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Abstract

Critical Race scholars contend that the current period of “race relations” is dominated by a “color-blind” racial ideology. Scholars maintain that although individuals continue to hold conventional racial views, today people tend to minimize overt racial discourse and direct racial language in public to avoid the stigma of racism. This essay identifies racist humor as a discourse that challenges such constraints on public racist discourse, often derided as “political correctness,” in ways that reinforce everyday and systemic forms of racism in an ostensibly color-blind society. While humor research generally highlights the “positive” aspects of social humor and celebrates the possibilities of humor to challenge and subvert dominant racial meanings, the “negative” aspects of racist humor are often overlooked, downplayed, or are viewed as extreme and fringe incidents that occur at the periphery of mainstream society. Moreover, race scholars have largely ignored the role of humor as a “serious” site for the reproduction and circulation of racism in society. I contend that in a post-civil-rights and color-blind society, where overt racist discourse became disavowed in public, racist humor allows interlocutors to foster social relations by partaking in the “forbidden fruit” of racist discourse. In this article, I highlight the (re)circulation of racist jokes across three social contexts (in mass market joke books, on the Internet, and in the criminal justice system), to illustrate that racist humor exists not in a bygone past or at the margins of society but is widely practiced and circulated today across various social contexts and institutions in an ostensibly color-blind society.

Keywords

race, racism, humor, jokes, White supremacy, color-blindness

Introduction

Critical Race scholars contend that the current period of “race relations” is dominated by a “color-blind” racial ideology and argue that although individuals continue to hold conventional racial views in the post-civil-rights era, today whites, and nonwhites, generally tend to minimize overt racist discourse and direct racial language to avoid the stigma of racism (Bobo et al. 1996; Bonilla-Silva 2013). In turn, research on color-blind racism suggests that while overt racist discourse has declined from public view since the civil rights era, it continues to

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reside in private contexts or has become coded and covert in public (López 2013; Myers 2005; Picca and Feagin 2007). Such findings have had a major impact on our understating of contemporary racial discourse and racism more generally, by concluding that in a post-civil-rights society, people often avoid public race talk, people are generally uncomfortable with public racial discourse, and as a result people maintain that they are “color-blind,” that they “do not notice race,” and that “race no longer matters” (Bonilla-Silva 2013). Moreover, with regard to studying discourses of racism as a “serious” issue, there is a general tendency to conclude that racist discourse, when it does occur, continues to be motivated by a negative affect (e.g., hate, fear, anger). As Meghan A. Burke (2016) contends, while these approaches have been important and influential in advancing our understanding of color-blind racism, they have become stagnant. Therefore, to advance our understating of the ways in which racism and racist discourse continue to be reproduced in society, we need to consider other ways in which racism continues to circulate in public and private social contexts, in ways that have not garnered much sociological attention.

For instance, are there spaces or contexts where overt racial and racist discourse occurs in public where people enjoy it? Are there settings where racist discourse is not seemingly motivated by say anger or hate but by “fun” and “amusement?” And while much research on color-blind racism concludes that a solution to color-blindness is for individuals to be more “color-conscious,” that is, to “notice race,” how might such “color-consciousness” further entrench contemporary forms of racial ideology and racism?

For example, many recent public controversies concerning race have occurred under the guise of fun and humor. From the use of racist jokes and racial ridicule among white comedians, celebrities, public officials, and police officers, to the racial theme parties and “Halloween costume” controversies that occur on college campuses across the country, these recurring incidents indicate that race-based amusement and humor play an important role in racist discourse today, in a society where more “serious” forms of racist talk are largely disavowed.

Therefore, how and why does racist humor continue to circulate in a “color-blind” society, and how does it reinforce and/or disrupt a color-blind ideology?

In this essay, I contend racist humor and ridicule has long been used as a mechanism for fostering social cohesion among whites at the expense of nonwhites in the United States (e.g., blackface minstrelsy), and that it continues to be used today as a discourse that unites interlocutors around racial feelings and racist ideologies. In this way, racist humor works to reinforce everyday and systemic forms of white supremacy, via a “white racial frame” (Feagin 2013). Yet, the pervasiveness of racist humor has not garnered much sociological attention. Because racist talk has become taboo in a post-civil-rights society, I contend individuals may be more compelled to indulge in the “forbidden fruit” of racism, in an ostensibly post-racial society, via “fun” and “humor” to circumvent perceived constraints on racist discourse more generally (Apte 1987; P. Berger 1997; Fine 1976; Pérez 2013). In other words, in a supposedly “color-blind” society, racist humor continues to be used as a social pleasure that reinforces racist sentiments and ideologies. While such activity challenges the very notion, the myth, that we live in a color-blind society, many deny that such humor is socially harmful and insist that these are “just jokes.”

In what follows, I will review literature on the social functions of humor, followed by a quick overview of the form of racist humor that was prevalent in the pre-civil-rights era. I will then briefly discuss the changing racial landscape of the post-civil-rights era that gave rise to the ideology of “color-blindness” and how racist humor operates here. I will then examine the use of racist humor across three social contexts (in mass market joke books during the 1980s, on the Internet, and in the criminal justice system), to illustrate that racist humor exists not in a bygone past or at the margins of society, but that it is pervasive and remains widespread today across various social contexts and social institutions.

Humor, Social Affiliation, and Social Distancing

Before looking at the role of humor in racism and racialization, it is worth reviewing the social functions of humor more generally. Scholars have long theorized that social laughter fosters greater social affiliation among participants (Coser 1959, 1960; Douglas 1968; Fine 1976; Morreall 1986). For instance, Coser suggests social laughter “decreases social distance” (Coser 1959:172), and many have argued that as a form of social communication, an important social function of humor is in facilitating social cooperation, social bonding, and group formation. That is, social theorists believe humor and laughter play an important social role in *uniting* interlocutors (Coser 1959; Fine 1976; Meyer 2000). While research increasingly suggests laughter is not unique to humans, as laughter is found among other primates and mammals, Guillaume Dezacache and Robin I. Dunbar (2012) contend that a unique evolutionary function of humor and laughter among humans was in increasing not only social affiliation and group formation but also group size. Humor use among human social groups, particularly through language, they contend, was a form of social “grooming at a distance” that allowed for larger social groups to be formed, in contrast to the natural limits that dyad-grooming practices placed on primate social group formations.

Therefore, as a form of human social communication, it is also important to understand that the kinds of humor that are shared socially, that participants find “funny,” and that aid in group formation are dependent on the social, cultural, historical, and political contexts in which participants and group members share and respond to such humor (Apte 1987; Boskin 1997; Douglas 1968; Fine 1976). As Coser notes, “specific types of humor flourish under different political conditions: there is totalitarian humor as there is democratic humor” (Coser 1959:172). Viewed this way, the “dark side” of humor and laughter is revealed as humor also functions politically to divide social groups, particularly in generating and reinforcing social boundaries, social distance, and inequalities (Billig 2005; Meyer 2000).

In the form of ridicule and insult, for example, humor and laughter are powerful forms of communication that can be used not only to “correct undesired social behavior,” but to target, discipline, marginalize, and alienate groups and individuals who are “othered” (Billig 2005; Lockyer and Pickering 2005; Pérez 2016a; Weaver 2011). Those sharing a laugh at the expense of an “out-group” foster greater social affiliation and decreased social distance with their “in-group,” while simultaneously creating and/or increasing social distance against their target(s) of ridicule and insult.

For instance, jokes targeting racial and ethnic “others” as stupid, buffoonish, dangerous, inferior, and so on, help facilitate the social bonding practices among in-group members, which in turn can (re)produce and reinforce an ethnocentric worldview (Fine 1983; Picca and Feagin 2007; Weaver 2011). In this way, humor also functions as a social “safety valve” that allows for “institutionalized outlets for hostilities and for discontent ordinarily suppressed by the group” (Coser 1959:180). In other words, race-based humor and laughter, when targeting an out-group in particular, plays an active role in group formation and boundary maintenance, as humor and laughter can simultaneously function as a uniting and divisive social activity (Fine 1976; Meyer 2000). With regard to racial formation (Omi and Winant 2014), such humor aids in reproducing and popularizing notions of racial superiority and inferiority (Picca and Feagin 2007; Pérez 2016a; Weaver 2011).

Understanding that a key social function of humor has been in facilitating social affiliation and social distance within and throughout human societies illustrates that social humor has social power. Moreover, humor is a rhetorical and political tool that can challenge, reflect, and reproduce asymmetrical power relations in society (Boskin 1997; Weaver 2011). This is why white ridicule of blacks and people of color is different from people of color ridiculing whites, as the insult and ridicule of whites by people of color has not carried the same social, political, and

historical *weight* and consequence (Apte 1987; Ford et al. 2014; Pérez 2013; Picca and Feagin 2007). Even when nonwhites engage in the use of racist jokes, particularly in reciprocal contexts with whites in predominantly white settings, Picca and Feagin contend that the use and reliance of conventional racist imagery (e.g., racist stereotypes and slurs) is material that was long ago created and perpetuated by whites, via a white racial framing of society, to reinforce a social system of white supremacy across generations (Picca and Feagin 2007:75). In turn, racist joking practices generally work to support racist notions despite the “good intentions” of joke tellers (Hall 2000; Pérez 2016b). Therefore, in a society where historic and continued inequities stem from a structured and systemic racial hierarchy, racist humor serves to reinforce racially unequal social relations (Billig 2001; Hall 2000; Pérez 2016a; Weaver 2011).

Yet, sociologists have said very little about racist humor. While few sociologists have provided some interesting and provocative insights on humor and laughter more generally (Fine 1983; Kuipers 2015; Reay 2015), and race and humor in particular (Barron 1950; Burma 1946; Weaver 2011), sociologists have largely overlooked the significant role of humor in racialization and in maintaining dominant racial ideologies (Pérez 2013). That is, sociologists have largely ignored racist humor as a “serious” site for the sociological analysis of racism. In turn, they have largely failed to examine how seemingly positive emotional states and activities (e.g., joy, laughter) and seemingly “unserious” social practices (e.g., joke telling) have worked to reinforce a “color-consciousness” that has served to reproduce and circulate racial stereotypes, narratives, imagery, and emotions, while fostering racial affiliation, reinforcing racial boundaries and ideologies, and aiding racial formation. Thus, to better grasp the role of racist humor in the reproduction of racism and racial ideology more generally, it is important to (re)examine the historical relationship between racist humor and white supremacy.

The Humor of White Supremacy, Pre-Civil Rights

A historical review of racist humor reveals how it has long played an important social function in maintaining and reproducing white supremacy in the United States. First, borrowing from Simon Weaver (2010), I note that racist humor is humor that makes use of stereotypes, narratives, and imagery to reinforce notions of racial or ethnic inferiority and superiority. Moreover, Weaver contends that such humor has often been motivated, in large part, by “racist or colonial histories and language and so [is] the result of intergroup relations imbued with historical power relations” (Weaver 2014:215). Second, I use Joe R. Feagin’s (2013) concept of the “white racial frame,” a “master” sociocognitive frame that has provided a “meaning making system” for individuals in a racialized society, to understand the function and evolution of racist humor in the United States. Feagin contends that a white racial frame emerged and evolved out of the historic and continued legacy of racial oppression in the United States. As a dominant sociocognitive frame, it has facilitated the maintenance of a “racialized worldview” among a majority of whites, and many nonwhites, by aiding in the social reproduction and circulation of cognitive, visual, and affective cultural knowledge about nonwhites as racially inferior and whites as superior (Feagin 2014:26–27). That is, the continued circulation and reproduction of racial stereotypes, narratives, and emotions, via a “white racial frame,” in this case with regard to racist humor, has served to support and reinforce a racial hierarchy of white supremacy.

For instance, from the pre-Civil War period to the civil rights era, blackface minstrel shows were a prominent source of humor and entertainment in the United States. This form of organized comic racial ridicule greatly contributed to the racialization and inferiorization of blacks in the United States and beyond, particularly in the white imagination (Boskin 1986; Lott 1993; Roediger 2007; Rogin 1994). In the pre-Civil War era in particular, this genre of humor largely consisted of white performers painting their faces black (using burnt corks or grease paint) while imitating, mocking, and caricaturing African Americans as buffoonish, inarticulate, stupid, and

childlike (Boskin 1986; Lott 1993; Roediger 2007). In turn, white blackface performances ridiculed and comically juxtaposed African Americans as inferior against an emerging Anglo-American culture and sentiment of racial superiority (Hartman 1997; Lott 1993; Roediger 2007; Saxton 1975).

As possibly “the most popular entertainment form of the 19th century” (Saxton 1998), a central feature of blackface minstrelsy was the “racist pleasure” it provoked from a predominantly white male audience (Lott 1993). As a result, the rhetorical impact of blackface was to reassure whites across class and ethnic backgrounds that blacks were inferior, ill-equipped for civilization, and content with slavery, all the while desensitizing white audiences from the horror and brutality of human bondage and chattel slavery (Hartman 1997; Roediger 2007; Saxton 1975). That is, blackface “cultivated a proslavery imagination” among whites during this period by reproducing and reinforcing “common sense notions” of black inferiority, which served to undermine calls for black freedom and dignity (Jones 2014).

This form of humor reflects the *superiority theory* of humor, which notes that a social function of humor and laughter is tied to perceiving others as inferior (Billig 2005; Morreall 1986). David R. Roediger (2007) contends blackface was also a powerful form of racism that played a key role in the formation of “whiteness” before and after the Civil War. That is, Roediger argues that the ridicule of blacks helped whites achieve “a common symbolic language—a unity—that could not be realized by racist crowds, by political parties or by labor unions” (Roediger 2007:127). This “common symbolic language” among various European descendants, immigrants, and classes was the comic racial ridicule of “blacks” for their collective enjoyment as “whites.” As a social activity, the pleasurable ridicule of blacks allowed European immigrants from various class, national, and ethnic backgrounds, with distinct interests, cultures, traditions, and languages, to view themselves not only as “white” but also as racially superior. By allowing working-class whites to feel racially superior to blacks despite their own lack of social, political, and economic power and status in an early Anglo-American capitalist society, Roediger, borrowing from William E. B. Du Bois (1935), notes that blackface provided a “public and psychological wage” for working-class whites, by instilling the notion that although they were poor, exploited, and powerless in a brutal capitalist society, at least they were “not slaves” and “not black” (Roediger 2007:13). That is, blackface worked as a “safety valve” that potentially rechanneled class conflict and tension during this period, by comically popularizing notions of white supremacy and black inferiority.

In turn, the “racist pleasure” (Lott 1993) gained from the ridicule of blacks contributed to the maintenance of a sense of “whiteness,” via a “white racial frame” (Feagin 2013), which allowed whites to place nonwhites at the bottom of the social, political, economic, and racial hierarchy as the natural order of society. In other words, the “racist pleasure” of shared social laughter among various ethnic European immigrants and citizens helped them build racial affiliation, cohesion, and solidarity as “whites”—not only through the reproduction of a shared racial ideology but also through the process of engaging in *ritualized* social laughter directed at a racialized target. In this way, the reproduction of whiteness and white supremacy during the nineteenth and early twentieth century was manufactured, in part, through the affective labor (Hardt 1999) of racist humor and laughter.

Racist Humor in a Color-blind Society?

During and after the Civil Rights movement, overt displays of racism in public were no longer easily tolerated, as scholars note that extreme racist discourse diminished in public settings as such views were publically contested and viewed as “racist” (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1996; Bonilla-Silva 2013). This cultural shift in public racist talk contributed to the emergence of the ideology of “color-blindness” that scholars argue has become the dominant racial framework of

the post-civil-rights era (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Omi and Winant 2014). As Bonilla-Silva notes, in this new post-civil-rights society, public racist language softened, and few publically claimed to be racist, while most expressed a desire to “live in a society where race does not matter at all” (Bonilla-Silva 2001:141).

Yet, while a discourse and language of color-blindness began to pervade contemporary public life, the actions and choices of whites in particular (e.g., selecting intimate partners, friends, neighborhoods, employees, schools) remained “color-conscious” in practice and outcome (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Golash-Boza 2016; Jung 2015). Such a contradiction between words and actions are resolved with discursive strategies and social practices that align with and reinforce an ideology of color-blindness, such as “it’s economics, not race,” “it’s just the way things are,” and “people want to live with people who are like them” (Bonilla-Silva 2001:141). These shared social representations and notions of the world, or “frames,” are guided by an ideology that maintains that “race does not matter,” even as race and racial inequality continue to order and structure society (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Golash-Boza 2016).

In turn, scholars contend racist discourse took a coded and covert form in public, or remained harbored in private contexts, to avoid the stigma of “racism” in a post-civil-rights society (Bonilla-Silva 2001; López 2013; Picca and Feagin 2007). As Bonilla-Silva maintains, in contrast to the Jim Crow era racism, in a color-blind era, overt racist discourse and “name-calling” is minimized, as “whites enunciate positions that safeguard their racial interests without sounding ‘racist’” (Bonilla-Silva 2013:3–4).

However, Moon-Kie Jung (2015) notes that when looking at the disconnect between the notion that “race no longer matters” and the persistence of racial inequality, particularly among blacks (e.g., lower life expectancies and wealth, higher rates of unemployment and incarceration), the “shallow depths” of the ideology of a supposedly color-blind society is revealed just beneath the surface (p. 44). That is, while public opinion polls suggest that “racial attitudes” among whites have improved over the last five decades, and race scholars find that overt public racist talk has significantly declined in recent decades, “digging below, or merely scratching, the surface . . . reveals the persistence of anti-Black schemas that belie the discourse of ‘color-blindness’” (Jung 2015:45). Moreover, Jung suggests that the changes in public life following the Civil Rights movement, the decline of public racist discourse in particular, may have been a “temporary” rather than “permanent shift” in which “whites conceded the importance of racism” (Jung 2015:48). In other words, when examining social, political, and economic life and its relation to racial discourse and racial inequality in a post-civil-rights and ostensibly color-blind society, we see a clear disconnect between social opinions regarding racial inclusion, respect and equality, and social action and outcomes that reproduce racialization, racial inequality, and domination.

With regard to social discourse on the acceptability of public racist humor, we see the same disconnect between the notion that “racism is no longer funny” in a post-civil-rights era and the continued prevalence of racist humor from the pre-civil-rights era to the present. For instance, humor scholars observed that following the Civil Rights movement, racist humor, that is whites ridiculing nonwhites, was no longer socially acceptable in public as a form of entertainment (Apte 1987; A. A. Berger 1993; Boskin 1986; Pérez 2016a). While blackface and other forms of racial ridicule comprised the “national sense of humor” of the pre-civil-rights era (Pérez 2016a), and contributed to the strengthening of white supremacy during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, today, blackface is regarded as “racist” as a result of the racial contestation by civil rights groups and cultural critics, who not only challenged negative ethnic and racial stereotypes but also “sought positive representations, and demanded that popular culture serve a multiracial democracy” (Kibler 2015:1).

In turn, Mahadev L. Apte (1987) suggests that following the Civil Rights movement, “ethnic” and “racial” humor in the United States was more “constrained” than at any point in U.S. history,

as people of color began to “assert themselves and . . . protest their being made the butt of humor initiated by anyone but themselves” (Apte 1987:27). Similarly, Arthur A. Berger (1993) suggests that in the post-civil-rights era, ethnic and racial minorities had succeeded in challenging such humor and “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” (A. A. Berger 1993:73).

In other words, humor scholars have argued that it became increasingly difficult for whites to make use of racist humor in public after the Civil Rights movement, as racial and ethnic minorities frequently and increasingly challenged representations that they viewed as racially insulting and harmful. Such observations among humor scholars reflect what race scholars have noted about the decline of overt public racist discourse more generally (Bobo et al. 1996; Bonilla-Silva 2013; López 2013).

Yet, as Jung (2015) suggests, if we look beneath the “shallow depths” of this shift toward color-blind ideology, we see the prevalence and persistence of racist ideology, discourse, and practice. For instance, while color-blind theorists and humor scholars argue that overt and “old-fashioned” racist speech and humor were no longer acceptable in public, and that it visibly declined in a post-civil-rights era, a closer look at the prevalence of racist humor reveals its continuity and significance in an ostensibly color-blind society. As Leslie H. Picca and Joe R. Feagin (2007) contend, racist joking continues to occur at “all levels of society,” both in frontstage and backstage settings. From private gatherings among friends, to the political arena and the Internet, racist joking has been prevalent in maintaining a “white racial framing” (Feagin 2014) of U.S. society, where such joking continues to rely on the use and reproduction of centuries old and contemporary racist imagery, slurs and epithets, stereotypes, and the mocking of culture, language, accents, and dialects.

Borrowing from Freud’s analysis of joking as “hiding social taboos and aggressive feeling and thoughts,” Picca and Feagin contend that racist joking allows joke tellers to circumvent and break societal taboos, “and thereby gain pleasure from expressing feelings and views that are normally repressed because of social pressure,” where “just beneath its apparently joking and unserious surface,” jokers signal more serious racial feelings and/or views that they may harbor (Picca and Feagin 2007:69). In this way, racist joking in a so-called color-blind society allows joke tellers to share and *test* “backstage” racial notions and sentiments in more public or quasi-public settings. Under the guise of “just kidding,” individuals say racist things that would otherwise be inappropriate and taken seriously (Pérez 2013; Picca and Feagin 2007).

Such joking practices are justified, especially in situations where audience members take offence, by asserting that “it was just a joke” and/or accusing the critic of “taking things too seriously” (Picca and Feagin 2007:69). These kinds of responses are used as routine discursive *shock absorbers* when joke tellers are challenged, while those who do not find amusement in the joke are treated as “humorless” and “killjoys” (Billig 2005). These repeated assertions and discursive strategies work to reinforce the notion that racist humor is unproblematic and unserious, thereby fueling contemporary ideologies that maintain that “race and racism no longer matter,” and therefore racist jokes are “just jokes.”

Christina A. Sue and Tanya Golash-Boza (2013) argue that such distancing and denial practices work to safeguard race-based humor from “local charges of racism,” as there is a strong “cultural expectation that individuals ‘go along’ with jokes . . .” which “. . . generates a normative response of silence, inaction or engagement with the joke,” and thereby strengthens color-blind ideologies (Sue and Golash-Boza 2013:1595). That is, while the continued use of racist humor, as a “color-conscious” discourse that notices rather than ignores race, disrupts and reveals the “shallow depths” of color-blind ideology (Jung 2015), the continued prevalence of racist humor, and the denial that such humor is racist, works to “deepen” racism in society. Building on Jung’s “core schemas” on the durability and transposability of racism, I argue racist humor helps

strengthen racism by (1) reinforcing and reproducing the racial categorization of people in society, (2) presupposing their “suitability/unsuitability for civic engagement, or belonging” based on those racial categories, and (3) encouraging the continued presumption and articulation of “superiority/inferiority” based on race (Jung 2015:49).

Finally, it is worth noting that a growing body of literature has focused on the use of “racial” and “ethnic” humor among whites and nonwhites, and on their use of racial humor to “subvert” dominant racial ideologies, particularly in the post-civil-rights and current era (Gillota 2013; Haggins 2007; Lowe 1986; Rossing 2016). While significant, such work has tended to emphasize and celebrate the more “positive” functions of race/ethnic-based humor and has largely ignored and/or downplayed the persistence of racist humor today. Moreover, as Simon Weaver (2014) contends, there has been tendency by scholars to discuss race-based humor as “ethnic” and “racial” humor, which frames such humor in more “neutral and inclusive” terms. This practice of circumventing the term *racist humor* has also worked to minimize the relationship between humor and racism, which contributes to a lack of research that highlights the significance and prevalence of racist humor and racist jokes in contemporary U.S. society and beyond (Billig 2001; Pérez 2013; Weaver 2011).

Data

According to the Encyclopedia of Humor Studies (2014), a joke is the “simplest form of a humorous text.” Jokes are generally comprised by a “setup, which presents the situation in which the events of the narrative develop” (Attardo 2014:417). The setup is followed by a “punch-line,” which should be incongruous relative to the setup. The pervasiveness and reappearance of particular kinds of jokes across social contexts and time periods are known as “jokes cycles”—types of short jokes (e.g., “one-liners”) that circulate socially and remain popular despite being topics that may be “forbidden in polite conversation” (Ellis 2014:414). That is, the “taboo” nature of particular jokes in certain societal contexts makes them ideal candidates for joke cycles, as they are potentially appealing and pleasurable among participants (Dundes 1987; Fine 1976). However, as Simon Critchley (2002) contends, jokes only work “successfully” (e.g., produce laughter, mirth, and/or pleasure) when participants are in “agreement about the social world” and have an “implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes joking” (pp. 4-5).

To examine the pervasiveness of racist jokes, below, I analyze the popularity, reappearance, and persistence of racist jokes across different time periods and social settings. First, I examine the popularity of joke books that emerged in the 1980s. *Truly Tasteless Jokes* (1982; 1983) was one of the most popular joke book series during the post-civil-rights period. The series contained a great number of racist jokes (e.g., “What do you have when you’ve got 10,000 blacks at the bottom of the ocean? A good start”; “How many Mexicans does it take to grease a car? One, if you hit ‘em right”). However, such joke books included numerous joke categories and targets, which worked to deny the interpretation of such joke books as “racist.”

Second, I examine the reappearance of racist jokes from such joke books on the Internet. In particular, I look at the inclusion of similar racist jokes within white supremacist websites. While others have examined the use of racist jokes on the Internet among far-right groups (Billig 2001; Weaver 2010), such studies have either taken for granted that extreme racists created such jokes or suggest that authorship is difficult to determine. I contend that a historical exploration of racist jokes as “joke cycles” reveals that numerous jokes included in far-right websites were jokes that appeared decades earlier in popular sources, such as the *Truly Tasteless Jokes* book series.

Finally, with numerous police departments currently under investigation for the presence of “racial bias,” I explore the persistence of racist jokes among police, despite efforts by police departments to improve community-police relations. Specifically, I make use of the U.S. Justice Department’s report on the Ferguson, Missouri Police Department (U.S. Department of Justice

[DOJ] 2015), which revealed the circulation of racist jokes among police officers and court officials, as well as news articles regarding similar incidents across the country. I find that racist jokes circulating in this context are also similar to racist jokes that have previously appeared and circulated in more popular sources. I contend that the study of the prevalence and persistence of racist humor in these and other areas remain frontiers in the study of color-blind racism (Burke 2016), and that they are in need of critical sociological attention.

Racist Jokes in the Post-Civil-Rights Era

While it is often difficult to determine the origins and authorship of joke cycles that appear in society (Dundes 1987; Weaver 2010), we can point to instances in which particular kinds of jokes gain popularity. For instance, take the following jokes:

What do you call a black boy with a bicycle? Thief!
 What's the new Webster's definition of the word "confusion?" Father's day in Harlem.
 How does God make Puerto Ricans? By sandblasting blacks.
 What's another word for cocoon? N-nigger.
 What do you call a black millionaire industrialist? A tycoon.
 How do you shoot a black man? Aim for the radio.

These jokes gained mass public circulation during the early 1980s in the book series *Truly Tasteless Jokes* (Knott 1982, 1983), under the pseudonym "Blanche Knott." Following the Civil Rights movement, which contributed to the cultural changes in the acceptability of public racial discourse, including race-based humor, such joke books "landed in force on the nation's bookshelves" (McDowell 1983). For instance, *Truly Tasteless Jokes* appeared on various national best-seller lists and remained on the *New York Times* "Best Seller List" for over 20 weeks (McDowell 1983). In fact, the books were so popular that writers and publishers began to complain for "being crowded out of the best sellers list" by such joke books, which led to the creation of the "Advice, How-to and Miscellaneous category" on the list (Applewhite 2011).

Part of the mass appeal of these joke books was that they were "politically incorrect," that they pushed back on "political correctness" and the social constraints on offensive public discourse that emerged following the Civil Rights movement. In turn, such books were marketed as "not for the easily offended," while authors and publishers assured to "offend everybody." For example, the table of contents of *Truly Tasteless Jokes* included numerous joke categories apart from "race" and "ethnicity" such as "Dead Baby" (e.g., "What does it take to make a dead baby float? One scoop of ice cream and a scoop of dead baby"), "Helen Keller" (e.g., "How did Helen Keller burn her hands? Reading a waffle iron"), "WASP" (e.g., "How do WASPs wean their young? By firing the maid"), and "Homosexuals" (e.g., "Why was the homosexual fired from his job at the sperm bank? For drinking on the job").

However, the production of such books was not indiscriminate or simply bent on "offending everybody." They were strategic in light of the recent cultural changes in race talk following the Civil Rights movement. For instance, in 2011, Ashton Applewhite wrote an article for *Harper's Magazine* titled "Being Blanche." Here, Applewhite finally revealed herself as the author of the *Truly Tasteless Jokes* series, a safe distance from the "culture wars" of the 1980s and 1990s. Applewhite noted that her concession to "political correctness" was that she "worked hard to weight the categories evenly so it would be clear that Blanche spared no one" (Applewhite 2011). Why would such joke book authors be so concerned with "offending everyone" in the context of the post-civil-rights era?

I contend that this new logic among humorists during the post-civil-rights era illustrates the process of "re-articulating" civil rights discourse (Omi and Winant 2014) and upholds the central

frames of color-blind racism, such as “abstract liberalism” (Bonilla-Silva 2013), to deny racism while circulating racist humor (Pérez 2013). For example, books, authors, and comedians have been increasingly marketed as “equal opportunity offenders” who target “everyone” since the civil rights era, which has allowed humorists to circumvent accusations of racism while making use of racist discourse (Pérez 2016b). In turn, “equal opportunity offender” discourse frames racist humor as an expression of “liberalism” (e.g., “its about free speech”), by pushing back on the “illiberalism” of those who are “easily offended” and critical: that is, those who are “politically correct.” The ambiguity offered by the use of the “equal opportunity offender” strategy has also facilitated the maintenance and commercial viability of this genre of “politically incorrect” humor, at a time when other comic acts more readily interpreted as “racist” (e.g., blackface, brownface) were under attack in the post-civil-rights era (Pérez 2016a).

It is important to note that while such joke books were framed as “offensive to everyone,” and were marketed as “not for the easily offended,” the circulation and popularity of such joke books were also used to support the conservative right’s attack on the cultural changes brought upon by the Civil Rights movement, the unacceptability of overt racist discourse in particular. For instance, conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh challenged the notion that ridiculing blacks was unacceptable in the post-civil-rights era:

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)

Moreover, in her revelation as the author of *Truly Tasteless Jokes*, Applewhite notes that in 2005, she was contacted by a writer for *Doublethink*, “an online magazine whose mission is to identify and develop young conservative and libertarian writers.” The magazine was interested in Applewhite’s “role in the culture wars” and for being “an early partisan against political correctness” (Applewhite 2011).

In other words, the success of the “equal opportunity offender,” as a challenge to “political correctness,” was in deflecting charges of racism, while simultaneously allowing individuals, whites in particular, to circulate racist jokes in public under the guise of “just jokes” and “free expression” during a period where serious forms of racist discourse were increasingly unacceptable. In turn, the strategic use and circulation of racist jokes during the post-civil-rights era, via equal opportunity offender rhetoric, contributed to the articulation, reproduction, and acceptability of racist humor during the emergence of a “color-blind” racial ideology.

Racist Jokes on the Internet

Edwin McDowell (1983) notes that early critics of joke books such as *Truly Tasteless Jokes* were concerned with the implications that such jokes might have on society. For instance, while some, like Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Barbara W. Tuchman, viewed such jokes as a “breakdown of decency and taste,” others were concerned that “bigotry could well be lurking just below the surface” and warned that such “racial jokes could be an invitation to racial hatred” (McDowell 1983). While it is important to note that jokes are “polysemic” (Weaver 2011), that they are prone to various readings and interpretations depending on the audience and social context (e.g., funny, offensive, aggressive, satiric, subversive), Weaver contends that the rhetorical potential of racist jokes is that they can be used to support serious forms of racism in particular readings and contexts. Although some humor scholars zealously deny the possibility that racist humor can support and reproduce “serious” racism (Davies 2004), one arena where we see racist jokes being used as an invitation to racial hatred is on the Internet.

For instance, Michael Billig (2001) found that early on the Internet became a setting for the circulation of racist jokes in far-right and white supremacist websites. Through an examination of racist jokes on such websites, Billig sought to illustrate a relationship between “humor and

hatred” and the “pleasure and bigotry,” to challenge the notion that extreme racism is “humorless” and that humor is an inherently “positive” social activity (Billig 2001:268). In websites such as “whitesonly.net” and “whitepower.com,” Billig found numerous pages full of “Nigger Jokes” that were used to ridicule and dehumanize blacks with violent racist humor. Yet, while such jokes were published on far-right and white supremacist websites, these websites readily framed the content as a source of “humor” and “fun” rather than overt racism:

“Not everything must be deadly serious. Nigger Jokes and More Politically InCorrect Fun” and “Please keep in mind that these links are here for humor sake, all be they in bad taste. No one is condoning violence against anyone.” (Billig 2001:273)

Much like the popular joke books of the 1980s, such websites also framed their racist humor as “tasteless,” “not for the easily offended,” and as a challenge to “political correctness,” all the while under the guise of fun and amusement.

Moreover, despite such jokes being harbored in open white supremacist virtual contexts, here we see how those on the far right negotiate their overt and extreme racism by attempting to “manage” how their racist rhetoric might be read and interpreted. Under the guise of “humor,” and in a social, cultural, and political context where extreme racism in public became taboo and stigmatized, we also see how even open racists and white supremacists began to negotiate and frame their racist ideology and rhetoric in more “color-blind” racial terms. That is, while jokes on such websites are clearly racist, authors attempt to “manage their impressions” (Goffman 1959) to *minimize* the content as “racist,” illustrating what Bonilla-Silva refers to as “color-blind racial ideology” or a “racism without racists” (Bonilla-Silva 2013). But as Jung (2015) contends, the weakness of this “dominant ideology” lies just beneath its surface, as the jokes in this case are not merely an invitation to humorous fun but to white supremacist ideology.

Today, such websites are not difficult to find on the Internet, as there are thousands of joke websites that contain racist jokes that can be readily accessed online (Weaver 2011). While not all such websites are openly associated with far-right racist groups, there is overlap between the kinds of jokes that appear across websites containing racist jokes, as many websites contain the same jokes. That is, racist jokes circulate on the Internet between “openly racist” websites and seemingly “non-racist” ones.

Again, while scholars suggest it is difficult to determine authorship of the racist jokes that circulate on the Internet, due to the anonymity of users, by analyzing racist jokes as “joke cycles” (Ellis 2014), I find that many racist jokes found on the Internet are jokes that appeared in popular joke books such as *Truly Tasteless Jokes*. For example, take the following jokes:

Why do blacks smell? So that blind people can hate them too. (Knott 1982:115)

Why do Mexicans drive low-riders? So they can cruise and pick lettuce at the same time. (Knott 1983:8)

I have found these same jokes reappear in numerous websites, including white supremacist websites such as “Tightrope.com,” “Niggermania.com,” and “chimpout.com.” It is worth noting that in the reappearance of such jokes on white supremacist websites, the jokes are often altered by including overt racist slurs to emphasize a more explicit racist connotation:

Why do **niggers** stink? So blind people can hate them too. (www.tightrope.com 2016; emphasis added)

Why do **spics** drive low-riders? So they can cruise and pick lettuce at the same time. (www.niggermania.com 2016; emphasis added)

Although such websites have global reach, it is also worth noting that they are largely based in Anglophone countries, particularly in the United States (Kuipers 2006), where many are affiliated with white supremacist organizations (Billig 2001; Weaver 2011). In contrast, Giselinde Kuipers (2006) notes that while such websites are easily accessible on the “Anglophone Internet,” Kuipers observes that control and censorship of online racist jokes on the Internet in the Netherlands has become institutionalized under Dutch law via Meldpunt, the Complaints Bureau for Discrimination on the Internet. According to Meldpunt, “a racist joke is a form of racism like any other and thus, under Dutch law, indictable.” As a result, such websites are “almost completely absent on the Dutch language part of the Internet” (Kuipers 2006:382). Although Kuipers notes that individuals are rarely convicted for racism in the Netherlands, Kuipers suggests that such laws are possible in Dutch society, versus the United States, because

In the U.S., freedom of speech has a sacred ring to it . . . whereas in the Netherlands, the protection of vulnerable social groups is deemed generally more important than freedom of speech. (Kuipers 2006:386)

Although this Dutch perspective is admirable, it is worth noting that it is only recently that Dutch blackface traditions, such as *Zwarte Piet* or “Black Pete,” are being publically contested and recognized as “racist” in the Netherlands (Tharoor 2016).

Nonetheless, while the Netherlands is currently the only country with an independent monitoring organization such as Meldpunt, explicit racist websites, many of which are affiliated with white supremacist groups that contain racist jokes, are also largely banned in most European countries (Kuipers 2006). Erik Bleich (2011) argues that the move to restrict and censor racist speech more generally in European states is rooted in the rise and spread of Fascism and Nazism in the 1930s and post–World War II era, where laws restricting public racist speech, particularly in the form of threats, insults, and discrimination, were steadily designed to limit the spread of racial and religious hatred. However, European societies are hardly immune from racism today, particularly with regard to racist humor (Bleich 2011; Weaver 2011). Moreover, such laws are not uncontroversial, as comedians and cartoonists in particular, from France to the United Kingdom, have made public challenges against laws that potentially limit their “freedom of expression” and the “right to offend” (Bleich 2011; Martin 2012; Staunton 2015).

Overall, it is important to note that the U.S.-based part of Internet has played a significant role in the spread and prevalence of racist humor and ideology over the last two decades, particularly among far-right white supremacists (Billig 2001; Weaver 2011). But while it remains quite obvious that racist humor would be shared and enjoyed among those on the far-right, it is worth exploring the use of racist humor within institutions that can and do produce real harm in the everyday lives of racial and ethnic minorities.

Racist Jokes in the Criminal Justice System

Recently, numerous police departments around the United States have been found with officers circulating racist jokes among their ranks (Berman 2015; Stack 2016; Williams 2016). This practice among law enforcement officers is far from new. For instance, Josephine Chow (1991) examined the circulation of racist police humor among LAPD officers following the 1991 videotaped beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles. An investigation of LAPD policing practices soon followed the videotaped incident that many viewed as racially motivated. Chow found that the investigation revealed the widespread use of racist humor and insults among officers, although such incidents were downplayed as isolated and rare. Moreover, Chow notes that “anti-bias” policies, which existed in numerous police departments since the mid-1980s, were pointed to as illustrations that police departments were serious about curbing racial bias and improving

community-police relations. For instance, the LAPD's policy against "racist messages" contained the following:

This Memorandum reaffirms the Departments policy concerning racially or ethnically oriented remarks, slurs, epithets, terminology, or language of a derogatory nature. These remarks are an inappropriate form of communication which becomes a destructive wedge in relationships with peers and members of the community. The deliberate and casual use of racial or ethnically derogatory language by Department employees is misconduct and will not be tolerated under any circumstances. (Chow 1991:855)

Yet, while many police departments around the country have had similar policies in place for decades, the casual and routine use of racist language and joking among officers is rarely disciplined or investigated, unless there is a broader social movement or public call for disciplining police racial abuse and violence.

For example, following the mass protests and demonstrations against the Ferguson, Missouri Police Department in 2014, which were in response to the police shooting of black teenage male, Michael Brown, by white police officer, Darren Wilson, the DOJ conducted a federal investigation to determine the presence of "racial bias" within the police department. One indication of "impermissible racial bias," among a predominantly white police force, captured and highlighted by the federal investigation was the circulation of racist jokes between "police and court supervisors, including FPD supervisors and commanders." The report noted that such jokes were shared on "official City of Ferguson email accounts, and apparently sent during work hours" (DOJ 2015:71). The following was used by the DOJ as an example of the kinds of racist jokes that were being circulated here:

An African-American woman in New Orleans was admitted into the hospital for a pregnancy termination. Two weeks later she received a check for \$5,000. She phoned the hospital to ask who it was from. The hospital said, "Crimestoppers."

The investigation concluded that while the "content of these communications is unequivocally derogatory, dehumanizing, and demonstrative of impermissible bias" (DOJ 2015:71), federal investigators were unable to find any "indication that any officer or court clerk engaged in these communications was ever disciplined," nor "any indication that these emails were reported as inappropriate. Instead, the emails were usually forwarded along to others" (DOJ 2015:72).

Similar to the reappearance of racist jokes from joke books into white supremacist websites, this particular joke among Ferguson police officers and court officials also has roots in more popular sources. For instance, the 1992 joke book *Jokes My Mother Never Told Me* contains a similar joke to the one shared among Ferguson police officers and court officials:

What does a black woman get every time she gets an abortion? \$500 from Crime-stoppers. (Barry 1992:11)

It is also worth noting that comedian Lisa Lampanelli, who has been branded an "equal opportunity offender" who does not bow down to "political correctness," performed a similar joke in her 2007 comedy special *Dirty Girl: No Protection*:

What do you call a black woman who's had seven abortions? A crime fighter!

A clip of this joke by Lampanelli is found on "racist-jokes.info," a site that was previously openly affiliated with white supremacist organizations (Weaver 2010). Finally, a similar joke is found in far-right white supremacist websites:

How does a black woman fight crime? She has an abortion. (niggermania.com)

And,

Q: What did the black women get for getting an abortion?

A: Fat cash from crime stoppers. (BlackJokes.net, N.d.)

Again, it is difficult to determine when, how, and why certain jokes reappear in specific social contexts, and whether or not the circulation of racist jokes among police officers originated from some of these above sources. However, the point here is to illustrate how pervasive and prevalent similar racist jokes are across social contexts.

While the argument can be made that such jokes may fulfill different social functions, as they can be interpreted differently depending on the audience and context due to the “polysemic” nature of jokes (Weaver 2011), one shared reading and interpretation that is clear thus far, across these settings, is that the use of racist jokes is seen as a challenge to “political correctness.” That is, across these different settings and contexts, we see that joke book writers, police officers, comedians, and white supremacists all frame their use of racist jokes as an attack against “political correctness.” For instance, LAPD official Tom Angel was critical of “political correctness” following public pressure for his resignation after he was found having emailed a series of racist and sexist jokes while second in command at the Burbank Police Department during 2012-2013 (Stack 2016).

Chow notes that defenders of police racist humor have previously argued that the use of racist jokes among officers “is a necessary evil, serving to bond coworkers in the grueling fight against crime” (Chow 1991:858). Others maintain that these are isolated incidents among “bad apples,” and that the sharing of such jokes does not necessarily mean that joke tellers believe the racial or sexist stereotypes, and that such jokes do not motivate behavior (Chow 1991; Davies 2004).

Yet critics point out that such jokes are shared across the chain of command, and reflect racial biases that may potentially impact policing practices that put criminal cases in doubt (Robles 2015). For instance, as Frances Robles (2015) points out,

The Broward County, Fla., state attorney’s office was forced to drop 11 felony cases, 23 misdemeanors and one juvenile case after four Fort Lauderdale police officers were caught sending racist texts, including some that used racial epithets to refer to suspects they chased. An officer also made a video trailer featuring actual police dogs and Ku Klux Klan imagery . . . All of the defendants in the dropped cases were black . . . In all of those instances, at least one of the four officers involved was the principal officer in the arrest.

Howard Finkelstein, a public defender in Broward County, Florida, argued that there is a strong relationship between racist humor and policing practices, and suggested that “if people think the beating of black young men is funny, then they are willing to beat young black men, period, end of story” (Robles 2015). As the DOJ concludes, the use of these racist jokes among police officers and court officials is nothing short of “derogatory” and “dehumanizing.”

Conclusion

The above examples are but a brief exploration into the prevalence and use of racist humor in an ostensibly color-blind society. These cases illustrate that while race and humor scholars broadly contend that racist speech and humor have declined after the Civil Rights movement, above, I highlight racist humor as a pervasive feature of contemporary social life in the United States, and how racist humor is connected to color-blind racism and ideology. In this way, I contend that the

study of racist humor remains a “new frontier” (Burke 2016) in the study of color-blind racism and racist ideology, and offers new directions and insights for better understating, broadly and closely, the ongoing structure and culture of racial formation and domination. Numerous sites, including those above, remain to be examined with much greater clarity, nuance, and depth by sociologists in general, and critical race scholars in particular. Many other cases, such as the circulation of racist political cartoons during the Obama presidency, the continued use of racial minstrelsy on college campuses, racist jokes in the workplace, and global racist humor such as anti-Muslim cartoons, illustrate that racist humor remains a powerful and significant form of racist discourse and practice in contemporary society, in ways that have been little explored by sociologists in general, and critical race scholars in particular.

But what are the theoretical implications of the findings above, beyond acknowledging the prevalence of racist humor today? And how might racist humor complicate scholarly findings of public racial discourse in a post-civil-rights and ostensibly color-blind society? Critically examining how racist humor is connected to racial ideologies illustrates that these joking practices are “everyday mechanisms” (Mueller 2017) that contribute to legitimizing, strengthening, and advancing “common sense” notions of race and racism. First, we see that racist humor has operated, and continues to operate, as a cultural tool in the racialization, dehumanization, and criminalization of people of color, blacks in particular, by reinforcing and popularizing notions of racial superiority and inferiority. Second, shared racist humor works to simultaneously increase social bonding, cooperation, and group identity formation among white participants at the expense of racialized targets. For instance, the use of racist humor within the criminal justice system shows how racist humor facilitates bonding and teamwork among white officers, at the same time that they engage in the dehumanization of nonwhite community members. And finally, we see that the ways in which racist humor is shared in public adapts to the social, political, and cultural changes in racial ideology and practice, as racist humor allows private “backstage” racist ideologies and sentiments to move into “frontage” public arenas (Pérez 2013). For example, Jason Wilson (2017) notes how white nationalists (“alt-right”) are currently “weaponizing” humor to popularize and spread fascist and white nationalist ideologies in the current political climate in the United States.

Therefore, while the prevalence of racist humor reveals the “shallow depths” of color-blind ideology (Jung 2015), as participants must be “color-conscious” rather than “color-blind” to “get the joke,” the assertion that racist humor is harmless (Davies 2004) works to strengthen an ideology that maintains that racism is no longer a serious social issue. Thus, a critical examination of racist humor, particularly in an ostensibly color-blind society, must also consider how such joking practices are a form of resistance and challenge to “political correctness,” as such humor is often used to challenge the constraints and limits on public racist discourse, on whites in particular, following the Civil Rights movement (Pérez 2013). That is, the use of racist humor allows participants to engage in a *regressive* form of “color-consciousness,” which allows them to recycle “racist stereotypes, narratives, imagery, and emotions” across social contexts and across generations (Picca and Feagin 2007), in ways that attempt to minimize and normalize this form of racism as unserious and far removed from “racial hatred” (Billig 2001).

Finally, it is worth noting that there has been reluctance among humor scholars to acknowledge and examine racist humor as “racist humor” (Billig 2001; Weaver 2010). Humor scholars in particular have argued that a current function of “racial” and “ethnic” jokes has not been to reinforce and reproduce racism or racist ideology but to challenge the “cultural sensitivity about prejudicial thinking rather than ridiculing any particular ethnic group” (Ellis 2014:415). I contend that a critical sociological analysis of racist humor must challenge such a position by highlighting *how* racist humor, a discourse that carries a centuries old legacy of racism and white supremacy, has contributed to, and continues to reinforce, notions of racial superiority and inferiority, regardless of intentionality (Hall 2000). By omitting a discussion of power or the history

of white supremacy in relation to the circulation and function of “racial” or “ethnic” humor, such analysis only strengthens contemporary racial ideologies that maintain that racism is no longer a serious issue, except in extreme and isolated incidents. In turn, by drawing connections between humor, ideology, and power through an examination of the prevalence and pervasiveness of racist humor within and across socio-historical, political, and generational contexts, and highlighting the role of such humor in maintaining racial ideologies and domination, I contend that critical race scholars can make a significant contribution to a frontier in the study of racism in society that is in much need of sociological analysis, insight, and critique.

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