
Topic: Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America

Abstract
I applied for and received funding in order to complete the research and writing of my book project entitled *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America*. This book uses popular ethnic humor as a lens through which to examine contemporary American race relations. In contrast to other works focusing on ethnic humor, which tend to focus on only a single ethnic group, my project focuses on the interactions among members from different ethnic communities. I analyze a wide range of texts, including film, television, stand-up comedy, and new media.

The first chapter focuses on recent developments in African American comedy. Most contemporary African American humor, inspired by Richard Pryor and exemplified by the HBO series *Def Comedy Jam* (1992-1996; 2006-2008), is influenced by a “double consciousness” model and is thus rooted in comic comparisons between black and white cultures. This “double consciousness” model is difficult to sustain in light of the massive growth of Latino and Asian American populations. Many African American artists have found it necessary to rethink black identity in relation to these other marginalized groups. I provide a discussion of the comedians Paul Mooney and Chris Rock, who often consider the diversity of the American ethnic landscape. Yet Mooney and Rock still attempt to reconfigure the complex American ethnic spectrum into a binary model: their humor, I suggest, reflects a resistance to seeing beyond the reductive white/black vision of American race relations. Dave Chappelle’s comedy contrasts sharply with this approach. Through an analysis of both Chappelle’s stand-up and his sketch comedy show, I assert that Chappelle looks past the simplistic white/black dichotomy and uses his humor to place blackness within a much wider multiethnic context. Finally, I consider the abrupt manner in which Chappelle left his lucrative series and discuss the ramifications of his absence on the future of African American humor.

Chapter Two focuses primarily on the Jewish humorists Sarah Silverman, Larry David and Sacha Baron Cohen. The humorists under discussion reflect an anxiety in the Jewish American community about the position of Jews in the multiethnic American landscape. In the early twentieth century, Jewish entertainers participated in discrimination against African Americans as a means of assimilating into mainstream white culture. The contemporary Jewish humorists under discussion represent a backlash against the assimilationist motives of earlier generations. Having already achieved the status of whiteness, these humorists attempt to assert their minority status by claiming affiliations with other ethnic groups, most often African Americans. Even as they claim affiliations with other groups, the humorists under discussion also work within the long tradition of Jewish culture and Jewish humor. Sarah Silverman, for example, builds her humor out of an extreme iteration of the Jewish American Princess (JAP) stereotype that became prominent after World War II. Larry David, on his series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, reaches further back into the Jewish tradition and creates a contemporary manifestation of the schlemiel figure from Eastern European culture. As Borat, Sacha Baron Cohen parodies very old forms of anti-Semitism, which view Jews as evil shape-shifting sorcerers. Through his wannabe gangsta persona Ali G, Cohen places this version of anti-Semitism in conversation with contemporary stereotypes about African Americans. All three artists use their personas to explore the peculiar position of contemporary Jews, who exist in a sort of middle-space between white and other.
In Chapter Three, I argue that the increased diversity of the American population has prompted many white humorists to articulate their own ethnic identity in ways that parallel traditional ethnic American humor. Without the legacy of oppression, this white ethnic humor has less potential to be genuinely transgressive; nonetheless, the rise of a white ethnic humor is indicative of the ways in which many whites in contemporary American culture are beginning to articulate their identity in more specific ways. Typically, whiteness remains an unmarked norm, but white ethnic humor offers an opportunity to view whiteness as a specific ethnic position rather than a raceless universal. I illustrate how non-white ethnic humorists—particularly African Americans—often critique white culture and present whites as bland, uptight, or nervous. Some white humorists, such as Mike Birbiglia and the late George Carlin, work these white stereotypes into their own acts. Next, I use various examples to show how the term “white,” like all ethnic signifiers, is much too broad to account for the full spectrum of whiteness. To this end, I discuss different humorous constructions of whiteness, ranging from the rise of working class “Blue Collar Comedy” to the blog “Stuff White People Like,” which mocks the stereotypical cultural preferences of educated, upper-middle class white liberals. Finally, I provide a detailed analysis of the Comedy Central animated series South Park. South Park, I argue, offers an overt exploration and critique of white privilege. Furthermore, South Park does not represent a single homogenous whiteness but rather explores a larger spectrum of white culture, demonstrating the ways that class, education, and regional affiliation guide the construction of whiteness.

Chapter Four analyzes some of the most commercially successful iterations of ethnic humor. The chapter builds upon Paul Gilroy’s conception of a “corporate multiculturalism,” in which token representations of diversity can be seen to increase the marketability of mainstream cultural productions. Gilroy’s term offers a compelling approach to two commercially popular genres: the animated children’s film and the network situation comedy. I focus on these genres primarily for their long, problematic history of ethnic representation and for their mainstream appeal. Both genres remain tied to their generic conventions and thus serve as, at best, one-dimensional vehicles for exploring issues of ethnic relations. I argue that contemporary iterations of these genres package and market the idea of diversity without really engaging with issues of ethnic conflict, inequality, or racism. In my discussion of children’s films, I focus specifically on films that use the voices of well-known ethnic humorists in order to ethnicize animals and inanimate objects. Films such as Madagascar (2005), Cars (2006), and Shark Tale (2004) often reinforce broad ethnic stereotypes even as they make overtures towards an idealized multiculturalism. Overall, their representation of diversity is decidedly muddled. Likewise, sitcoms such as The Office (2005—), Modern Family (2009—), and Community (2009—) offer representations of diverse family units or multicultural workplaces. In keeping with sitcom conventions, however, these series sidestep issues of genuine ethnic conflict. Rather, they project a fantasy world in which systemic inequality does not exist and diverse ethnic characters live together in a rarely disrupted harmony. Both genres display the ways in which ethnic humor—often a vehicle for cultural critique—can be neutralized and contained in mainstream cultural productions.

In contrast to the “corporate multiculturalism” discussed in Chapter Four, Chapter Five considers comic works that use ethnic humor to engage with diversity in more productive ways. I begin with an analysis of the Showtime series Weeds (2005—) and the film Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle (2004). These works create a multiethnic humor, which focuses on how individuals might re-examine their own ethnicity through interactions with other groups. While ethnic humor
delineates rigid group boundaries and is often driven by conflicts between white and other, multiethnic humor focuses on interactions among members of many different ethnic identifications and blurs the lines between marginalized and mainstream cultures. This humor does not represent the point of view of any one ethnic group but is willing to engage with the full complexity of the American ethnic spectrum. Finally, I return to Russell Peters in order to offer a fuller analysis of his transnational approach to ethnic humor. Peters has achieved a global following and is particularly popular in Asia and the Middle East. As host of the Showtime series Comics Without Borders (2008)—a showcase for stand-up comedians from all over the world—he has helped to generate an international comedy movement. I argue that Peters creates a cosmopolitan humor, which is based on his knowledge of other cultures and dialects and often involves humorous stories from his travels throughout the world. Peters ultimately encourages intercultural dialogue without relying on idealized and simplistic notions of diversity.

Budget:
I requested and received $4000 for salary. This allowed me to work full time on my research over the summer.

Results:
The results of my SAIF Grant were very successful. Not only did I finish writing the manuscript, but I also got the book accepted for publication at Rutgers University Press, which is a highly respected academic press, especially for works focusing on media studies.

Benefits to the University
This book will give national attention to the University and serve as an outward symbol of the University’s commitment to diversity. Furthermore, this research informs my classroom practices, as I discuss the importance of ethnic representation in all of my courses. In particular, I feel that discussions of race and ethnicity often emphasize racism and persecution. Ethnic humor, while by no means ignoring these issues, is often a site of positive resistance and community building and can therefore provide a useful counterpoint to trauma and oppression. Ethnic humor therefore provides students with a richer understanding of American multiethnic culture.