor shortages' on US farms during the war effort. It was believed the program would help control 'illegal immigration' by providing legal means to employment, while securing the labor needs of an expanding agricultural sector (Calavita 1992; Craig 1971). In reality, *braceros* were treated like cattle and the *Bracero Program* intensified the exploitation and mistreatment of Mexican workers. Long working hours with little-to-no-pay was common, miserable living conditions, and the 'disposability' of workers, particularly those demanding justice, were widespread (Gonzalez 2005). The plight of *braceros* prompted US Department of Labor official Lee G. Williams to declare the program a form of 'legalized slavery' (Camacho 2008: 110). The program, which officially ended in 1964, two decades after WWII, failed to curb undocumented migration. By the early 1950s mass deportation was seen as the second solution. Deportation spectacles like 'Operation Wetback'[ii] in 1954, which brutally deported over a million persons back to Mexico (Astor 2009), were public displays of reactionary nationalism that served to affirm the boundaries between 'Anglo Americans' and 'wetbacks.'

This context gave rise to the phenomenon of José Jiménez. Surprisingly, little is written on Dana or his character. Available scholarship provides a quick reference to the character as a racist depiction, but generally does not rely on primary sources or provide much analysis. The importance of examining the comedian, the character, and interpreting the content for the reader is to help her imagine the context and situate the content in a socio-political and historical period. During the early 1960s, television was also a recent phenomenon. People only had three or four television channels to choose from. Therefore, a character like José Jiménez had the potential to become an instant national sensation. By the early 1960s, when Latinos comprised less than 4

per cent of the total US population (Rumbaut 2006), comedic depictions of Latinos, like Frito Lay's 'Frito Bandito', a corn-chip-stealing mustachioed caricature, and José Jiménez were widely circulated and contributed to stereotypes of Latinos as criminal, unintelligent, un-assimilable, and not-American (Bender 2003). However, while opposition to Frito Bandito has received wider scholarly attention (Westerman 1989; Noriega 2000) the José Jiménez story has not shared the same critical analysis and is all but forgotten.

Data and methods

Primary sources pertaining to Dana and his character José Jiménez include oral histories, interviews, images, audio/video, and newspaper coverage. Many of these materials were accessed from the American Comedy Archives at Emerson College, August 2012, with support from the University of California Center for New Racial Studies. An alumnus of Emerson, Dana founded the archive in 2005 (www.emerson.edu) with a focus on conducting and housing an oral history collection of prominent American comedians (Keepnews 2006). The archive also contains a large collection of albums, literature, and various miscellaneous materials pertaining to American comedy, making it a unique collection in this respect.

Among the various materials I retrieved from this site, this study relies primarily on two collections: 1) *The Oral History Collection*, which consists of audio/visual interviews conducted by Dana and archivist/historian Jenni Matz between February 2005 and May 2007. Interviewees include comedians, directors, writers, producers, agents, and other 'experts' on comedy. Having read a number of these oral histories, I focused on, and coded, Dana's interviews for this project. Initially unaware of the contestation of Dana's character, these interviews allowed me to gain access to Dana's memory and the negotiation and (re)articulation of his character in order to

reconstruct and interpret the findings below. 2) *The Bill Dana Collection*, consisting of scripts, letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, and an LP collection of much of his recorded work, was also essential in developing this project. Other sources, including news articles, images, and audio/video were found online and accessed on Google's newspaper archive, youtube.com, and bill-dana.com.

These sources were analyzed using an *interpretive research design* (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) to develop a close 'intertextual analysis'[iii] of Dana's interviews, performances, news coverage and other media concerning the increasing popularity and opposition of his character from 1960–1970. This involved accessing and evaluating the variety of primary sources mentioned above. I relied on an *abductive* form of inquiry (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 27–34) as I learned about this case. That is, I developed my interpretation from a continual back and forth between the literature, empirical data, and my analysis *while* 'making sense' of my data. As Schwartz-Shea and Yanow contend, '[in] this dance of inquiry, data generation and analysis are ongoing and intertwined' (56). This method allowed for greater flexibility and trustworthiness both in the field and in the writing process.

An analysis of newspaper accounts (Richardson 2007) was used to examine the rhetorical media-discourse surrounding the rise and fall of Dana's character. As Richardson observes, '[r]hetoric is political language designed and therefore with the capacity to shape public belief and the decisions and behaviour of an audience' (2007: 186). In what follows, I also analyze the way news and entertainment media framed the acceptability of Dana's character. An interpretive approach, therefore, allowed me to evaluate my data to 'make sense' of the success and contestation of José Jiménez during an era of mass mobilization for racial equality.

Figure 1.1 Bill Dana as "José Jiménez." Courtesy of the American Comedy Archives (www.emerson.edu).

A rising star

José Jiménez placed comedian Bill Dana in the national spotlight as one of the most visible and influential performers of the 1960s, receiving numerous honors and awards for his character. Dana attributes the early success of José Jiménez to his broad appeal as an underdog story. In an interview with Dana in *The Milwaukee Journal,* Mosby (1963) notes that:

> José Jiménez started off as a gag character when Dana was a writer on the Steve Allen show […] Over the years José has grown in Dana's mind into a full personality: everybody's fall guy laboring under the handicaps of poor education and a limited command of the English Language.

This was a common narrative in media depictions of Dana and José in the early 1960s and falls within the melting-pot narratives and the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches stories of the early 20th century. According to Dana:

> José has a universal appeal […] he's not out to hurt anybody- he just does the best he can with what he has. (Mosby 1963)

Yet, it is largely what José *lacked* (e.g. a strong command of English, intelligence, common sense, etc.) that made José entertaining and an instant celebrity.

Figure 1.2 Bill Dana performed as "José Jiménez the astronaut" at John F. Kennedy's Inauguration Ball on January 20, 1961. Courtesy of the American Comedy Archives.

Finding the funny

The parallels between Dana's portrayal of Latinos and blackface minstrelsy illustrate a consistent overlap in the techniques used to ridicule non-whites. I have already alluded to the ways in which African Americans and Latinos were depicted as child-like and how this notion was enacted onstage by dressing the targets of ridicule in ill-fitting clothing (see Figure 3). Other

techniques include the use of malapropisms, mispronunciation and confusion for comedic effect. For instance, a running gag for José Jiménez was to invert the 'H' and 'J' sound, a common outcome among Spanish language natives, children in particular, who apply the Spanish phonological and orthographic system to English words (Fashola et al. 1996: 827). Take the following example from the *Steve Allen Show* in 1959:

> **Pat Harrington:** This is Dave Hinckley, back with José Jiménez. (Slight audience laughter)
>
> **Bill Dana:** Ju are back wit me (audience laughs)
>
> **Pat Harrington:** Yes sir, I don't want to seem impertinent, uh, but just exactly what do you teach, Santa Claus, to say?
>
> **Bill Dana:** Well, furst I teach, Sanuh Claus, to laugh.
>
> **Pat Harrington:** You teach him to laugh?
>
> **Bill Dana:** Yes, I teach jeem to say (removes board to reveal "JO JO JO" written on blackboard) JO, JO, JO. (Full audience laughter)
>
> **Pat Harrington:** (Looks around in consternation, covers the words again)

Dana recalls this experience:

> [W]e moved out to Los Angeles, in Burbank, in November of 1959 […] getting ready for the holidays […] we thought, well wait a minute, if we had a school for Santa Claus and the instructor were Latino […] so we went on, Pat Harrington as the straight man […] I had no beard or anything, just had a little Santa Claus outfit with a little hat […] And there was a big laugh. And I remember thinking, whoa, wait a minute […] And that was the whole start. That was the total essence of the creation of José Jiménez. (Dana and Matz 2005a: 26)

This strategy of pairing a buffoon with a confident and articulate interlocutor was also a common feature of blackface minstrelsy (Lott 1993; Sotiropoulos 2006). Incongruously situating José Jiménez in situations requiring greater levels of competency was the driving force of much of Dana's comedy during the early 1960s. The absurdity and hilarity of an incompetent working-class Latino immigrant flying a space shuttle, navigating a submarine, or directing complex bureaucratic organizations, like the military or the CIA, are important to the *fictional* realities in the comedy. While one reading of Dana's comedy suggests that the targets of these jokes are the institutions, roles, or professions, or that the humor results from the incongruity of the character in these situations, an alternate reading suggests José's foibles parody and mock the hardship faced by 'real life' working-class Latino immigrants during this period (documented and undocumented). These *factual* realities lie not in the realm of comedy, but of tragedy. The pain and suffering of disposable immigrants is hidden by the amusing blunderings of José Jiménez, and is reminiscent of the comical distortion of the misery faced by African Americans.

A key difference between Dana's portrayal of Latinos and blackface is that no cosmetic blackening or browning was used by Dana to ridicule Latinos. Dana's ethnic ambiguity likely facilitated his portrayal of Latinos as he relied centrally on linguistic techniques in his performance. As a form of 'culturally racist humor' (Weaver 2011a) Dana's comedy targeted cultural markers like language and nationality. In contrast, Weaver notes 'embodied racist humour' often relies on biological and physical markers and generally targets those of African descent. While both embodied and culturally racist discourse work to rank whites vs. non-whites, the emerging civil rights struggles rendered embodied racist discourse unacceptable in public by the early 1960s (Bonilla-Silva 2010). In the US, the discourse of cultural racism, largely invested

in issues of nationalism and illegal-immigration, was taking center stage at this time and José Jiménez was a prime attraction.

Figure 1.3 Bill Dana as "José Jiménez" on the *Steve Allen Show* in 1959. Courtesy of the American Comedy Archives.

Fame and (mis)fortune

Roediger (1991) and Rogin (1998) note many blackface performers during the early 20th century were white immigrants. The Irish and Jewish[iv] in particular, they contend, used blackface and the deprecation of black Americans as currency for assimilating ethnically in the US. By distancing themselves racially from blacks, white ethnics worked to gain entrance into Anglo American

society (Roediger 1991). Similarly, by performing an incompetent, working-class, Latino immigrant for a largely Anglo American audience, Dana, a second generation Jewish-Hungarian, was becoming a national celebrity in 'brownface'. After introducing José Jiménez to a national audience, Dana recalled the quick impact:

> People calling in, '[w]ho was that guy?'[…] they all thought this José Jiménez was Amos, it was the real thing. (Dana and Matz 2005a: 26)

Dana uncritically acknowledged the parallels between his minstrel José Jiménez with Amos of the *Amos 'n' Andy Show* (1928–1960), whose fate his own *Bill Dana Show* (1963–1965) and José Jiménez would soon share. José Jiménez quickly enlarged Dana's celebrity as he recorded various albums, performed for President Kennedy, and landed his own television show several years after the cancelation of *Amos 'n' Andy*.

> I got a call from Sheldon Leonard [Television Producer]. He said, 'Bill, I've got some very good news. NBC has picked up the *Bill Dana Show.* 26 firm. No pilot'. (Dana and Matz 2005a: 37)

Dana suggests much faith was placed on his abilities and his character by moving forward without a pilot for the show. As a successful television producer, Sheldon Leonard was certain audiences would tune in to laugh at the *brownface* minstrel. The greater risk was Dana's decision to move forward with the show:

> [W]hat I earn now in personal appearances and guest spots […] is much more than I'll make from the series next year. But this is a gamble. If the series is a hit I could easily be a millionaire. And I admit I like money: I'd like to be financially independent. (Kleiner 1963)

Dana foresaw becoming wealthy from his minstrel character. Indeed, many minstrel performers increased their fortunes by doing blackface. As Roediger points out:

> The substantial salaries of minstrel entertainers engaged popular attention […] to do blackface for a time as prelude to fame and fortune elsewhere. In a real sense, then, rubbing on blacking *was* an accumulating capitalist behavior. (Roediger 1991: 119 [emphasis in original])

This point underscores the profitability of racist ridicule and the public thirst for racialized imagery. Dana and the executives at NBC were anticipating great returns on their investment and worked to ensure the audience would play along.

Manufacturing consent?

One of the obvious questions to be raised about José Jiménez is what Latinos thought about the growing popularity of the character at the time. As Dana suggested:

> I have my biggest audience response and following from Latin [sic] speaking people […] I don't think there is anything about José that offends Latins [sic] or anyone else. (Associated Press 1961)

While I was unable to retrieve viewing figures to support this notion, a polysemic understanding of Dana's comedy does not preclude the potential for José Jiménez to act as a form of racist humor and have fans in the Latin American community. Again, it is important to keep in mind that 'Latins' comprised less than 4% of the total US population in 1960 (Rumbaut 2006). Dana's predominant audience, therefore, were Anglo Americans. Perhaps anticipating criticism for the *Bill Dana Show,* during the spring of 1963 Dana initiated pre-emptive measures to steer perceptions about his new show set to appear later that fall:

> José's appeal is such that not even Latin Americans object to the caricature. In fact some have written thanking Dana for presenting José as an ordinary human being, struggling to get along in a bewildering world. They're tired of seeing Latins [sic] typed as shiftless and lazy or as sinister bums. (Mosby 1963)

Another interview suggests:

> Dana foresees no difficulty pushing dialect comedy […] 'Latin Americans are my biggest fans' […] because José is not presented as a stereotype […] but a real live person. (Salerno 1963)

In multiple interviews Dana illustrates this sensitivity to potential criticism for his character. This recurring strategy of emphasizing his 'Latino friends' can be seen as a way to deny racism in his comedy (Bonilla-Silva 2010).

> He's proud that Latin Americans enjoy José and realize that Dana isn't ridiculing anybody in his characterization. 'José' says Dana 'is very popular in Mexico'. (Kleiner 1963)

And:

> As such, he already has considerable appeal, and Dana claims that José has become something of a hero to many Puerto Ricans and other Americans with Latin Backgrounds. (Turner 1963)

Such instances reflect the early use of rhetorical performance techniques to avoid accusations of racism. It is also important to highlight the (un)critical role media played in co-constructing this narrative of 'Latino friends,' using the rhetorical strategy of *prolepsis.* According to Richardson, citing Jasinski (2001: 554) this strategy 'involves responding to the anticipated objections of one's opponents' (Richardson 2007: 189). Therefore, this manufactured framing of José Jiménez

as 'acceptable to Latinos' can be viewed as an effort to legitimize his portrayal of Latinos to quell opposition to the character, appease the critics, and make the character acceptable to a predominantly white audience during a period of increasing racial contestation.

Narrative responsibility and denial of racism

When describing his role as an artist, Dana suggested that he developed a sense of narrative responsibility in his portrayal of Latinos and that he wanted to 'get as close to the real thing' as possible. Take the following story:

> We went down there to have a vacation […] in Puerto Rico, and I met a guy […] at the Club Nautico, at the yacht club […] I say, 'Well, what do you do?' He says, [José Jiménez accent] 'I am the Dutch [Dodge] representative.' I said, 'How nice, you with the Netherlands government?' [José Jiménez accent] 'No, no, I am the Dutch [Dodge] representative.' 'Holland, tulip?' No, I'm the DUTCH [Dodge] representative. DUTCH [Dodge], Plymouth, Chrysler' (Interviewer laughs) […] This was 1947, and I used to tell this story […] and others I had picked up in the dialect. (Dana and Matz 2005a: 28)

Van Dijk (1993a) suggests the stories whites tell about non-whites often have a 'persuasive' or 'argumentative' function as they are used as 'evidence' to support generalizable conclusions about non-whites (126). Dana retold this story in various interviews in the early 1960s to illustrate that his inspiration for José was drawn from interaction with real life Latinos who 'sound that way' [v]. To minimize an offensive reading of his character, Dana repeatedly suggested that his intention was not to ridicule Latinos:

> I decided that when I would use a dialect, that it wouldn't be a caricature, not an unkind stereotype. (Dana and Matz 2005a: 29)

Dana shared similar stories and examples to deny racism (Van Dijk 1992) and racist intent in his development and portrayal of José Jiménez. He expressed much frustration for being interpreted that way:

> [T]he thing that used to really bug me, a lot of times, people would refer to José as a stereotype. Well the fact of the matter is, number one, there was a lot of José's, the various changes and iterations of the character. But if you got in a cab in New York City and somebody said, [José Jiménez accent] 'OK, where do you want to go?' You know what I'm saying, 'oh, this guy is doing this impression' – you just think this is the guy, so everybody thought he was the real thing, and I delighted in that. (Dana and Matz 2005a: 29)

As a 'method actor' Dana contends José was not a stereotype and that his performances were intended to give an accurate and believable representation of Latinos to the audience. His frustration stemmed from his belief that his brand of comedy was far removed from 'real racism':

> I knew what I thought was funny […] I knew to have respect for other people's – other cultural groups early on, and I don't know any successful comedian who's fuel was hate […] there are a lot of people that can be unkind, but hate and comedy, they – they're not compatible. (Dana and Matz 2005b: 14)

In contrast to Dana's notion that hate and humor are 'not compatible,' Billig (2001) and Weaver (2011a, 2011b) highlight the widespread use of violent racist humor on racist-joke sites, many affiliated with white supremacist organizations. While Dana's comedy might appear benign alongside the kind of brutal racist jokes found on such websites, a closer reading reveals the racist discourse his character inherited.

Dehumanization

To reiterate, the main source of humor from Dana's character relied upon a juxtaposition between a buffoonish Latino immigrant against Anglo American cultural norms and WASP archetypes, a common technique in blackface. The absence of organized opposition to Dana's racial ridicule among Latinos until the late 1960s allowed the comedic dehumanization of Latinos to continue on a national platform.

In describing his character, Dana contradicts his notions about portraying José as a 'sympathetic human being' or 'flesh and blood' character. Take the following:

> José was a vaudeville character. He could be uh, uh, an astronaut or he could be a submarine commander. He could be a farmer or a senator, whatever […] he was a puppet. (Dana and Matz 2005a: 37)

However, to fault Dana for the resonance of his character with a largely Anglo American audience is to miss the point, as many elites[vi] (e.g. television produces, advertisers) were eager to profit from Dana's early success and played key roles in steering his development and national visibility:

> Lou Edelman convinced Danny Thomas and Sheldon Leonard and I, I agreed with him, that José could be a flesh and blood character. So we tested it, that he would be the elevator man. They even said boy, the elevator boy […] That's the José that I want everybody to remember, because that was the flesh and blood character. (Dana and Matz 2005a: 37)

At first glance, this discussion of presenting José Jiménez as a 'flesh and blood character' appears to contradict the claim above that the character was dehumanizing. However, a closer look illustrates how the theme of the 'man-child' emerges by presenting José not as an 'elevator

man' but an 'elevator boy.' Such notions closely resemble Anglo descriptions of Mexicans by scholars and writers decades earlier. As historian Hubert Howe Bancroft (1888) suggests:

> The Mexican – the mestizo now being dominant and representative – has remained in a state of adolescence, as indicated by his capricious, thoughtless, and even puerile traits. (Gonzalez 2004: 86)

Dana and his sponsors, therefore, appear to share the 'ethnic notions' (Riggs 1987) of their intellectual forbearers via the dehumanizing portrayal of Latinos as José Jiménez. That is, to comically position this *fictive* Latino immigrant in positions that they believed no *real* Latino immigrant could fulfill. While the development of *The Bill Dana Show* appeared to bring José Jiménez 'back down to earth,' as an 'elevator boy' instead of an astronaut, it is the comic relief provided by José as a 'man-child' and 'the help' that further centers the character as one of ridicule rather than as an 'underdog story.'

Crash landing

Pulling the plug

The *Bill Dana Show* was not the hit Dana and company expected it to be. The show aired in the fall of 1963 and, by November 1964, Dana received notice from Mort Werner, producer and head of programming at NBC, that the show would be canceled. Advertisers and producers, such as Proctor & Gamble, would follow suit. The show lasted a season and a half. It is unclear what led to the demise of Dana's show. Poor ratings were suggested as the primary culprit. Competing with the television series *Lassie* for viewers was another.

However, the socio-political context certainly played a role. For instance, by 1964 numerous protests, marches and uprisings calling for racial equality took place throughout the

country. In July of 1964, a few months before Dana received final notice, the Civil Rights Act was signed banning discrimination, including of 'race and national origin,' in the workplace and public settings. Dana briefly alluded to the growing social unrest as a possible factor in his show's failure. After suggesting various other theories Dana notes:

> The mail helped […] Some of it was almost homicidal – Who do we kill, should we march on Washington or NBC? (Associated Press 1965)

Such mail, which was not saved in Dana's archive, suggests that by 1964 there was an emerging contestation of José Jiménez. After his primetime stint, Dana continued with guest appearances and advertising roles to maintain his income over the next several years.

By the mid-1960s, José's comedic celebrity was increasingly used in advertisements. It was his controversial billboards for the *Yellow Pages* that sparked Dana's downfall. As Dana recalls:

> [T]here were these big signs, J-E-L-L-O-W, all over the place. And I got a call from these friends of mine in the movement, you know, in La Causa, Viva La Causa […] they said, 'Hey, what are going to do, we got a public utility, we got to hit him.' I said, 'Take your best shot'. (Dana and Matz 2005a: 30)

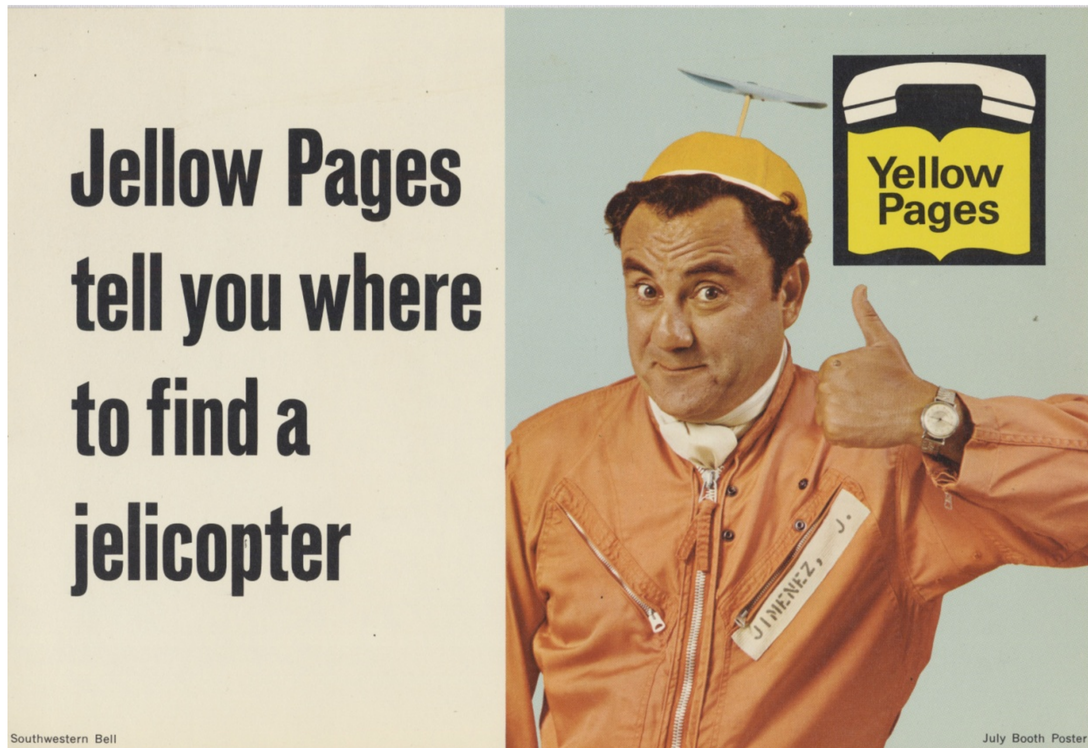


Figure 1.4 José Jiménez billboards for the Yellow Pages. Courtesy of the American Comedy Archives.

It was Dana's original routine, the inversion of 'H' and 'J' sounds, which Dana employed in the *Yellow Pages* ads that became the symbolic target by Chicano civil rights organizations:

> Mexican-Americans say it's about time the United States found out they work hard, pay their bills and pronounce their 'j's'. (Associated Press 1968)

By 1968, various Chicano civil rights groups were rallying against José Jiménez. Two of the most vocal were the Mexican American Anti-Defamation Committee (MAADC) and the Involvement of Mexican Americans in Gainful Endeavors (IMAGE). As Nick Reyes of MAADC observed:

> Twenty years ago you had quite a lot of advertising using Negros in a demeaning fashion […] Now it seems the Mexican-American is the new person for advertising. (Associated Press 1968)

In early September 1968, members of IMAGE and MAADC issued a news conference in San Antonio, Texas where they declared their plan of action to oppose Dana and other anti-Latino media images:

> [We] will ask for air time to counter what [we] consider insulting Mexican-American characterizations and will boycott firms who persist in using the characterizations. (The Associated Press 1968)

'El movimiento' was under way and Dana was a prime target.

Suicide or casualty?

Once again, Dana took to the press to garner support for his character to challenge opposition. For instance, in an interview with journalist Vernon Scott (1968), Dana stated his position to the public:

> It's taken nine years for anything negative to come out from Latin American sources […] Until now I've had nothing but favorable comment. People would write, 'Thank God you aren't playing a Puerto Rican with a switchblade' or 'We're grateful you're not playing a Mexican sleeping under the sun.'

This form of rhetorical distancing (Bonilla-Silva 2010) can be viewed as an effort to minimize the mounting accusations of racism. By August 1968 Dana announced his new organization,

Latin Americans in United Direction (LAUD). Along with host Marin Castillo, Dana planned to produce an entertainment show based on Mexican-Americans:

> It's not just for the Latin [sic] community. We want [A]nglos to get involved in Mexican-American problems. People don't realize that Mexican-Americans comprise about 11 per cent of the Los Angeles population – which makes it a larger minority than the Negroes […] We hope to syndicate the show in New York, San Antonio and Miami where there are other large Latin American groups. (Scott 1968)

Still, Chicano civil rights groups increased their pressure on Dana and countered with outreach. As Dana recalls:

> I was invited […] but I knew it was a challenge. Nobody's going to tell me, 'Hey, you can't do something.' But at one point I said, 'Hey, who needs it? I've got plenty of avenues and if one person's getting hurt by this, then it's not worth it'. (Dana and Matz 2005a: 32)

Opposition continued and by 1970 Dana declared José Jiménez 'dead' [vii] in front of thousands of people in the Los Angeles Sports Arena during a night of 'Latin American unity':

> [W]hat went on in the 60s, because of the uh, the desire for the Latinos to get some kind of a representation in the media and in, in society in general […] José got caught in a firestorm […] there was a huge event […] in Los Angeles. And I declared José Jiménez was dead. (Dana and Matz 2005a: 29)

It appears the escalating pressure and criticism by activists and organizations like IMAGE, MAADC, and the Congress for Mexican American Unity, among others, led to Dana's demise. Initial strategies included reaching out to Dana, his advertisers and the networks. When such

efforts proved insufficient, people like Tony Calderon of IMAGE and Nick Reyes of MAADC organized grass roots campaigns, issued press releases, and organized boycotts to draw attention to their increased opposition to José Jiménez and other insulting portrayals of Latinos.

Newspapers framed the incident as Dana 'succumbing' to pressure from 'hyper-sensitive', 'crazy', and/or 'humorless' Mexican-Americans. In an effort to save face Dana suggested the character was buried of his own accord, not from outside pressure:

> José Jiménez committed suicide […] he wasn't murdered as some people think […] I made a unilateral decision to kill José. (Scott 1970)

Dana continued to deny racist intent, but strained to distance José Jiménez from other racist images like Frito Bandito:

> It's an extremely gray area […] But there were two reasons why I retired the character. I was searching for my own identity and I was sick of explaining the difference between José and Frito Bandito. (*Times-Union* 1973)

Dana also suggested that audience perception contributed to his decision to abandon his character:

> Too many people were telling me they loved that dumb Mexican I was doing. Actually, I picked up the dialect in Puerto Rico and I never played him dumb. (Scott 1970)

Such reactions by Dana's audience members illustrate the powerful rhetorical potential that racist humor has in strengthening racism generally (Weaver 2011a).

Finally, Dana's competing positions illustrate Billig's (1990) idea about the 'dilemmatic' aspects of ideology. Billig suggests ideology is not comprised of simple 'internally consistent belief-systems.' Rather, 'as lived practices and common sense beliefs' (18), ideologies contain

contradictory positions and themes that pull individuals in simultaneously opposing directions, such as 'tolerance and prejudice.' In this way Dana attempted to reconcile his contradictory effort to identify with a growing movement for racial justice, while attempting to preserve his career as a *brownface* minstrel. Ultimately abandoning the character, Dana's ideological 'dilemma' continued as he acknowledged his decision was a 'big mistake' that brought him financial ruin and caused him much psychological distress (Dana and Matz 2005a: 31). However, given the historic context it is difficult to imagine Dana could have continued as José Jiménez.

Mocking Latinos today

The death of José Jiménez symbolized the end of a particular form of racist ridicule. That is, of a uni-directional form of ridicule in which a white performer sustained a career by targeting a particular minority group. The result of pressure on Dana and similar racist portrayals meant that racial ridicule by whites, which was the cultural norm during the pre-civil-rights era, was believed in 'poor taste' afterwards (Berger 1993; Boskin 1996). However, I would like to offer two brief observations of how Latino stereotypes in comedy continue to be circulated in the public domain from the post-civil-rights era to the present.

Latinos in brownface

While whites were largely prevented from ridiculing ethnic/racial minorities following the civil rights movement (Berger 1993; Boskin 1997), this gap was filled by non-whites mocking themselves (Apte 1987). Similar to the emergence and popularity of blacks in blackface in the

post-Civil-War period (Sortiropulos 2006), Bender (2003) notes how many Latino-controlled productions in the post-civil-rights period contained negative stereotypes. For instance, Bender argues comedian Cheech Marin of *Cheech and Chong* represented a 'drug-stupefied' image of Latinos, despite Marin himself being a 'straight-A student in high school' (172). Latino comics like Paul Rodriguez and George Lopez, he contends, also rely on narratives of 'crime' and 'foreignness' in their imagery of Latinos. That is, it's important to keep in mind how negative characteristics get racialized. As Boskin and Dorinson (1985) suggest, it was by reproducing white constructions of blackness in their performances that blacks were able to be 'successful' performers. A similar claim might be raised of Latino comedians.

Alternatively, Avila-Saavedra (2011) contends the use of stereotypes by Latino comics is a form of 'amelioration,' a semantic shift in which 'a traditionally pejorative or insulting term acquires a neutral or more positive connotation' (280). For instance, when comedian Carlos Mencia uses terms like 'beaner' and 'wetback' in his jokes, or a Jiménez-style accent, Avila-Saavedra suggests that Mencia is using such jokes in an 'ironic way' to illustrate his shared experiences with other Latinos. This allows Latinos to laugh *at* the stereotypes and neutralize them, and provides a 'safe space' for whites to enjoy Latino stereotypes in public. By bringing Latino comedy into the mainstream, Avila-Saavedra suggests it effectively expedites the assimilation process by 'depoliticizing' the racial insult (282). The immunizing effect of such discourse on Latinos is apparent by the absence of visible organized protest. As Dana notes:

> If I were Mexican, instead of Hungarian, José might still be alive. (Scott 1970)

However, Weaver (2011a) contends that a fixed meaning in this kind of 'reverse discourse' comedy is not possible as the polysemicity of humor allows for an anti-racist meaning to co-exist alongside a racist one. In describing this inherent paradox of the 'humor as resistance' strategy, Weaver notes that 'while we may see the presentation of the reverse voice of the "other" as the preferred meaning, there is a prior reliance on the sign system of earlier racism. These earlier meanings have the potential to re-emerge, gain purchase, and act rhetorically' (120). In contrast to Avila-Saavedra's assertion that the use of stereotypes among Latino comics works to 'depoliticize' ethnic/racial insult, the polysemia present in this kind of humor works to *doubly-politicize* Latino stereotypes, simultaneously working to undermine and reinforce them. And if Latino and non-Latino audiences increasingly find this kind of humor tolerable in the post-Jiménez era, at what point do they tolerate the re-emergence of Latino-ridicule by whites?

The equal opportunity offender

While the pre-civil-rights strategy for racial ridicule was generally *uni-direction*al, a white performer targeting a particular 'other,' the 'equal opportunity offender' (EOO) strategy (Pérez 2013) illustrates how white (and non-white) comedians continue to mock non-whites in the post-civil rights and 'color-blind' period, where such discourse is believed to be increasingly constrained and disavowed (Apte 1987; Bonilla-Silva 2010). The EOO strategy relies on a *multi-directional* approach that involves diversifying the targets of ridicule, including self-ridicule, by a particular performer. For instance, one of Dana's contemporaries, comedian Don Rickles, employed this strategy effectively as a way to circumvent opposition. In his Grammy-nominated album *Hello Dummy!* (1968), the same year Dana was targeted for his *Yellow Pages* billboards,

Rickles can be heard performing a wide range of ethnic and racial stereotypes, dialects and insults. There were no protests or boycotts of Rickles during this period[viii].

Today, white comedians are increasingly relying on this strategy as a way to ridicule non-whites. Comedians Jeff Dunham and Nick Kroll, for instance, have re-emerged minstrel depictions of Latinos with characters like José Jalapeño and El Chupacabra. Dunham's rendition of José Jiménez as a jalapeño-pepper-shaped puppet inherits some of the linguistic strategies used by Dana, such as the inversion of the 'H' and 'J' sounds, and furthers the dehumanization of Latinos by literally turning José into a racialized puppet. Kroll maintains the buffoonish depiction of Latinos, this time as an absurd, overly enthusiastic and heavily accented Latino DJ. These comedians, among others, do not solely target Latinos and are conscious of employing the EOO strategy as a way to circumvent opposition and deny racism. Take the following interview with comedian Nick Kroll:

> **Spiznagel:** For a white guy, you play a lot of non-white characters on *Kroll Show*. Guys like El Chupacabra, Fabrice Fabrice, the Mexican boxing trainer, the guy with the dreadlocks. None of it's done in blackface, but it walks a fine line. Do you ever worry about how your ethnic characters could be misconstrued as borderline racist?
>
> **Kroll:** Not really, no [… my] thinking is, if we're setting out to make comedy in which nothing is off limits, then everybody is fair game. So it's across the board. We're not picking on anyone or any race in particular. (Spitznagel 2013)

This brand of 'postmodern minstrelsy,' suggests Weaver (2011a), 'is slippery and harder to pin down' as racist discourse, 'but paradoxically easier to debate' as audiences and critics alike attempt to decipher the performer's intentions (150). A critical evaluation of comedy, he

contends, should go beyond trying to uncover the intentions of the author and look for the '*mechanisms* involved in the process' (4). Using this approach, it is difficult to see how contemporary white comedians can effectively engage in ethnic/racial ridicule without relying on the EOO strategy as a mechanism that exacerbates an ambiguous reading of their performances and encourages debate and speculation about their 'true intentions' when using racial stereotypes.

Conclusion

In this chapter I examined Latino minstrelsy to provide a new avenue to the study of ethnic/racial ridicule, as numerous important works on blackface minstrelsy have been produced in recent decades. Largely forgotten, I present a rich case study of the rise and fall of comedian Bill Dana and his Latino minstrel character José Jiménez to provide an analysis of the 'intersections of biography and history' (Mills 1959) during the civil rights era, and the media discourse that attempted to legitimize his portrayal of Latinos. I argue José Jiménez was an extension of blackface, as Dana relied on similar linguistic/performance techniques used to ridicule African Americans in order to entertain a largely Anglo American audience. I contend the prominence of José Jiménez occurred at a time when blackface was growing increasingly unpopular, following protest by African Americans, while the escalating exploitation (e.g. the Bracero Program) and disposability (e.g. 'Operation Wetback') of Mexican immigrants was under way.

By focusing on the mechanisms Dana used in his performances, the media narratives surrounding his character, the socio-political context, and the resulting contestation of the character, this examination goes beyond a simple 'reinforcing racism' critique of Dana's comedy and provides a multi-layered analysis of this significant, yet overlooked incident that challenged

the humor of white supremacy. Such an approach allowed me to illustrate *how* José Jiménez was part and parcel, not separate from or a mere reflection of the racialization and dehumanization of Latinos during this period. As Billig (2005) contends in his critical analysis of humor, 'ridicule plays a central, but often overlooked, disciplinary role in social life' (5). In this way 'humour and seriousness remain intrinsically linked' (243). However, the targets of ridicule do not always remain silent, as the continued exploitation and buffoonish depiction of Latinos prompted Chicano media activists to challenge Dana to evaluate his comedy and abandon his character.

Opposition to José Jiménez and other forms of racial ridicule occurred during a period of mobilization for racial equality. The racial insult was pronounced in such depictions as the humor relied largely on a *uni-directional* mode of racial ridicule (e.g. whites in blackface or brownface). Contestation by targeted groups rallied against this kind of monosemic racist discourse which was less ambiguous. Alternatively, the current form of racial ridicule consists of a *multi-directional* mode which diversifies the targets of ridicule (e.g. self-ridicule, equal opportunity offender) and generates greater polysemicity and ambiguity in the joke (Weaver 2011a), which facilitates the denial of racism (van Dijk 1992). This strategy allows for the re-emergence of racial ridicule, among white comedians in particular, as it becomes more difficult to challenge such discourse as primarily racist (Weaver 2011a). While it is possible to decode the subversive potential in contemporary race-based comedy (Boskin 1997; Weaver 2011a), the re-emergence of conventional and novel racialized depictions of Latinos and other non-whites, by white and non-white comedians, also contributes to strengthening a 'white racial frame' (Feagin 2010) in an ostensibly 'color-blind society' (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Understanding this process makes visible an 'invisible grammar' (Bonilla-Silva 2012), and humor, of domination.

Chapter 2

Rhetoric of Racial Ridicule in an Era of Racial Protest: Don Rickles, the 'Equal Opportunity Offender' Strategy, and the Civil Rights Movement

In this chapter, I contrast the rise and demise of comedian Bill Dana and his minstrel portrayal of Latinos, with the racial comedy of comedian Don Rickles. Rickles detracted sharply from the pre-civil rights racial comedy of his contemporaries during the 1960's by shifting the targets of racial ridicule from one group to many. Making use of civil rights discourse, Rickles became an "equal opportunity offender." This strategy allowed Rickles to circumvent the opposition faced by his contemporaries and allowed Rickles to deny racism in his comedy during and after the civil rights period. In this study I examine Rickles' 1968 Grammy nominated performance *Hello Dummy!* as an early contribution to "post-racial" discourse, which is premised on the notion that racial inequality is a thing of the past. I examine the rhetorical mechanisms that Rickles used to perform racial ridicule and circumvent the kind of opposition faced by his contemporaries during a period of social change.

"It appears that the most crucial element in the dissemination and use of ethnic humor is the perceived ambiguity of the speaker's intentions and motives by those who are its targets… Unless the humorist or the joke-teller makes it explicitly clear that he or she is not using humor to express prejudicial attitude, bigotry, and racial and/or ethnic superiority, he or she is likely to be accused by members of ethnic groups of having such attitudes"

Apte (1987: 27)

"That's all the Jews do, sit in their underwear, belch and watch TV (audience laughs). The Irish guys are staggering around. The colored guys are going 'glory, glory halleluiah' (audience laughs). The Mexicans 'I'm goin to da toilet I don't care what the colored guys do' (audience laughs). And the queers are going 'let's go in the park and have a love out!' (audience laughs). These are the jokes lady. If you're waiting for Billy Graham to come in here forget about it (audience laughs)."

Don Rickles (1968, *Hello Dummy!)*

Introduction

The first half of the 20th century consisted of numerous campaigns against racial and ethnic ridicule in the US. Various efforts by ethnic whites, such as Italians, Irish and Jewish, to end the circulation of denigrating and insulting stereotypes occurred during the early part of the century (Mintz 1996; Kibler 2009). African Americans succeeded these campaigns during the early part of the civil rights movement as they contested the legacy of blackface minstrelsy and a century's worth of racist and insulting portrayals of blacks (largely by whites) as uncivilized and buffoonish (Boskin 1979, 1986). By challenging blackface comedy shows like "Amos 'n' Andy," one of the longest running and most popular shows on radio and television until the civil rights period (Von Schilling 2003), groups like the NAACP sought to improve the public image of African Americans (Boskin 1986; Ely 1991; Haggins 2008). During the latter part of the civil rights period, Latinos continued this wave of public protest against racial and ethnic ridicule by challenging anti-Latino caricatures and stereotypes, like Frito Lay's "Frito Bandito," a corn-chip stealing bandit, and comedian Bill Dana's Latino minstrel character "José Jiménez," a dim-witted and inarticulate buffoon (Bender 2003; Pérez 2014). The Polish American Congress would follow suit as they challenged the circulation of "Polack jokes" in media that ridiculed Polish immigrants as "stupid," "crude," and "brutish" people (Pula 1996). This wave of protests signaled a turning point in American comedy (Apte 1987; Berger 1998), one in which ethnic and racial minorities would no longer sit passively by as Anglo Americans engaged in the "pleasure of racist laughter" (Lott 2013) at their expense.

Comedian Don Rickles was able to rhetorically circumvent this growing wave of protest against racial ridicule by creating a more "ambiguous" form of racially insulting comedy (Apte 1987; Pérez 2013; Weaver 2011). In contrast to his contemporary "ethnic" humorists who

targeted a particular group in their performances or careers, Rickles delivered a style of public racial ridicule that was conscious of "diversifying" the targets of ridicule in his performance. During the civil rights movement, escalated racial protests and racial anxiety significantly weakened the country as a "racial dictatorship" (Omi and Winant 2014). Yet, at a time when fellow comedian Bill Dana was being targeted by Chicano civil rights groups for his racist portrayal of Latinos as inarticulate buffoons (Pérez 2014), comedian Don Rickles can be heard delivering a wide range of racist insults, stereotypes, and dialects in his 1968 Grammy nominated performance *Hello Dummy!*.

In this essay, I analyze Rickles' performance as the emergence of the "equal opportunity offender" strategy. The rhetorical impact of this strategy worked to "frame" (Goffman 1974) his insults as carrying, more or less, *equal weight* in the eyes and ears of the audience. This rhetorical strategy allowed Rickles to engage in racial ridicule during a period of social and political transformation.

The goal of my analysis is not to suggest that Rickles *is* a racist or to somehow uncover his "true intentions," but rather to illustrate the rhetorical mechanisms that Rickles used to perform racial ridicule while circumventing the kind of opposition faced by his contemporaries. This strategy of the "equal opportunity offender," I suggest, veiled Rickles' comedy as ambiguous rather than racist. Rickles would later face some criticism for his comedy, and would "tone down" his act, but he largely escaped the kind of protests and boycotts faced by fellow comedians and comedy shows. Rickles' comedy illustrates the rhetorical efficacy of the "equal opportunity offender" strategy to veil racial insult and ridicule as palatable and "just a joke," even during periods of intense ethnic and racial conflict. An analysis of Rickles' comedy points out *how* offensive racial comedy changed from the pre-civil rights period to the present. In recent

years this influential rhetorical strategy has been increasingly incorporated, among white comedians in particular, as a way to make racial and ethnic ridicule acceptable in the eyes and ears of an audience.

White comedians and race

The general strategy employed by whites to produce ethnic and racial "humor" during the pre-civil rights era largely consisted of overt ridicule (Apte 1987; Boskin 1979; Boskin and Dorinson 1985; Lott 2013; Mintz 1996). Until the civil right movement, white performers typically built their routines around racial and ethnic ridicule targeted at a particular group. Blackface minstrelsy was the most prominent example, as it was one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the US from the pre-civil war period until the civil rights era (Boskin 1986). White performers, including ethnic whites, painted their faces black and imitated and ridiculed African Americans as inferior, buffoonish, and un-assimilable (Lott 2013; Rogin 1998; Roediger 1999). While ridicule of working class European immigrants was also a part of this discourse of "othering" through comedy (Kibler 2009; Mintz 1996), by the early 20th century the boundaries between white and non-white were more rigidly defined as white ethnic minorities were increasingly "becoming white" (Brodkin 1998; Ignatiev 2008; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 1999), and their ethnic identity became an "option" (Waters 1990). Blackface minstrelsy greatly contributed to this assimilation process by allowing ethnic whites, like the Irish and Jewish, to hide their ethnic identity behind a painted black face while ridiculing African Americans (Roediger 1999; Rogin 1998). By mid-20th century, white ethnic performers gained popularity through routines that targeted other non-whites.

This form of "comedy," which reflects the superiority theory of humor (Billig 2005), reinforced ethnic and racial stereotypes of non-whites. But also, it served to strengthen a racial hierarchy or "white racial frame" (Feagin 2014). Indeed, as Feagin suggests, over the last few centuries this powerful frame has provided a lens through which whites produce, interpret and defend "racial stereotypes, images and emotions" that help secure "white privileges and advantaged conditions as meritorious" in contrast to the "alleged inferiority and deficiencies… of people of color who are racially oppressed" (Feagin 2014: 26).

According to Weaver (2011), this kind of comedy, in which a particular group was targeted by racial ridicule, can also be seen as a *monosemic* form of racist discourse that contained one dominant meaning or interpretation. That is, during pre-civil rights comedy whites ridiculed non-whites. As a *uni-directional* form of ridicule that flowed down the racial hierarchy (Pérez 2014), it was easier for targeted groups to interpret and challenge such comedy as "racist" during the first half of the 20th century, as the racism in these comedy routines was less ambiguous. The difficulty of *monosemic* and *uni-directional* forms of racist comedy to "succeed" in public discourse in contemporary society, when produced by whites in particular, illustrates that the rules for public race based comedy have changed.

While a "sense of humor" is a core cultural value in the US, the post-civil rights period created a context in which "greater constraints" were placed on public use of ethnic jokes, insults, and caricatures than at any other point in US history (Apte 1987). The emerging "emphasis on cultural and ethnic pluralism," Apte contends, rendered "ethnic humor" as a controversial topic, where deployment of ethnic humor by non-group members was generally disavowed. This shift in the consumption of comedy was also reflected in its production. As Littlewood and Pickering (1998) argue, the emergence of an anti-sexist and anti-racist shift in the

“alternative” British stand-up comedy scene during the early 1980s raised important question about whether the comedy “kicked up or down” the social hierarchy (295).

This vigilance of racist comedy among comedians is also apparent in the US context. For instance, by 1970 comedian Bill Dana abandoned his widely popular Latino minstrel character following protests by Chicano civil rights activists (Pérez 2014). Similarly, comedian George Carlin, famous for his liberal use of obscenities, legal battles over free speech in comedy, and overt criticism and ridicule of religion and American culture, expressed his refusal to do “ethnic humor” in the early 1970s:

> “There isn’t a lot that outrages me…except racial jokes, ethnic jokes. I find nothing funny about that- just tasteless.” (Ford 1974)

By the early 1990s humor scholars took notice and began to suggest it was nearly now impossible for whites to perform ethnic and racial humor in public (Apte 1987; Berger 1998). The continued difficulty for white comedians to perform offensive racial comedy in public is also evident in such examples like comedian Ted Danson’s blackface flop at the Friars club in New York City during the early 1990s (Ebert 1993) and the public apology by comedian Michael Richards following his racist rant against black audience members at the *Laugh Factory* in Hollywood, CA in 2006 (Farhi 2006). This contestation against ethnic and racial ridicule and the struggles for racial equality drastically changed the public sense of humor, for white Americans in particular.

However, while true that it became increasingly difficult for whites to engage in racial ridicule during the civil rights era, comedian Don Rickles illustrates that it was not rhetorically impossible to do so. While Rickles’ comedy was certainly controversial, the rhetorical ambiguity of his performance allowed Rickles to continue to perform racial insults. As Epstein (2001)

notes, “[t]hese kinds of jokes drew criticism, of course. But Rickles succeeded because audiences knew he was kidding and meant no harm, though the words themselves cut deeply” (224). While Epstein does not describe *how* Rickles’ comedy works, he suggests that the ethnic “middle man” position of Jews in the U.S. placed Jewish comedians as “important mediators between Jews and American culture.” That is, Jewish performers remained simultaneously “inside” and “outside” the Anglo American mainstream. He contends that Jewish comedians gained “acceptance from an alien Gentile culture and did so in a way that was not threatening to middle America” (xi).

One way in which such comedy was not threatening to “middle America” was by continuing the tradition of racial insult. According to Gillota (2013), this mediator position among Jewish performers created a complicated history between Jews and racial ridicule. Gillota suggests that while their status as “outsider” allowed them to continue to identify with the plight of African Americans, they remained prominent blackface performers through the first half of the 20th century. However, largely considered white following WWII, the blackface mask “began to wear thin” (53) and Jewish performers faced increased opposition to blackface and other forms of ethnic and racial ridicule, which contributed to the distancing of Jewish performers from this genre. Yet, Rickles’ brand of racial ridicule proved that audiences were not only willing to continue laughing at offensive racial ridicule, but that they were being relieved by it.

Cathartic racial humor

Studies conclude the civil rights movement drastically changed public race-talk and that it is no longer publically acceptable, for whites in particular, to make overt and offensive racist claims in public (Bobo et al. 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2013; Doane 2006). This shift in the logic of public racial discourse is illustrated by the emergence of coded or covert forms of race-talk in public and the

appearance of "semantic moves" (e.g. "I'm not racist, but…") that were unnecessary in the pre-civil rights era (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Haney- Lopez 2014; Mendelberg 2001). Correspondingly, the logic of race comedy in public has changed. Comedians have learned to utilize distancing strategies in order to persuade an audience that they are not racist even as they tell racially offensive jokes (Apte 1987; Littlewood and Pickering 1998; Pérez 2013; Weaver 2011). Together, these changes in the acceptability of serious and humorous public racial discourse, which resulted from a mass movement for racial justice, have generated a context in which offensive race-talk in public has become socially unacceptable and increasingly taboo.

Yet, conventional theories of humor suggest that what is socially taboo tends to be an ideal candidate for humor. For instance, relief theories of humor suggest that laughter works as a social and psychological "safety valve" by providing release for socio-cognitive tension when expressing unacceptable discourse as a joke (Berger 1998; Billig 2005; Morreall 2009). As Berger (1997) contends, "however deplorable the sentiments expressed in these jokes may be from a moral standpoint, they may nevertheless be perceived as funny; indeed the very fact that such jokes may be deemed morally offensive may enhance their attractiveness as a forbidden pleasure" (52). Using this approach, one way to read Rickles' performance in 1968 is as a form of cathartic comedic relief for the racial tensions of the period.

Who tells certain jokes and the context in which they occur is also important for the public acceptance of unacceptable public discourse. That is, the social role of "the comic" is not unlike the role of "the jester" – it provides special permissions to the individual to violate established social norms. In this way, the comedy club can be seen as an extension of Bhaktin's medieval carnival, where the rules of ordinary social discourse are temporarily inverted (Gilbert 2004: 59). But again, the public scrutiny faced by comedians like Bill Dana, Ted Danson, and

Michael Richards also indicate that simply being a comedian and being on a comedy stage is not a license to tell or perform offensive racial jokes, characters or commentary freely. Jokes, however offensive, must be crafted appropriately in accordance with prevailing social norms (Pérez 2013). Therefore, while the perceived identity of the joke teller and the context in which jokes are shared are significant, *how* such jokes are told is just as, if not more, important.

In order for an audience to "accept" offensive racial jokes in the post-civil rights era, there needs to be a perceived "incongruity" (Burke 1959; Gilbert 2004) between the performer as a "person" and the jokes being told. A public audience needs to believe that there's a "non-racist" human underneath the "racist comedian" (Pérez 2013). As Apte (1987) suggests, "the most crucial element in the dissemination and use of ethnic humor is the perceived ambiguity of the speaker's intentions and motives by those who are its targets" (27). The ethnic and racial humor of the pre-civil rights period did not need the presence of such ambiguity or intentionality, as the subordination of non-whites during this period of "racial dictatorship" (Omi and Winant 2014) did not require their approval. However, this *monosemic* form of humor is no longer possible in public without opposition from targeted groups. Apte concludes that in the post-civil rights period comedians must make "it explicitly clear that he or she is not using humor to express prejudicial attitude, bigotry, and racial and/or ethnic superiority," otherwise "he or she is likely to be accused by members of ethnic groups of having such attitudes" (27).

The civil rights movement created a context in which a more "ambiguous" form of racist comedy could take form. During a period in which the state responded to the victims of racial injustice with the promise of "equal opportunity," humorists like Rickles borrowed this notion and turned it on its head by seemingly *democ(k)ratizing* the targets of racial and ethnic insult. The *democ(k)ratization* of racist comedy, via the "equal opportunity offender," allowed for

greater *polysemia*, or multiple interpretations and ambiguity (Weaver 2011), to take root in such discourse in the post-civil rights era, where racism generally become more elusive (Bonilla-Silva 2013). According to Weaver, this shift created a context in which there is greater ambivalence and confusion in interpreting this kind of race based comedy as *monosemic* racist discourse. Comedians, such as Rickles, have increasingly worked to exploit this semantic-slippage, while audiences and critics attempt to decipher the "authorial intention" of such performers (149).

Therefore, it is important to look at the "mechanisms in operation" that allow comedians to make use of offensive racial humor that is generally disavowed in contemporary public discourse (Lockyer and Pickering 2005; Weaver 2011). This approach will allow critical observers to highlight the special rhetorical strategies in operation, that allow comedians to access offensive racial discourse in a way that is otherwise inaccessible to most other speakers in most other public contexts.

Goffman (1959) observed that individuals tend to reserve the derogation of others for when they are not present (170-175). The "backstage," he argued, provides a safe space for individuals to voice their insults and contempt of absent audience members. This "treatment of the absent" is sharply inconsistent with the way people generally engage with others in face-to-face "frontstage" settings. In contrast, a comedy club is a socially sanctioned space that gives license to individuals on stage to violate these social norms in public (Gilbert 2004). Comedians routinely mock, insult and derogate audience members in their performances. In what follows, I analyze the "treatment of the present" by insult comic Don Rickles in his 1968 Grammy nominated performance *Hello Dummy!* in order to illustrate the rhetorical efficacy of stand-up comedy to breach boundaries of acceptable racial discourse in public. To my knowledge, no in-

depth attempts have been made to analyze Rickles' comedy or to situate it in the context of the civil rights movement.

Methods

I use Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the rhetorical strategies used by Rickles to perform racial ridicule during the civil rights movement. I borrow from Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) and van Dijk (1992, 1993) and their examination of the changes in public racial discourse in the post-civil rights and post-WWII era and the strategies used by whites to engage in public race-talk. Bonilla-Silva (2013) illustrates a number of strategies used by whites and contends that a central feature of the emergent "color-blind" ideology of the post-civil rights period consists of an active avoidance by whites in using direct racial language to express their racial views (102).

Building on their studies, my approach (Pérez 2013, 2014) illustrates how comedians use specific rhetorical strategies and techniques to say racist things instead of avoiding them. This is due, in part, to the social role of the comedian. In contrast to social scientists who are interviewing individuals about their racial attitudes, the comedian is looking to entertain and elicit a reaction (laughter) from the audience (Apte 1987; Mintz 1985). Shocking and taboo discourse is currency in the social world of stand-up comedy, in a way that is distinct from most other public settings, as individuals generally work to "manage their identity" (Goffman 1959) by avoiding offensive discourse in public.

I also borrow from Goffman's work on "keying" to examine Rickles' comedy (Goffman 1981; 1974). This approach allowed me to decipher the strategies and techniques that made Rickles' brand of racial ridicule more palatable, as he was careful not to misstep on a land mine during his waltz of insult in a period of racial protest. I will focus on 4 particular strategies in the

following section: *Negative Self-Presentation, Negative Other-Presentation, Audience Homogenization via Insult, and Appeals to Humor.*

Negative self-presentation

According to van Dijk (1992, 1995), one of the ways in which racism is rhetorically and discursively maintained is through "positive self-presentation." This strategy allows dominant in-groups members to omit negative qualities and characteristics of their own group, while engaging in "negative other presentation," which emphasizes negative stereotypes and characteristics of out-groups. By highlighting perceived deficiencies of minority groups, dominant groups maintain boundaries between "us" and "other." Yet, the civil rights movement created a context in which such discourse by non-group members would be perceived as racist in pubic (Apte 1987; Bonilla-Silva 2013).

The use of "negative self-presentation," or self-deprecation, is an important rhetorical strategy employed by comedians to circumvent this constraint (Pérez 2013). This strategy helps close the gap between audience and joke teller by allowing the performer to "manage" his or her identity (Goffman 1959) in front of the audience. As Apte (1987) observes, "self deprecating humor is not only about one's ethnic background, but also about one's sex, religion, language, social status, and so on… It appears that such jokes, when told by the ethnic groups themselves, are acceptable. Only when outsiders tell them, do the jokes become public and not tolerated" (38). This strategy is one that is consistently employed by Rickles in his 1968 recording. Take the following example early in his performance:

> "I'm a Jew. We're the chosen people. We don't have to do nothing. Pick up a couple of dollars and phone God. 'Hello God' (audience laughs). Jews, you gotta be like the Jews.

Just sit in the house, in your living room, in your underwear. 'Put on the TV Shirley [belches]' (audience laughs). That's all the Jews do, sit in their underwear, belch and watch TV" (audience laughs).

Rickles invokes conventional stereotypes about Jews and money throughout his routine. This strategy allows the performer to reveal unflattering and commonly shared stereotypes regarding his ethnic background, and works rhetorically by helping the performer build rapport with the audience early on. Rickles also employs other standard Jewish stereotypes such as the "hook nosed Jew" and the "Jewish American Princess," a stereotype about materialistic and sexually repressed Jewish women (Booker 1991; Dundes 1985). Take the following example directed at a female audience member:

> "You've gotta be a Jew, lady. You're the only one with a stole on and it's 105 for crying out loud (audience laughter, cheers and applause). You're either a Jew or an old beaver in heat" (audience laughs).

Rickles directs his attention at a female audience member that he believes to be Jewish. Rickles insults the audience member for her presumably expensive and inappropriate attire for the event, as well as her supposed repressed sexuality. This approach reinforces the negative self-presentation strategy by targeting an audience member that presumably shares the performer's ethnic identity. Finally, towards the end of the show Rickles reveals to the audience that he is consciously and deliberately engaging in negative self-presentation:

> "That's right! I make fun of my own people!"

By mocking his Jewish identity, and insulting Jewish audience members, Rickles employs the negative self-presentation strategy in order to "manage his identity" before the audience. By doing so, the strategy signals to the audience that Rickles is willing to target his own group and

that he does not view his own ethnic group as exempt from ridicule or primarily from a positive perspective. In contrast to some of his contemporary Jewish "ethnic humorists," like comedian Bill Dana who omitted his Jewish identity while he engaged in Latino minstrelsy, Rickles placed his Jewish identity as a core part of his act and mocked it. By doing so, Rickles set the stage for engaging in "negative other-presentation" during a period of increased constraint on ethnic and racial ridicule by non-groups members (Apte 1987).

Negative other-presentation

A central feature of Rickles' brand of insult comedy is that he presumably targets everyone. He is an "equal opportunity offender." His style of comedy earned him nicknames like "The Merchant of Venom" and the ironic title "Mr. Warmth." Indeed, in his 1968 performance Rickles proceeds to insult a number of ethnic, racial and national groups, women, homosexuals, and heterosexuals alike. This strategy distinguished Rickles from his contemporary "ethnic humorists," particularly those that continued in the minstrel tradition. His consistent and effective use of being the "equal opportunity offender" during the civil rights era signaled a cultural shift in the style of racial ridicule that would be increasingly tolerated during and after the civil rights movement.

As discussed earlier, during this period racial ridicule became more difficult for non-group members as a result of a growing emphasis on "cultural pluralism" (Apte 1987). Yet, by engaging in negative self-presentation, a certain degree of freedom was provided for comedians to engage in "negative other-presentation." According to Apte, by telling "ethnic jokes in which *all* extant ethnic groups are made the target… the idea here is that since all ethnic groups are ridiculed, no one should take offense" (1987: 38. Emphasis in original). That is, the rhetorical

effect of this strategy is that by "insulting everyone," Rickles is ostensibly insulting "no one." Take the following examples, which follow his self-deprecating Jewish jokes above:

> "The Irish guys are staggering around. The colored guys are going (African American accent) 'glory, glory hallelujah' (audience laughs). The Mexicans (Latino accent) 'I'm goin to da toilet I don't care what the colored guys do' (audience laughs). And the queers are going (effeminate voice) 'let's go in the park and have a love out!' (audience laughs).

Rickles employs the negative-self presentation strategy, to illustrate that Jews are also targets in his act, before engaging in negative other-presentation to mock the Irish, blacks, Latinos, Arabs, Polish, Welsh, Mexicans, etc. and homosexuals. By strategically establishing that his performance is one that seemingly targets all groups, Rickles takes the liberty to ridicule groups that are presumably "off limits" during this period of intense racial conflict, blacks and Latinos in particular:

> "I kid about the Negros. Be proud, be proud of your heritage. We need the Negros. For what? What the hell we need the Negros for? (audience laughs). Oh yeah, so we can have cotton in the drug store (audience laughs)…Why do I make fun of the Negros? Cause I'm not one of them" (audience laughs).

And:

> "Mexicans you never fool around with the wife, right? You're too busy laying on the floor fixing the mud so it don't cave in (audience laughs). They never fool with the wives, the Mexicans, they're walking around the house yelling (Latino accent) 'turn on the television!' (audience laughs)… But, if it weren't for you people we'd never have filth (audience laughs).

Throughout his performance, Rickles picks out audience members and ridicules them by using ethnic, racial, and national stereotypes, banter, mimicking and mocking their dialect, language and culture, and creates absurd scenarios and imagery to generate what Freud called "tendentious jokes," or jokes that focused on topics that are socially taboo (Gilbert 2004; Seshadri-Crooks 1998), all of which were intended as "play" (Goffman 1974: 48) That is, part of what makes his racial jokes and banter "playful" and appealing to the audience is that Rickles is using discourse that has become socially unacceptable during the civil rights movement. Rickles circumvents opposition to his racial insults by diversifying the targets of ridicule, a strategy that works to convince the audience that his insults carry "equal weight."

However, it is important to note that while Rickles ridicules Latinos and blacks using conventional stereotypes and imagery, he is careful to avoid using racial slurs and master signifiers like "wetback," "spic," or "nigger" in his act. By doing so, Rickles reveals the boundary of the "playful" racism that is central to his act. As Goffman (1974) suggests:

> "[A]lthough individuals can playfully engage in an extremely broad range of activity, limits on playfulness are established in various groups… Among familiars, for example, there will be appeals to 'taste.' (49)

One of the effects of the civil rights movement was to make racial slurs "distasteful" in public discourse. Therefore, Rickles works to provide "keys" (Goffman 1981; 1974) or cues to the audience that distance his racial insults from literal meaning and allows the audience to interpret or "frame" his racist discourse as "play," that he is only "kidding." As Goffman (1974) observes, a "key" refers to:

> "[A] set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else." (43-44)

In this case, racism is the "primary framework" and racist jokes, seemingly, are the "something quite else." Therefore, it is not merely that Rickles is *in* a "comedy club" that gives license to *what* he utters. But it is the strategic delivery of his banter (the *how*) that veils his racial insults as socially acceptable by denying racism (van Dijk 1992) in his performance. During this sequential process of "negative self-presentation" and "negative other-presentation," Rickles rhetorically and strategically delivers his content to the audience to produce a "community of laughter" (Mintz 1985) that can readily enjoy the "forbidden pleasure" of racial and ethnic ridicule (Seshadri-Crooks 1998) during a period of racial and ethnic protest.

Homogenization via insult

In his analysis of stand-up comedy, Mintz (1985) observes that certain rituals need to take place in a comedy club in order for an audience to "go along" with a show. The comedian, he suggests, "establishes his or her comic persona, discussing personal background, life-style, and some attitudes and beliefs. This allows the audience to accept the comedian's marginal status and to establish that the mood of comic license is operative. This mood is accentuated by encouraging applause and laughter, thereby establishing a tone of gaiety and fun. Then the comedy routine itself can begin" (79). The goal, he suggests, is to "establish for the audience that the group is *homogeneous*, a community, if the laughter is to come easily" (78 [emphasis added]).

Based on examples provided above, Rickles' comedy detracts from this goal as his style of comedy consists of fragmenting, rather than homogenizing his audience. In his brief

commentary on Rickles, Mintz provides a similar observation by suggesting that "[s]o-called 'kamikaze' comedians such as Don Rickles make the insult banter a feature of their act, but that is a special brand of stand-up comedy not necessarily connected with the process of establishing a community (79)." However, Mintz does not describe *how* Rickles "special brand" of comedy works or *how* it operates to create a "community of laughter" during his spectacle of ethnic and racial ridicule and derogation.

One consistent technique used by Rickles to produce a "community of laughter" was the use of the verbal cues or "keys" (Goffman 1981: 174-175) that signaled to the audience that they were a "group." As Goffman suggests:

> "[V]ocal cues can be employed to ensure that the boundaries and character of the quotatively intended strip are marked off from the normally intended stream"

Rickles' provides "parenthetical" or "bracketed" statements that are intended to signal to the audience that they are a homogeneous group. Take the following example in which Rickles targets a Latino audience member and a Jewish woman:

> "Look at the size of him lady. He just lays on you and you die (audience laughs). **Look at this, the lady went** (shrill feminine voice) 'what the Mexican lay on me? (audience laughs). **Anyway gang** (audience laughs)…. The old Jewish lady got in heat when she heard the fat Mexican was gonna lay on her (audience laughs). **Anyway gang.** "The hell you think's gonna happen? You won't have any kids… a taco falls out!" (audience laughs).

As illustrated in previous sections, through the rhetorical strategy of negative self-presentation, Rickles is granted license to negatively present "others." Through this process of sequential degradation, Rickles creates a seeming community of the "collectively disparaged." Audience

members share a laugh at the expense of targeted groups or individuals at hand, before Rickles moves on to a new victim. In order to signal a collective affinity, Rickles provides verbal cues to "key the audience" (e.g. "anyway gang") that they are a group. This creates a "community of laughter" during his focused banter, which the rest of the "gang" can enjoy. During this process, Rickles produces different combinations of "in-groups" and "out-groups" as he rapidly shifts his attention from one target to the next. However, it is important to keep in mind that what keeps this "community of laughter" together is the cathartic release provided by the racial (and gender) ridicule that Rickles' comedy provides.

Rickles also readily changes "frames" (Goffman 1974) throughout his 1968 performance, as he rapidly weaves in "unserious" racial and ethnic insults with "serious" commentary on "bigotry." This strategy is also facilitated by "keying" the audience with changes in the tone, pitch and tempo of his voice:

> "[Slow paced, declarative tone] Anyway folks, we enjoy though. **We kid around, right?** It's ridiculous. With bigotry, with the Negros, with summer, with race riots. It's idiotic, I mean that. [Faster paced, joking tone] Didn't recognize the Negro gentleman in the back. How are ya baby? As far as I'm concerned sit up front, make trouble (audience laughs). **Anyway gang.** [laughs]. **That is a Negro guy isn't it**. Cause the way things are nobody wants to say what they are today. It's the truth. You walk up to the average Negro, what do all the bigots around here say 'are you a Negro?,' [Deep voiced Caribbean accent] 'No mister Rickles I am a calypso singer (audience laughs). I come from Saint Thomas. My name is Leroy' (audience laughs)… Ever since the war, **they don't say they're Negros**. Huh. Hawaiians (audience laughs). **Anyway gang**."

His “unserious” racial and ethnic insults are generally accentuated by multiple higher or lower pitched voices or dialects that “speak from his mouth” and tend to be faster paced. When switching over to his “serious” frame to reveal the “real Rickles,” he employs a slower paced and more declarative voice that “speaks from his chest.” By doing so, Rickles is “keying the audience” that his racist jokes and insults are supposed to be interpreted as “play” (Goffman 1974: 48). This strategy multiplies the perceived ambiguity and *polysemicity* in his comedy, as it becomes more challenging to read his comedy as primarily a form of *monosemic* racist discourse (Apte 1987; Weaver 2011).

However, while this rhetorical strategy of fragmenting and insulting the audience in order to homogenize them suggests that “everyone” is the target of ridicule and that “no one” is spared from his “wrath,” Rickles’ comedy tends to disproportionally “kick down” (Littlewood and Pickering 1998) the racial/ethnic and gender hierarchy. Therefore, in order to minimize opposition to his brand of insulting racial ridicule, Rickles works to remind his audience that they are “just jokes.”

Appeal to humor

Viewing humor as a rhetorical tool, Gilbert (2004) observes that a joker can shield criticism by distancing a claim and renouncing its intent by declaring it was “just a joke” (12). Rickles employs this strategy numerous times throughout his performance as a refrain. For instance, in his banter with the Latino audience member early on in his show about “filthy Mexicans,” Rickles makes sure to remind the audience and the target that his jokes and comments are all in “good jest:”

"**No I kid**, Henry… you're a wonderful Mexican, really. **I'm a Jew and you're a Mexican,** and I say this from my heart. A Negro can move into my neighborhood. You can't (audience laughs).

Rickles suggests he is only "kidding" and continues to mock the Latino audience member. The rhetorical impact of his "just kidding" disclaimers, therefore, are intended to "frame" his insults as "play" (Goffman 1974) and deny racism (van Dijk 1992), in order to appease the targeted audience member and persuade the rest of the audience into accepting that his comments are "just jokes." In another instance, a female audience member sitting near the stage distracts Rickles. Rickles uses this as an opportunity to insult her and to continue mocking the Latino audience member:

"Don't make it a rally you dummy broad (audience laughs). What the hell's a matter with you? Want the Mexican to come over to your table and get the runs (audience laughs)? **It's only a joke** Mexican, you're the chosen people, we're wrong (audience laughs)."

Rickles insults the woman with sexist banter by referring to her as a "dummy broad" and continues to engage in "culturally racist humor" (Weaver 2011) by ridiculing Latinos and their "diarrhea-inducing-food" as "dangerous." Yet, Rickles illustrates sensitivity to the socio-political context and mockingly suggesting that the woman is "making it a rally" during his show while he retorts to the Latino audience member that his insults are "only jokes." Presumably finding Rickles' banter humorless, Rickles responds to the Latino audience member and his lack of amusement:

"Don't you find this funny Mexican?"

This deliberate effort by Rickles to remind the audience that he is "only kidding" and that his comments are "just jokes" can also be viewed as part of the rhetorical strategy of *prolepsis* (Richardson 2007). This strategy involves anticipating and reacting to potential criticism from the audience. As illustrated above, in a number of occasions Rickles invokes this strategy when audience members can interpret his comedy and banter as offensive. In order highlight that his racial and ethnic ridicule is intended to be "framed as play," at the end of his performance Rickles switches from a "comedic frame" (Gilbert 2004) to a "lecture frame" (Goffman 1981) and states his position on his brand of humor in his closing remarks:

> "[Slow paced, declarative tone] My humor, ladies and gentleman, is directed in a way to laugh at ourselves. If you accept it in that spirit, I am deeply grateful. If there be doubt, I hope you will see us another night… I am no rabbi, priest or reverend. You know this. I stand here and speak of all faiths, creeds, and colors. And why not, really why not? Because in my experience in the navy, when things were rough nobody bothered or cared to ask. Color, church synagogue. Who cared? Frightened to death we stood together on the bow of the ship and said 'please,' and that is the truth, 'please.' When our time is up we will all be on one team. So why do we need bigotry and non-sense. Let's enjoy while almighty God gives us time. Will Rogers once said, 'I never picked on a little guy. Only big people.' May I say to this entire audience, on a hectic night, you are pretty big, and I do thank each and every one of you" (audience applause).

What Rickles attempts to provide with his closing remarks is a "framework" for how to interpret his comedy. That is, the function of such commentary can be viewed as a way to "stage his talk" and "manage his identity" (Goffman 1959) in order to create distance between his brand of racial and ethnic ridicule and "real racism." Rickles changes his voice from "unserious" to "serious"

and invokes discourse about "our shared humanity." The rhetorical impact of such commentary by Rickles is that it creates further ambiguity (Apte 1987) and *polysemicity* (Weaver 2011) in his performance and makes it more challenging to frame as *monosemic* racist discourse. In this way, the combination of strategies illustrated above show how Rickles brand of stand-up comedy allowed him to make use of overt racial discourse inaccessible in most other forms of public talk.

Discussion/Conclusion

Rickles' performance during this period of social transformation can be seen as a strategic form of racial comedy that is "flirting with law" (Seshadri-Crooks 1998). According to Seshadri-Crooks, racist jokes in a "multiracial and 'liberal' democracy," work to re-channel aggression and hostility that has become taboo through changes in written and moral law (362). The emergence of laws banning racial discrimination, along with the rise of cultural norms against public displays of racial intolerance and offensive racial discourse, created a context in which comedians like Don Rickles straddled the line of appropriate and taboo racial discourse (Littlewood and Pickering 1998). By paying attention to the rhetorical joking mechanisms at work, Seshadri-Crooks contends observers will be able to focus on "how variations in the dialectical pressure of aggression and inhibition- conditions of the joke- produce different joke situations indicating shifts in the history of racism and its common sense" (364).

The rhetorical strategies Rickles employed in his 1968 performance signal a shift away from the kind of racial ridicule in comedy that was prominent in the pre-civil rights era. The use of the "equal opportunity offender" strategy became increasingly necessary as the emerging socio-political climate regulated offensive racial discourse in public, among whites in particular, comedic and otherwise. Negative self-presentation or self-deprecation, for instance, allowed

comedians like Don Rickles to narrow the distance between joke teller and audience. Self-targeted insults work rhetorically by convincing the audience that the performer can "take a joke" at his or her own expense. The performer is then granted license to insult the audience, in this case through the use of racial and ethnic ridicule in particular. Rickles also employed other rhetorical strategies and distancing techniques, such as verbal cueing and switching between comedic and serious frames, to persuade the audience that his insults were "just jokes." These strategies worked to homogenize the audience while insulting them, and created a "community of laughter" that would tolerate racial and ethnic ridicule during this period of racial protest.

Rickles' racial ridicule also provided a form of "cathartic release" for the audience during a period of intense racial conflict. His jokes provide relief during a time when white supremacy was unwilling to concede some equality to non-whites, and people of color responded with mass protests and urban unrest. The rhetorical impulse of his humor attempted to re-channel some of the violence and conflict in the streets. The humor implied the notion that "if we laugh at ourselves, we won't kill each other."

While it is tempting to view Rickles' comedy as primarily a "subversive act" against bigotry, his comedy can also be seen as actively combating the emerging norms against offensive racist discourse in public. To see the *polysemicity* (Weaver 2011) in Rickles' comedy is to acknowledge the ways in which it is challenging bigotry at the same time that he is reinforcing it. As Gilbert suggests, citing (Nilsen 1993):

> "jokes based on… stereotypes become even funnier when we think that the stereotypes are being broken in the jokes, but we later discover that the stereotypes aren't being broken at all" (Gilbert 2004: 152).

Weaver notes that while we may prefer to privilege the "reversal" in comic racial discourse, as one that ostensibly subverts racist meaning, there is a prior reliance on racist meaning that has the potential to be reactivated and rearticulated (Weaver 2011: 120).

For instance, one way in which Rickles' comedy can be seen as a way of reactivating or rearticulating prior racist meaning is to see how it worked to publically challenge the emerging norms of "racial etiquette." His comedy was a form of contestation to what later came derisively to be referred to as "political correctness." Littlewood and Pickering (1998) contend that "politically incorrect" comedy can also be viewed as one of "adaptation rather than subversion" (301), as the strategies detailed above helped Rickles' comedy adapt to a changing socio-political and discursive environment. His comedy, therefore, can be understood as an early form of anti-PC discourse that has been increasingly embraced by those on the conservative right in particular (Fairclough 2003; Littlewood and Pickering 1998). As conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh suggested:

> "How come you can't have a little fun about blacks?... What protects them? Why are they immune from legitimate forms of humor?" (Baker 1993).

Although Rickles did not receive the level of opposition faced by some of his contemporary comedians for his brand of strategic racial ridicule, the socio-political context did work to restrain his brand of comedy. As Littlewood and Pickering (1998) observe, comedians who relied heavily on derogatory jokes began to "[tone] down their acts and [became] more self-conscious of their content, uttering disclaimers or resorting to narrative devices designed to shield the teller from the attribution of racism or sexism" (299). This shift is apparent in Rickles' 1968 performance, as illustrated above, and continued into the post-civil rights period. As Smith

(1988) notes, by the 1980s "Rickles toned down his ethnic insults and concentrated more on physical traits (fat people, tall people, dopey people, etc.)" (533)[1].

However, while Rickles ostensibly diminished his use of racial insult, comedians who engage in racial ridicule have increasingly relied on the rhetorical strategy of the "equal opportunity offender." For instance, during the mid 1990s, fellow Jewish comedian Jackie Mason was shaking up the comedy world with his hit Broadway show "Politically Incorrect" (Brantley 1994). This performance closely followed Rickles' formula of diversifying the targets of ridicule and insult, and was seen as a "breath of fresh air" during the post-civil rights period.

More recently, non-Jewish white comedians like Jeff Dunham and Lisa Lampanelli have made racial and ethnic ridicule central features of their comedy, and they are conscious of employing the "equal opportunity offender" strategy in order to minimize opposition to their work. As Dunham, one of the highest grossing comedians in the world, observed when discussing his controversial comedy:

> "I've skewered whites, blacks, Hispanics, Christians, Jews, Muslims, gays, straights, rednecks, addicts, the elderly, and my wife. As a standup comic, it is my job to make the majority of people laugh, and I believe that comedy is the last true form of free speech" (Gell 2009).

As such comedy deals centrally with sensitive issues that stem from a history of racial oppression, white comedians are hyper-vigilant about criticism and adamant that such comedy is "not racist," "just a joke" and an exercise in "free speech."

Similarly, Lampanelli, a self-described "equal opportunity offender," defended herself against online backlash when making use of racial slurs on Twitter by emphasizing her "non-

[1] It is worth pointing out that Rickles recently received public scrutiny for his Obama jokes that many viewed as racially offensive (Kilday 2012)

racism" as well as her deployment of this strategy. Lampanelli contested online criticism by stressing:

> "I've played every comedy club and every theatre across the country for the last 25 years and seen a lot of audience members from different ethnic persuasions… I have always used in my act every racial slur there is for Asians, blacks, gays, and Hispanics. To me, it's acceptable if the joke is funny and if it is said in a context of no hate. It's about taking the hate out of the word" (Shuter 2013).

While Billig (2001) has examined the "pleasure of bigotry" in his analysis of racist jokes among white supremacist organizations on the Internet, Lampanelli implies that such jokes are "not really racist" when shared by a "funny" comedian in a multicultural context. However, this example also illustrates that comments made on a comedy stage do not translate easily onto other public contexts. Therefore, comedians tend to make deliberate use of the "equal opportunity offender" strategy in order to veil their commentary as "just jokes" and "not racist." The fact that non-Jewish white comics are increasingly using this strategy "successfully" suggests that the previous constraints on racial ridicule among whites are weakening. That is, we have entered a new era of "common sense" when it comes to racial ridicule.

Finally, I contend the emergence and continuity of the "equal opportunity offender" strategy in comedy corresponds to the current period of "race relations" that has been increasingly described as "color-blind" (Bonilla-Silva 2013). While it appears counterintuitive to view this brand of racially insulting comedy as "color-blind," the central tendency within the logic of this racial ideology is to "abstractly equalize" whites and non-whites in order to minimize the continued significance of race and racism in contemporary society (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Feagin 2014; Omi and Winant 2014). From this perspective, the civil rights movement

ended racism, and racism is no longer a major issue that impacts the "life chances" of ethnic and racial minorities. Therefore, I contend this brand of racially insulting comedy falls in line with the logic of color-blind racism in at least three important ways:

> 1) By providing cathartic relief for the constraints on overt racial discourse in contemporary society, for whites in particular, racist comedy becomes relegated to the realm of the "unserious," as it is viewed as "just a joke."
>
> 2) By asserting that racial ridicule is "just a joke," the current "common-sense" understating of this kind of humor, as it relates to racism more generally, reinforces the notion that racist jokes are "peripheral" and far removed from "hate-filled *real* racism."
>
> 3) By suggesting that the insults, slurs and stereotypes that target whites and non-whites carry *equal weight,* the continued significance of race and racism is minimized and trivialized.

Therefore, it is important that we consider not only how stand-up comedy has (positively) contributed to social and cultural transformation, but as an "agent of change" we must also *critically* focus on how comedy can simultaneously work to weaken and strengthen social inequalities and racial ideologies in an ostensibly "color-blind" and "post-racist" society.

In chapters 1 and 2 I focused on two case studies that examined the shifting boundaries of racial comedy during the civil rights era. I illustrated how protests against comedians engaged in racial ridicule during the civil rights era demarcated the boundaries between pre-civil rights and post-civil rights racial humor, while performers like Don Rickles developed new performance strategies to adapt to a changing racial climate. In the following chapter, I examine how the pedagogical and strategic nature of offensive racial humor in a stand-up comedy school has institutionalized these strategies in an ostensibly "post-racial" era.

Chapter 3

Learning to Make Racism Funny in the 'Color-Blind' Era: Stand-up Comedy Students, Performance Strategies, and the (Re)Production of Racist Jokes in Public

In this chapter, I examine the pedagogy of racial comedy in the current period. I present a challenge to studies of contemporary racial discourse that suggest overt racetalk in public is on the decline. I contend stand-up comedy serves as a mechanism for expressing ethnic and racial stereotypes in public. In this ethnographic study on the training of stand-up comedians, I probe how comedy students learn to use rhetorical performance strategies to couch ethnic and racial stereotypes in more palatable ways, in order to be "funny" rather than "offensive" in public. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) I also illustrate the role elites play in managing racial discourse. I find white vs. non-white comedy students are taught to engage in racial discourse in different ways. Whites are taught distance and denial strategies which allow them to engage in overt racial commentary and deny racism or racist intent, while non-whites are often encouraged to engage in racial stereotypes uncritically. This study shows how strategic use of humor allows the "constraints" on current racial discourse, on whites in particular, to be broken suggesting a new phase of color-blind racism may be underway.

"I'm not a misogynistic and racist person… [b]ut I do find those jokes funny, so I say them."

-Comedian Daniel Tosh (Hibberd, 2011)

"I've skewered whites, blacks, Hispanics, Christians, Jews, Muslims, gays, straights, rednecks, addicts, the elderly, and my wife. As a standup comic, it is my job to make the majority of people laugh, and I believe that comedy is the last true form of free speech"

-Comedian Jeff Dunham (Miller, 2008)

"Racism has not managed to harden. It has had to renew itself, to adapt itself, to change its appearance… to undergo the fate of the cultural whole that informed it.

-Frantz Fanon (1967: 32)

Introduction

Scholars have noted the decline of overt racist discourse in public in the post-civil rights era and contend that the ideology of overt Jim Crow racism has been replaced by a *new racetalk*; one that is subtle, covert, "color-blind" (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000) or of a "kinder and gentler" form (Bobo et al. 1997). As a result, scholars argue that public expression of racism has changed dramatically where strategic forms of public racetalk have emerged (Bobo and Charles 2009; Bonilla-Silva 2002; Van Dijk 1992). Overall, the literature on new public expressions of racism suggests that overt expressions are unlikely to occur in public as there are strong social norms and repercussions that have produced a strategic, politically correct and/or polite racial discourse.

But consider stand-up comedy. Comedians frequently breach norms of etiquette and polite public discourse. With respect to race, stand-up comics often rely on blatant racial and ethnic stereotypes of the perceived deficiencies and proclivities of "others." Joke tellers justify the use of such stereotypes by pointing out that the role of comedy is to confront touchy subjects, breach norms of etiquette, name taboos, etc. (Dundes 1971; Gilbert 2004; Morreall 2009; Oring 2003). What matters is "being funny." The use of comedy to rupture the taboo is not unique to racial discourse, as one can imagine sexual or political humor surfacing in sexually or politically repressive societies (Davies 1998 2011; Morreall 1983). Yet, what is of interest in this study is the increasingly unique and understudied role racial-comedic performance plays currently in

American public racial discourse, where overt racist language in public is restricted in an ostensibly color-blind or post-racial society.

In this chapter I argue that comics make racist discourse palatable by learning to employ certain strategies of talk that are intended to circumvent the current "constraints" on racial discourse in public (Apte 1987). These strategies, however, are different from those used for public racetalk in which racist discourse is coded or hidden rather than expressed directly, as others have documented (Bonilla-Silva 2002; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Jackman and Crane 1986; Van Dijk 1987). If color-blind racism tends to be concealed, racism in comedy is hidden in plain sight. The strategies that comics learn suggest another possible answer to the question of how racism is communicated in a society that disavows racist speech: racism is expressed in public and overtly, but its offensiveness is deflected, in part, by the use of strategies that make the performers seem "not racist," even as they say racist things.

Shifting racial discourse

Many Americans believe racism to be a thing of the past (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Coates 2008; Hyman and Sheatsley 1956; Lipset 1996; Sniderman and Piazza 1993). Studies show a shift in American racial views and an overwhelming condemnation of racism (Jackman and Crane 1986; Sigelman and Welch 1993; Slavin and Madden 1979). Yet, numerous studies continue to illustrate that racial discrimination and stereotyping persist (Bobo et al. 1997; Bonilla- Silva 2001, 2010; Feagin 1991, 2000). The current period of race relations, scholars argue, consists of subtle and elusive forms of racism and has produced many contradictory behaviors, attitudes, and realities in contemporary American society. A "racism without racists," contends Bonilla-Silva (2010), is the racial ideology of the post-Jim Crow U.S. where there tends

to be an unwillingness to believe that racism continues to exist and negatively impact the "life chances" of racial and ethnic minorities.

Researchers find that racial discourse has changed dramatically in the post-civil rights era, altering the landscape of racetalk. Scholars have offered two complementary answers to the question of how racism is expressed in a society that claims to reject racism.

One theory suggests that racist arguments are now coded or covert. In public discourse, for example, individuals often rely on a variety of strategies to impugn racial minorities without doing so overtly (Augoustinos and Every 2010; Bobo et al. 1997; Bonilla-Silva 2002; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; Doane 2006; Hill 2008; Van Dijk 1987, 1992, 1993a). Scholars have documented various strategies or semantic moves in racial discourse in the post-civil rights era. Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) in particular contend that the current racial ideology, reflected by a "new racetalk" which has emerged in recent decades, has been to elude overt racist claims in public while "[preserving] the contemporary racial order" (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000: 51). This new racetalk, captured in interviews and surveys regarding racial attitudes, is used by whites in contemporary public racial discourse where overt racism has become taboo.

For instance, scholars have shown terms such as "urban, welfare, crime" are often used to refer publically to poor inner city black and brown minorities (Mendelberg 1997, 2001; Mendelberg and Oleske 2000). Such terms are meant to invoke clear cultural deficiencies where biological claims are no longer legitimate. Mendelberg (1997) contends that such coded terminology is used by "white political elites to appeal to white voters" at the expense of racial minorities (Mendelberg 1997: 151). These strategies suggest that public forms of racetalk have changed dramatically from overt forms of Jim Crow racism to covert or subtle expressions of public racism in the post-Jim Crow era (Bobo and Charles 2009; Bonilla-Silva 2010).

A second answer to the question of how racism is expressed in a society that claims to reject racism is that overt racist discourse continues to be shared in private settings. Studies find that racist talk persists in the form of sharing and expressing stereotypes and prejudicial statements in private conversations, discussions and/or jokes, and continues as usual in intimate settings of family, friends, workplace, and other closely knit social circles (Eliasoph 1998; Feagin et al. 2001; Hill 2008; Myers 2005; Myers and Williamson 2001; Picca and Feagin 2007).

The two answers suggest complementary forms of racetalk: covert in public settings and overt in private ones. At the same time, they suggest overt or explicit racetalk in public settings is unlikely to occur in the current post-racial or color-blind period as a result of the shift in public racial discourse after the civil rights movement. However, race scholars have paid little attention to the development and role of stand-up comedy as a space where overt racial discourse occurs in public.

Comedy and the race question

Declining significance of race?

Just as race scholars claim that overt racist discourse has disappeared from the public realm, many humor scholars agree. The most significant theories of humor frame it as a way to create in-group cohesion versus out-group boundaries by oppressing or controlling others, as a relief or social safety valve, and/or a way to resolve incongruity (Morreall 2009; Raskin 1985). While not mutually exclusive, these theories offer different perspectives on the role of humor in society.

According to the *superiority theo*ry of humor, one of its main functions is to dominate others (Burma 1946; Boskin and Dorinson 1985; Morreall 1983). For over a century, from the pre-civil war period to the pre-civil rights era, “blackface minstrel shows” were one of the

prominent forms of humor in American society in which humor functioned to subordinate black Americans. Until the civil rights period, white performers unabashedly painted their faces black using burnt corks while imitating, mocking and caricaturing southern and northern African Americans (Boskin 1986; Roediger 1991; Saxton 1998). Scholars also note how humor was used to force immigrants to "Americanize" through ridicule of language and customs (Apte 1987; Lowe 1986; Mintz 1996).

While the pre-civil rights period was marked by what Boskin and Dorinson (1985) call ethnic and racial "humor of accommodation" (that is, accommodating to white tastes and expectations), they observe that it was during and after the civil rights period where ethnic and racial minorities, blacks in particular, openly laughed at "The Man," or what Weaver (2010a) calls the emergence of a "reverse discourse" of anti-racist comedy as a form of resistance to oppression. The *relief theory* notes that humor also functions as a way to release social anxieties and tensions, rupture social taboos and subvert "polite realities" (Attardo 2000; Billig 2001; Morreall 2009; Ritchie 2005). It might be argued that the racial conflict during the civil rights period was eased in part by comedians of color who appealed to white audiences as they sought to challenge racial inequality with their wit (Boskin 1979).

As a result, scholars find the problematic aspects of race humor in public discourse have been largely relegated to the private sphere in the post-civil rights and color-blind eras (Apte 1987; Eliasoph 1998; Feagin 2010; Myers 2005; Picca and Feagin 2007) or have taken a coded form. Abrahams and Dundes (1969), for instance, suggest that the rise of "elephant joke cycles" in the 1960's were a covert way in which whites expressed their anxieties about racial integration and miscegenation, where "elephant jokes" were code for black.

Q: How do you know when an elephant's in bed with you?

A: Nine months later you have a problem.

These jokes exist as "cultural phenomenon," they contend, arising out of a socio-historical context and in response to the "Negro Revolution" (Abrahams and Dundes 238:1969). Others note how overt racist humor is harbored in "cyberspace" among white supremacist organizations (Billig 2001; Weaver 2011).

However, stand-up comedy breaks this mold. Much like Bakhtin's (1968) observations of the carnivalesque, from the Middle Ages through the 20th century, as a bracketed social space where dominant social norms are believed to not apply, a comedy club is a public space where performers can push and invert the boundaries of polite and formal public discourse.

The seismic-shift in public racial discourse in the post-civil rights era seemingly impacted the world of stand-up comedy. Berger (1993), for instance, suggests that by the early 1990's "ethnic and racial minorities [had] gained enough political power to make it just about impossible to direct hostile humor against ethnic and racial groups… in the media and public forums" (Berger 1993: 73). Lawsuits and/or public apologies for humor deemed derogatory by targeted groups were quite common during this period. A notable example is comedian Ted Danson's controversial blackface performance at the Friars Club in New York City (Fisher 1993). According to Apte (1987), "ethnic humor" in American society during this time was more "constrained" than at any point in American history, in the public sphere in particular. "Traditionally oppressed groups" began to "assert themselves and… protest their being made the butt of humor initiated by anyone but themselves" (Apte 1987: 27). While Apte and Berger stress that overt racial discourse in comedy has greatly diminished, more recent observers have begun to take notice of the reemergence of such discourse via comedy by whites in particular (Lockyer and Pickering 2008; Santa Ana 2009; Stanley 2007).

Critical humor studies

While much of the humor literature echoes the race literature with respect to the decline in public racial discourse, it offers conceptualizations to help us understand why race based comedy persists in an ostensibly post-racial or color-blind society.

Billig (2001) and Weaver (2010b) contend that much humor scholarship often takes a "celebratory stance" on humor, ignoring or minimizing the role it plays in reproducing racism. More critical humor scholarship suggests that the role of humor in perpetuating detrimental racial ideologies is an open question (Billig 2001; Ford 1997; Lockyer and Pickering 2008; Weaver 2011). While some argue jokes are essentially harmless (Davies 1998, 2004), critical scholars contend race based humor walks a fine line between challenging racial inequality and strengthening hegemonic notions of race (Boskin 1979; Gilbert 2004; Husband 1988; Park et al., 2006). Weaver (2010a, 2010b), distinguishing between racist and anti-racist humor, suggests that "[where] humour draws on dichotomous stereotypes of race and/or seeks to inferiorise an ethnic or racial minority, not labelling the humour racist," as opposed to racial "is a form of ideological denial" (Weaver 2010b: 537). He further suggests, citing Davidson (1987), that the notion of "racial" humor is "exaggerated in the literature." Raskin also observes that "most ethnic humor is functionally deprecatory, or disparaging" (Raskin 1985: 180).

Yet, humor is also "socially and historically situated" (Abrahams and Dundes 1969; Weaver 2010b). Jokes may be perceived funny or unfunny in different contexts and periods. Jokes are polysemic, ambiguous and elusive (Lockyer and Pickering 2008). A theoretical grasp of the social functions of humor, therefore, can assist in understanding how and why overt and racist language is permissible in comedy in the current color-blind and politically correct period. While the *superiority theory* holds that humor is a way to dominate and the *relief theory* notes it

is a way to ease social tensions, the *incongruity theory* suggests humor also functions as a way to resolve incongruous ideas. The sudden realization of certain incongruities, theorists suggest, often give rise to humor (Morreall 2009; Raskin 1985). Thus, one can argue that racist comedy in the color-blind era is acceptable in part because of the incongruity between our "common-sense" notion that "racism is bad" and a "thing of the past," while performers make inappropriate racial comments as a way to rupture taboo racial discourse in public, and stand behind "just a joke" and free speech claims as they publically disparage racial and ethnic minorities.

While one can argue that discussing racial topics while trying to challenge traditional racist tropes is not racist in the conventional sense, race based humor often teaches the audience *how* to think about race while reifying and relying on racial stereotypes. Gilbert (2004), citing Apte (1987), notes the "liberatory" and "empowering" potential of self-disparaging humor risks becoming "self-flagellation" if unremitting (Gilbert 2004: 19). This issue is highlighted by comedian Richard Pryor and more recently comedian Dave Chappelle, both noted African-American comedians who took trips to Africa during periods of ideological crisis concerning their roles in perpetuating versus undermining racism through their work. Pryor publically stated to drop his use of the word "nigger" upon return (Jackson 2005), while Chappelle left his hit cable program *Chappelle's Show* and a $50 million contract with cable network *Comedy Central* (Johnson 2009). These examples raise important questions with respect to "racial versus racist" humor engaged by comedians in the post-civil rights and color-blind period.

Performing racial discourse

While scholars debate whether race based humor is intended to dominate others, relieve social tensions or resolve incongruities, I argue that comedians must learn to utilize rhetorical

performance strategies in order to navigate public racetalk – not as a way to avoid overt racist expressions, as other studies have found, but often to state them publically. Joke tellers often invoke perceived and commonly assumed racial differences, which tend to take the form of stereotypes. As a result of the shift in racial discourse, however, Apte (1987) warns that it must be made clear to the audience that the performer is not a racist when performing ethnic and racial stereotypes in public. Such a feat is accomplished, I argue, by employing certain performance strategies which help preserve a veil of authentic inauthenticity for the performer: "I am not racist even as I say racist things." This purposefully invoked veil on part of the performer, works to ensure distance between literal claims and comedic intent and is maintained through rhetorical performance strategies: self-disparaging humor, the "equal opportunity offender," distance and disclaimer mechanisms, and so on. Yet, they are not only intended to "save face," but borrowing from van Dijk (1992) I argue that such strategies are also intended to deny racism or racist intent in performances that engage in offensive racist discourse in public.

Using a play frame, Tannen suggests the "metamessage" of play shapes how actions and behaviors are to be interpreted in a humorous context (i.e. not to be taken literally) (Tannen 2005: 32). Borrowing Goffman's frame analysis, Clift (1999) also notes that humor such as irony allows a "reduced personal responsibility" by creating distance and detachment between the author from what is said (Clift 1999: 28). This is particularly important for performers when using racist and sexist discourse. As comedian Daniel Tosh, host of *Tosh.O* (one of the most viewed programs on *Comedy Central* in the post-*Chappelle's Show* period), suggests:

> "I'm not a misogynistic and racist person… [b]ut I do find those jokes funny, so I say them" (Hibberd 2011).

Park et al. (2006) contend that performers uncritically enacting racial stereotypes “naturalize” racial differences, as they often do little to challenge the racial hierarchy. In a society where “racism is deeply rooted,” they argue race based jokes “reinforce hierarchically structured racial differences,” which are less likely to be critically challenged when veiled through humor. Performances dealing with racial stereotypes are often “reminiscent of racial ideologies intended to justify racial discrimination in the past” (Park et al. 2006: 159). According to Ford, humor often “blunts the critical sensitivity” of the audience towards “socially unacceptable actions or sentiments” (Ford 1997: 272). When strategically engaging in taboo racial discourse and masking it with performance strategies, a successful performance pleases an audience and often shields the performer from accusations of racism. Absent strategic performance, however, comics risk being offensive or, worse still, not funny.

Take the public outcry that followed comedian Michael Richards’ racist tirade in a Hollywood comedy club November of 2006. During this incident Richards proceeded to verbally attack a black audience member heckling his routine. The verbal attacks were filmed by audience members, and millions later witnessed his vicious comments online. “Shut up!” Richards yelled, “50 years ago we’d have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass! (scattered laughs, cheers, and oohh’s from the audience)… throw his ass out (pointing at the audience member) he’s a nigger!”(audience gasps) (TMZ 2006). “I’m a performer. I push the envelope” Richards stated as he publically apologized for his comments. “I’m not a racist that’s what’s so insane about this,” Richards later told David Letterman, host of the *The Late Show* on CBS (Von Meistersinger 2006).

Part of what makes Richards’ performance unsuccessful, offensive and racist, is that it veers from a “playing with racism” frame. By failing to employ the rhetorical performance

strategies that preserve the veil of *authentic inauthenticity* (until after the fact – "I push the envelope… I'm not a racist"), which protect and distance the performer from both audience and content, his performance comes off as "real racism." As noted stand-up comedy author and instructor, Judy Carter, observes:

> "Chris Rock can talk about things he doesn't like about black people and sound hip and cutting edge. If you are white and you do it, you sound like an ignorant, ugly bigot" (Carter 2001: 149).

Richards' performance fails to engage the proper strategies. The audience perceives no incongruity in his performance, anxieties are heightened not reduced, the veil is removed, and his performance becomes a racist rather than comedic/ ironic spectacle. A strategic presentation of humor in public allows individuals to circumvent the constraints of public racial discourse and engage in overt stereotypical depictions of the "other" which are disavowed in most public spaces.

Scarpetta and Spagnolli suggest that while scholars have looked at the way humor is structured and made recognizable, less attention has been paid to the "interactional practices through which humor is made acceptable" (Scarpetta and Spagnolli 2009: 213). In line with other studies on the strategic use of racial discourse, I argue that it is ritualized social practices, and not context alone, that allow performers to make stereotypical references often deemed unacceptable in most public settings, funny and entertaining in this context.

This project, therefore, focuses on how performers learn to use such strategies in a stand-up comedy school and how students are taught to engage in racial discourse in a society that ostensibly claims to reject explicit racial commentary in public. I borrow from and modify van Dijk's (1993b, 1995b) list of discursive structures which were used by the instructors in my

evaluation of the managing of racial discourse in this context: Metaphor, positive self-presentation, negative other-presentation, apparent empathy, positive lexicalization, and phonological distancing are some of the discursive structures used by instructors to deny racism in student performances. These discursive structures were used in combination with three recurring performance strategies: Using racial common sense, self deprecation, and distancing mechanisms such as creating characters or mimicking dialects. Moreover, the legitimation of such strategies taught by comedy instructors, illustrate the "symbolic capital" and "symbolic power" (Bourdieu 1989) they have while imposing their vision of racial comedy on students.

Data and methods

I gathered data for this project using participant observation, by enrolling as a student in a stand-up comedy school in Los Angeles in August 2008. Participation and observation enabled me to "grasp the meanings associated with the actions" (Lofland et al. 2006: 15) of the students and instructors in the school. While context is important and significant in the evaluation of any discourse, this study situates comedic racetalk in a cultural and historical context, placing public racial humor in the broader shift of contemporary public racial discourse. According to Gee "[c]ontext refers to an ever-widening set of factors that accompany language in use" such as setting, people present (e.g. ethnic, racial, and gendered identities), "as well as cultural, historical and institutional factors" (Gee 2004: 28). Participation and observation, therefore, allowed me not only to grasp the "local meaning" in the context of the comedy school but also to situate these meanings and actions in a critical analysis of comedic racial discourse in a color-blind society. These observations were triangulated against an interdisciplinary approach to historic shifts in racial discourse, theories of humor and pedagogical literature on contemporary

performance comedy in order to analyze the "discourse-historical" background in which these "discursive 'events' are embedded" (Wodak 2001: 65).

Data was analyzed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). As an interdisciplinary approach to analyze power and inequality in society via discourse, CDA views language as a form of social practice that reproduces "social and political domination" through text and talk (Fairclough 1995). CDA enables scholars to identify ways in which individuals engage in "everyday racism" (Augoustinos and Every 2010; Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000; van Dijk, 1992; Wodak and Matouschek 1993). Van Dijk (1992, 1995a) and Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) in particular, illustrate how much racial discourse is often intended to deny racism in the post-Nazi and post-Jim Crow eras. In his analysis of the reproduction of racism, van Dijk also contends that elites play a major role in "initiating, monitoring and controlling" the "orders of discourse" of public text and talk, by virtue of their "preferential access" and power in shaping public discourse in society's major institutions (Van Dijk 1995a: 4). Therefore, I found CDA to be most appropriate in analyzing my data to illustrate *how* students learned to engage in public racial discourse through comedy, in ways that often (re)produced and denied racism, by focusing on how the instructors "initiated, monitored, and controlled" such discourse in this context.

Two factors motivated this ethnographic study of a comedy school: 1) I sensed that racetalk in stand-up comedy failed to conform to the public covert or private overt pattern found in most studies of contemporary racial discourse. Rather, race based stand-up comedy seems public and overt. This led me to believe that the setting had to be governed by norms different from those identified in the existing literature. 2) I recognized that instruction in the stand-up comedy school might reveal the process by which people were taught the norms of appropriate racetalk in stand-up comedy. As Scarpetta and Spagnolli suggest, stand-up comedy can be seen

as an "institutional form of talk-in-interaction" (Scarpetta and Spagnolli 2009: 214). By focusing on the comedy school as an "institutionalized community of practice" (Gee 2004: 38) I was able to understand the "everyday theories" about race and comedy that allowed performers to engage in discourse disavowed in most other public settings.

I investigated these issues through observation and participation, informal interviews, conversations, and group discussions in a Los Angeles area comedy school and comedy club between August 2008 and March 2009. I accumulated well over 200 hours of participation and observation.

I found this school on multiple search engines using *"stand-up comedy schools and Los Angeles"* and therefore assumed it to reach a wide and diverse prospective student body. A majority of students I encountered found the school online as well. Students were majority white and were overwhelmingly male.[ix] My student count consists of classes I attended and not the total number enrolled at the time: 20 white males, 5 Latino males, 3 black males, 1 Asian male, 1 white/Asian male, 4 white females, 1 Latina female, 2 black females, 1 Asian female. The age range was very broad with the youngest student a recent high school graduate, while the oldest students were approaching retirement. There were three instructors: Ted[x] (white male), the owner and lead instructor of the comedy school, Shana (black female), former student and working comic, and Joe (white male), former student and working comic.

I did not encounter any self-disclosed LGBT students, although the frequency with which male students and male instructors jokingly referred to each other as "gay, fag, cocksucker and homo" may have contributed to this fact. The environment was heavily hetero-male dominant in both numbers and content. The ease and frequency in which derisive sex and gay jokes were shared was in sharp contrast with the cautious and strategic way race jokes were made,

demonstrating that race based jokes were more difficult to perform in public. These and other observations contributed to my focus on racial discourse in this setting.

Learning to make racism funny

In contrast to Apte (1987) and Berger's (1993) assertion that performers can no longer engage in racial and ethnic humor in public about "groups other than themselves," the following observations illustrate how whites and non-whites are taught to engage in racial discourse in comedy in the current color-blind era.

The discursive structures and strategies I observed were typically taught and employed to perform race as a way to entertain a live audience rather than offend them. These strategies were different from those described by Bonilla-Silva (2002, 2010), Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) and others who have studied strategic public racetalk. They are different in that individuals are not on the *defensive*; that is managing impressions by using coded language while being interviewed about racial attitudes to save face. On the contrary, these students are on the *offensive;* learning to use strategies to make overt racial statements publically entertaining and acceptable, rather than objectionable and offensive. More importantly, however, is how white and non-white students were taught to engage in racial discourse in different ways. While whites were reminded to tread through racetalk carefully, non-whites were often encouraged to embrace racial stereotypes uncritically.

Performing racial stereotypes required successful execution of performance strategies which typically reflected the position in the "racial hierarchy" of the performer. The general pattern was the lower on the racial hierarchy the less elaborate the strategies, while the higher on the hierarchy, the more intricate. That is, racetalk was easier for non-whites, while more difficult

for whites. The result is that whites and non-whites learn to perform racial stereotypes in public in an ostensibly post-racial and color-blind society.

Managing white racial discourse

The "hurtline" metaphor

One of the ways in which the instructors emphasized their authority in the school was by managing racial discourse, of whites in particular, through the "hurtline" *metaphor*. The hurtline is crossed when a performer oversteps the boundaries of acceptable public racial discourse (from funny to offensive), was understood as hurtful to the targets, but also a disruption of normative racetalk. More importantly in this context, crossing the "hurtline" was costly in terms of laughs.

Given the difficulty for whites to engage in racial discourse more generally, it was understood, although not openly discussed, that white students had more constraints in comedy, as opposed to non-whites. As lead instructor Ted (white male) mentioned to me one evening following a student's poor performance in front of a live audience at the comedy club:

(1) "The hardest people for me to make funny… white boys. They have less to work with."

Ted's job, as he puts it, is to "make people funny." When failing to do so, he risks not only his promise that "anyone can learn to be funny," but also tuition paying students who do not get a return (laughs) for their investment. By suggesting that "white boys" have it more difficult because they have "less to work with" (inability to freely engage in racial discourse), Ted is *generalizing disadvantage* and implies that white comedy students are more difficult to make funny due to their "constraints" (Apte 1987) on certain kinds of discourse. Rather than suggesting that the student's poor performance may in part be due to any number of factors (bad jokes, poor delivery, tough audience, etc.), the notion that white students are not funny because

they have less material to work with is a common trope used by whites beyond the comedy school (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000).

The "hurtline" metaphor was often conveyed to students following unsuccessful performances in which inappropriate or offensive discourse was performed. Ted (white male, lead instructor) reinforced this idea following an incident in which he crossed the "hurtline." At the comedy club one evening Ted was on stage introducing Shana (black female instructor) as the emcee for the night. As Shana approached the stage she extended her arm forward with a closed fist to greet Ted. Failing to reciprocate the greeting, Ted gave her a blank stare and then a blank stare to the audience and said dryly:

(2) "Sorry… I'm not a negro!"

The audience responded with a few scattered chuckles. The intended joke was the incongruity between Ted, an old white male, being unfamiliar or uncomfortable with "bumping fists" because that was a "black thing." James (white male, late twenties), one of the performers that night, told Ted in class the following week that his friends in the audience (mostly white) did not know how to react to that joke and it made some of them uncomfortable. Ted used this as a teachable moment to reemphasize the "hurtline" metapho*r*:

(3) "Yea… I crossed the **hurtline**… that's what happens."

(4) "You are likely to get in trouble when you talk about a **group you don't represent**."

This incident reinforced how students, whites in particular, find it difficult to engage in racial discourse freely, even in this context. Thereafter, Ted reiterated the *racial common sense* strategy. That is, acknowledging the pitfalls of engaging is discourse "about a group you don't represent." Members higher in the racial hierarchy freely mocking those lower goes against current racial common sense by crossing the norms of polite racial discourse. While crossing the

"hurtline" was suggested at face-value as overstepping any form of disrespectful discourse, it was generally understood as a euphemism or metaphor for racism.

This observation is more apparent when compared to other incidents regarding hurtful discourse. Jessie (white female, mid twenties), for instance, was developing a joke about dating a gay magician:

(5) "I thought he was straight… but it was a trick… he sure fooled me."

Ted (white male, lead instructor) suggested she make him:

(6) "[A]s gay as possible… make him dance around more… have him flaming."

White students engaging in racial discourse were never encouraged to amplify racial stereotypes in my observations. Yet, sex, gender and sexuality were not only discussed more freely and openly when compared to racial discourse, but often in highly stereotypical ways. The "hurtline" metaphor, therefore, was mostly reserved for managing the racial discourse of white students in particular.

However, while the "hurtline" metaphor implied that racism would not be tolerated in this context, it was often suggested that the best performances invoked potentially offensive discourse. According to Ted:

(7) "Being 'edgy'…you want to be able to get just close enough to that hurtline …without crossing it."

This contradiction between being told not to cross the "hurtline" while suggesting that the most innovative performers summon offensive discourse was resolved by emphasizing the benefits of attending this school. The instructors routinely noted that students could develop and improve their skills by attending the school (and paying tuition), at a faster rate than "hitting the open mics" (amateur shows open to the public often held in bars or comedy clubs), often alluding to the comedy school as a "trade school" where students could perfect their craft. As illustrated

below, one of the skills students were taught was *how* to approach racial discourse in this context. Such notions reinforced the authority of the school and instructors as comedy experts.

Avoiding overt ridicule

One of the main functions of the "hurtline" metaphor was ensuring students did not engage in overt ridicule of non-whites in particular, especially in cases where other strategies were absent (e.g. self-deprecation, distancing). Such carefree racial discourse on the part of white students would be too reminiscent of earlier periods of racial inequality. This kind of engagement would also undermine the "hurtline" metaphor and the credibility and reputation of the instructors and school. Therefore, during such incidents Ted (white male) would stress that such performances are problematic.

On one occasion, Bob (white male, mid sixties) was developing a joke in class about the increasing use of technology in his workplace:

(8) "Man these **Chinese** IT guys I tell yah… (mocks the Chinese language) **'ching ching chong'**… they think they can do everything with computers (scattered laughs). I want to see you use your computers to walk through the sewer mains" (scattered laughs).

Ted (shaking his head) concluded this was inappropriate racial discourse:

(9) "**Don't** make it an Asian…. **it can be racist**."

Using pragmatic (asserting racism) and interactive (shaking head, withholding laughter) discursive strategies, Ted concludes that this joke "can be racist" and reminded students to be aware of the "hurtline." Ted suggested Bob should disengage from racial discourse. Bob agreed and dropped the joke from his set. This incident illustrates how Ted's role as instructor can shape how white students in particular are prevented from engaging in overt ridicule of non-whites.

From a post-racial perspective, this might seem like a good thing. While this incident implies that jokes that "can be racist" would not be tolerated, this in fact is not the case as illustrated below. Managing white racial discourse, therefore, was not intended to prevent white students from engaging in racial commentary, but to teach them how to do so strategically in more palatable terms.

Negative self-presentation?

While van Dijk (1992, 1995b) suggests that dominance is generally maintained through positive self-presentation (omitting negative characteristics of one's group) and negative other-presentation (highlighting the perceived negatives of the "other"), in this context students were often required to engage in *negative self-presentation,* or self-deprecation, before engaging in negative other-presentation. By mocking self or group, culture, background, etc. this rhetorical performance strategy allowed the performer to save face while "taking one to the chin." As Carter (1989) suggests:

> (10) "An audience needs to feel a sense of fair play… a little self-deprecating humor makes you seem fallible to the audience and makes them feel more comfortable" (Carter 1989: 91).

This recent sense of "fair play" with regards to racist jokes in public can be attributed to the changes in race relations and racial discourse in public since the civil rights era. White engagement in negative self-presentation, therefore, reflects the notion that overt white supremacy and superiority has been apparently delegitimized (Bonilla-Silva 2001, 2010). For instance, following Bob's Chinese IT guy joke above, Ted (white male, lead instructor) explained:

(11) “Opening the show with racial stuff makes audiences uneasy… especially when it’s not a group you represent… find one of your buddies to be an IT guy instead of an Asian.”

Bob, in mocking a group he did not represent, risked being perceived as racist and offending an audience. By suggesting he make the target one of his “buddies,” Ted implies “white males” should be the target here, not “Asians.” Note, however, that the instructor cautioned against “**opening** the show” with racial material. As we will see further ahead, to do so later by incorporating strategies, such as negative self-presentation, was acceptable.

The next example illustrates this point more explicitly. Drew (biracial Asian/white male, late twenties) was rehearsing his jokes, which dealt primarily with racial stereotypes of groups he did not belong to. He began with a series of black jokes. After his set the instructor insisted:

(12) “I need you to **take some shots at yourself** before you go into your race material.”

The fact that his “race material” incorporated banal racial stereotypes (blacks having lots of babies, being lazy, complaining too much) was not the issue according to Ted. Rather, the problem was that Drew had not “taken some shots at himself” first. Ted reinforced the self-deprecation strategy by suggesting he begin with talking about being bi-racial. The following week he began with this joke:

(13) “So I’m half Jewish and half Japanese… or Jewpanese as I call it” (class laughs)

Negative self-presentation or self-deprecation, therefore, is a strategic variation of the positive self-presentation strategy and alleviates some of the tension of crossing the “hurtline” and staving off accusations of racism. While a veil of fairness is produced, this strategy conveys

to the audience that the performer can also “take a joke,” thus allowing the performer to negatively (re)present “others.”

Negative other-presentation

Approaching the taboo is the realm of comedy. However, the balancing act between engaging in entertaining racial discourse in public and deflecting accusations of racism is not an easy one. Yet, one consistent variable seems to be the use of self-deprecation as a way to engage in *negative other-presentation*. Carter (2001) observes that this strategy often allows the performer to mock others:

> (14) “Comics make fun of themselves so it gives them permission to make fun of the audience… If you’re Irish, you do Irish jokes. If you’re Jewish, you do Jewish jokes” (Carter 2001: 140).

However, it is through the use of negative other-presentation in discourse that reifies the boundaries of dominance and inequality between “Us” and “Them” (Van Dijk 1995a). Take the following performance by Mike at a showcase event at the comedy club one evening. Mike (white male, mid twenties) was a working comic and former student of Ted’s. Ted (white male, lead instructor) would often invite former students to participate in these events as examples of experienced performers who took his classes. During this performance it was obvious Mike was a quick and skilled performer who employed different strategies to engage in racial discourse with ease. Through his sustained use of the negative self-presentation strategy he was able to use multiple racial/ethnic stereotypes repeatedly in his set.

The previous performer, Jessica (black female, late thirties), mocked her former lover and the inadequate size of his penis. Following Jessica, Mike incorporated her joke into his opening act:

(15) "Thanks Jessica for letting everyone know I have a small penis" (audience laughs).

Mike continued this negative self-presentation, mocking the size of his penis and his sexual insecurities, throughout his performance while engaging in negative other-presentation repeatedly:

(16) "Anyone watching the Super Bowl… so I'm doing the fantasy football thing this year…not because I'm into the player stats…I just wanted to know what it felt like to **own a group of black guys**" (Mixture of laughs, cheers, oohh's and applause).

By engaging in negative self-presentation Mike was able to push the "hurtline" further away and brush up against it with ease. His jokes were well received by the audience and his performance was one of the most successful of the night; meaning he received many laughs during his set compared to other performers. Mike comforted the audience by acknowledging the racial hierarchy:

(17) "I know… white people have done a lot of fucked up things"

Through the *apparent empathy* semantic move, by speaking briefly of the horrors of slavery and the genocide of Native Americans by whites, Mike recognized the significance of racism. He continued to deprecate white people while relying on apparent empathy to empathize with the victims of racism, thus giving the impression that he was only "playing with racism" and therefore not a racist. Mike was able to joke about other groups he did not belong to while avoiding audience discomfort and diffusing accusations of racism by producing a veil of fairness

through his *authentic inauthenticity.* He then quickly turned to more racial stereotypes, which the audience readily enjoyed:

(18) "Can you imagine if **Jews** had a football team…what would their mascot be… a guy holding a **bag full of money**?" (audience laughs).

Mike employed the negative self-presentation strategy, taught in the school, as a way to exploit his racist jokes in a way that generated laughter and approval rather than offense. Indeed, the audience response to his racist jokes may be a form of Freudian tension release as others have suggested (Abrahams and Dundes 1969; Morreall 1983, 2009). More importantly, however, I argue that strategic use of such material in public discourse is more likely to produce "laughs" rather than the material itself, signaling a shift in racial comedic discourse where overt and sustained racist ridicule is no longer allowed. The end result is the maintenance and (re)production of a racist discourse which relies on conventional ethnic and racial stereotypes, while veiled through humor and performance strategies, which is disavowed in most other public contexts.

Creating distance and denying racism

Successful performances which relied on ethnic and racial stereotypes often involved successfully employing distancing and denial techniques. These not only save face but distance and shield the performer from the content as well, much like the "burnt cork" used by performers in blackface. Students were also encouraged to use other strategies, such as "character development" or "disclaimers," in their performance to distance and deflect audience tension. Again, Carter suggests to:

(19) "[perform] characters… as if doing a scene in a play. An imaginary wall comes between [you] and the audience" (Carter 1989: 95).

Students learned that it was safer to engage in racial discourse in character than in person. Dave (white male student, late twenties), for instance, was encouraged to use *phonological distancing* to avoid the issue Bob (white male, mid sixties) faced when mocking Chinese incoherently. As Ted (white male, lead instructor) put it while telling Bob his Chinese joke was problematic:

(20) "If you could do a great impression then you could **get away with it** because you are being a '**dialectician**.'"

By Ted suggesting Dave is a skilled "dialectician" in comparison to Bob, Ted uses *positive lexicalization* to ease Dave's anxiety about racial discourse and as a way to legitimize his symbolic power over the students. Because Dave was skilled at mimicking ethnic and racial dialects Ted suggested he could perform racial material successfully:

(21) "Dave doing **Japanese characters** is ok because he can do the **accent** and **mimic** the **dialect** well."

Dave, however, previously noted his discomfort with racetalk in his performances for "ethical reasons." Nonetheless, Ted encouraged him by suggesting:

(22) "Look…**you are not being racist**…you are explaining your **cultural ignorance**."

Ted attempted to address Dave's concern about "coming off as racist," as Bob did with his Chinese jokes, by *denying racism* in Dave's performance. Ted absolved Dave from engaging in racist discourse by removing the constraints and suggesting he is merely explaining his "cultural ignorance," which eased some of Dave's anxieties and increased his comfort with performing racial material in both class and the comedy club. Dave, who worked as a teacher, was

developing a joke where he discussed dealing with his international students and their homework excuses:

(23) (In a stereotypical Asian accent)- "Teachah… ahhh …I soo soly bout homewok…ahhh my dog ate my homewok….and ahhh… I ate my dog (audience laughs)."

Dave's abilities as a "dialectician," according to Ted, would allow him to perform Asian stereotypes (Asians are dog eaters, poor language abilities) successfully by creating distance between Dave and the audience, whereas Bob mocking Chinese incoherently would appear racist. Positive lexicalization and the denial of racism were used by Ted to persuade Dave to engage in racial discourse. While Dave's ability to mimic racial dialects helped him distance the content of the joke (Asian stereotypes) from Dave the "white guy," Dave was cajoled by Ted despite his reluctance to engage in racial discourse early on illustrating the role of the instructor in managing white racial discourse.

The result: Dave's impression was perceived as clever and funny, while Bob's incoherent gibberish was perceived as crude and offensive. This reinforced the *authentic inauthenticity* of Dave's performance as "playing with racism" while Bob is "being racist," thus denying racism in Dave's performance. At the comedy club, the joke was so successful Dave believed it was the biggest laugh in his set that evening:

(24) "Ahhh!... I knew this joke was gonna work …and I knew I just had to get to it."

Dave went from "not doing racial stuff for ethical reasons" to performing Asian stereotypes in public in a matter of weeks. This example illustrates van Dijk's (1993a) point about the role elites play in the reproduction of racism in public despite a veiled language of tolerance, much like the "hurtline" discourse in this context.

These kinds of distance and denial rituals in comedy conform to racial discourse strategies more generally (Augoustinos and Every 2010; Bonilla-Silva 2002; Coates 2008; Van Dijk 1992). As suggested by van Dijk and others, they are intended to save face, for whites in particular, against accusations of racism. Not by refraining from racial discourse, as others suggest, but by learning to perform overt racial discourse strategically. The examples above demonstrate the challenges white students face with respect to racial discourse and how Ted managed such discourse in this space. While negative self-presentation also allows non-whites to talk about race, as illustrated bellow, distance and denial mechanisms were most often encouraged upon and used by white students as a way of redirecting audience tension and discomfort with public racial discourse by asserting an authentic inauthenticity frame in their performances.

Managing non-white racial discourse

While white students grappled with the "hurtline," non-white students often received the opposite lesson from the instructors. Not only were non-white students allowed to engage in racial discourse more freely, as opposed to white students, they were often encouraged to do so in ways that reproduced racial stereotypes. In contrast to the potential inappropriateness or offensiveness when whites performed racial material, non-white student engagement in racial discourse was not typically viewed as crossing the "hurtline." At most that line was much further away.

For example, Drew (biracial Asian/white male, late twenties), was advised by Joe (white male, assistant instructor) on how to improve his Asian jokes:

(25) "I want you to sound **more Asian**."

Comparing this incident to the previous one where Bob (white male, mid sixties) mocks Chinese incoherently or Dave (white male, teacher, late twenties) is encouraged to use his "dialectician" skills to mimic his Asian students, the overarching message conveyed to students is a double standard when it comes to engaging in racial discourse. Because Drew "looked" more Asian than white, he was encouraged to stereotypically mock Asians by sounding "more Asian." Drew was granted *phonological freedom* because his "Asian-ness" was more salient than his "whiteness," from the point of view of the instructor, and was directed toward Asian stereotypes. This incident was starkly different from Bob's Chinese jokes, where Bob was advised to abandon them, and Drew did not need special phonological skills such as the ability to mimic racial dialects to distance his stereotypical Asian accent.

While non-white students were granted more freedom to engage in racial discourse, they were also reminded to engage in negative self-presentation, which again was often directed towards reproducing racial stereotypes. Joseph (Latino male, mid twenties), for instance, was encouraged in class to use stereotypes about Mexicans and Latinos by the instructor. As Ted (white male, lead instructor) suggested:

(26) "**You can** make fun of them [Mexicans]…**but I can't** make fun of them because it makes me seem racist."

Ted denies racism by implying that non-whites who engage in self-deprecation cannot be racist despite engaging in hegemonic race humor. While Dave's engagement in racetalk was seen as expressing "cultural ignorance," Joseph was encouraged to "make fun of them." More important is how the instructors used their authority in this context to encourage non-white students to engage in stereotypical racial discourse about groups "they *do* belong to."

Thereafter, non-white students were reminded to engage in negative-other presentation, but to a greater degree. Ted entices Joseph:

(27) “Now…if you’re going to get **racist** let’s go **all the way**.”

This suggestion of “going all the way” with racist jokes was never suggested to white students, even when stressing the use of other strategies. Again this reflects how the strategies are taught differently to individuals in a different position in the racial hierarchy. Joseph talked about growing up as a Mexican-American but often confused for Filipino in both class and the comedy club:

(28) “So I get confused for being **Filipino** sometimes….some Filipino guy comes up to me and starts talking (audience laughs)…. I have no idea what he’s saying… it sounds so **chicken cluckish** to me (audience laughs)…all I hear is ‘**cluck cluck cluck**’ (audience laughs).

Joseph’s Filipino joke was similar to Bob’s Chinese joke. Both disparaged the language of a group “they did not belong to.” Joseph made no effort and was not told to engage phonological distancing. Joseph was not advised to drop this joke, but rather to “go all the way” with his racist jokes. Since Joseph’s joke was not seen as problematic, again Ted denies racism in this performance despite how closely it resembles Bob’s joke, which was interpreted as racist. By Ted allowing non-whites to freely engage in overt racial discourse it reinforces his notion above that “white boys have less to work with.” These kinds of interactions between non-white students and the instructors illustrate the kind of symbolic power the instructors, Ted in particular, had over students in legitimizing racial discourse in their performances. They also demonstrate how racial discourse was managed differently between white and non-white students.

Resistance

The general message for students seemed to be that reproducing stereotypical racist imagery was tolerable, when 1) Performed strategically by creating distance and denying racism 2) Performed by a "perceived" member of that group, even when deliberately misrepresenting reality, and 3) When it was funny. Although the instructors exerted much influence and power over student engagement in racial discourse, and most students followed this script accordingly, performers also illustrated moments of resistance to the reproduction of stereotypical racial discourse in this context. More passive forms of resistance took the form of withholding laughter, students wiggling in their seats, making eye contact with friends, avoiding eye contact with the performer, and occasional vocalizations from students and audience members. Few occasions offered more open forms of resistance.

In one instance, Jessica (black female, late thirties) experienced tension when Ted (white male, lead instructor) suggested that in a joke about her mother she give her a black southern "mammy" dialect. Jessica refused to portray her character of her mother this way despite various attempts by Ted to have her do otherwise:

(29) "I just think it would be **funnier** to do it this way."

By suggesting that it would be "funnier to do it this way," Ted used his symbolic power as a comedy instructor to attempt to persuade Jessica to engage in a stereotypical portrayal of her character. Jessica looked bothered by Ted's advice during class. I spoke with her later that evening. Jessica expressed her discontent:

(30) "Stereotypes just **don't reflect reality** for me…like when Ted wanted me to give my mom a 'black southern accent'…. you know the stereotype of a 'big southern

black woman'… I don't feel like I need to do that…**that's just not who she is**… and I don't want to go there."

Jessica sees the limitations and problems of reproducing racial stereotypes and stresses that they are a misrepresentation of her lived experience. Despite various attempts by the instructor to have her do otherwise, Jessica stood her ground, omitted racial stereotypes in her jokes and proved to be a successful performer without them.

While non-white performers could certainly be funny without engaging in racial stereotypes, Shana (black female instructor, former student) acknowledged the challenge non-white performers face:

(31) "I don't want to be seen as a black comic… but as a comic who happens to be black… **I want to get away** from stereotypical black humor… I want to be a Bill Cosby black"

By suggesting that she is often perceived as a "black comic," rather than one who "happens to be black," she implies that there is an expectation that she needs to engage in "stereotypical black humor." While acknowledging her desire to "get away" from black stereotypes the reality is that much of her act consisted of black stereotypes. As she puts it:

(32) "I try not to pull the race card **but it works**… I do it and it works."

This tension, therefore, between performing to the audience's "expectations" from a performer of color and the desire to "get away" from racial stereotypes is not one white performers have to face. This tension also challenges the notion that whites are "disadvantaged" because they are unable to engage in racial discourse freely in comedy, when the freedom non-white performers have is to trade in racial stereotypes, whether or not the intention is to subvert or reinforce such notions.

In comedy, stereotypes of all sorts reign supreme, not just race. The instructors are reflecting, in the examples above, what they believe to be successful material and routines among non-whites in comedy more generally, namely the use of racial stereotypes. However, they also exercise symbolic power over the students. While these examples confirm van Dijk's (1992) analysis of elite discourse in the reproduction of racism, they also demonstrate the tensions and resistance they produce as in the example by Jessica; though such examples were less frequent in my observations as students often followed the suggestions of the instructors.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study challenges the prominent scholarly views of how racism is communicated in the post-civil rights era: covert in the frontstage, overt in the backstage. It suggests that racism in stand-up comedy can be public and overt, but made palatable because the comic is typically not regarded as racist. This subterfuge is partly the result of the context and by engaging in "playful" or "unserious" discourse, but more importantly through use of rhetorical performance strategies depicted here and *how* they safeguard and allow the performer to (re)produce a veil of *authentic inauthenticity* by using racial stereotypes in public under the guise of humor to deny literal claims.

As biological and functionalist views of race have been increasingly delegitimized, those grounded in cultural affirmations continue to gain momentum and reaffirm the racial hierarchy in the post-racial and color-blind U.S. (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Coates 2008). These cultural differences and deficiencies are often fodder for comedy, which I argue is playing an increasingly unique role in racial discourse currently. This study illustrates how individuals are taught to (re)present "others" in public in a humorous and entertaining way, how race is performed in order to

navigate the treacherous landscape of public racial discourse, and how the strategies depicted here are legitimated by authorities with symbolic power. Attention is focused on the way instructors manage white and non-white racial discourse in the comedy school as students learn to engage in public racial discourse in a color-blind society. Such racial discourse, which is ostensibly disavowed in public, often relies on stereotypical racial depictions and serves to reinforce racial ideologies and distinctions, despite intent from both whites and non-whites.

The liberating element of humor is generally taken to be a weapon used by traditionally oppressed groups (e.g. racial, ethnic and gender minorities). "Ethnic humor," suggests Boskin (1979), is often acknowledged for its "liberatory" and "rebellious" potential, where scholars note the humor of "Negros" and "Jews" as subversive acts against oppression. The prominent narrative of oppression in the post-civil rights period, however, is one where the dominant group feels oppressed. Legalized racial integration, the culture of political correctness which limits racial discourse by whites in particular, affirmative action policies that whites believe disadvantage more qualified whites in favor of less qualified "token" minorities, all create a sense of unfairness and oppression for the "former oppressor." If indeed humor serves to liberate censured behavior (Bakhtin 1968; Eliasoph 1998), we should expect more, not less, overt racial discourse through humor in the post-racial and color-blind eras.

It is important, therefore, to pay close attention to the shifting racial discourse in the world of comedy as a critical site where a *new racial discourse* is tested and normalized. It may further be argued that such discourse is a preview of what is to come in a post-racial U.S., where comedians are "ahead of their time." As Bakhtin (1984) noted, "a carnival sense of the world" begins to permeate life outside the carnival. The rise of racial/racist humor in the color-blind era

suggests a turn from prior decades where others have documented the constraints that limit whites in particular from engaging in racial humor freely in public (Apte 1987; Berger 1993).

Stanley (2007) also observes the shift in comedic race discourse from one where "only non-white comics could get away with provocative material about blacks," to a discourse where "white comedians are increasingly testing the limits of taste and mock intolerance." Comedians Andrew Dice Clay and Ted Danson, for instance, faced public criticism for breaching norms of appropriate racial (and gender) discourse during the late 80's and early 90's. And while Michael Richards illustrates the persisting limits of white engagement in racial discourse in comedy, the color-blind era and the persistent attack against a culture of political correctness (Eliasoph 1998; Fairclough 2003) appears to have ushered in a new racial discourse where (white) comedians, under the banner of free speech, are at the forefront of a more openly racial/racist public discourse. Comedians Daniel Tosh and Jeff Dunham, for example, are noted for bravely venturing into racist discourse others avoid (Hibberd 2011; Mooallem 2009). While more research is needed to support this hypothesis, one need only pay attention to the increasing trend of the use of humor and the *carnivalesque* to rupture the constraints of public racial discourse in the color-blind era (e.g. on college campuses, in the workplace, in politics, in other forms of media) to suggest this possibility.

While Stanley (2007) acknowledges the potential pitfalls of "defying political correctness" as emboldening "genuine racists to join in the fun," Billig's (2001, 2005) study of racist humor among white supremacist organizations is such an example. Weaver (2010b, 2011) also contends that racist humor, as a rhetorical device, can support racist discourse, while Santa Ana (2009) notes that racist jokes can impact public perceptions of racial minorities, particularly when broadcast to millions of viewers regarding their perceived "threats."

In this sense, stand-up comedy is a "race-making institution." At the micro-level, Omi and Winant suggest that "racial projects" are maintained in part through the everyday common sense assumptions about racialized others. In the everyday, stereotypes allow us to consciously and unconsciously "notice" race (Omi and Winant 1994: 59). The implication that people are laughing at stereotypes, which are the currency of comedy, may suggest that it is appropriate racial discourse, whether or not performers believe to be engaging in stereotypical or subversive discourse. At the macro-level, scholars note the "humor industry" is a very profitable and increasingly influential venture (Apte 1987; Boskin 1979; Gilbert 2004; Santa Ana 2009). Race based comedy, therefore, preserves what Feagin (2010) calls the "white racial frame." That is, racism is not solely a question of individual prejudice, but of actors legitimizing racial hierarchies, reinforcing racial power structures and reproducing racial ideologies (Feagin 2010). Van Dijk (1993a) reminds us that some actors have more power and influence than others.

However, the point is not only that peripheral "genuine racists" might be emboldened through the mainstreaming of racist comedy, but that the unique and frequently unchallenged (re)production of racism *through* humor more generally fits within the larger logic of a shifting racial discourse in public. The implication of a more critical assessment of race based humor, therefore, is not the enforcement of a politically correct discourse, but rather to "make the familiar strange" (Mills 1959) by pulling the veil and challenging commonly held notions about the nature of such humor in society as "just a joke."

Chapter 4

Diversity in Comedy…Who Cares? Race and Gender Trends in Best Comedy Grammy Nominees from 1959-2015

This chapter is a time-series analysis of the racial and gender demographic trends of winners and nominees in Grammy Award for "Best Comedy Album," the longest running prize in commercial comedy in the U.S. Using five year moving averages, I measure the cultural impact of the civil rights movement on this award by analyzing the race and gender trends of exclusion and inclusion from civil rights movement to the present. I find the civil rights movement had a significant impact on racial inclusion (but not gender) until the mid 1980s. While the current data suggests there is greater gender diversity in recent years, it also illustrates a trend toward racial re-segregation, a pattern that has been found in other cultural and economic domains, such as housing, education, and private sector employment.

"In the years prior to the civil rights movement, the black comic persona occupied clearly delineated spaces for black and white audiences. Crossing over, while possible for a few, required strict adherence to codes of conduct that did not transparently challenge the race relations of the day."

Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad* (2007: 2)

"[T]he rise of new social movements… began around 1970 to claim a significant share of the cultural field and to reshape it along more representative, if not precisely more democratic, lines… seen as our most prominent barometer of group status, prizes have played an enormous role in the emergence of minoritarian and oppositional cultures into positions of visibility and esteem."

John English, *The Economy of Prestige* (2005: 78)

"People think it's the census or something, I mean that this has gotta represent the actual pie-chart of America. Who cares?... Funny is the world I live in. You're funny I'm interested. You're not funny, I'm not interested … I have no interest in gender or race or anything like that. But everyone else is kind of, with their little calculating , 'is this the exact right mix,' you know, I

think that's uh… to me it's anti-comedy, it's anti-comedy, it's more about, you know, PC non-sense, than, 'are you making us laugh or not?'"

Jerry Seinfeld, *CBS This Morning* Interview (2014)

Introduction

In a recent interview with comedian Jerry Seinfeld, currently one of highest grossing comedians in the world (Forbes 2013), Peter Lauria, business editor at Buzzfeed, posed a seemingly innocuous question concerning the lack of racial/gender diversity on his hit new show, *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*. "Oh this really pisses me off" was Seinfeld's initial reaction to the question. His dismissive response to the lack of diversity in comedy was not taken lightly as critics pointed out the lack of racial and gender diversity in the world of comedy more generally (Rothman 2014). On the surface, Seinfeld's comments appeal to notions of merit. From his perspective, the lack of diversity in comedy is irrelevant if the goal is to spotlight those who make us laugh. However, it is worth considering how such logic has also been used to maintain inequality in other spaces, such as keeping women out of universities (Graham 1978), gays out of the military (Stiehm 1999), and blacks out of neighborhoods (Massey 1993). Applying this logic to the world of comedy also rings false considering that many of the icons of comedy are comedians of color (Haggins 2007; Zoglin 2008).

However, upon closer examination the issue of diversity and representation in comedy reveals a longer history of exclusion and inclusion, as well as struggles over representation, meaning and esteem. According to Apte (1987), while the "sense of humor" can be viewed as a core cultural value in American society, the "sense of humor" in the U.S. has changed overtime as it has reflected and influenced the social and political landscape (Boskin 1997). For instance, one of the dominant forms of humor during the pre-civil rights period was blackface minstrelsy.

This genre of comedy consisted of whites imitating and ridiculing African Americans, and was one of the most popular forms of humor from the pre-civil war period to the pre-civil rights era (Boskin 1986; Lott 2013; Rogin 1996). Today, blackface is considered a racist and tasteless kind of performance. That is, *what* and *who* we find funny has changed overtime.

Among the most celebrated and influential producers of humor in contemporary American society is the comedian (Boskin 1997; Gillota 2013; Mintz 1985). Comedians are known for providing incisive social commentary on and off the stage, and can be viewed as modern day "shamans" whose witty observations often reveal deeper sociological meaning (Mintz 1985). Therefore, when a prominent comedian like Jerry Seinfeld breaks from his comedic persona to seriously frame and discuss the issue of diversity in comedy as "anti-comedy," Seinfeld rhetorically suggests that the question itself is not only humorless, but dangerous as it threatens to distort the core value of an "American sense of humor." Yet, ethnic/racial and gender diversity in comedy have greatly contributed to the "American sense of humor" as some of the most visible and celebrated comedians since the civil rights era (e.g. Lenny Bruce, Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Joan Rivers, Whoopi Goldberg) played significant roles in popularizing and shaping the genre of stand-up comedy as an entertaining and insightful cultural practice in contemporary American society. Therefore, the central question for this paper will focus on the trends of ethnic/racial and gender inclusion since the civil rights era: what are the patterns of racial and gender segregation and integration in comedy, and what do they look like overtime?

I will analyze the diversity of stand-up comedy over the last five decades by observing the demographic trends of winners and nominees in the Grammy Award's "best comedy Album" prize from 1959-2015. This is the longest running and most consistent award given to comedians

from the civil rights era to the present. As English (2005) suggests, since the civil rights era "prizes have played an enormous role in the emergence of minoritarian and oppositional cultures into positions of visibility and esteem" (78). Therefore, the Grammy Award will serve as a useful cultural indicator to measure the question of racial and gender diversity in this culture industry. The core interest in this paper is an examination of the race/ethnicity trends, and I include gender trends for comparative purposes. This study will be useful to further our understanding of the impact of the civil rights movement on the diversity within cultural fields since the civil rights era (English 2005), as well as highlight the ongoing trends toward racial exclusion and re-segregation in the entertainment industry (Hunt et al. 2015).

Segregated Comedy

Until the civil rights period, comedy, much like everything else in the U.S., was largely segregated across a strict color-line, between black and white (Haggins 2007). A major feature in pre-civil rights era comedy consisted of ethnic and racial ridicule, blackface minstrelsy being the most prominent example. The genre was largely comprised of white performers in painted black faces, and consisted of song, dance, acrobatics and stage gags performed by whites as they imitated, ridiculed and juxtaposed African American buffoonery against an emerging Anglo-American culture and sensibility (Lhamon 1998; Lott 2013). A major feature of blackface was the "stump speech" in which blackface performers spoke to the audience in a "black" English dialect. Although the stump speech portrayed African Americans as ignorant, childish, absurd, and pretentious to the amusement of a predominantly white male audience, it was in these speeches where humorists made social observations and commented on the social and political

issues of the day (Lott 2013; Roediger 1999). The stump speech has been viewed as the predecessor of contemporary American stand-up comedy (Toll 1974; Watkins 1994).

A majority of early blackface minstrel performers were white, middle class northerners, such as Dan Emmett and Thomas D. Rice. Marginalized white ethnic groups, such as the Irish and Jewish, also played important roles in developing the genre of blackface during the late 19th and early 20th century. Scholars suggest blackface allowed white ethnics to distance their ethnic identity and assimilate into whiteness (Lott 2013;Roediger 1999; Rogin 1996). African Americans were largely excluded from performing in blackface minstrelsy until the post-civil war era (Sotiropoulos 2009). When they were allowed to perform, these new blackface artists projected themselves as "authentic" blacks, although they did so by adhering to racial ridicule and stereotypes set in place by white performers in blackface (Boskin and Dorinson 1985). This form of racial ridicule was a major part of the "American sense of humor" until the 1950's.

During the early part of the 20th century, blackface was also adapted to various kinds of performance (e.g. theater, opera, vaudeville) and technologies (e.g. radio, television, animation). Although few black comedians performed on television and film during the first half of the 20th century, those that did often had to reproduce images of blacks as buffoonish, ignorant and lazy (Sotiropoulos 2009). For instance, Lincoln Perry, better known as "Step'n Fetchit," became the first black actor to become a millionaire by portraying the popular comic stereotype of a lazy Negro (Watkins 2010). Due to segregation and the continuation of racial ridicule, African Americans developed spaces for black artists to perform and contest dominant racial narratives. Known as the "Chitlin' Circuit," these venues consisted of a series of clubs in the north-east, south, and upper mid-west. Many celebrated black artists of the mid 20th century emerged from the Chitlin' Circuit into the mainstream (Watkins 1999). Jewish performers also carved out their

own performance spaces, such as the Borscht Belt in the Catskills Mountains in New York (Epstein 2001). It is worth noting that these were not comedy clubs in the contemporary sense, but performance venues more generally, where singers, dancers, musicians, comedians, etc. shared the stage. However, unlike blacks, Jewish spaces were not an explicit result of legalized racial segregation (Gillota 2013).

Not only were these segregated spaces safe zones for marginalized groups to express themselves artistically, but until the civil rights era it was primarily in these and other zones where non-whites were able to talk among themselves explicitly and frankly about their marginal status in society. It would not be until the post WWII period and the civil rights era that Jewish and blacks comedians brought their backstage private discussions of segregation and racism to the frontstage for a white public (Boskin and Dorinson 1985; Epstein 2001; Haggins 2007).

However, one of the most consistent and overlooked forms of segregation in comedy has been between male and female performers (Gilbert 2004; Gillota 2013). As Gilbert (2004) observes, performance comedy in the US has been a male dominated field. The notion that women "lack a sense of humor" or are "not as funny as men," Gilbert contends, are powerful cultural narratives that contribute to this "humor divide." Similarly, Brottman (2004) argues that comedy in the US is a world of "male heterosexual machismo," noting that few male comics have been openly gay, and until recently popular female comedians were rare. Yet, Unterbrink (1987) illustrates that there is a long tradition of women in American comedy. Dating back to the mid-1880s, Unterbink points to prominent female performers throughout the development of various comedy genres (e.g. vaudeville, burlesque, stand-up, situation comedy, etc.). However, she notes that men have played a dominant role as both performers and hiring decision makers. It is worth mentioning here that "womanface," in which men dress as women, don wigs, wear

makeup, and use a falsetto voice all for comedic effect remains largely acceptable and common in comedy.

But if women have been marginalized in comedy, women of color were doubly subjected to a marginal status. As comedian Dick Gregory, one of the first African American stand-up comedians to cross over and be accepted by white mainstream audiences, noted during celebrated comedian Jackie “Moms” Mabley’s funeral in 1975 “had she been white, she’d have been known fifty years ago” (Unterbink 1987: 82).

Stand-Up Comedy and the Civil Rights Era

The civil rights movement drastically changed the social, cultural, political and economic landscape of the U.S. by presenting a fundamental challenge to a segregated society. During and after the civil rights movement virtually every sphere of American society began to grow more integrated along race, as well as gender, lines – though rarely without a fight. Schools, housing, public and private establishments and occupations, and cultural industries like sports and entertainment evolved slowly, often painfully, toward racial/ethnic inclusion. This era of “Great Transformation,” contend Omi and Winant (2014), was the result of a broad based movement that sought to end racism by working to push the U.S. away from a “racial dictatorship” and towards a “racial democracy.” Legislative efforts to institutionalize integration took shape in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination based on race and gender in particular. According to Stainback and Devey (2012), the Civil Rights act was a tremendous legislative achievement that contributed to increasing integration of the U.S., though they find the pace of integration has stalled since the 1980s.

The evolution of the cultural industry of stand-up comedy coincided with this massive movement for social change in three important ways: politically, stylistically, and technologically. First, people of color began to protest ethnic and racial ridicule that was prevalent in the pre-civil rights era. That is, communities of color who were no longer tolerating the injury of racial insult. For instance, popular "sambo-like" characters, such as those on the comedy show "Amos and Andy," were being challenged by the NAACP and other civil rights groups as an extension of blackface minstrelsy during the early 1950s and were taken off the air (Boskin 1987). Other groups, such as Chicano media activists, were contesting comedian Bill Dana and his buffoonish Latino minstrel character José Jiménez during the late 1960s (Pérez 2014). Earlier in the 20th century, Kibler (2009) illustrates how Irish and Jewish communities used similar efforts to contest insulting portrayals of their respective groups. This kind of political opposition to ethnic and racial ridicule, along with a growing civil rights movement, made it more challenging to ridicule and target non-whites in public during and after the civil rights era (Apte 1987). An irony of such efforts, however, is that they also contributed to a "whitening" of television programming and other media by delegitimizing the characters blacks and other non-whites played and were typically given.

Second was the development and emergence of a new style of stand-up comedy. According to Nachman (2003), post-war era comedians were "skillful and resourceful joke-tellers," but they were not concerned with openly confronting socio-political issues through comedy. As Nachman suggests, "they were jovial go-along get-along guys whose mandate was to amuse…. entertainers who had no public world view" and that "[t]hey were efficient but anonymous joke merchants" (22). In contrast, Nachman contends the "new wave of comics" that emerged during the early 1950s were more willing to talk openly about ongoing social issues like

segregation, political corruption, and wars abroad. Their style was more laid-back, conversational, controversial, topical, and personal. During the late 50s and early 60s, comedians like Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce and Dick Gregory shared their satiric commentary in coffeehouses and college campuses, instead of traditional showrooms, and were some of the most influential performers to shape the style of stand-up comedy that is most familiar today. While Mintz (2008) suggests that this new style of comedy was not exactly new, pointing to earlier humorists like Mark Twain who used "comedic lectures" as a form of social and political satire and commentary, he contends that this new period in U.S. comedy did begin to open up to previously excluded groups, such as African Americans and women. For instance, it was during this period that comedian Dick Gregory became one of the first black comedians to perform in front of white and integrated audiences in a non "sambo-like" role. According to Haggins (2007), while the pre-civil rights era demarcated comedy through segregated spaces between black and white, "the civil rights moment marked the beginning of black humor's potential power as an unabashed tool for social change" (4).

Finally, new advancements in recording technology allowed for the mass production and consumption of comedy record albums. While comedy recordings were in circulation as early as the 1890s in "wax cylinder" recordings, and increased in popularity during the early 1910s with the emergence of "disc-shaped records," the recording capacity on these records was only a few minutes and they were largely luxury and novelty items. It was not until 1948 that "Long Play" discs, or LP's, could store nearly an hour of sound and became available for mass consumption (Nachman 2003; Smith 1988). This transformed the consumption of comedy as it allowed for the production of "comedy albums," which local disc jockeys played to help publicize records and performances and made many comedians at the time overnight stars (Nachman 2003: 17). Thus,

it was a combination of these three changes in and out of the comedy industry that contributed to the expansive "comedy boom" of the post-civil rights era and beyond (Zoglin 2008). Awards for commercially available performances (e.g. musical, comedic, etc.) would soon follow.

However, Gillota (2013) contends that although the civil rights movement did open up the arena of comedy to non-white performers, the same was not the case for women. And while the brashness of the "new wave" of male comics was celebrated as "edgy" and "hip," the gatekeepers of comedy, like the *Tonight Show's* Johnny Carson, publically stated their disinterest in female comics:

> "When a gal does 'stand-up' one-liners she has to overcome that built-in identification as a retiring, meek woman... if a woman comes out and starts firing one-liners, those little abrasive things, you can take it from a man… but from a woman, sometimes, it just doesn't fit too well" (Knoedelseder 2009: 78).

This male-centric view of comedy has only continued to persist. For instance Eddie Brill, stand-up comedy booker for the *Late Show* with David Letterman suggested that "[t]here are a lot less female comics who are authentic," when asked about the lack of female performers appearing on the *Late Show*. "I see a lot of female comics who to please an audience will act like men." The interview brought to light Brill's continued pattern of discrimination and exclusion of female comedians from the show which resulting in Brill being fired. Numerous comedians commented on Brill's behavior, including comedian Elayne Boosler who suggested, "sexism, racism, closed doors & ignorance in ANY field in 2012 are unacceptable." (Itzkoff 2012).

Prizes and the Study of Culture

The 20th century, suggests John English author of *The Economy of Prestige*, has been the century of awards. From the Nobel Peace Prize to the Oscar, English notes that the cultural practice of awarding prizes has become one of the most "ubiquitous features of cultural life, touching every corner of the cultural universe, from classical music to tattoo art, hair styling and food photography" (English 2005: 2). While the practice of awards dates back to at least the Greek Arts and Drama competitions of 6th century BC, English suggests that the recent "prize frenzy" reflects the rapid expansion of a commercialized culture in a rapidly changing cultural economy. It is not surprising, therefore, that an award is issued to a core American value like the sense of humor (Apte 1987).

English contends that cultural prizes are not created in a political vacuum, but are shaped by prevailing social inequalities of class, race, gender and nationality (English 2005: 27). For instance, by the 1960s the rise of new social movements, according to English, "began…to claim a significant share of the cultural field and to reshape it along more representative, if not precisely more democratic lines." However, borrowing from Bourdieu (1984), English also contends that prizes play a critical role in the "management of tastes."

In order to analyze the demographic changes in stand-up comedy from the civil rights era to the present, I will focus on the winners and nominees in the Grammy Awards best comedy album from 1959-2015. It is worth noting that the award does not include all comedians throughout this period, but reflects the "tastes" of the award voting body which is comprised of the creative members of the recording industry. The voting body includes artists, conductors, songwriters, engineers, as so on, who are involved in and familiar with the creative process. Record companies can submit nominations but they are not allowed to vote. Entries are screened by experts in particular fields and voted on by members in good dues standing. The award

winners are revealed on the televised screening of the award (grammys.org 2015). As Hunt and Ramon (2015) suggest, the overwhelming majority of industry professionals is typically white and male.

According to the original mission of the award, drafted by comedian Stan Freberg, the goal of the Grammys was to celebrate "artistic excellence" and not album sales. "We shall judge a record on the basis of sheer artistry, and artistry alone… Sales and mass popularity are the yard sticks of the record business… They are not the yard sticks of the academy" (Schipper 1992: 6). Despite the plea of "artistic purity," English suggests that the Grammys are among the most commercial awards, and that being nominated or winning an award generally boosts album sales (English 2005: 332). While there are numerous awards given to American comedians and humorists, from "Oddfest" and "The Commie Awards," to the "The Mark Twain prize for American Humor" and "The American Comedy Awards," most other awards have not been around as long as the Grammys, and others are no longer active. Other gatekeepers of comedy include television personalities and shows, such as *The Tonight Show* and the *Late Show*. As Nachman suggests, during the 1950s Ed Sullivan played a major role in filtering comedy tastes for American audiences during his tenure (Nachman 2003: 21). Knoedelseder (2009) and Gilbert (2004) note that female comedians generally experienced a higher degree of discrimination on such shows.

From the 1960s onward, the Grammy Award played a prominent role in the celebration and management of comedic talent and tastes. The National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences (NARAS) created the Grammy Award in 1957 in an effort to distinguish "good music" from "bad music." The creation of the Grammy Award also coincides with the three changes in the comedy industry discussed above. While the Grammy Award is largely an award for music,

from the beginning comedy albums were included as an award worthy category. This is not surprising considering the intimate relationship music, dance, and comedy (bundled together as "vaudeville") shared on the stage in the U.S. during the early 20th century (Gilbert 1963; Trav 2006). Yet, it is worth mentioning that not all genres and performers were equally valued by the Grammys. "Rock and roll," for instance, was excluded during the formative years of the award because the founders believed it to be a "vulgar" and passing fad (Schipper 1992). As a result, the early award categories and nominees largely reflected the tastes of its founders and members. That is, this award serves as an archive which can be used not only to analyze evolving preferences in styles of music and comedy, but because the development of the award coincides with a mass movement for racial and gender equality, it also provides a unique opportunity to track the demographic representation of performers, in this case comedians, to measure the impact the civil rights movement had (or did not have) on stand-up comedy.

Data and Methods

In order to analyze the demographic changes of comedians from the civil rights era to the present, I chose to focus on the Grammy Award and its category for "best comedy album" for two reasons: a) this award is consistent from 1959 to the present (although the title of the award changes a few times). The consistency of this award allowed me to track the diversity of performers over this time period. b) The longevity and timing of the award – which first appeared during the early years of the civil rights movement – provided me a rough gauge of the impact the civil rights movement on the demographics of this culture industry.

Most of my data came from the Recording Academy in March 2011. The "Grammy History Summary Report" provided by the Recording Academy contains a listing of winners and nominees, along with the album titles and record labels. However, the summary provided was

incomplete. The list of winners and nominees included were from 1958-1992 and from 2003-2009. In order to fill in these gaps I cross referenced numerous websites that contained award information in order to fill in the list from 1993-2002 and 2010-2015. As of February 2015, a complete list is available on Wikipedia.

I compiled demographic information for each performer into my data set (n = 319). I made use of performer websites, books on stand-up comedy and comedians, and Wikipedia entries to determine ethnic/racial background and gender of nominees and winners. This was especially important for determining Jewish identity for performers. In the event I was unable to find ethnic identification for Jewish performers, I labeled such performers as "white," and for most purposes below I count Jewish performers as white (Brodkin 1998). Cross tabulations by race/ethnicity and gender were used to determine the demographics of performers since 1959 and 5 year moving averages from 1959-2015 were used to measure these trends over time.

Diversity in Comedy

The following tables illustrate the diversity of performers included in the Grammy Awards category "Best Comedy Album" from 1959-2015. Table 1(n = 319) shows the total proportion of winners and nominees by race/ethnicity and gender. Most strikingly, the data illustrates that men dominate this award category and take home roughly 90% of nominations throughout this 5 decade period. To put this in perspective, according to the 2014 Hollywood Diversity Report, women currently account for 26% of lead actor roles in theatrical films (Hunt et al. 2014). Therefore, this finding is consistent with Gilbert's (2004) observation that women have been marginally represented in commercial stand-up comedy and reflects common sense notions that suggest women are not as funny as men (Hitchens 2007).

In Table 1, we also see that whites dominate this award, and white males take half of all nominations. If we combine Jews and whites, whites take about 80% of all nominations for his award. Jewish comedians in this award are the most over represented ethnic group, accounting for 23% of winners and nominees, while only comprising between 2-3% of the overall population throughout this period. However, it is mostly Jewish men who are represented in this category, as Jewish women only account for 9 out of 74 nominations. In Table 2 we see that only one award has been given to a Jewish woman. Elaine May shared the award with comedy partner Mike Nichols in 1962 for their album "An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May."

Table 1. All Nominees 1959-2015.

	White	**Jewish**	**Black**	**Latino**	**Asian**	**Total**
Male	157 (.50)	65 (.20)	42 (.13)	9 (.03)	7 (.02)	**280 (.88)**
Female	21 (.06)	9 (.03)	6 (.02)	0 (0)	3 (.01)	**39 (.12)**
Total	178 (.56)	74 (.23)	48 (.15)	9 (.03)	10 (.03)	**319 (100%)**

The representation of African Americans at 15% of winners and nominees closely reflects their overall demographic representation of roughly 12%. Again, it is also predominantly black males being nominated, as 42 of 48 nominations have gone to black male comics. Latina/os are the most underrepresented group in this category with 9 nominations. While it is important to point out that during the 1960s Latinos comprised roughly 3-4% of the population, today Latinos have rapidly increased to over 16% of the population. That is, the inclusion of Latinos in the award has not kept pace with demographic shifts. No Latina has appeared in this award. Finally, Asian American performers most closely reflect their demographic figures at 3% of winners and nominees, while the gender representation for Asian Americans is the least disparate.

Figure 2 (n = 61) includes award winners only from 1959-2015 and illustrates that the overall gender gap is wider when we focus on who wins the award. Here we see women sharply drop from 12% of nominees to less than 7% of the winner pool. In contrast, the representation of African Americans doubles from 15% to 30% when we look at the winner pool. However, only one African American woman has received the award, Whoopi Goldberg in 1986.

Table 2. Winners Only 1959-2015.

	White	**Jewish**	**Black**	**Latino**	**Asian**	**Total**
Male	28 (.46)	10 (.16)	17 (.28)	1 (.02)	1 (.02)	**57 (.93)**
Female	2 (.03)	1 (.02)	1 (.02)	0 (0)	0 (0)	**4 (.07)**
Total	30 (.49)	11 (.18)	18 (.30)	1 (.02)	1 (.02)	**61 (100%)**

It is worth mentioning that numerous artists are nominated and awarded multiple years to have a better understanding of how prizes and awards also function as a producer of "stardom" (English 2005: 3). For instance, in Table 1 comedian George Carlin is nominated 16 times during the award's history, the highest of any comedian, followed by Bill Cosby with 13 nominations and Richard Pryor with 10. Together, these three comedians account for roughly 13% of the winners and nominees, greater than the overall inclusion of women in this award.

Therefore, in Tables 3 and 4 I focus on the spread of performers by only counting each performer once. By excluding multiple entries, we see that the gender gap is somewhat narrowed, as illustrated in Table 3 (n = 148) where women now account for 15% of winners and nominees.

Table 3. All Nominees 1959-2015 (counted once).

	White	Jewish	Black	Latino	Asian	Total
Male	75 (.51)	32 (.22)	14 (.10)	2 (.01)	2(1.4)	**125 (.85)**
Female	10 (.07)	7 (.05)	5 (.03)	0 (0)	1 (.7)	**23 (.15)**
Total	85 (.58)	38 (.27)	19 (.13)	2 (.01)	3 (.02)	**148 (100%)**

However, if we look at who actually wins the awards in Figure 4 (n = 35), we see that the ratio once again approaches 9:1. In Table 4 I find that only 4 women have won the award since 1959: Elaine May in 1962; Lily Tomlin, a decade later in 1972; Whoopi Goldberg in 1986; and Kathy Griffin in 2014.

Table 4. Winners 1959-2015 (counted once).

	White	Jewish	Black	Latino	Asian	Total
Male	15 (.43)	9 (.26)	5 (.14)	1 (.03)	1 (.03)	**31 (.89)**
Female	2 (.06)	1 (.03)	1 (.03)	0 (0)	0 (0)	**4 (.11)**
Total	17 (.49)	10 (.29)	6 (.17)	1 (.03)	1 (.03)	**35 (100%)**

Only 2 Latinos have appeared on this list-- Cheech Marin and George Lopez, and 3 Asians-- Tommy Chong of *Cheech and Chong*, Kamal Ahmed of the *Jerky Boys,* and Margaret Cho. Latinos and Asians have not received an award in over 4 decades, when duo Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong won for their 1974 album “Los Cochinos.”

Table 5. Race/Ethnicity in the U.S. 1960-2010 (census.gov, gallup.com)

Race/Ethnic Group	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
White	88.6%	87.7%	83.1%	80.3%	75.1%	72.4%
Black	10.5%	11.1%	11.7%	12.1%	12.3%	12.6%
Asian and Pacific Islander	0.5%	0.8%	1.5%	2.9%	3.8%	4.9%
Hispanic (of any race)	3.2%	4.4%	6.4%	9.0%	12.5%	16.3%
Non-Hispanic White	85.4%	83.5%	79.6%	75.6%	69.1%	63.7%
Jewish		2.6%				1.7%

Table 6. Sex in the U.S. 1970-2010 (census.gov, Gibson 2012)

Sex	1970	2010
Female	51.3%	50.8%
Male	48.7%	49.2%

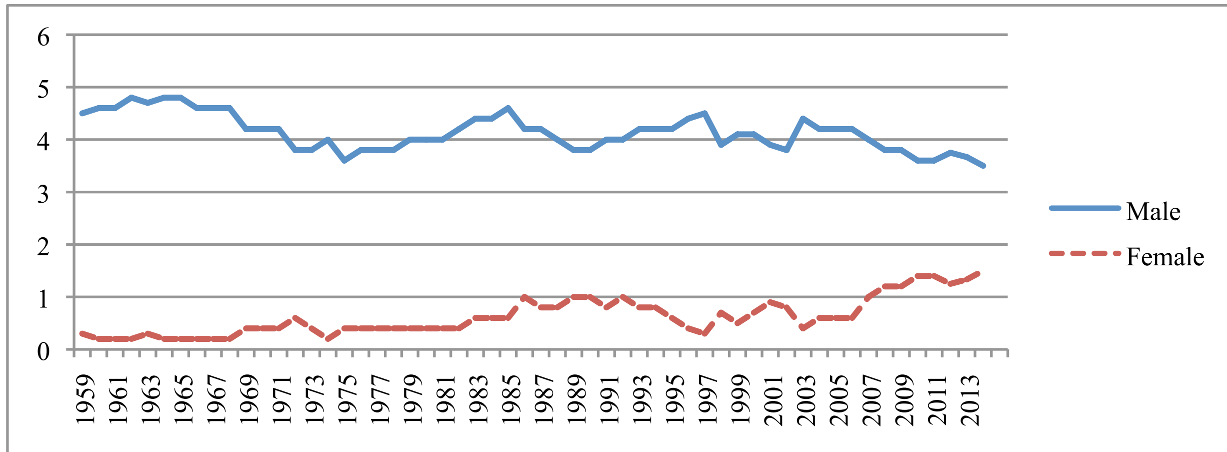
Trends Over Time

The tables above provide an indication of the overall diversity of performers in this award over this five decade period. However, the graphs that follow illustrate the trends over time using 5-year moving averages. Generally, 4 to 6 records are nominated per year. In order to "smooth" my moving averages I counted each album as 1 entry and proportioned out the performers to share a nomination when a nominated record included multiple performers. For instance, while Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong are nominated and receive awards, I divide their shared nomination into 1 entry. This strategy allowed me to capture and track trends over time most effectively.

For instance, while the figures above illustrate that the inclusion of women in this award has been marginal, that roughly 1 out of 10 nominations has gone to women and that only 4 women have won in the awards history, in Figure 1 below we can see that women are being nominated with greater frequency over the last decade. This trend reflects the more recent and widespread inclusion and celebration of female comedians in the entertainment industry (Kohen 2012). However, it is worth mentioning that the most visible aspect of this trend is the increased presence of white women. Apart from Margaret Cho, the only other non-white female comedians to appear in this award in recent decades are African American comedians Laura Hays, Adele Givens, Sommore, and Mo'Nique who share a nomination for their 2001 album "The Queens of Comedy." Whoopi Goldberg is the last and only African American female comedian to win since 1985. Overall, while the civil rights and women's rights movements failed to impact the inclusion of women immediately, the current trend indicates that the gender gap is steadily

narrowing for this award. Nonetheless, the most striking thing about these findings is the persistent and steady exclusion of women.

Figure 1. All Nominees 1959-2015 (5 year moving averages by gender)

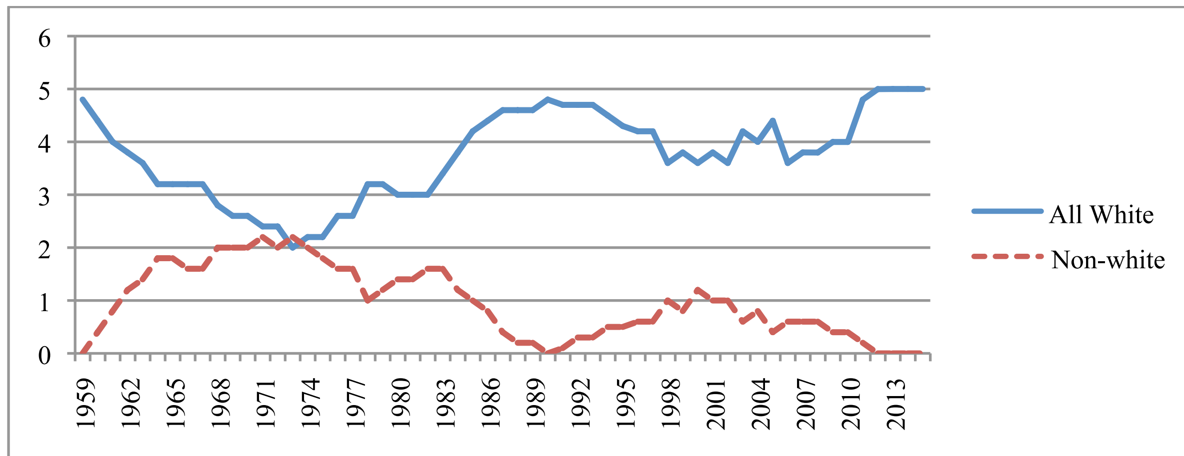


As for trends in racial inclusion in this award the reverse is true. That is, while the inclusion of (white) women has shifted from low levels of inclusion to slightly higher levels today, the inclusion of non-whites has sharply decreased since the mid 1980s. For instance, the presence of non-whites, blacks in particular, was relatively high during the civil rights era. In Figure 2 below we can see the inclusion of non-whites increased during the civil right period, peaked around 1972, and began to decline quickly by the early 1980s. In other words, the civil rights era and the years immediately following this period were the most racially inclusive to date in this award.

During the late 80s and early 90s few to no comedians of color were being nominated for this award. From the mid 1990s to mid 2000s there is a slight increase in the number of non-white comedians, following the emergence of Chris Rock (1998, 2000, 2006), Margaret Cho (2002, 2004, 2011), and George Lopez (2004, 2008, 2010). However, Chris Rock is the last performer of color to win in a decade with his 2005 album “Never Scared.”

In other words, what these contrasting trends indicate is that while the gender gap in this award category is steadily shrinking over the last decade, the racial gap has widened since the 1980s.

Figure 2. All Nominees 1959-2015 (5 year moving averages by race/ethnicity).



From Racial Inclusion to Exclusion

During the formative years of the Grammy Award, black comics began to cross the color-line as a few were anointed with mainstream commercial appeal (Haggins 2007). Two of the most prominent early black comedians were Dick Gregory, who grew active in the mid-1950s, and Bill Cosby, who grew active in the early 1960s. As noted in the data above, Cosby was highly regarded by the Grammys and received a total of 13 nominations over his career, second only to George Carlin who received 16. Cosby's appeal to white audiences in particular has been much discussed and attributed to his ability to transgress racial barriers with his comedy, much of which centered on his early childhood experiences and was noted for the absence of racetalk (Haggins 2007; Watkins 1994). That is, Cosby was celebrated for espousing rhetoric of color-blindness (Dyson 2005; Haggins 2007). In this way, Cosby was appealing and unthreatening to whites during a period of intense racial conflict.

In contrast, one of the most glaring exclusions in the Grammy Award is that of comedian Dick Gregory. Gregory was also one of the most visible comedians during the early 1960s. He was one of the first black comics to perform in white venues and appear on the Ed Sullivan show (the gatekeeper of comedy in the 1950s), and produced 13 comedy albums during the 60s and 70s, none of which were ever nominated by the Grammys. Unlike Cosby, Gregory was known for being a vocal critic of racial inequality and Jim Crow segregation in his comedy and was an active participant in the civil rights movement, escalating his criticism against racism and militarism throughout this period (Haggins 2007; Iton 2008; Watkins 1999). By the late 1970s, however, Gregory was largely excluded from the Hollywood mainstream for his political views (Haggins 2007). That is, in contrast to Cosby, Gregory was seen as a threatening figure and his exclusion from the award can be seen as an effort to obscure and bury his critical public discourse from the mainstream. This was not the case for white comics who held critical and anti-establishment views, as comics like Mort Sahl, Lenny Bruce and George Carlin were nominated multiple times. Therefore, what the Grammys reflected was not only a matter of "artistic excellence" but a political perspective on racial issues as well.

Thus, it is worth considering how other non-white comics highly regarded by the award fit into the racial logic of the Grammys. Black comics like Richard Pryor and Flip Wilson brought a seemingly "authentic" black comic persona to the stage with their "urban" sensibilities and street-talk, and comic portrayals of ghetto life during the 60s-80s (Haggins 2007; Watkins 1994, 2002). Pryor in particular rose to commercial stardom and received numerous awards and nominations from the Grammys as an infamous ambassador of the "N-word," a choice he would latter come to regret and publically denounce (Haggins 2007). Other non-whites, like Cheech Marin and Tommy Chong, were nominated multiple times by rendering portrayals of Latinos and

Asians and drug-stupefied buffoons. In other words, while the award was generally careful to exclude critical non-whites voices, it largely celebrated and advanced two kinds of non-white comic personas during the civil rights period: Non-threatening and color-blind, or neo-minstrel self-deprecating fools.

In the post-civil rights and post-Richard Pryor era, and with the emergence of cable television, many comedians of color became more emboldened to discuss their experiences as racial and ethnic minorities (Iton 2008; Watkins 1999). The HBO series Def Comedy Jam in the early 1990s, for instance, began to showcase many new African American comedians with a "black perspective." A spin-off series, Loco Slam, showcased new Latino comics. Again, male comedians comprised the majority of these performers. It is likely the racial/ethno-centered perspectives of this new cohort of comedians of color was off-putting to Grammy voters, largely comprised of whites (Schipper 1992), during a period where the emergence of a "color-blind" ideology and discourse was gaining significant traction. The emerging discourse of "color-blindness" suggested that racism and racial inequality would dissipate if people simply "stopped talking about race" (Bonilla-Silva 2013).

However, as race scholars contend, color-blind discourse is often followed by an absence of racial minorities (Bonilla Silva 2013; Omi and Winant 2014). Indeed, between 1988 and 1995 no comedians of color appear in this award. During this period, white comics dominate this space and largely adhere to a "color-blind" logic. For instance, Peter Schikele wins an award 4 years in a row during this period, from 1990 to 1993. Schikele is a white classical music composer and his comedy centers on lectures of fictional composer P.D.Q Bach, a fictional child of Johann Sebastian Bach. Needless to say, there was no racetalk in Schikele's comedy.

It would not be until the emergence of Chris Rock in the mid-1990s that a new "black superstar" would emerge in this award. What distinguished Rock from many of his contemporary black comics was his unabashedly critical observations about the "black underclass" in a way that reflected and reinforced a disparaging rhetoric of poor blacks. For instance, in his controversial routine "Black People vs. Niggas" in 1996, Rock publically aired class tensions within the black community during a period of intense debate over welfare reform and the applicability of 1960s civil rights legislation to continue to provide government assistance to poor blacks:

> "There's like a civil war going on with black people, and there's two sides: there's black people… and there's niggas. And niggas have got to go! Every time black people want to have a good time, ign'ant ass niggas fuck it up! I love black people, but I hate niggas! Oh I hate niggas! Boy, I wish they'd let me join the Ku Klux Klan!... Now the politicians are trying to get rid of welfare. Every time you see a welfare story on the news, you always see black people. Hey! Black people don't give a fuck about welfare. But niggers are shaking in their boots: "They gonna take our shit!"" (Bennun 2000)

Rock's comedy would also reflect the Reagan era "welfare queen" narrative by suggesting that "a black woman that's got two kids going to work everyday bustin' her ass hates a bitch with nine kids getting welfare. Bitch, stop fucking. Put the dick down. Get a job!" As Iton (2008) suggests, the timing and context of Rock's ascendancy is significant. It was the summer of 1996 when Rock's album was recorded in Washington D.C., a time when debates about the abolition of welfare were well underway. Iton contends the popularity of Rock's comedy coincided with "the widespread appetite for disparaging tales of the nigger" (177). Like Cosby's color-blind and apolitical comedy during a period of intense racial protest, Rock's color-vivid and politically

charged comedy took center stage during an era of reactionary backlash against the gains of the civil rights era. Rock won a Grammy Award for this performance and believes that it saved his career (Rabin 2004).

Finally, the most recent shift in this award is one towards racial exclusion. The appearance on non-whites in the award has steadily declined since the 1980s, with few exceptions. This trend is not unique to this award, as other have pointed out the "whitening" of other prizes, like the Oscars (Horn et al 2012; Hughey 2015; Hunt and Ramon 2015). This whitening of media is surprising in a period undergoing significant demographic shifts. For instance, one of the most significant exclusions in the Grammy Award today is that of Indian-American comedian Hari Kondabolu. Kondabolu is currently one of the most visible comics of color, having appeared on numerous late night shows, such as David Letterman and Conan O'Brien, and was featured in a recent New York Times series on emerging non-white comics to follow on the heels of his 2014 album *Waiting for 2042*. The title is borrowed from census figures which predict that 2042 is the year whites will no longer be the majority in the U.S. The content of the album is heavily invested in making critical observations of contemporary forms of racial inequality, and Kondabolu has been dubbed a "social justice" comic in line with Lenny Bruce and Dick Gregory. Yet, Kondabolu has been snubbed by the Grammys. In contrast, contemporary white comics making critical observations about race, such as Louis C.K., are routinely praised by the Grammys.

Discussion/Conclusion

A recent survey of diversity in Hollywood yields similar findings regarding the current racial and gender inequity in representation in the industry at large. The "Hollywood Diversity Report" is

currently the most comprehensive study on racial and gender inequality in the entertainment industry. The study seeks to examine the relationship between diversity and "the bottom line" in Hollywood. According to Hunt and Ramon (2015), while box office figures and other indicators illustrate that "diversity sells," Hollywood continues to be an industry led and dominated by white males. The underrepresentation of racial and gender minorities is rampant in the industry, both on screen and behind the camera. Hunt and Ramon contend racial and gender inequality in the industry is reproduced in a few key ways. First, because most new productions fail or underperform, executives work to minimize risk by hiring and associating with individuals they feel comfortable with and who they believe will garner the most success (i.e. whites and males) to produce media that they believe the market demands (films and shows with predominantly white casts and credits). In turn, racial and gender minorities are often not the first source where talent is sought. Second, talent brokers and agencies, as well as awarding academies and memberships, all gatekeepers to the industry, also tend to be overwhelmingly race and gender homogenous. When pressed to diversify, Hunt and Ramon find industry brokers claim diverse talent is narrow and more difficult to come by. Therefore, as an industry rampant with race and gender inequality, women and non-whites tend to be overlooked, while the artistic talents of white males are continually sought and celebrated in efforts to secure "the bottom line" (i.e. profits). However, one of the shortcomings of this study is that it is focused on current trends and does not offer historical data.

Based on other studies looking at diversity on Hollywood more generally, we would expect to find similar levels of racial and gender inequality historically (Erigha 2014). Indeed, the gender story in the data above reflects this standard sociological expectation. That is, while the figures above indicate that the gender trends from high exclusion to greater levels of

inclusion in commercial stand-up comedy suggest gender inequality in this field is decreasing (Kohen 2012), comedy remains a highly gender stratified cultural industry. As Gilbert (2004) contends, cultural stereotypes about women lacking a "sense of humor" are powerful and may have played a significant role historically in preventing women from entering this occupation. Furthermore, as Hunt and Ramon suggest, males have continued to be the gate keepers in the industry writ large (2015). Together, these social practices reproduce and reinforce hegemonic masculinity in this domain.

However, because there is little to no research on the demographics of comedians it is difficult to make generalizable claims about gender and racial trends and disparities. Gilbert (2004) provides one of the few figures available on female performers by tracking comics on the *Tonight Show* with Jonny Carson from 1962-1990. Out of 497 days that guests appeared on the show, Gilbert finds 241 appearances were made by 72 male comics, while 12 female comedians made 33 appearances. In other words, males appeared 88% of the time and comprised 86% of performers, while female comedians appeared 12% of the time and comprised 14% of performers. That is, the representation of women on the *Tonight Show* is similar to the findings I provide above. These figures also suggest that the patterns I find in the Grammy Awards are reflective in other comedy settings. However, Gilbert largely ignores racial demographics and trends. To my knowledge no other demographic studies for comedians exist.

In contrast, the racial story above presents an interesting sociological puzzle as it seemingly flouts conventional sociological expectations. That is, while we would expect little racial diversity historically, the racial diversity of comedians in the Grammy Award early on is anachronistic. For instance, the first few decades of the award appear highly and atypically diverse relative to most other public spheres at the time (Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey

2012). There was no overt pressure or public campaign to diversify the award, and legislative efforts to decrease racial discrimination in public and private institutions did not directly apply to this emerging cultural industry. Rather, the racial inclusiveness of comedians in the award in particular, and comedy in general, reflected the emerging socio-political and cultural landscape of U.S. society at that moment in time. That is, U.S. society was experiencing a "Great Transformation" in race relations as the civil rights movement worked to dramatically change the country from a "racial dictatorship" and towards a "racial democracy" (Omi and Winant 2014). The emergence of stand-up comedy as a new phenomenon coincided with this movement, and comedic discourse often drew material from the rapidly changing cultural landscape and emerging social norms. The norm of racial segregation and inequality is one that a number of comics at the time drew upon, some challenging the iniquities, others reinforcing stereotypes, often simultaneously (Pérez 2013; Weaver 2011). As an institution, the Grammy Award emerged during this period and it worked to spotlight certain performers and performances on a national stage in an effort to manage cultural tastes (Bourdieu1984; English 2005). Many of those spotlighted early on were black.

Therefore, it is worth considering what might account for the racial inclusiveness early on and the steep decline of non-whites in this award from the post-civil rights era to the present. That is, while comedians of color appeared with unprecedented frequency during the civil rights period, and many of these performers have become iconic figures in American popular culture and public discourse, the underrepresentation of racial minorities in this award today is also anachronistic given the ongoing demographic shifts in the U.S., pressures to diversify and embrace multiculturalism in a post-civil rights era, and the number of non-white comics currently making their mark in other areas.

But why should we care about diversity in comedy, to echo comedian Jerry Seinfeld's rebuttal to the lack of racial and gender inclusion in comedy? Does it really matter in the grand scheme of things *who* makes us laugh? I contend that it matters a great deal since the lack of diversity and visibility in this particular cultural industry indicates and illustrates the ongoing and larger structural and cultural changes in race (and gender) relations since the civil rights era. Moreover, this trend in racial re-segregation and exclusion in this Grammy category is one that is currently being documented in numerous public spheres, from schools and housing to work and entertainment media, where white preferential treatment of other whites, or favoritism, rather than overt racial animus, is steering racial inequality today (DiTomaso 2012; Frankenberg and Orfield 2012; Hunt and Ramon 2015; Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012). That is, space (and humor) is once again being demarcated by race (Anderson 2014) and taste (Freidman and Kuipers 2013). Not in aggressively overt ways as was the case in the pre-civil rights era, but in ways that tend to be subtle and often appear reasonable when paired with notions of "merit," "talent," and in this case "wit."

Finally, it is worth repeating that racial and gender inequality is also currently reflected in other elite entertainment awards like the Oscars and Emmys (Hunt and Ramon 2015). As English (2005) contends, awards have been critical not only in spotlighting talent, but have also served as a "prominent barometer of group status" by placing racial and gender minorities "into positions of visibility and esteem" (78). The increasing absence of non-whites in elite entertainment prizes today is but a reflection of the current status of non-whites more generally, non-white women in particular, as well as the ongoing patterns of racial inequality and exclusion currently underway.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Overall, I believe my dissertation makes an innovative and significant contribution to the study of race/ethnic relations and racial discourse in contemporary American society. Employing ethnography, discourse analysis, archival research and time-series analysis, I examined the cultural shifts in how racial comedy is performed, and the demographic changes in American stand-up comedy, over the last five decades. My research shows that comedy is an important and strategic site to analyze how frank and explicit race-talk has been contested and regulated by organized publics and private entities, how racial/ethnic and gender inclusion have changed over time, and how otherwise objectionable race-talk is currently deployed by humorists. I contend cultural industries like comedy are important, yet understudied, cultural-fields that bridge academic and public debates about the limits of offensive discourse in a "free speech" society. The timeliness and public engagement of my scholarship is illustrated by the media coverage it has recently received from national media outlets.

I plan to revise and add new cases to my dissertation in order to publish it as a book manuscript with a major university press. For instance, I am currently working on two new interrelated studies examining the diffusion of racist jokes from the mainstream to far-right hate groups. Two questions guide my new research project: 1) How do racist jokes in popular post-Civil Rights era joke books contribute to a "post-racial" discourse? 2) What has been the impact of the internet on the propagation/transmission of hatred in humor, as measureable in hateful jokes on far-right websites?

In the first part of a two-part study, I will examine a series of *New York Times* best-selling joke books that emerged during the early 1980s. The *Truly Tasteless Jokes* series sold millions of copies, and was infamous for its then-shocking explicit use of racist, sexist and other

kinds of offensive jokes:

What do you call a black millionaire physicist? A nigger (Knott 1983).

The popularity of these joke books occurred at a time when people of color had successfully contested overt racial ridicule in comedy and comedians where distancing themselves from extreme racist discourse (Apte 1987; Boskin 1986; Ely 1991; Pérez 2014). I suggest that by "re-articulating" civil rights discourse (Omi and Winant 2014), that is to say by becoming an "equal opportunity offender," this book series was able to circumvent such regulation, in a way similar to comedian Don Rickles which I examine above. Using content analysis and discourse analysis, I will examine how different groups were targeted and depicted (e.g., whites vs. non-whites, women vs. men), and whether or not these insults carried "equal weight" (e.g., "nigger" vs. "WASP" jokes). I argue these books worked to support "post-racial" discourse by falsely equating targets to deny racist intent.

The second part of this study will look at the re-circulation of jokes in these books on the internet. While researchers have examined the discourse of online racist jokes (Billig 2001; Weaver 2011), they have attributed authorship and origin of such jokes to far-right extremist hate groups, and have overlooked the role of mass cultural objects, like the *Truly Tasteless Jokes* series, in reproducing extreme racial discourse. I find that the extreme racist jokes in these books, published before the internet, are found in racist joke websites today, many of which are affiliated with hate groups in far-right online communities.

My focus thus far has been an examination of racial discourse and inequality among comedians and within the world of comedy. However, as I finalize my dissertation, a number of humor controversies have emerged which illustrate the continuation of the racial power of humor more broadly. For instance, the recent report on the Ferguson Police department by the Justice

department, following the shooting of young black male Michael Brown, revealed the widespread use of anti-black jokes among a predominantly white police force in a predominantly black neighborhood. The investigation followed a series of nationwide protests against rampant police brutality and shootings of young black and brown men by police officers (Berman 2015). New revelations indicate that this is not an isolated incident and that such joking practices exist in police departments across the county The San Francisco Police Department recently dismissed seven police officers following an investigation into the widespread use of racist and homophobic jokes shared via text message and email among officers (Williams 2015). The use of racist humor by police officers is reminiscent of studies that find the use of violent racist humor among far right white supremacist organizations (Billig 2001; Weaver 2011). However, it is worth noting that when such humor is made public, groups and individuals often face stiff social consequences. Police officers, politicians and celebrities continue to lose positions and endorsements following revelation of their backstage racist humor. Meanwhile, college campuses across the country are also working to mitigate the use of racist discourse, often veiled as satire and amusement, among college fraternities and sororities, while trying to balance first amendment rights. That is, the racial power of humor exists well beyond the comic stage.

The circulation of such jokes in these and other contexts illustrates not only how pervasive these kinds of jokes are, but that such jokes play a significant role in reproducing and reinforcing racial inequality in various social contexts. That is, these are more than just jokes and can be used as veiled expressions of hostility, used as a bonding ritual between members while simultaneously producing boundaries against the targets, and can be used to strip away the humanity of targets who are ridiculed as inferior and unworthy of dignity and respect.

In these are other cases I will further investigate the sociological significance and importance of racial humor as a site ripe for sociological analysis. My research will play a leading role in this direction. The central goal of my book project will be to examine the significance of humor as a vehicle for creating, reproducing and challenging everyday racism. I will build on my existing body of work and I will make use of emerging scientific studies on the cognitive and physiological effects of humor on social affiliation and distancing (Carter 2014; De Dreu et al. 2011; Dunbar et al. 2011). These and other studies will serve as an empirical backdrop for my theoretical argument about the critical, yet understudied, significance humor has played in racial formation, racial conflict, and race relations in the U.S. over the last two centuries.

Finally, I am also interested in examining the role of race and racism in current public debates and controversies in western "liberal" democracies on the efficacy and legitimacy of individuals, organizations and governments to "regulate" offensive discourse. This is particularly important and timely in light of the recent shooting of the Parisian satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo following its insulting depictions of the prophet Mohammed (Pérez 2015). For instance, I am working on another study that argues that while no formal laws exist to police offensive public race-talk in the US, the new racial climate of the post-civil rights era allowed individuals, groups, and institutions to police racial discourse and humor in the absence of state regulation. It is these informal regulations that are at play when the backstage racist discourses and humor of police officers, politicians, celebrities, and so on, are revealed publically. The next phase of this ongoing project will be to develop a comparative component. I will analyze the regulation of racial discourse and humor in societies that have laws intended to regulate abusive speech (e.g. UK), as well as the growing opposition to such laws, such as the "Right to Offend" campaign in

UK. It is worth noting that in the UK comedians are some of the most visible and vocal opponents of speech laws as their work is now subject to state regulation. These and other projects illustrate the continued relevance and significance of my work.

Endnotes

Chapter 1
[i] Transcription was supplemented by Amelia Tseng.
[ii] The term 'wetback' is a racial slur used to deride undocumented Mexican immigrants who presumably got wet while crossing the Río Grande which crosses Texas and Mexico. It is often applied broadly to Latina/o groups.
[iii] I use 'intertextuality' rather than 'triangulation' to acknowledge 'the multiple ways in which humans can make sense of the same event, document, artefact, etc.' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012: 88).
[iv] Olzak's (1994) ethnic competition theory suggests racial strife most likely occurs at the intersection – between the marginalized and further marginalized.
[v] See Hill's (2007) discussion of 'mock Spanish' and the reproduction of racism.
[vi] See van Dijk (1993b) on the role of 'elites' in the reproduction of racism.
[vii] Dana revived the character shortly after to maintain financial stability (Scott, 1972; Dana and Matz, 2005a: 32).
[viii] Black comedian Garret Morris and his 'Latino Baseball player' on *Saturday Night Live* is another example (Hill and Weingrad, 1986).

Chapter 3
[ix] The underrepresentation of women is reflected in the profession at large where stand-up comedy continues to be a male dominated space. Humor scholar Mikita Brottman argues stand-up comedy to be a "world of male heterosexual machismo" (Brottman, 2004, pp. 114)
[x] Participant names have been altered.

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