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"Cause Everybody Laughs at the Chinese Accent": An Exploration and Analysis of Racial
Humor

"Joking about race is never just a joke", said one of my sophomore AP Comp classmates during a Socratic seminar about race. Racial humor is always difficult to properly execute, as illustrated in the "that's racist" response to comments that simply note what one's race is. During this discussion, the group ultimately came to the consensus that it is better to not joke about race because it can sometimes hurt the target of the joke or perpetuate stereotypes. But is it all that bad?

For instance, growing up, I was always told I was smart. However, people told me that not because they knew about my grades, but because I was Asian. On the surface, it's nothing to complain about considering no one had the indecency or courage to call an 11-year old a "chink" (I was often mistaken for Chinese because every Asian is Chinese), but I did feel like I disappointed others when they learned I was not in an advanced math class. Thus, I sometimes joke about how we need to have an Asian American movement with the tagline, "Asians Can Be Dumb Too!" in order to debunk the model minority myth, which is the expectation that all Asians are advanced at science and math (University of Texas). This joke is a hit among my fellow Asian friends and truly is an effective way to subvert the stereotype.

Reflecting on that seminar discussion about racial humor and my own jokes caused me to reflect on the effects of racial humor, as such comedy tends to be a tightrope to walk on. I wanted to learn how racial comedy could be executed properly, which led me to observe how it's been executed in the past. Ultimately, my essential question was, "How has comedy shaped racial/ethnic identities and people's perceptions of it?"

To answer my question, I corroborated primary and secondary sources, one of which is a survey I conducted regarding students' opinions of racial comedy and their effects on racial identities. Admittedly, it's unreliable to draw any statistics from it due to its high nonresponse rate (18 responses) and highly biased sample (high school juniors and seniors in the Silicon Valley), but it's still useful in its varying range in opinions. Additionally, I consulted sources that analyzed comedians who frequently utilize racial comedy and analyzed some on my own. While comedy encompasses many different mediums, from sketches to sitcoms, I will be specifically focusing on stand-up comedians since their jokes do not have to be censored by television, leaving the jokes to be as offensive or political as they were intended to be. I also decided to focus on Asian American comedians due to my ability to better relate to them and the lack of research on this group in comparison to African American and White comedians.

After extensive research, I've concluded that while comedy has historically been used to perpetuate stereotypes and undermine racial minorities, recently, comedic trends have shifted to instead subvert these stereotypes, inform others on marginalized racial/ethnic identities, and foster in-group cohesion ever since the insurgence of the Civil Rights Movement and subsequent increase in social activism. There are still instances of minstrelsy in comedy today, but the effects of such humor are complex, which ultimately opens up discussion on the responsibilities

comedians have when crafting their jokes. This research paper will first provide a brief overview of the history of racial comedy and explore the reasons behind the comedic shift. Then, I will delve into a deeper analysis of live comics' jokes and the apparent effects of their racial humor. Finally, the debate about modern stereotype humor will be briefly discussed.

Before we can begin to analyze the reasons behind shifting comedy trends throughout the decades, it is important to understand the three main theories about humor. What makes jokes funny, and why do we decide to joke about it? The earliest humor theory, the superiority theory, was developed by early philosophers Plato, Aristotle, and Thomas Hobbes. This theory claims we laugh at those inferior to us and are entertained by the misfortune of others. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, coined the relief theory, in which individuals use humor as a tool to safely release suppressed thoughts and feelings. It could be thought as a coping mechanism. The last theory is German philosopher Immanuel Kant's incongruity theory, wherein jokes occur when there is a disconnect between the audience's expectations and the joke's payoff. Basically, this theory suggests that the element of surprise is what makes jokes amusing (Warner).

By considering these humor theories, the explanation for comedy trends and its turning point becomes clearer. From as early as the mid-1800s, racial comedy took form in blackface minstrelsy, in which white actors, such as Cantor and Al Johnson, would paint their faces black and imitate African Americans for comedic purposes (Sammond). Such comedy aligns with the superiority theory, as African Americans were used as an object of mockery in minstrelsy. It was only until the 1950s "new wave" when racial comedy began to acquire a more critical eye in stand-up, the 70s marking the beginning of its peak. During the 70s' countercultural comedy era, Comics such as Richard Pryor and George Carlin would discuss cultural issues from politics to

race relations (Zoglin). Coincidentally, the 50s also marked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement and the 70s was the zeitgeist for counterculturalism and social movements, which most likely explains the reason for comedy's turning point. Comedy seemed to be used as a coping mechanism for the amount of racial tension at the time, as supported by Freud's catharsis theory, or as a way to subvert stereotypes, shed light on misconceptions, or satirize the idiosyncrasies of society, in turn surprising the audience and thus, aligning with incongruity theory.

Now, with comedians such as George Lopez and Hasan Minhaj, the number of comedians who perform such "charged humor", which according to *All Joking Aside: American Humor and Its Discontents* is "humor that challenges social inequality and cultural exclusion", continues to increase and gain more popularity, likely due to the upsurge of social activism that we see today. With movements such as Black Lives Matter and social media allowing higher exposure of social injustice, more comedians are encouraged to use their platform to speak out about these issues. As humor historian Joseph Baker observed, "Just as humor has been used as a weapon of insult and intimidation by dominant groups, so it has been used as a weapon for resistance and retaliation by minorities" (Lewis 115).

According to "Getting a Laugh," humor can help enforce stratification and status differentiation, as jokes tend to target a specific social identity like race or socioeconomic status (Lynn & Robinson). This seems to be the case of the mid-1800s to early-1900s vaudeville and minstrel shows. The most popular example of minstrelsy is Jim Crow, who was a caricature of African American slaves ("Jump Jim Crow"). Even with the 13th Amendment's abolishment of slavery, blackface minstrelsy persisted as it branched out into new media, like radio and

television. Slapstick comedy shorts that were based on the “coon” caricature, which characterized African Americans as lazy and thuggish, were created in the 1910s. Notable minstrel films include “Chicken Thief” and 1914’s “Coontown Suffragettes”, where “mammies”, the matronly African American archetype, organized a movement to keep their husbands at home to do housework (Pilgrim). Although humor that targeted African Americans were the most popular, comedy that targeted other races and ethnicities were successful as well. For instance, according to Jerry Zolten, an associate professor at Penn State, “the first record to sell a million copies was 1913’s ‘Cohen on the Telephone,’ a comedic routine mocking Jews” (Zimmerman). There was also a prominent display of “yellowface” in the 1961’s *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. Similar to blackface, yellowface is when a White actor plays an Asian caricature. In this film, Mickey Rooney plays Holly Golightly’s landlord, Mr. Yunioshi. This character has buck teeth, slanted eyes, a heavy Japanese accent, and an aggressive attitude (Phruksachart). Given this exaggerated characterization, in the same way blackface minstrelsy has been used for comedic purposes, it is clear that this character is intended for comedic effect, and the fact that this Asian character is played by a White male adds insult to injury.

In terms of negative effects, evidently, racial humor can be negative in that it spreads false information about the racial identity being joked about. One may argue that while this was especially true in the segregated past when there was little to no interaction between racial groups, we currently live in a time of multiculturalism where our generation has learned to not quickly believe stereotypes and develop prejudices. However, such mindsets still plague today’s youth. One of the survey respondents (Bernardo) describes how racial humor can foster prejudicial beliefs: “...when meeting certain people that fall into cultural categories like Asians, I

can't help but to attach the stereotypes that I was exposed to as a child through offensive joke to that person. I've just learned to set them aside and learn who people really are." As illustrated by this response, racial humor has the ability to feed us harmful stereotypes. Even if one learns to look past the prejudices, some can not help the implicit biases and prejudices humor has conditioned them to have.

Unfortunately, the effects can extend from pure ignorance to pure hatred. Since every joke has a target, a line between the "in-group" and the "out-group" will always be solidified, further enforcing segregationist attitudes. It is a basic concept in social psychology; the "in-group", your peers, develops a stronger connection by deriding and ostracizing the "out-group", those who are in a different group from you (Rietveld). Basically, by exaggerating African American features and culture in blackface minstrelsy, white Americans were able to develop a better definition of what it meant to be white, their culture becoming the antithesis to that of African Americans (Zimmerman). Even outside of minstrelsy, people continue to notice the hate that racial humor can invoke, as highlighted in this survey response:

As for my own social identity, there have been jokes about Asians not being good looking, not speaking English, etc. I think this has caused Asians to be sort of ostracized or forgotten. People don't find Asians to be attractive because of these verbal jokes, and that may be why there are not many Asians in the media.

This response suggests that such jokes have the potential of fostering ostracizing behaviors, to the point where it may have a direct impact on Asian success. By joking about and therefore highlighting the marginalized group's flaws, it further establishes the division between

races. Though ignorant at its core, it has the potential of becoming hate when the segregated line becomes drawn.

On that note, the last major negative effect that racial comedy can have is the degradation of the target's pride. This survey respondent expresses her concerns over stereotype humor when she says, "In regards to our language fluency, overall it just builds bad stereotypes and makes us who can't speak a language feel bad as well." Even though poor language fluency is not inherently bad, it can turn negative when it becomes subject to mockery and derision. It may make those who are subject to the stereotype become hyper-aware of this exposed flaw, as pointing it out implies that the characteristic is odd enough to be remarked on. Even mundane stereotypes like "all Asians eat rice" can become harmful or at least obnoxious when it is applied so generously. Some may choose to ignore it, but others may try to repress this part of their culture in an attempt to escape the the oversimplified mold that others have made for them.

"Positive" stereotypes can also be damaging to one's dignity. In regards to the model minority myth, one survey respondent claimed, "Because of the common stereotype that Asians are smart, I feel like I should fit that stereotype, but I don't. As a result, I think the social identities that are associated with me are only standards that I need to fulfill, although I know that's not true." While negative stereotypes cause targets to escape the generalization and potentially suppress their cultural identity, positive stereotypes can cause targets to feel like they are not good enough. The positive stereotype becomes a standard that they're expected to meet, and if they do not fit that, they may be as seen as inferior.

However, it is not all overwhelmingly negative, as with the recent growth in social activism starting from the Civil Rights Movement, we have seen a rise in comedy that is more

favorable to minority groups. As George Lopez best put it, “If you look back in time, comedy was always insensitive to people of color because our country, and comedy, was dominated by whites” (“George Lopez”). The marginalized became tired of getting the short stick in comedy, so many aimed to subvert stereotypes instead of perpetuating them. Stand-up comedians do this in different nuanced ways, but each subversion produces a similar effect: the audience’s perspective of the targeted race is corrected and they become more informed.

The first method of subversion that comedians use is directly highlighting why certain stereotypes are damaging, absurd and/or wrong. Sometimes, comedians will execute this method with a personal anecdote. For instance, Jo Koy has a bit in his 2017 comedy special, *Live from Seattle*, where he addresses the misconception that all Asians are essentially the same, for people fail to realize the cultural differences between each ethnicity.

My dad would say borderline racist shit to me when I was a kid... Just sitting at the dinner table like:

“You know why I married your mom right?”

“Why?”

“‘Cuz I love Chinese food.”

[pause, shocked look on face] “She’s Filipino dad...”

“Whatever... rice is rice.”

What the fuck? Rice is rice! That’s so racist! (“Rice is Rice”)

In this joke, he contemplates on his father’s indifference to the diversity in Asian culture. The father does not know what ethnicity his wife is because to him, all Asians look and are the same, hence the “Rice is Rice” quotation. Jo Koy is shocked by the amount of ignorance in his

father's comment, as there are clear cultural differences between each ethnicity. By sharing his experiences with racism, he is able to highlight society's ignorance towards race and articulate how that misconception is quite ludicrous.

Some comedians decide to achieve the same subversive effect with *satire*. This method works by imitating those who believe in the stereotype, in turn exaggerating the trope to emphasize its ridiculousness. Hasan Minhaj, a Muslim-American stand-up and Daily Show correspondent, effectively implements satire in a Daily Show news segment about a Muslim woman who got denied soda because the flight attendant believed she could use it as a weapon.

You throw that [soda can] at someone, *bam*, they are out like a trout... 198 soda cans later, the plane is yours... Oh, we're crafty... Anything on a plane is a weapon to a Muslim, alright? The corner of a Dorito chip can slice the neck, alright? You think that seat cushion is a flotation device? You are wrong, that is a smothering pillow. You see a Skymall, I see a paper cut katana. ("The Daily Show")

Excessively elaborating on the hypothetical weapons that a Muslim can use allow the audience to see the prejudice for what it really is: idiocy. By delving into the prejudiced line of reasoning, the audience is able to see how preposterous it actually is, especially when it comes from the mouth of someone whom the stereotype applies to.

Another method of subversion is utilizing the stereotype to show how ridiculous the people who use the stereotype actually are. Jimmy O. Yang employs this method when he says, "I'm not ashamed to say this: I used to tell people I was Jackie Chan's son to pick up chicks. Look, look, it works until they met my dad and he looks more like Mr. Miyagi with a shaved head" ("Asian Comedian"). He plays on the "all Asians look the same/are related" trope in this

joke. While he is able to earn “street cred” using Jackie Chan’s name, he is simultaneously highlighting the illiteracy of society. He, obviously, is not Jackie Chan’s son, but some are gullible enough to believe it because they give into the stereotype. The fact of the matter is, no one will easily believe any average white man to be Nicolas Cage’s son if he simply said so because there wouldn’t be a solid foundation of evidence. But alas, some are easily believed these two Asians are related. While this trope is traditionally used to simplify and mock Asian culture, Yang was able to turn this stereotype on its head and instead mock *others* who believe it. Not only that, but he was able to “own” this stereotype to his own benefit, in turn undermining its oppressive power.

Overall, by utilizing comedy as a way to undermine stereotypes that harm and simplify entire races and ethnicities, comedians are able to shed a light on the realities of these cultures and in turn, normalize those who belong to it. Even the act of joking about these stereotypes itself is humanizing, as it shows how self-aware and outspoken these comedians are for tackling common misconceptions. The audience’s prejudices will strip away during a stand-up show, as the characteristics that once defined a racial/ethnic group disintegrate before their eyes. The veil of generalization is lifted, and people are able to see them for who they really are: human. Margaret Cho describes it best when she says, “When I was out there, I would think that if we had some kind of material out here to show these people Asians aren't so different, they could see Asians as being Americans, too.” (“Margaret Cho”)

While comedy can help people gain a better understanding of other cultures and can increase feelings of acceptance between different racial/ethnic groups, it can also help strengthen the bonds of people *within* a racial/ethnic group, as argued by Linda E. Francis, a former

Associate Professor at Cleveland State University for the Department of Sociology and Criminology (Lynn & Robinson). Comedians craft this “relatable” type of humor in a multitude of ways, including joking about traits that are very specific to the targeted culture, by criticizing the dominant culture, and discussing issues within the community. In some cases, it can also cause the targeted racial/ethnic group to feel proud about their identity.

The first type of “relatable humor” is based on the cultural traits of a specific race/ethnicity. For instance, in Jo Koy’s *Live from Seattle* stand-up special, he jokes about the typical behaviors and attitudes of Filipino parents.

Filipino moms predetermine what their kids are supposed to be when they grow up. You know I’m not making this shit up. There’s a lot of Filipinos in here right now that are nurses... My mom wanted me to be a nurse, are you fucking kidding me?!... I told my mom I wanted to be a comedian, she cried, “Why? Why do you want to be a comedian, Josep? All your aunties are nurses... Your cousins are nurses... Do you see any clowns in this ‘family’?” (“Follow Your Dreams”)

As a Filipino, I can say with full conviction that this is painfully accurate, which is what makes it hilarious. My mom, who is Filipino, wanted to be a nurse and my stepmother, who is also Filipino, is currently a nurse. One of my uncles is even in the healthcare industry. When I watched this comedy bit with another Filipino, she thought similarly, and we were able to laugh about it together. Laughter, a shared experience, brings people together and strengthens their bonds. Because we both had a shared understanding of this culture, we were ultimately brought closer to each other. Not only that, but it made me feel more connected to my culture, as it felt like I was a part of an exclusive inside joke. It makes me feel special.

Of course, because of the natural inverse relationship of in-group cohesion vs. out-group discrimination (Rietveld), comedians sometimes encourage cultural in-group bonding by ridiculing the racial majority. In Margaret Cho's stand-up set for the Just For Laughs Festival in 2015, she contemplated the controversy of the hit television sitcom, *Fresh Off the Boat*.

I'm proud of it [the show], but the people at the network didn't like the name "Fresh Off the Boat". They thought it was racist. Of course, it was all White people. It's so cute when they get offended on our behalf. They're like, "Okay, okay, that's a bit much" [nervous laughter]... I think that White people like to tell Asian people how to feel about race because they're too scared to tell Black people. ("Margaret Cho - Fresh Off the Boat")

With this joke, she is talking to her Asian peers about the strange sensitivity of White people. She especially highlights this disparity through "us vs. them" language. Clearly, this joke will not end up gifting Asians with dominance, but it does provide people within the race with a slight feeling of superiority or an esteemed dignity, if anything, that can help them cope with the realities of being a second-class citizen. Essentially, with this joke, she built in-group cohesion through out-group discrimination.

Lastly, comedians can help foster in-group cohesion by discussing the problems within the community. In *Patriot Act*'s Affirmative Action episode, Hasan Minhaj comments on the Harvard Asian discrimination controversy.

Now Asians, and I am lumping all of us together right now, I find it hilarious that this is the hill we're willing to die on. Our entire lives we get shat on; "Oh, you guys have small dicks, you're bad drivers, you're the color of poop, you smell like kimchi." We say

nothing. The moment we can't get into Harvard, we're like "I'll see you in court motherfucker..." Also, Asians, just so you know, we are only 5.8% of the population, but last year we were 22.2% of Harvard's admitted class. We are straight *dunking* on every other minority group, but in classic Asian parent fashion, we're like, "22%? Why not 100%?"

On the surface, it would seem that doing such a thing would be polarizing and may present the comedian as a traitor, but by bringing attention to a glaring issue in the community, those within it would be able to see the fallacy and be encouraged to remedy it with group effort. By making an effort to solve the issue, each person would be contributing to the goal of bettering the community. Additionally, people tend to be brought together during and after conflicts, as displayed by the patriotism during any World War and the altruism during tragedies. Ultimately, the comedian wants to highlight this issue in order to spread awareness and hopefully, solve it for the benefit of the whole.

From these examples of stand-up comedy and the potential effects of it, it is clear that racial comedy can be used not just for the dominant racial group to assert their superiority, but for the marginalized to fight against these assertions by shedding light on the realities of different racial groups and tightening the bonds between those within a racial/ethnic group. This survey response provides us with a good summary of my analysis of racial humor's positive effects:

I've come to accept my culture a lot more rather than when I was younger. I would get made fun of for eating/drinks ethnic foods or drinks, leading me to hide my background as much as possible... I began to accept and become more comfortable with who I am.

And a lot of that really came from comedy, finding other people like me and being able to

relate with them and turn some negatives into positives. In a sense, ‘reclaiming’ the aspects that were usually made fun of brought me to where I am today. Being able to be proud of who I am.

However, the effects of racial humor are not completely black and white. Even when the joke is told by someone of the race who is the butt of the joke, there are complex effects of humor that play on stereotypes, which opens up the debate on the responsibilities comedians have when crafting such jokes.

On one hand, utilizing such racial comedy can reinforce the stereotype if the audience does not understand its satire or they use it as a way to assert their superiority. As *The ‘Other’ Laughs Back...* claims, stereotypical humor can be perceived as exploitative by the targeted racial/ethnic group and/or pandering to the dominant culture (Weaver). Even if the comedian wasn’t intentionally trying to make a joke that undermined their race and actually meant to subvert these stereotypes, the audience may perceive it as a perpetuation other than a subversion, especially with satire. Dave Chappelle had to cancel *The Chappelle Show* partially for the same reasons: the white and black audience laughed at his racial humor for different reasons. The black audience was laughing *with* him, while the white audience seemed to laugh *at* him (Inhat, et al). When asked about their opinion on jokes that play on stereotypes, one survey respondent stated, “I think that jokes that rely on stereotypes to be funny are bad. It only reinforces the stereotype, which can then cause harm to the people it's referring to and cause body image issues.” However, it could also be argued that by making fun of one’s own race with stereotypes can also have the effect of normalizing the race joked about. As demonstrated by my earlier

analysis in comedians' stereotype subversion, being able to joke about your own race can humanize yourself to others and ergo, foster acceptance.

In addition to acceptance, most comedians tend to believe that stereotype jokes should be acceptable if it is based upon truth. This is often called "telling it like it is." An example of this mindset is used towards Sofia Vergara's character on *Modern Family*. Journalist Amanda Dobbins believed that Vergara's character is akin to Charo, an actress from the 70s, in that they are both known for their sexy, Latina stereotypes. In response to this concern, Vergara tells journalist Maria Elena Fernandez, "We [Colombians] are yellers, we're pretty, we're sexy, and we're scandalous. I am not scared of the stereotypes" (Weinman). As this quote illustrates, Vergara embraces the stereotypes because it is simply the truth. To her, there's no point in subversion if the trope is true. She is not playing on the stereotype just to entertain viewers; she is accurately portraying Colombian culture. Similarly, Ken Kwapis, the creator of *Outsourced*, a sitcom about a White American man who goes to India in order to run a telemarketer company, believes stereotypes will be inevitable, especially when dealing with culture clashes. He believes that with the show, he's trying to explore stereotypes and therefore humanize the characters, not perpetuate them (Wilson). This survey respondent summarizes this belief: "I think my previous answers can reflect that I believe stereotypes are what they are because ultimately they are still based on truth. When a person of the same social identity makes those jokes I think it shows that they have demonstrated a good and slightly analytical awareness of their racial and cultural history."

Evidently, racial humor has experienced a transformative shift from oppression to resistance due to the shift in the socio-political climate of America—from segregation to the Civil

Rights Movement. From the early 1800s, racial comedy in the form of vaudeville and minstrelsy aligned with Plato's superiority theory, as it would be used by the white majority to assert their dominance and justify the oppression of racial minority groups, in turn furthering the divide between racial groups. The Civil Rights Movement helped trigger an antithetical comedic trend and aligned with Freud's catharsis theory and Kant's incongruity theory: a subversion of racial stereotypes and strengthening of bonds between those within a racial group and those from different ones. Despite the improved political correctness in comedy, there are still instances where comedians will perform a variety of 1800s minstrelsy, and sometimes, their intentions to undermine stereotypes instead perpetuates them. Thus, there is an ongoing conversation on whether comedians should perform such stereotypes if there is such a disconnect between intention and effect. In an era of political correctness and hypersensitivity, it's important to discuss how comedians can effectively execute racial humor and whether they even have a responsibility to be politically correct. Hopefully, my in-depth analysis of comedy's effects on racial identities can help answer this question.

Regardless, from my observations, it seems like the modern comedy world is projected to help provoke social change. Maybe with comedy, we can humanize each other and in turn, break down the misconceptions that divide all social groups, including race, gender, sexual orientation, and class. Maybe with comedy, we can feel more connected to and proud of our identity. Maybe with comedy, us Asians can finally be recognized as stupid.

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