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Comedy, race and ethnicity

As the previous chapter suggests, universal agreement as to what is funny is rare, if not impossible. We have also seen how laughter can invoke a temporary suspension of normal mental processes, so that we can often find a joke, a character, a scene or a sketch funny despite ideological concerns we might have. As Schaeffer puts it, '[w]e enter a world of amorality when we laugh, where our moral, practical and rational concerns have a moratorium on their functioning' (1981: 28). If the context is right, comedy provides a vacation away from the intellectual and affective world we inhabit for most of our waking lives. Comedy presents a world full of contradictions, since it can be the voice of both the powerful and the weak, it can be simultaneously subversive and affirming, funny yet offensive or, with or without the passage of time, no longer funny but simply offensive. Arguably, comedy and the laughter it produces are an invitation to a partnership, an invitation to share, even if momentarily, an illusion of complicity and belonging, but comedy has this effect by excluding others. As Andy Medhurst puts it, comedy can be as much a 'fence keeping you out as a gate letting you in' (2007: 20). This notion that comedy can be a Janus-like process, a barrier as well as an entrance, both a 'sword and a shield', is important when we attempt to understand the relationship between comedy, race and ethnicity.

Comic material in broadcasting and film can, as we have seen, have different meanings for different audiences at different times, but it invariably relies a great deal on stereotyping. The term stereotyping was thrust into circulation in 1922 by the American Walter Lippman, who recognised its role in the process of opinion formation and reproduction. Lippman saw stereotypes as inadequate, biased, obstacles to rational thought and resistant to social change but, at the same time, necessary if we are to understand the complex modern world. Though the concept of the stereotype is more complex than many definitions allow, it is useful to accept the broad definition of a stereotype as 'an exaggerated belief associated with a category [whose] function is to justify or rationalise our conduct in relation to that category' (Pickering 2001: 10). Stereotyping is problematic and demeaning for those stereotyped,

especially minorities, since it assumes an exclusionary norm. Comedy has an important role in determining attitudes and behaviour towards stereotyped social groups, but the nature and effect of this role is a matter of debate. Karen Ross argues that 'while stereotypes have no basis in reality they are nonetheless real in their social consequences' (1996: 4). Omid Djalili, however, suggests that: 'Stereotypes are only stereotypes, I feel, because they actually have a modicum of truth in them' (Djalili quoted in Lockyer and Pickering 2009: 113). The apparent disagreement here is over the nature of the stereotypes discussed. Ross, writing about representation more widely than in comedy, refers to negative racist stereotypes while Djalili, as a comedian, is referring to recognisable cultural traits suitable for joking about (and undermining) in his act. The inflections of the use of stereotypes are much more complex than they superficially appear (see Malik 2002: 28–9) and their use in comedy complicates them further. As we saw in the introductory chapter, there are those who feel that laughing at others is an expression of a perceived social superiority, so that comedy serves to represent the object of laughter as somehow inferior. Balanced against that is the view that laughter is the enemy of social distinctions, that it helps to eradicate mistaken notions of superiority or inferiority, often by exposing the limitations and prejudices of those who try to maintain such distinctions.

Not surprisingly, when considering ethnic and racial humour we find sharply polarised views about its intent, function and effect. At one end of the spectrum there are those who insist that ethnic and racial humour can only ever serve to assert a presumed superiority of one racial or ethnic group over another. These critics argue that since both racism and jokes are social and cultural products, racial humour is not simply a product of an individual psychology, but is an aspect of racist society. For Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, the consequence is that 'racist jokes … act as propaganda in support of racist ideology' (2009: 51). They argue that jokes are not merely a passive, harmless reflection of existing social attitudes, but that they perform a much more proactive role in reinforcing and perpetuating social and ethnic prejudice, that they 'are active in the process of the construction of the meaning of "otherness" and inferiority of social groups' (2009: 59). Though Howitt and Owusu-Bempah recognise that jokes about an ethnic minority told by a member of that minority – they cite the prevalence of Jewish jokes told by Jewish comedians, for example – might be seen as 'an opportunity to rejoice in the culture of an ethnic group', they conclude that ethnic jokes can never contribute in a positive and relevant way to contemporary multicultural society (2009: 64).

It is not hard to sympathise with these views when looking at some of the racist jokes on websites which are dedicated to reinforcing ethnic stereotypes and a sense of (almost always) white supremacy. Websites supportive of the Ku Klux Klan and other sites, cited by Michael Billig (2009) and Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, are overtly racist, using categories including 'niggers', 'spics'

and 'fags' and listing jokes that offer their users ways of articulating racist propaganda that would be repetitious and moronic as ordinary conversation (see Howitt and Owusu-Bempah 2009: 57). Expressions of overt racism as comedy are now thankfully rare in broadcast media and film, but examples of much more ambiguous racist humour, which depends on how the context is interpreted and meaning is inferred, are not. To condemn all racial and ethnic humour as malignant is, according to commentators such as Davies (1990) and Berger (1993), to misunderstand the ways in which comedy works and suggest that there can be a healing, restorative function of racial and ethnic humour. Their approach has its origins in Freud's theories which suggest that many jokes are motivated by hostile aggression, which is otherwise socially frowned upon or even forbidden. Freud argued that 'the joke will allow us to turn to good account those ridiculous features in our enemy that the presence of obstacles would not let us utter aloud or consciously' (2002: 100). For Freud the ability to deal with the repressed through jokes acts as a mechanism which avoids more draconian responses. His three-dimensional view of human personality, in which primitive, socially unacceptable *id* impulses are inhibited or censored by the moralistic *superego*, while the *ego* or conscious self mediates between them, implies that 'we can get away with making all sorts of insulting, aggressive, or sexual remarks as long as they are delivered in a humorous fashion' (Rappoport 2005: 20). Building upon Freud, Davies (1990) and Berger (1993) argue that stereotype-based humour can enable the harmless release of social-emotional tensions within and between groups, that racial and ethnic jokes do not mean that people hate the object of the joke, but rather offer an opportunity to 'play' with aggression. This is not to deny the potential for racial and ethnic humour and comedy to reinforce prejudice, but to argue for a more complex, and less prescriptive, view of the ways in which comedy works. Films, radio and television programmes provide a context in which audiences may passively transgress the conventional boundaries of both reality and good taste, offering a kind of cognitive and affective playground in which it is possible to stray from normative beliefs and values. The crucial point here is that such films and programmes 'are not inviting us to abandon our moral values, only to rise above them for a moment, take a breather from being good and from the serious work of trying to make a better world' (Rappoport 2005: xiii). It's unfortunate that the logic of humour being a safety valve for society appears to share the logic of racist violence against minorities in times of social unrest. The key factor is whether reference is made to ethnic and racial stereotypes in a way that reinforces them or undermines them.

Sarita Malik (2010: 76) usefully summarises a distinction between racism and racialisation, which is simply when 'a racial character or context is imposed on an individual or group'. The interpretation of the representation of the group marked as 'Other' is ambivalent rather than negative. The point of this

distinction is to highlight the fact that to see the issue of race as belonging only to the minority is in itself racist (see Malik 2010: 79–80; Ross 1996: 17–18).

Discussing comedy in the context of race and ethnicity comes down to two basic questions: firstly, what is the relationship between social reality and the comedy's representation of race and ethnicity, and, secondly, who is the comedy for? Many further questions follow from these: Is the comedy addressing a particular minority, the majority or both? The effect of the comedy clearly depends on the extent to which these constituencies feel on the inside or outside of their community. Do they share recognition of any stereotypes used? Do they have experience of racism? Do particular ethnicities see themselves as unique and separate or as part of an inclusive multicultural ethnic continuity?

Hollywood cinema has traditionally downplayed ethnic difference and promoted the idea of the melting pot, thus privileging conformity to US values and homogeneity among American citizens, as Lester D. Friedman (1991a) argues. Friedman (1991a: 3) recounts how his attempts to research Jewish ethnicity in contemporary Hollywood were largely seen as divisive by respondents. In contrast, while studying television comedy, Brett Mills is happy to say that 'Jewish comedy is American comedy' (2005: 126) or at least 'the fact that British audiences can happily consume and enjoy American sitcoms like *Seinfeld* without requiring an understanding of the Jewishness of its content demonstrates how Jewish comedy has become a performance style dissociated from its ethnic, religious and cultural roots' (2005: 127). Mills implies that the ethnicity of the persons in front of and behind the cameras isn't as significant as that of the consumer of the text. Friedman (1991a: 3) initially suggests otherwise but goes on to argue that the ethnic context within which an individual perceives texts 'must be considered an important component of how one gathers meaning from all texts, even those that contain no overt references to ethnicity' (1991b: 21–2). Whether one's ethnicity is determined by 'consent or descent' (1991b: 19), by internal or external factors, chosen or allocated, it is a complex factor in identity. The negotiations involved in reacting to comedy, in deciding what works or doesn't work, is funny or unfunny, inclusive or exclusive, acceptable or unacceptable, or some combination of the foregoing, make it a significant experience for individuals and social groups. Whatever the nature and effect of racial and ethnic humour, it is clear that there have been some significant shifts in the ways in which radio, television and film comedy have presented or inflected it over time. The chapter proceeds with broad case studies of British and American culture.

Following up: race and humour

- To what extent should humour be required to be socially responsible? Is such a concept compatible with humour?
- Is racialised (rather than racist) comedy desirable?
- Is it possible to use stereotypes in ways that counteract and/or resist racism?

Ethnicity in British screen comedy

On British television changes in attitudes are clearly marked in the differences between the 1970s comedy *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, where the leading Indian character, Rangi Ram, was played by the white British actor Michael Bates, and the series *Goodness Gracious Me*, broadcast on BBC radio from 1996 to 1998 and then on BBC television from 1998–2001, written by and starring Sanjeev Bhaskar and Meera Syal. The latter programme played with British stereotypes, turning the common practices of drunken groups of white British restaurant-goers on their head in the sketch in which Asian characters 'go for an English', asking for 'something really bland' up to and including 'the blandest thing on the menu' and behave in a raucous and boorish manner. The success of *Goodness Gracious Me* was followed by *The Kumars at No. 42* (2001–6), also starring Bhaskar and Syal, a programme that enjoyed considerable international success in India, Malaysia and North America. Whereas Michael Bates played the stereotype, Bhaskar and Syal are confident enough to play with stereotypes in an ironic fashion, unafraid to parody aspects of Asian culture in ways that are funny to a wider multicultural audience. In addition to Bollywood films that play to British Asian audiences, comedy dramas such as *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), *East Is East* (1999), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) and *West Is West* (2010) trace the progress made in multicultural Britain without blinding audiences to the work still to be done. The essential optimism of these works seems justified when looking back at racial and ethnic comedy programmes on British television of the 1960s and 1970s (see Mather 2006).

The difficulties of engaging with the issue of race relations in British television comedy were shown by the inept early *Curry and Chips* (1969) featuring a blacked-up Spike Milligan. However, the BBC's *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965–75) proved a groundbreaking comedy or, at least, 'signalled a drastic break from television's habitually "polite" and awkward response towards racial themes' (Malik 2002: 92). The series spawned two feature films in 1969 and 1972, and a number of international spin-offs including *All in the Family* in the US (see Chapter 5). *Till Death Us Do Part* attracted considerable controversy, with Warren Mitchell playing the opinionated white working-class bigot Alf

Garnett, whose views on politics, women, race and the younger generation were at the forefront in each episode. The production staff, including the writer Johnny Speight, were clearly of the view that the programme was anti-racist and that by ridiculing the main character they exposed him and the nature of his racial prejudices (including animosity towards the 'Jews up at the Spurs', a rival football club to his beloved West Ham) for what they were. However, Garnett's extensive use of the term 'coon' and other derogatory names for minority groups gave offence, particularly as some viewers missed the satirical irony of Speight's writing. Stuart Hood argued that 'If racism is widely spread in a society, as it is in ours, such shows will be seen by a considerable part of the audience as validating their views' (1983: 26). Ross is able to cite research that shows that audiences of *All in the Family* see the character of Archie Bunker appearing to be 'telling it like it is' or to be a bigoted fool depending on their prejudices before watching it (1996: 93). Reception, not the programme makers' intentions, is the important factor.

If *Till Death Us Do Part* attempted to confront racism through the attitudes and arguments of an all-white cast, other British programmes did feature black and Asian actors. *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972–76), produced by Thames, was hugely popular, running to fifty-six episodes in seven series and generating a film based on the programme in 1973. The basic premise is that a black couple, Bill and Barbie Reynolds, move next door to a working-class white couple, Eddie and Joan Booth. For Ross, *Love Thy Neighbour* 'broke new ground in featuring an attractive black couple who were positive and assertive and most definitely not victims' (1996: 94). Eddie's use of abusive terms such as 'nig-nog', 'choc-ice' and 'Sambo' are countered by Bill's references to Eddie as 'honky', 'snow-flake' and 'paleface'. Such exchanges attracted considerable controversy at the time, though the writers of the show argued for the comic irony that they felt lay behind the name-calling. If, as the DVD sleeve notes say, the series 'takes some of the heat out of race relations by showing the funny side of everyday conflict', then this happens largely because it is the white character Eddie who comes off worse in the exchanges. He is shown as less tolerant, less open-minded, less physically capable and much lazier around the house. He is portrayed as being less intelligent than Bill and is more often than not the butt of the jokes. When, in an episode from February 1974, Eddie inadvertently loses the airline ticket that Bill has bought for Barbie so that she can visit her mother in Trinidad, he spends several hours rooting the council rubbish tip looking for it; Bill has already found the ticket, but decides to make Eddie suffer before telling him.

The series exposed the extent to which racist attitudes and racist language permeated Britain in the 1970s. Though Joan and Barbie get on well together and share a sense of female solidarity, Joan can still tell Barbie that, with all that Trinidadian sunshine, 'you'll come back black as a nigger'. In the working man's club frequented by Bill and Eddie, the men rehearse conversations

about black immigration from former British colonies that were commonplace in Britain at the time. Arguing that black migration causes unemployment, Eddie refers to the 'nig-nog nurses' that fill the hospitals, contrasting them with those 'white foreigners', the Irish. When Bill stays with them, Eddie rejects the view that Bill is an 'ordinary human being', telling Joan that Bill can't be, because he's black: as he says, 'they've got primitive passions and strange ways'. The live-audience laugh track suggests that all this is deemed to be funny but it is unclear if the laughter is at the views themselves or the crudeness of their articulation. In either case it is left to the plot-lines to make sure that Eddie pays the price for his racist views. Through a dialogue between characters reacting to Britain's changing circumstances, racist views are articulated, examined and exposed but in language offensive to many at the time and unacceptable today. The sitcom form also leaves them doomed to repeat forever their conflictual deadlock (see Mather 2006: 81).

While *Till Death Us Do Part* and *Love Thy Neighbour* reflect the consequences of Empire in an increasingly ethnically diverse Britain, the BBC sitcom *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* (1974–81), set in a British army camp in India in 1944, finds comic material in the colonial experience itself. Much of the comedy comes from the conflict between the professional soldier Sergeant-Major Williams (beautifully played by Windsor Davies) and the diverse bunch of inept, cross-dressing conscripts who make up the Royal Artillery Concert Party and whose main aim is to avoid being sent into action in Burma. Made following the success of *Dad's Army* (1968–77) and at a time when memories of the Second World War and of National Service were still strong, the comedy relies on the incongruous situation of the concert party, whose interests are in putting on a show whatever the limitations, while a war – as well as demands for Indian national independence – rage around them. The Sergeant-Major's efforts to instil some army discipline into the concert party meet with little success, as they offer a carnivalesque resistance to army life, the 'real' business of war and ruling the colony, and frequently rely on the help of the base's Indian servants.

Rangi Ram acts as the focal point for the comedy which springs from ethnic differences between the British and the Indians. He appears overly anxious to please and appease his colonial 'masters', considers himself to be 'British', but also subverts them and exposes their limitations. He invariably offers a perspective on events that apparently spring from indigenous wisdom, often expressed in a pithy utterance delivered straight to camera, but he is also the source of much of the comic word-play, often based on a misunderstanding of English language and culture, citing the song 'Pack Up Your Troubles on the Old Kent Road', or mistaking 'gelatine' for 'quarantine'. His attempts to speak on behalf of his compatriots also generate jokes, as when he declares that the punkah-wallah would most definitely not sell his grandmother for one hundred rupees to help out the concert party, since he sold her last week for two hundred rupees. Until the death of Michael Bates in 1978, Rangi Ram was,

nevertheless, a central figure in the sitcom. In the episode 'A Star Is Born', for example, Rangi takes the initiative to stop the Sergeant-Major's efforts to send the gang to the front line. He remains an intriguing figure, offering parodic comment on both British and Indian culture, but undoubtedly supports uncomfortable, patronising stereotypes.

The Fosters (1976–77), based on the US sitcom *Good Times* (see below), was the first British sitcom to feature an all-black cast, including Norman Beaton and a young Lenny Henry, and the later *Desmonds* (1989–94), starring Beaton, achieved sustained success curtailed only by the death of its star. Both these shows, embedded in black British communities, sidestepped comedy based on racial difference, but racial intolerance in Britain of the period remained an issue for not just Afro-Caribbean and Asian ethnic groups but all minorities, as the comedy series *Mind Your Language* (1977–79) shows. Promoted as a 'new multi-racial comedy series', it featured Barry Evans teaching English language to a diverse range of foreign adults in an evening class. As might be expected, the comedy revolved around linguistic misunderstanding, jokes, puns and the sniping that took place between the different national stereotypes. Hugely popular at the time, the show appears banal, inept, pedestrian and, yes, racist today (see Malik 2002: 97), but it does represent something of the ways in which British television was beginning, ineptly as ever, to recognise that it must accommodate diverse ethnicities as Britain became a more multi-racial society. A brief and unfunny revival in 1986 only showed how far that society had changed.

Following up: race and comedy on British television

☞ Consider an episode or episodes from a television comedy series from the twentieth century that includes characters of different races and ethnicities. Does the comedy address issues of race and ethnicity in a progressive, positive way or does it reinforce racism and racist views already embedded in society? Does knowing the history of the text and the time of its production help you understand its particular examples of humour, or not?

☞ How subjective is your response in terms age, gender, class and race?

African-American screen comedy

In 2010, out of roughly 309 million Americans, Black or African-Americans made up 12.6 per cent of the US population, a self-ascribing racial minority of roughly 39 million people, a number equal to about two-thirds of the entire UK population. The now well-documented nature of the representation of African-Americans on screen can be seen as giving some indication of the

changing status of one particular group in American culture: 'the integration of blacks as equal participants in society remains an official but elusive goal, and the absence of black representation in film [and television] is one manifestation of that problem' (Winokur 1991: 191). The representation of African-Americans in Hollywood and on television has been surveyed in depth by, among others, Donald Bogle (1994, 2001). Karen Ross concludes in her study of Anglo-American film and television that: 'It is the poverty of black images rather than their frequency that constitutes the real problem' (1996: 170). The overall lack of representation merely raises the stakes for examples that do appear: 'any existent representation of blacks will have an enormous amount of social energy cathected on to it. That the bulk of this representation should occur in comedy is an indication of the strength of the attempt to avoid the representation of an enormously difficult subject' (Winokur 1991: 191). Winokur's comments argue that the social tension around race in American society has restricted the representation of black Americans, and that the cultural hierarchy that suggests comedy is relatively trivial allows it to present what might be too problematic for other genres. While we will briefly refer to the larger representation of black culture, our focus on comedy can only give a partial picture of the whole, acknowledging that it is perhaps a disproportionately large part of the picture. Coleman and McIlwain, for example, express frustration that too often 'Black life and culture remain relegated to the comedic' (2005: 133).

Despite the American Civil War (1861–65) leading to the liberation of slaves, soon after 1876 many states enacted laws that racially segregated their society and placed their black citizens in second-class status with separate, and effectively inferior, facilities and rights. During this period entertainment was always a grey area. While white audiences felt themselves entitled to the best in entertainment they were seldom comfortable when that meant freely acknowledging the talents of black performers. This produced the somewhat bizarre and contradictory practice of minstrelsy where white performers blacked up to perform for white audiences (see Carpio 2008: 24). Nevertheless, given music and dance as avenues of success, albeit restricted and based on stereotyping, black performers took their chances. Since black and white culture were ostensibly separate, seeking out genuine black performers added a cachet of 'exotic' otherness to the experience. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s the fashionable Cotton Club in Harlem kept strict segregation between black performers such as Cab Calloway, Count Basie and Duke Ellington and their orchestras, and the white audiences who flocked to see them. But the mainstream music industry these artists competed in was still dominated by white managers, radio and record producers and white competitors.

The same was true in other media. The Nicholas Brothers, for example, are clearly, even given the limited amount of footage available, contenders for the best dancers in America in the 1930s and 1940s, yet dance movies were

invariably structured around white stars. *The Pirate* (1948) shows Gene Kelly keen to put himself alongside the Nicholas Brothers for the key number ('Be a Clown') but the film was not welcomed critically and did poorly at box office. The usual procedure for the inclusion of black performers in feature films was to make their appearances non-essential to the plot so that they could be cut out for exhibition in white-only cinemas in the Southern states. Conversely, the presence of their scenes would justify headline billing in black neighbourhood cinemas.

Such restrictions clearly limited black actors too. Though there were black filmmakers serving black audiences, they were only ever able to do so on a financial shoestring, and profits, when there were any, were often siphoned off by white backers. The best-paying opportunities for black actors in the mainstream industry were usually thankless supporting roles as comic relief. Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (1994) summarises the limited number of stereotyped roles available in classical Hollywood. The much-criticised Hattie McDaniel, the first black Oscar winner for her role as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), felt it was better to be an actress earning $700 a week for playing a maid rather than earning $7 for being one (see Ross 1996: 15). Ross critiques what she sees as Bogle's 'highly optimistic perspective' in his assessment of the impact of black actors and actresses playing '*against* their roles' (cited Ross 1996: 13), but it seems to us that Bogle is right to the extent that we understand actors to be something more than the roles they inhabit. The ways these issues play out in relation to comedic texts may be illustrated with a specific example from classical Hollywood.

In the 'land yacht' sequence from *Sullivan's Travels* (1940), Sullivan the director is posing as a vagrant but, encumbered by his entourage following in the bus, he hitches a lift with a young whippet tank (or hot rod) driver and attempts to outdistance them. In the slapstick sequence that follows all the ethnically and class marked occupants of the bus are bounced around; the driver, the journalist, the female secretary and the photographer on the front seat; the fixer, radio-operator and doctor at the back; and the cook (Charles Moore, credited as 'Colored Chef') in the galley kitchen. There is a clear hierarchy of slapstick comedy as to who is most humiliatingly shaken, the secretary's stockings add 'a little bit of sex', for example, but it is the cook who comes off worst. One interesting element among the pratfalls is when he gets pancake batter all over his face and is effectively 'whited up'. This echoes an earlier gag in the sequence when a motorcycle policeman is splashed with mud by the passing bus and thus 'blacked up'. The humiliation of an authority figure is in itself comic, the idea of a black policeman in the historical context of the film, might also be meant to be funny, and could clearly be read as racist. However, since he loses contact with the bus (i.e. becomes incompetent), at the moment of wiping the mud away even this may be mitigated. This pair of jokes does, ultimately, ask questions about the fixed nature of racial values

and shows whiteness and blackness as accidents, splashed on. While this is not, perhaps, something any of the filmmakers would claim (any more than they might claim racist intentions), it does appear to be a potential of the film's comedy to momentarily shake things up in a time when segregation insisted that racial values were utterly fixed.

If fixed and negative values are upheld by limited stereotypical representations there is clearly an argument to be had as to whether it is better for such representation to exist or not. In reaction to the transfer from radio to television of *Amos 'n' Andy* (1951–53) the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) mounted successful campaigns against its production (see Cripps 2003). This had the unlooked-for effect that there would be no new television shows with black central characters for over a decade (while leaving the two existing seasons of *Amos 'n' Andy* running in syndication until 1966. See Coleman and McIlwain 2005: 127 and Morreale 2003: 302). Other ethnicities did not react in the same way to ethnic shows like *The Goldbergs* (1950–55) and *I Remember Mama* (1949–56) since they portrayed the 'vestiges of a national culture' while, by contrast, the depictions of *Amos 'n' Andy* appeared to the black middle class set on assimilation to be only 'an aberration of white American culture' (Cripps 2003: 34). This attitude undervalued the role of black culture in American culture, particularly that of the Southern states (see Genovese 1975). Winokur, in discussing the sequence of *Back to the Future* (1985) where the white mid-western teenager played by Michael J. Fox 'invents' rock and roll, identifies 'a desire on the part of white America to have been less beholden to black culture (among others) for the structure of its own culture' (1991: 202). That debt was always obscured by segregation which required surrogates to mediate black culture to white audiences. Elvis Presley, for example, emerged as a conduit between black and white music and was found deeply disturbing by the racist white establishment. The presence of black culture in any form might, it seemed, make a difference to attitudes.

The 'subtle integrationist message' of seeing a 'negro family' on television (Cripps 2003: 38) is difficult to evaluate. It clearly helps familiarise the mainstream community with the marginalised one and contributes to the stock of images available to subsequent programme makers. These were somewhat expanded by Bill Cosby co-starring alongside Robert Culp in the spoof spy series *I Spy* (1965–68). Even *Julia* (1968–71), starring Diahann Carroll as a widowed mother and nurse, though widely regarded as excessively bland and irrelevant, is shown by Aniko Bodroghkozy to have been challenging by its very presence: 'the show's "whiteness", middle-classness, and in-offensiveness did not defuse its threat to entrenched racist positions' (2003: 142). Nonetheless, Coleman and McIlwain argue that assimilation is an outdated 'racist ideology' in which 'Black culture was most prized when it approached the norms and values of Whiteness' (2005: 130).

Hollywood's ideology had traditionally been assimilationist in regard to all other ethnic groups and this approach continued in 1960s film production in which the pre-eminent and Oscar-winning black star is Sidney Poitier, whose persona was that of 'the quietly dignified and intelligent urban black man' (Ross 1996: 16). The 1967 comedy film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* has him play a Nobel prize-winning doctor courting the daughter of classical Hollywood stars Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn and patiently waiting for them to overcome their unjustifiable racist prejudices against interracial marriage. This was a topical subject. In 1960 when the exceptional dancer, singer and actor Sammy Davis Junior married the Swedish actress May Britt he was threatened personally but also legally as 'anti-miscegenation' laws were still on the statutes of thirty-six states, seventeen of which still enforced them. The Hollywood Production Code of 1930, which specifically banned miscegenation as a subject, was in operation until 1966. But *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was not a crusading argument for a change in law: in early 1967 the US Supreme Court had overturned all 'anti-miscegenation' state laws (though Alabama didn't actually amend its state constitution until 2000).

While Poitier's saintly dignity played well with black middle-class audiences, working-class black audiences in downtown cinemas were keen to see less passive heroes of their own colour. It was the novelty of aggressive and masculine black male heroes that drove the blaxploitation cycle of the early 1970s. These films appealed against the background of a number of riots in cities across America in protest against continued police oppression and the lack of tangible change as a result of 1960s Civil Rights legislation (see Carpio 2008: 18).

One significant Hollywood comedy film during this period with direct black input was *Blazing Saddles* (1974), co-written by Richard Pryor and starring Cleavon Little. The basic plot revolves around attempts to dispossess the inhabitants of Rock Ridge so that the railroad can go through the land. When the corrupt Attorney General Hedley Lamarr (Harvey Korman) attempts the land-grab by sending in his thugs to scare the townsfolk away, they demand and get a new sheriff. Lamarr is able to persuade the weak, sex-obsessed Governor Le Petomane (Mel Brooks) to send Bart (Little), a former railroad worker, to Rock Ridge to be the new sheriff, confident that when he gets there he will be lynched. Instead, with the help of the Waco Kid (Gene Wilder) who 'has killed more men than Cecil B. DeMille', Bart manages to rally the townsfolk and defeat Lamarr and his rowdies. This basic summary does nothing to even begin to explain the comedy at work in the film, which mixes gags, comic vulgarity, visual puns, and slapstick with clever one-liners, many of them interrogating the the historical racism of the period depicted and the incipient racism of the western genre. When the white gangmasters ask if the black railroad workers know the song 'Camp Town Ladies', they deny it until roles are comically inverted as the cowboys start stereotypical minstrel dancing in the manner of what their boss Taggart (Slim Pickens) calls 'Kansas

City faggots'. When two of the workers, Bart and Charlie (Charles McGregor), end up in quicksand, Taggart rescues the $400 handcart they rode into it on but leaves them to their own devices. When they have struggled their way out, Taggart tells them 'break's over boys' and to stop lying about getting a suntan, since 'it won't do you no good anyhow'. Bart crowns him with a shovel.

Blazing Saddles allows its black hero to outwit his enemies by playing upon their stupidity, ignorance and stereotypical expectations. When Bart arrives in town as sheriff the residents imagine his first act ('Excuse me while I whip this out') will be to expose himself rather than to read a speech but he evades their immediate armed hostility by taking himself hostage and mimicking the exaggerated fear of previous Hollywood stereotypes. He even gets to break the fourth wall. The film plays upon and subverts a range of racial stereotypes, most of which owe their existence in part to representations of race enshrined in conventional westerns. When the railroad workers offer to join with the townsfolk, they are told that 'we'll give some land to the niggers and the chinks, but we don't want the Irish!' *Blazing Saddles* makes the most of the ethnic continuum of American culture and, by not exclusively dwelling on racism or contemporary black issues (it's smart enough to show that it is ultimately Hollywood hokum), fully justifies Ella Shohat's statement that: 'An awareness of texts as palimpsests of competing ethnic and racial collective discourses is … critical for a multicultural reading which goes beyond any number of invisible ethnocentrisms' (1991: 246).

The much more scattershot *Kentucky Fried Movie* (1977), directed by John Landis and written by David Zucker, Jerry Zucker and Jim Abrahams, offers a series of sketches some of which have a keen interest in ethnicity and different ethnic stereotypes. One spoof film trailer within the film mocks the sub-genre of blaxploitation films with black female heroines played by Tamara Dobson or Pam Grier by teaming their version, Cleopatra Schwartz (Marilyn Joi), with the definitely un-cool orthodox Hassidic Jew, Schwartz (Saul Kahan), whose only contributions to the violence seem to be breaking a bottle over a man's head and helping with the belt feed of the heavy machine gun Cleopatra is using. The collision plays on 'Schwartz' as a Jewish surname and Yiddish for black and the association of both ethnicities with 'the ghetto', albeit on different continents at different times, and the sheer incongruity of this meeting of stereotypes. It shows, from the outside, both the appeal of blaxploitation and how marginal an understanding of black culture informed non-black Hollywood's engagement with it.

The comedy element in actual blaxploitation films by black filmmakers appears marginal and under-explored. It is present in elements of the key film *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970), which re-appropriated old comic stereotypes (see Bogle 1994: 233–4), *Car Wash* (1976) and the micro-budgeted *Dolemite* (1975). The films directed by and starring Poitier with Bill Cosby, *Uptown Saturday Night* (1974), *Let's Do It Again* (1975) and *A Piece of the Action* (1977) were

clear-cut comedies, however, and succeeded at the box office. Bogle suggests that: 'because they did not address racial issues, [they] were early crossover hits' (1994: 258). Though it is not often seen in this way, *Blazing Saddles* was perhaps also a crossover hit, appealing to black and white audiences. The vitality of black performers and culture was attractive to white audiences but (with action-oriented blaxploitation suffering rapidly diminishing returns) was increasingly seen as needing to be packaged in an unthreatening manner. No longer limited to removable excerpts, black performances could become integral to the plot, but they were still to be tailored to non-black sensibilities. The potential for comedies with black stars to crossover to white audiences was confirmed by the massive success of *The Silver Streak* (1976) starring Gene Wilder with Richard Pryor in an expanded sidekick role. There is a certain ironic logic to Pryor being successful as a crossover film star. As a stand-up comedian he began by trying to emulate Bill Cosby but, after becoming radicalised in late 1960s California, his live routines (see *Live and Smokin'* filmed in 1971) spoke from his personal experience of 'the ghettoised black underclass' (Wagg 1998: 260). His stand-up validated black experience against white: 'rejecting the pressure to sanitize black culture in the name of integration' (Carpio 2008: 89). His film stardom also meant he reached huge audiences, and tour footage was edited into features *Live in Concert* (1979), *Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982) and *Here and Now* (1983). His film comedy roles such as in *Stir Crazy* (1980), again with Wilder, are surprisingly tame by comparison.

The career of Eddie Murphy, which picked up on and extended Pryor's film success, shows how much more mileage there was in crossover vehicles (see Haggins 2007). The *Saturday Night Live* performer appeared in a string of huge hits: *48 Hours* (1982), *Trading Places* (1983) and *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984). In each film Murphy's character is 'the only significant black man in the film' (Winokur 1991: 200). Only *Trading Places* is an out-and-out comedy though Murphy's performances added a comic element to all of them. In *Trading Places*, Murphy plays a vagrant selected as subject for an experiment in nurture by two elderly commodities traders and given privilege and education in order to show he can perform as well for them as an upper-class white employee played by Dan Ackroyd. Deprived of links to his community, he becomes the successful acquisitive capitalist the Duke brothers want but later collaborates with Ackroyd to undermine their scheme and bankrupt them. His reward is financial success but, while his opposite number gains a girlfriend during the course of the film, a female partner is a final scene afterthought for him. In *Beverly Hills Cop*, where he works mainly alone, rather than with a white 'buddy', he gains a hotel room by posing as a *Rolling Stone* journalist in town to interview Michael Jackson and claiming that the hotel is discriminating against him. While the bravura performance is successful, it suggests that exceptions are made only for entertainers and the media and that claims of racism can be frivolous or used for gain.

Winokur (1991: 199) suggests that in such roles Murphy 'is a black man in blackface, pretending to be black, a fair representation of the classic minstrel paradox. It is blackness passing as itself, wearing the face it is forced to take, re-representing itself as a larger audience conceives of it.' This is somewhat problematic in that it doesn't allow Murphy to own his performances or to be anything other than the role he's playing. It is certainly clear that Murphy's success involves an appeal to a mainstream white audience and that crossover comes with compromises, but, as in our discussion earlier about black actors in classical Hollywood, there's a wider context in which the performer communicates, which includes black audiences. Other successful films like *Beverly Hills Cop II* (1987) and *Coming to America* (1988) ensured that Murphy was the most successful Hollywood star of the 1980s but his attempts at playing more sophisticated characters in *Boomerang* and *The Distinguished Gentleman* (both 1992) were less successful at the box office. Murphy has since fallen back on remakes (*The Nutty Professor* (1996), *Dr Doolittle* (1998)), multiple roles as broad stereotypes (*Nutty Professor II: The Klumps* (2000), *Norbit* (2007)) and memorable vocal work (Donkey in *Shrek* (2001) and sequels).

Whoopi Goldberg's career illustrates a similar situation for black female performers (see Haggins 2007). Introduced to audiences in a dramatic role in *The Color Purple* (1985), though an established stage comedy performer, Goldberg struggled to find adequate vehicles as a star (rather than a supporting actress as in her Oscar-winning role in *Ghost* (1990)). Her greatest box-office success to date came in *Sister Act* (1992), a comedy musical virtually without reference to race in which she played a singer forced to live in a convent as a (bogus) nun to avoid vengeful criminals. In this role, Geoff King suggests, she offers 'the figure of an African-American as a source of renewal of a desiccated white culture' (2002: 146) but is allowed to do so only in an especially de-sexualised and unthreatening way (see Haggins 2007: 155–6). King goes on to argue that '[t]he very fact that comedy – coded as ultimately unthreatening, unserious – has been the primary realm in which black performers have consistently achieved superstar status in film speaks volumes about the racial politics of American society' (2002: 150).

American broadcast television in the 1970s offers a number of parallels to developments in film. In the mid-1970s after the success of the combination of variety and comedy sketches in *The Flip Wilson Show* (1970–74) had topped ratings in 1971, there were a number of sitcoms with black casts: *Sanford and Son* (1972–77), a Norman Lear adaptation of *Steptoe and Son* starring the seasoned stand-up comic Red Foxx as Sanford; *Good Times* (1974–79), set in Chicago housing projects; and *The Jeffersons* (1975–86), a spin-off from Lear's *All in the Family*. The contentious protagonists were shown as disadvantaged by 'racism, public policy and discrimination' and angry about it, but the dramatic stability of the sitcom form prevented them addressing issues in depth, being 'largely distracted by their own poverty and disenfranchisement' (Coleman

and McIlwain 2005: 130). These shows were doing well enough to hang on as sitcoms began to fall in popularity, but it would be a slightly different take on the black family, *The Cosby Show* (1984–92), which came as 'saviour of the genre' (Wagg 1998: 197). Unlike the Lear shows, *The Cosby Show* 'takes an assimilative position on race issues' (Wagg 1998: 197) and it was a ratings-topper for much of its run, clearly appealing to the breadth of American (and international) audiences. It forms a touchstone of the difficulties in discussing race and comedy in that, while there are several ways to critique its middle-classness (though standard for non-black sitcoms), its lack of recognition of racism and its concern not to offend audiences, *The Cosby Show* manages to connect across different ethnic audiences, to replace negative stereotypes with Cosby's 'incarnation of the perfect father figure' (Real 2003: 233) and to entertain without any loss of dignity on the part of the performers (see Real 2003: 236 and Mills 2005: 81). Ross notes that: 'The show allows black and white audiences alike to relate to the Huxtables, perhaps even to aspire to their lifestyle' (1996: 101). Opportunities to affirm black pride are taken but without making racism an issue. The episode when Cliff helps his daughter write about Martin Luther King is often cited (Season 3.6), but a later episode (3.11) in which Cliff's father and his buddies recount Second World War stories is equally potent, focusing on the racism of their enemies and the African-American contribution to the war rather than racism and segregation in the US army. For Real, '*The Cosby Show* recodes blackness, but it fails to address directly class and group conflict within American society' (2003: 241). As such, Amanda Dyanne Lotz notes, *The Cosby Show* 'embodied the high-water mark in terms of integrated audience success' (2005: 143).

Since the success of *The Cosby Show*, the critical consensus is that the black community has been ill-served by television. Though it helped bring a lot of other black-centred shows to the screen, their attempts to find alternative ways

12 *The Cosby Show*. Bill Cosby's hit 1980s sitcom communicates an assimulationist message.

of doing things produced what Coleman and McIlwain call the 'neo-minstrelsy era' with *The Wayans Brothers* (1995–59) getting its own NAACP boycott (2005: 132–3). Several of these shows appeared on the upstart network Fox which 'sought a foothold with a regular audience of any size' and noted that the African-American audiences making up 11 per cent of American households kept their sets on longer than other demographics. Fox went on to shift their attention to a young white male audience that was tuning in to black sitcoms, 'allowing Fox to "trade up" for a demographic advertisers valued for its perceived cultural capital and buying power, while abandoning the black viewers who helped the network compete with the Big Three [ABC, CBS, NBC]' (Lotz 2005: 143). Subsequently, new networks UPN and The WB (both beginning in 1996) took up where Fox left off and deliberately catered to black audiences, making the Big Four less likely to do so and essentially ghettoising black performers in American television. In fact their policies were so similar that UPN and The WB merged (as CW) in 2006. Lotz concludes that 'what audiences see on television is often a reflection of society at large. Despite changes in the past fifty years, American society remains very segregated' (2005: 149).

Kentucky Fried Movie, referred to earlier, has a segment titled 'Danger Seekers', a spoof of television programmes during the 1970s fad for stunt men, in which a character called Rex Kramer in a white jump suit puts on a crash helmet against a nondescript white wall. He then steps across a railway track (to the 'wrong' side presumably), interrupts a group of large black men playing craps against a wall and yells 'Niggers!' at the top of his voice before running off. The men, initially baffled, give chase and the scene fades out. This cheap and minimal sketch breaks a taboo and uses stereotypes, but the butt of the humour is not obviously the black characters but the nerdish danger seeker who can expect to pay the consequences for his actions. It points to the contentiousness of racist insults and who can use them (which we shall return to) and it attempts to make humour from the basic and fundamental fact that difference exists. It ought not to matter, but it continues to do so.

To what extent should film and television material made by black professionals be oriented towards the white-dominated mainstream audience whose tastes place restrictions upon them? Outside mainstream concerns, Spike Lee's self-produced *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) was able to address black sexuality head on and comically, though in the punishment of its female central character's promiscuity and bisexuality Ross detects 'misogynistic and homophobic sub-themes' (see 1996: 65–6). Nonetheless, the break-out success of Lee's low-budget film, and to a lesser extent Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987), showed 'that black-oriented films can appeal to a mixed audience and make serious money' (Ross 1996: 81). The New Black Cinema of the late 1980s and early 1990s was financed on this evidence though the comedic impetus of the initial films was swamped, as in the blaxploitation cycle, by contemporary violent urban thrillers. Nevertheless, the low-budget *House Party* (1990) was a

significant hit, spawning two sequels, and showing that black-centred comedy could make an impact, and there now appears to be a consistent international as well as domestic market for broad, black-centred comedies, or what Bambi Haggins calls 'comedies of color-coded color-blindness' (2007: 103), such as *Big Momma's House* (2000), *Barber's Shop* (2002), *Barbershop 2* (2004), *Beauty Shop* (2005), *Daddy Day Care* (2003), *Daddy Day Camp* (2007), *Are We There Yet?* (2005) and *Are We Done Yet?* (2007). Comedy films that mix black and white stars like *Bringing Down the House* (2003) and *Guess Who?* (2005) still tend to nullify the issues they raise, especially about interracial romance (see McDonald 2007: 36–7).

Black American comedy for black audiences is at its most vital in televised stand-up comedy. When Chris Rock's 1996 *Bring the Pain* routine was broadcast nationally it had a significant impact through addressing a black audience and, instead of opposing black culture to white, homing in on divisions within that audience:

> Because black people hate black people, too. Everything white people don't like about black people, *black* people don't like about black people. It's like our own personal civil war.
>
> One one side, there's black people. On the other, you've got niggers.
>
> The niggers have got to go. Everytime black people want to have a good time, niggers mess it up. You can't do anything without some ignorant-ass niggers fucking it up. (Rock 2002: 344)

For Rock's appreciative black audiences there appears to have been a sense of relief at overcoming political correctness or burdensome essentialist racial solidarity (see Haggins 2007: 80). In striking against community tradition Rock anticipates (and impersonates) objections:

> Man, why you got to say that? … It isn't us, it's the media. The media has distorted our image to make us look bad. Why must you come down on us like that, brother? It's not us, it's the media.
>
> Please cut the shit. When I go to the money machine at night, I'm not looking over my shoulder for the media.
>
> I'm looking for niggers. (Rock 2002: 346)

In the mouth of a white comedian this would be an extremely troubling, racist gag especially in its terminology, and, as Haggins (2007: 84) suggests: 'Rock constantly treads the thin line between humor and heresy.' In his stand-up comedy Richard Pryor was noted for using the term about himself and his audience in a commonplace, affectionate way, reappropriating it for black use. Yet this was something Pryor backtracked on in 1982 after a trip to Africa reminded him of everything the term represented (see Haggins 2007: 55–7). Chris Rock explains his use of the term later in the routine:

> Any black person can say 'nigger' and get away with it. It's true. It's like calling your kid an idiot. Only you can call your kid that. Someone else calls your kid an idiot, there's a fight.

> Yet some white people still wonder why black people can say 'nigger' and they can't. (2002: 346)

While not giving up on its 'team shirt', the black community was ready to acknowledge its lack of homogeneity and its internal diversity. Ultimately Rock's routine is an acknowledgement that class is an issue in American society that is often obscured by race.

Rock's success was a harbinger of things to come. From 1998 the Original Kings of Comedy (Bernie Mac, Cedric the Entertainer, D.L. Hughley and Steve Harvey) played to huge stadium audiences and became the most successful comedy tour ever. The film of the same title, directed by Spike Lee (2000), shows their comedy to be uncompromising in its focus on black experience in America, and took their material to new, even larger audiences. This was 'crossing over' without compromise, showing that comedy was capable of communicating across the fault lines in a culture. The question remains as to whether it also reinforces them.

Chappelle's Show (2003–5), the cable sketch show fronted and co-written by Dave Chappelle, was 'one of the funniest and most incendiary series on American television in the early 2000s' (Haggins 2007: 206), offering a number of challenging takes on race (the blind, black, white supremacist) and exploitation of taboos (the 'Niggar family' sketches). During production of the third series Chappelle bailed out, 'allegedly troubled by the possibility that his play on stereotypes reaffirms racist views' (Carpio 2008: 81). Recognising that some sectors of the audience were laughing at rather than with him, Chappelle deemed his own work 'socially irresponsible' (see Haggins 2007: 231). Humour that plays on the ambivalent stereotypes and contentious terms associated with race in American culture remains powerfully charged. Comedy solves none of the issues around race and ethnicity but it consistently draws attention to them, with unpredictable results.

Following up: representing race

☞ To what extent is representation on screen in comedy film or television desirable for racial or ethnic minorities?

☞ Does public expectation for performers from racial or ethnic minorities to 'represent' their communities restrict them or provide them with comedic opportunities?

☞ What problems are caused by the fact that humour produced by and for one community will be seen by other communities and might be read in different ways?

Pushing British boundaries: ambiguity and ethnic identity

By the late 1990s in Britain it was possible for a white Jewish comic actor to impersonate a black character in ways that reflected the emergence of a multicultural society and the ambiguous attitudes which this change engendered. Of course impersonation of black characters by white actors has been a consistent feature of Anglo-American entertainment since music hall and vaudeville in the nineteenth century, from US radio's *Amos 'n' Andy*, Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) to BBC television's long-running *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (1958–78). A growing awareness that the blackface tradition was inappropriate in the 1970s was evidenced in the musical sketch 'The Short and Fat Minstrel Show' on *The Two Ronnies* in 1973, and by a spoof on *The Goodies* in 1977. However, the emergence of Sasha Baron Cohen's character Ali G on Channel Four's *The 11 O'Clock Show* in 1998, the subsequent *Da Ali G Show* from 2000 and the feature film *Ali G Indahouse* (2002) presented racial impersonation with radically different intent, purpose and effect.

Ali G ('real' name Alistair Lesley Graham) ought not to have been either a sympathetic or a funny character. Ill-educated, if not wilfully ignorant, homophobic and misogynistic, apparently well-versed in the world of illegal drugs, he offered a hilarious (mis)representation of black American hip-hop culture and its appropriation by British youth. Though he speaks the language and struts the stuff associated with the African-American gangs of Compton and Watts, he actually lives in Staines. The comedy stems from the basic incongruity between Ali G's dream and his reality. He boasts that, having tamed the rival gangs of Chertsey and Beaconsfield (both havens of British affluent middle-class suburbia), 'there have been no drive-by killings in West Berkshire'. His talk of the 'Da West Staines massiv' and its 'gangsta' rivalry with 'Da East Staines massiv' is rendered absurd by those who know the sleepy Thames-side town for what it is, its main claim to fame being the place where linoleum was first invented and produced (see Lockyer and Pickering 2009: 187).

Though the persona itself is consistently funny, Ali G is perhaps at his best in the interviews with unsuspecting figures of authority and in the round-table discussions with experts. Unaware that they are being set up, the interviewees and experts get drawn into conversations by Cohen's clever combination of genuine astuteness and apparent naivety. The interviews, in particular, produce their comic effect by a clash of radically different discursive views of the world. Talking with Professor John Henry, an authority on the misuse of illegal drugs, Ali G proves as knowledgeable as the professor, but from the perspective of someone who treats drug use as a legitimate and intimate element of daily existence. Having listened to the effects of drugs on health, on blood pressure, dizziness and palpitations, Ali asks if there 'are any negative effects'. He knows the price of the drugs and asks whether class

A drugs are guaranteed to be better quality. In an interview with the President of the American FBI Association, he manages to get a confession that sometimes interrogations go beyond what is normally acceptable, but 'not as often as in the movies'. Ali takes the hypothetical situation about selling drugs as a personal accusation, wondering whether the Berkshire police have been in touch with the FBI. In a panel discussion with four experts about animal rights, his tale about putting a mouse in a microwave is condemned as 'fiendish' and 'appalling'. In supposedly serious panel discussions on politics, the family, the environment and medical ethics, Ali's views and opinions are greeted with similar outraged responses. Hilariously, when interviewing a minor right-wing politician, Sir Rhodes Boyson, renowned for his ultra-traditional social views, and unaware that the word 'caned' can mean getting high on drugs, Ali manages to get Boyson to admit that he got caned (beaten) at school. As Lockyer and Pickering point out, the less an interviewee gets the joke, the funnier it is (2009: 192).

Sometimes the comedy comes not from Ali's knowledge of his world, a world alien to his 'experts', but from his ignorance. In a discussion about euthanasia, he wonders what it has to do with 'da yoof in Asia'. He is shocked to hear that water is recycled, but is comforted by the implication that it is acceptable to piss in the bath. In a discussion with the Labour politician Tony Benn, he insists that Mrs Thatcher was a communist. He is convinced that dogs can drive, because he 'has seen it on the telly'. His obsession with sex proves an embarrassment for the television personality Gail Porter and even for the seasoned magician Paul Daniels when he tries to upstage Ali by adopting a similar 'home-boy' costume and persona.

Cohen's comic impersonation has its dangers. Noting that all impersonation carries both positive and negative connotations, Pickering and Lockyer assert the importance of context, or what they term the 'comic frame', if comic impersonation is to be funny rather than offensive. They argue that: 'What is specifically peculiar to comic impersonation is not only that it permits offence but also that it makes light of the offence at the same time' (2009: 184). Of course the comedy relies to an extent on ridiculing the guests and interviewees, on setting them up so they parade their own pomposities and pretensions, but it can also serve to expose the fallacies and assumptions on which their worldview rests. It can be unnerving, salutary and funny to watch 'experts' embroiled in questioning their superiority, their power and prestige, to watch puzzlement and uncertainty invading their mindset. What Cohen offers us, through Ali G, is that 'ludicrous context', the sheer comic incongruity when values, beliefs and perspectives collide.

Opinions are divided as to whether the character is racist or not. While Gilroy (2004) argues that Ali G simply exploits that playful manipulation of subjectivities that marks postmodern culture in a youthful multicultural Britain, Malik (2002: 106) identifies Ali G as part of the 'culture of racism'

in the British comedy tradition. Lockyer and Pickering suggest that 'Ali G's act was finely balanced on the thin edge between social satire and racist buffoonery' (2009: 199) and argue that his crude obsessions about sex, women, gang rivalry and drugs, and his offensive language, perpetuate negative black stereotypes. Lockyer and Pickering's discussion is shot through with some frustration about their lack of knowledge of Cohen and his intentions (195) and the character himself: 'was he a white, Jewish or Asian wannabe?' (196). In this they resemble the unlucky personalities who encounter him face to face and who are unable to fathom his multiple identities and get beyond the stereotype presented to them. Cohen creates a situation where human foibles are exposed for what they are: something shared by us all since 'we all harbour ethnic stereotypes, and cannot always successfully censor them' (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah 2009: 54). The butt of the joke is not the stereotype itself, but anyone who believes in and wants to live the stereotype.

Following up: Ali G and ambivalence

☞ Does the comedy of Ali G reinforce racism and racist stereotypes or undermine them? Or does it ultimately occupy the more ambivalent area between these two options?

☞ How much does success or failure of the comedy and comedy performance that touches on race depend on audience expectations?

In concluding our chapter on comedy, race and ethnicity with a discussion of Ali G, we return to the same point highlighted by the sudden end of *Chappelle's Show*, noted earlier: a concern about what audiences do with texts. The fact that contemporary comedy offers a range of subject positions from which to interpret its humour becomes troubling for critics and producers when it becomes clear the array offered may include undesirable (racist) ones, as we have seen in earlier discussions of *Till Death Us Do Part* and *All in the Family*. Queer reading (see Chapter 8) focuses on viewpoints that emphasise the mutability of the social conventions of gender and sexuality that are supposed to follow from biological sex. Yet what follows from racial difference in social consensus appears much less clear-cut. The comedy created by Ali G is perhaps most contentious when it appears that his racial identity is willed and chosen when it is surely the key to all aspects, both serious and comic, of our relationship to the issue of race that it is a matter in which our choices are considerably limited. Comedy that makes reference to race may remind us of the fact of our difference, and of the uncomfortable reality that we cannot determine how others will respond to it, but comedy can also cross, blur and break the boundaries built upon difference. In so far as humour retains the

power to include and exclude individuals and groups it remains an ambivalent tool, one that illustrates the value of understanding not only how comedy works but also what it does.

Recommended reading

Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor Around the World*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007.

Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic and Gender Humor*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005.