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

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Abstract

This article contends performance comedy serves as a mechanism for expressing ethnic and racial stereotypes in public and presents a challenge to studies of contemporary racial discourse which suggest overt racetalk in public is on the decline. 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), this study illustrates the role elites play in managing racial discourse. It is found that white versus 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)*

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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.

(Fanon, 1967: 32)

Introduction

Scholars have noted the decline in 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racist discourse in public in the post-civil rights era and contend that the ideology of overt Jim Crow racism has been replaced by a *new racetalk*, one that is subtle, covert, 'color-blind' (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000), or of a 'kinder and gentler' form (Bobo et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[1] 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 currently plays in American public racial discourse, where overt racist language in public is restricted in an ostensibly color-blind or post-racial society.

In this article, I argue that comics make racist discourse palatable by learning to employ certain strategies of talk which 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 USA, 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; Mendelberg and Oleske, 2000). Such terms are meant to invoke clear cultural deficiencies where biological claims are no longer legitimate. Mendelberg (2001) contends that such coded terminology is often used by 'white political elites to appeal to white voters' at the expense of racial minorities. 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, the 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: that which is covert in public settings and that which is overt in private ones. At the same time, they suggest that

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

The 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 theory* of humor, one of its main functions is to dominate others (Boskin and Dorinson, 1985; Burma, 1946; 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).

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 that ethnic and racial minorities, blacks in particular, openly engaged in anti-racist comedy or 'reverse discourse' as a form of resistance to oppression (Weaver, 2010b). 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 that 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 1960s 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 a 'cultural phenomenon,' they contend, arising out of a socio-historical context and in response to the 'Negro Revolution' (Abrahams and Dundes, 1969: 238). 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 1990s '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 (2010a) contend that conventional 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 in need of further research (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, 2010a: 537). He further suggests, citing Davidson (1987), that there is an exaggeration of 'racial' humor in the literature. Raskin also observes that 'most ethnic humor is functionally deprecatory, or disparaging' (1985: 180).

Humor is also socially and historically situated (Abrahams and Dundes, 1969; Weaver, 2010a). Jokes may be perceived as 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* has it as 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 gives 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 that 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 he would drop his use of the word 'nigger' upon his return (Jackson, 2005), while Chappelle left his hit cable TV 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 in 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, 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 the 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. 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 that the 'metamessage' of play shapes how actions and behaviors are to be interpreted in a humorous context (i.e. they are not to be taken literally) (Tannen, 2005: 32). Using Goffman's frame analysis, Clift also notes that humor such as irony allows a 'reduced personal responsibility' by creating distance and detachment between the author and 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 watched 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 that 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 'uncomfortably reminiscent of racist ideologies that have been used to justify racial discrimination in the past' (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. Without a 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 in November 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 Staff, 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 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 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, 2002) 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' (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 studies of 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 analyzing 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, which led me to believe that the setting had to be governed by norms different from those identified in the existing literature; and (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. The majority of students I encountered found the school online as well. Students were in the main white and overwhelmingly male.[2] My student count consists of classes I attended and not the total number enrolled at the time: 20 white males, five Latino males, three black males, one Asian male, one white/Asian male, four white females, one Latina female, two black females, and one Asian female. The age range was very broad, with the youngest student a recent high-school graduate and the oldest students approaching retirement. There were three instructors: Ted[3] (white male), the owner and lead instructor of the comedy school, Shana (black female), a former student and working comic, and Joe (white male), also a 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 with 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*; that is, 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, and 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 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), is understood as hurtful to the targets, and there is a disruption of normative racetalk. More importantly, in this context, crossing the 'hurtline' is costly in terms of laughs.

Given the difficulty for whites in engaging 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 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 the wrath of tuition-paying students who do not get a return (laughs) on their investment. By suggesting that 'white boys' have it more difficult because they have 'less to work with' (such as the inability to freely engage in racial discourse), Ted is *generalizing disadvantage* and implying 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 overestimation 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 reinforced this idea following an incident in which he crossed the 'hurtline.' At the comedy club one evening Ted was on stage introducing Shana, the 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 one 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 20s), 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' metaphor:

(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 in 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-20s), 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 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 in the following text, 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 to ensure 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 these incidents Ted would stress that such performances are problematic.

On one occasion, Bob (white male, mid-60s) 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 later. 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 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 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 20s) 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 by 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 then 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 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-20s) was a working comic and former student of Ted's. Ted 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 30s), 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 side 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, late 20s), for instance, was encouraged to use *phonological distancing* to avoid the issue Bob faced when mocking Chinese incoherently. As Ted 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, with 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. These examples 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 next, distance and denial mechanisms were most often encouraged 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 20s) 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 ones where Bob mocks Chinese incoherently or Dave 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 at reproducing racial stereotypes. Joseph (Latino male, mid-20s), for instance, was encouraged in class to use stereotypes about Mexicans and Latinos by the instructor. As Ted 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 different positions in the racial hierarchy. Joseph talked about growing up as a Mexican-American but was often confused for being Filipino:

(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 earlier 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) 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 wriggling 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 experienced tension when Ted suggested that in a joke about her mother she give her a black southern 'mammy' dialect. Jessica refused to portray the character of her mother in 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, and she 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 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 racial ones. The instructors are reflecting, in the examples shown, on 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 of Jessica, though such examples were rare in my observations as students often followed the suggestions of the instructors.

Discussion and conclusion

This study challenges 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 a result of the context and of engaging in 'playful' or 'unserious' discourse, but more important is the 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 USA (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Coates, 2008). These cultural differences and deficiencies are often fodder for comedy, which, I argue, currently plays an increasingly unique role in racial discourse. 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 the 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 intentions otherwise 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 USA, 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 1980s and early 1990s. 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) appear 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 a racist discourse that others avoid (Hibberd, 2011; Mooallem, 2009). While more research is needed to support this hypothesis, one need only pay attention to the increasing trend in 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 various 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 (2010a, 2011) also contends that racist humor, as a rhetorical device, can support racist discourse, while Santa Ana (2009) notes that racist jokes can impact on 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 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 themselves to be engaging in stereotypical or subversive discourse. At the macro-level, scholars note that 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.

The point, however, 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 that it should '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.'

Notes

1. I borrow from Bonilla-Silva's definition of racism as part of 'the ideological structure of a social system that crystallizes racial notions and stereotypes' which become 'common sense' (Bonilla-Silva, 1997: 474).
2. 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 believes stand-up comedy to be a 'world of male heterosexual machismo' (Brottman, 2004: 114).
3. Participant names have been altered.

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