

# **New Ways To Express Old Hatred**

## **The Transformation of Comic Racism in British Popular Culture**

By

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# Abstract

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*New Ways To Express Old Hatred* is a sociological account of the consistencies and changes comic racist discourse has experienced over the past forty years in British popular culture, accounting for both content and communicative form in relation to the ethics and aesthetics of humour. The main focal point of the study concerns a case study representative of the communicative changes installed by the digitalisation of media in the cultural public sphere. *Sickipedia.org* which demonstrates a contemporary, participatory comic community that is simultaneously representative of popular culture. *Sickipedia.org* circulates explicit comic racist material on a large scale across several formats including its main website, several smart phone applications and a range of social media including *Facebook* and *Twitter*. This contemporary emergence of comic racism is discussed in relation to the historical context of wider comic racism in British popular culture, comparatively evaluating the form and content of material from the 'clubland' humour of the 1970s, the anti-racist tradition of 1980s Alternative comedy, the thematically fragmented popular comedy of the 1990s through to prejudicial liquidity evident in more recent comedy.

The central argument being asserted is that comic racist discourse has been consistently reproduced for the last forty years. However its communicative form, aesthetic presentation and in some cases its content has undertaken a process of transformation in order for it to be circulated in contemporary popular cultural products unchallenged by both social critics and institutional authorities. *Critical humour studies* stresses that ridicule-based humorous discourse must be treated critically, especially if that ridicule is directed at groups who are socially marginalised. Comic racism represents the discursive stability of traditional racist discourses that have circulated in society since the Enlightenment, reproducing the ideological perspectives of white supremacy, social exclusion of 'Others' and the perceived, amalgamated biological and cultural inferiority of non-white 'races'. Drawing from content analysis and critical discourse analysis of *Sickipedia.org*, this study, on a textual level, with reference to theory and history, critically discusses the persistent reproduction of comic racism in the cultural public sphere of the UK, deconstructing the hateful messages embedded in racist jokes and providing an original contribution to *critical humour studies*.

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# Introduction

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## A new way to express old hatred

In 2006, *The Bumper B3ta Book of Sick Jokes* was published by London-based publisher The Friday Project. This book consisted of 'sick' jokes that were generated online by members of the public. Sick humour has been defined as humour that deals insensitively with subjects such as death, disease, deformity and the disabled (Mindess et al, 1985). The website created to collate this content became known as *Sickipedia.org* (a play on *Wikipedia.org*) and has officially run since 2007, growing both in content and popularity across the world far beyond the capacity of the initial book. *Sickipedia.org* is fundamentally a British-based site that prioritises documenting British news events in a humorous context, using British colloquialisms<sup>1</sup>, and drawing the majority of its traffic from British users (similarweb.com).

"Every time there is a big story - say a murder or a disaster, following the news comes the jokes. Psychologists probably have something to say about this, but not us, we just want to be the number one place for finding, recording and disseminating this material.

To put it bluntly - we want to hear your nasty jokes. And in return? Well, you can sit here and read more of the little blighters. The end result will be the finest website in the whole damn world. We have faith in you". (sickipedia.org/help)

*Sickipedia.org* marks a contemporary, participatory comic community that is both representative of popular culture and what I consider to be a legitimate facet of the cultural public sphere. It disseminates its material to an estimated two to ten million people a month (alexa.com; similarweb.com; sickipedia.org) across a range of digitalised media platforms. A third of its content is racist.

This thesis provides a historical, sociological account of the consistencies and changes comic racist discourses have experienced over the past forty years in British popular culture, accounting for both content and communicative form in relation to the ethics and aesthetics of humour. The contemporary re-emergence of comic racism is discussed in relation to the historical context of wider comic racism in British popular culture, comparatively evaluating the form and content of material from the late 1960s to its present-day expressions on *Sickipedia.org*. The central argument is that comic racist discourse has been consistently reproduced for the last forty to fifty years. However, its communicative form and aesthetic presentation have changed, primarily so

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1 Quote from Sickipedia's General Guidelines - "Use UK English spelling - that's 'apologise' not 'apologize'" (sickipedia.org).

that its circulation and consumption in contemporary popular cultural products can subsist and go unchallenged by social actors, regulatory bodies and institutional authorities.

This study is conducted within the field of *critical humour studies* which is built around a central scholarly ethos that much humour is formed around the ridicule of Others. For this reason humorous discourse must be treated critically, especially when ridicule is publicly directed at groups who are stereotypically abused and socially marginalised. The main focus of the study is on contemporary manifestations of comic racism, articulated on the Internet, representing the discursive stability of traditional racist discourses that have circulated in Western society since (and in some cases prior to) the Enlightenment. These discourses reproduce the social exclusion of Others, and most importantly, the perceived amalgamated biological and cultural inferiority of non-white 'races' from the ideological perspective of white normative supremacy and superiority.

Throughout the thesis the terms 'humour' 'comedy', 'comic', and 'joking' will be referred to extensively, and it is important from the outset to establish the subtle differences in each of their meanings to outline exactly how they are used. 'Humour' is the most commonly used term in this research, and in general it refers to any form of action or language used to create laughter or amusement, or any experience of laughter or amusement an individual or collective has as a result of language or action. 'Comedy', in the thesis is used in a different, less broad sense, referring more specifically to humorous language and discourse that is disseminated in public, for example the radio and television-based comedy, and the works of comedians in British popular culture outlined in Chapters Two and Three.

The term 'comic' is used very similarly to 'humour', sometimes interchangeably, referring to forms of language and actions related to humour. The term 'comic' is most commonly throughout this research used to refer to discourses which are characterised as being humorous, for example comic racism - racism that is expressed with the intention of being interpreted as amusing. In other cases it is referred to publics formed around a shared interest in humour or comedy, which disseminate humorous discourses, for example comic communities. Finally the terms 'joke' and 'joking' refer specifically to an assemblage of language - a linguistic structure - that is specifically designed to be humorous, or provoke a humorous response from an audience. As the jokes discussed in this research can contain various historically-situated, social, cultural and political meanings, related to power and representation, a joke can be considered a discourse. Additionally throughout the research there are references to racist jokes containing, or acting as racist rhetoric. This refers to the notion that many of the joke examples provided, attempt to persuade, or convince an audience that there is some element of truth in the language, in this case racialised or racist ideology (see Weaver 2010).

This thesis aims to provide original contributions to *critical humour studies*, not just in terms of exposing a previously undisclosed case which illustrates the most contemporary manifestations of comic racism in British popular culture, but also in terms of discussing comic racism from the

perspective of communicative form in as much detail as the content. This will be positioned within the conceptual framework of the public sphere.

In discussing the position of comedy within the public sphere, as a form of communication that can be centred on social, cultural and political subject matter for both emancipatory and marginalising purposes, the sociological critique of humour gains further academic legitimacy. Through the usage of the public sphere concept, critical humour theorists are provided with a coherent framework to assist in the decision as to what forms of humour are fundamentally requisite of critical evaluation, and in which the theorisation of potential societal implications can be determined with more clarity.

Forms of public comedy, including comic racism, do not exist solely within the realm of language and discourse, they are socially and culturally situated - constructed in interactive communities of producers and audiences. Humour should not solely be critiqued in terms of its potential to offend individuals and groups, even if they are marginalised. Furthermore, the distinction between disseminating comic racism privately and publicly must be identified and expanded upon. In positioning humour and comedy as a legitimate facet of discussion, debate, and deliberation in the cultural public sphere, the critical evaluation of comic racism, in terms of its potential ethical transgressions, is placed within a more complex argument and framework.

This framework states that comedy and joking must be critiqued in accordance with the ideological messages conveyed, and not determined exclusively by who is offended by them. A public sphere framework highlights how communicative structures and processes have had direct ramifications on comic racism's various manifestations in popular culture. It also emphasises that publicly expressed comic racism reproduces marginalising, socially detrimental ideas and values amongst a living public that is appreciated, celebrated, repackaged and re-circulated. Through discussing comic racism as a part of a fluid public sphere, and the fundamental historical approach of the study, more light can be shed on its ambivalent expression and appreciation in the public realm.

This ties into the controversial debate surrounding the relationship between prejudice, humour, freedom of expression and the legislation put in place by the British government to protect citizens from racial hatred. The Racial and Religious Hatred Act was sanctioned in 2006 ([legislation.gov.uk/ukpga](http://legislation.gov.uk/ukpga)) in an attempt to make it an illegal offence to provoke hatred on the grounds of 'race' or religion. However, the very notion of penalising an individual legally on the basis of something that is *said*, is effectively calling for restrictions to freedom of expression - an in itself dangerous proposition. This convoluted relationship is complicated further if the language or speech used to express racial hatred is humorous, or resembles humour. The central limitation to racial hatred regulation in this context, is that there is no clear way of determining whether what is articulated in a humorous assemblage of language is *meant* by the speaker, or is conversely an example of linguistic irony - the notion that one was 'just joking'.

This key problem will be examined throughout the thesis, forming a central argument that in the context of publicly-communicated comic racism (specifically in the case of a discursive site such as *Sickipedia.org*, operating in a virtual, networked public space), a critic cannot have knowledge of producer intentionality. Neither can comic racist communities' audiences. Furthermore, a critic also does not have an insight into audience interpretation, and importantly, neither does a joke's producer. Therefore, I stress that publicly-communicated comic racist content must be addressed on a discursive basis, taking into account the text independently from production and consumption, identifying how racialised representations are constructed within the language, how they reproduce racist ideological values, and express racist rhetoric.

Therefore drawing from critical discourse and content analysis of *Sickipedia.org*'s vast body of comic racist jokes, this study aims to - on a textual level, with reference to history, humour and 'race' theory, and the conceptual framework of the public sphere - critically discuss the persistent reproduction of comic racism in the UK and deconstruct the hateful messages embedded beneath the playful aesthetics of jokes, providing an original contribution to *critical humour studies*.

## The primacy of the black 'race' in British comic racist discourse

In order to provide evidence of these over-arching processes of Othering in *Sickipedia.org*'s jokes, critical discourse analyses and accompanying content analysis data will only be applied, in depth, to anti-black comic racist discourse. The central argument in this study is that components typical of traditional racist ideologies are consistent in publicly communicated, online comic racist discourse, and that contrary to certain public perceptions, notions of political correctness have not been victorious - explicit racist values and attitudes are reproduced in comic discourse, *today*, and they must be critically addressed. Aware of the dangers of this argument becoming too theoretically diffuse, I have established the most logical, efficient and sociologically coherent way of formulating it: to determine the ethnic group that provides the most stable social and cultural evidence of being racially discriminated against, reproduced across both humorous and non-humorous discourses, in both contemporary and historical contexts. Discourse aimed at the black 'race' provides this.

That is of course far from asserting that no other ethnic groups are discriminated against, in comic and non-comic texts, but based on the socio-historical evidence provided by examples in both humorous and non-humorous discourses, it is clear that the black 'race' acts as the most prominent and central target of British comic racism in the cultural public sphere. It is therefore the most suitable ethnic group to provide evidence supporting the thesis' central contribution. Decades of complex social, historical and cultural discourses and practices have placed blackness into this core position. These include processes of Othering in traditional racist discourses, through to the early examples of comic racism in the British popular cultural context that have been subsequently reinforced on contemporary platforms through years of discursive reproduction. Evidence suggests that within the British context, publicly-communicated comic racist discourses are strongly concerned with reproducing processes of *anti-black* Othering.

## Research aims

The research aims of the thesis are as follows:

- To outline how both the ethical and stylistic issues within popular comedy, and the broadening developments of the public sphere, have facilitated the communicative transformation of comic racist discourse in British popular culture.
- To reveal and critically analyse a wide body of *serious* racist discourse being circulated on a contemporary, British, mass consumer-based media platform in the cultural public sphere.
- To demonstrate how both historical and contemporary anti-black comic racist discourses are representative of wider, non-comic, racialised ideologies and racist rhetoric, through the identification of discursive patterns in the form of stereotypical racialised motifs.
- To outline potential reasons behind contemporary comic racist discourses' reproduction in British popular culture without wider social critique or censure.

## Chapter outlines

The thesis is divided into two parts. The first provides the overarching historical context of comic racism in British popular culture and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for the analysis. The second part accounts for the empirical contributions based more exclusively on the contemporary case study of comic racism - *Sickipedia.org*. Part One outlines the theoretical literature essential for discussing this subject matter, and the history of public comic racism in British popular culture. It also discusses the literature concerning the public sphere and how it allows for an appropriate conceptual framework to illustrate comic racist discourses' communicative transformation. In Part Two, racist jokes are analysed in detail in order to document the discursive stability of racist rhetoric originally formed in non-comic historical discourses. Throughout the entire thesis there will be many references and illustrations justifying anti-black racism's position as the primary object of analytical enquiry.

Chapter One acts as the literature review and provides the theoretical grounding of the empirical work. I outline the sociological approaches to humour theory and *critical humour studies* with reference to the philosophy of humour and contemporary studies that have addressed the ethical issues of humour. Also Chapter One addresses 'race' and racism theory, outlining the construction of racialised ideology, and the social and cultural foundations of racist ideology and discourse. Finally, this chapter discusses the scholarly contributions which have addressed these separate concepts in conjunction with each other. Chapter Two illustrates the transformation comic racism has experienced purely from the perspective of the aesthetics and ethics of humour itself - the content. It historically accounts for the transition of comic racist discourses, particularly anti-black, in British popular culture from its early manifestations in entertainment with blackface minstrelsy, through the 'clubland' boom of the 1970s, the backlash against it with 1980s alternative comedy,

and comedy's process of mass commercialisation and artistic diversification throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

Chapter Three addresses this transformation of comic racism exclusively in terms of communicative form with specific references to the public sphere. It reveals how the public sphere must be addressed as a fluid, ever expanding discursive space of which cultural products such as comedy, and by extension, comic racism, must be considered a part. Comic racism is a public expression of communication that has been historically shaped by external communicative structures and processes. Chapter Three will not just complete the historical narrative of comic racism in British popular culture, it will highlight the positive contributions public sphere theory can provide to *critical humour studies* in general, and explain the communicative strategy and logic of *Sickipedia.org*.

Chapters Four, Five and Six contain the critical discourse analyses of fourteen racist jokes from *Sickipedia.org* with reference to many others. They provide the main empirical contribution of the thesis. They discuss the discursive, semantic and comic themes and trends of *Sickipedia.org's* comic racist content, and contextualise it within traditional, historical, racist discourses. The analysis highlights the historical discursive, and thematic differences and consistencies of racist jokes in terms of racialised ideologies, values, attitudes, processes and rhetoric. Moreover, these chapters will discuss how racism operates within humour, and how successful racist jokes are linguistically designed to create ambivalence and ambiguity amongst audiences which assists in their continuous reproduction. Each of these analytical chapters will be structured in the same fashion with the discussion of racialised motifs, developed over hundreds of years of traditional racist discourses, and the examination of how they are re-expressed in *Sickipedia.org's* jokes.

The thesis will conclude with Chapter Seven, which features a more concise discussion of the meanings and implications of comic racist discourses circulated on contemporary digitalised media platforms. This will involve an evaluation of the ambivalence that surrounds racism articulated in humour and the view this researcher takes on the best way to address it. Moreover, the conclusion will address how comic racist material within the conceptual context of the cultural public sphere provides a new, and original contribution to the academic discussion of comedy in general, illustrating new approaches for future research.

## Methodological approach

The methodological research paradigm this thesis adopts is fundamentally associated with critical discourse analysis. There are several dimensions that require investigation in order to provide the level of comprehensiveness this project aims for in terms of a detailed account of comic racism in British popular culture and its contemporary transformation. Critical Discourse Analysis can provide a wider sociological understanding concerning how *Sickipedia.org's* content reproduces racist ideology from a linguistic, semantic, and discursive perspective.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) supplies rich data that can address the sociological questions central to the research. As a form of textual analysis, CDA can be understood as an attempt to show systematic links between texts, discourse practices and socio-cultural practices (Fairclough, 1995a). Terry Locke (2004) states CDA can view prevailing social orders as historically situated, socially constructed, and therefore changeable. Within this, social orders and processes are sustained less so by the will of individuals, but by particular constructions of reality, known as discourses.

In terms of its heritage, critical discourse analysis has a complex historical usage. It owes its genesis to linguistics. Linguistic analysis applied to media texts became influential in the 1980s and it aimed to expose assumptions and values that were wrapped up in the construction of grammatical forms. According to Halliday (1970) language has ideational, interpersonal and textual functions. Written texts may communicate about events and processes in the world, and establish and reproduce social relations or construct links with the situations in which they are used.

However critical discourse analysis strongly differs from linguistics, most notably due to the usage of the term 'discourse'. Deacon et al (2007) explain that 'discourse' as a concept applies to language in social life or the relationship between language and social structures. It concerns the symbolic interaction between people. Discourse, as opposed to linguistics, represents a focus on the actual uses of language as a form of social interaction in particular situations and institutional contexts (Bloor & Bloor, 2007). It also concerns the notion of representation - of how social categories, practices and relations are constructed, essentially creating social realities.

Deacon et al (2007) stress that it is essential we address communication in terms of discourse. The ways in which we speak, write and learn to communicate are influenced by our cultural norms and values. We learn to think and communicate within a particular tradition, therefore language is inseparable from context. To refine this more specifically to media texts, when analysing them we can look at the intended purpose of the text and its appropriateness to the situations in which it is encoded. Through this one can reveal how power, authority, responsibility and inequality are obfuscated by the uses of language in media.

Furthermore, Deacon et al state that according to Michel Foucault, discourse refers to broad domains of language which both condition and mobilise historically specific strategic possibilities of meaning, understanding and practice. Discursive frameworks are made up of speech or writing seen from specific beliefs, categories and values. Therefore discourse can be potentially ideological. Foucault, according to Deacon et al argues that the discursive and the social inform each other, they are intertwined and we make sense of the world using discourse, as discourse represents language in specific historical and cultural contexts (ibid.).

From this theoretical core, critical discourse analysis, in the Foucauldian tradition, questions what is valid knowledge at a certain place or time, how knowledge is passed on, and what consequences knowledge has for shaping and developing society (Jäger & Maier, 2009). Siegfried

Jäger and Florentine Maier claim that critical discourse analysis is at its centre, critical. What separates CDA from discourse analysis, is that the critique is not situated outside of discourse, analysts must invoke norms, values, universal human rights, and importantly, realise that these are also discursively constructed - the analyst "has to take a stand" (p.38).

Fairclough (1995b) distinguishes three stages of critical discourse analysis. The first involves locating the formal properties of text. A researcher must establish which components of a text belong to the processes of production and which to processes of interpretation drawn from knowledge, beliefs, ideas, values and assumptions. In the second stage, one must establish the relationship between the text and these processes of production and interpretation - essentially *seeing* text as discourse. Production and interpretation must be addressed in terms of specific areas of social organisation such as the immediate situation and social institutions. This is because both productive and interpretive processes are conditioned by situational, institutional and contextual factors. The third stage is concerned with shaping the influence of these contextual factors.

Also, Locke (2004), and Thao and Quynh Lê (2009) claim that ideology is intrinsic to both discourse and CDA - CDA is meaningless if ideology is absent. Ideologies, according to Van Dijk (1995) are defined in terms of fundamental social cognitions, organising attitudes, and social representations that form the interpretational basis and contexts of discourse.

There are strengths and advantages for conducting discourse analysis. One such advantage I would argue relates to the abstract notion of methodological autonomy. Discourse analysis provides the researcher with a degree of freedom to accurately interpret texts. The method formally encourages the researcher to reflexively negotiate subjective preconceptions and read what is there. All arguments must be supported by the data itself for others to see clearly, reducing, as Fran Tonkiss claims, "any number of different, and equally plausible readings" (2008, p.378). In this respect good discourse analysis can be considered high in validity in regard to the organisation of social meanings in texts.

There are however issues raised that question the usefulness of discourse analysis, for example the negatives of the critical discourse analyst's autonomy. The advantages in terms of the internal validity of a researcher's free, close, interpretative account of a given text, are dependent on 'good analysis'. The inherent strengths of good discourse analysis become weaknesses if it is conducted badly. The internal validity of an analysis can be called into question due to the coherency of the interpretation, the evidence, the detail, and the use of arguments from outside of the text used to support the claims. Highlighting the ongoing debate concerning value-freedom, normativity and research reflexivity, regardless of how much a researcher aims to impartially analyse a text, critical discourse analysis can never be truly objective (Tonkiss, 2008).

Another shortcoming of discourse analysis is actually more of a disadvantage of qualitative research more generally. This is that the method (alongside other qualitative methods) often deals

with a moderately small data set. Therefore in this context, discourse analysis is always unlikely to be widely representative of all similar texts, and even if the argument states that it is more widely generalisable, one cannot prove this due to the method's limitations. With these two disadvantages, both the internal and external validity of the method is debatable.

As a solution, that accounts for these weaknesses of CDA's representativeness, this research additionally used content analysis to provide accompanying data concerning *Sickipedia.org*'s content, and its communicative logic and strategy. This ultimately provides a more well-rounded and comprehensive account of contemporary comic racist discourse. The content analysis provided an empirical dimension to the research which is grounded in more quantitative methodological perspectives, and compliments the theoretical components of the research which focus on the communicative processes facilitating comic racism's dissemination.

The content analysis provided the starting point in terms of the empirical fieldwork. As a more quantitative-based form of analysis, it acted as a practical method that was conducted in order for the research to progress. The content analysis of *Sickipedia.org* helped obtain a significant understanding of the content before further qualitative analysis could be conducted on the texts and their social meanings be theorised, limiting potential criticism as to the validity and representativeness of the critical discourse analysis.

Content analysis can be considered the "scientific" study of content and communication (Prasad, 2008, p.174). It is a technique for examining content, information or symbols in most common communication media such as written documents, photographs and advertisements (Lawrence Neuman, 2006). Its primary purpose is to make broad, yet valid inferences from the text in regard to its message and politics of representation (Deacon et al, 2007; Weber, 2004; Prasad, 2008). However this is conducted from an observatory perspective, it looks at communications that have already been produced and asks questions about those communications (Prasad, 2008; Kerlinger, 1973).

Content analysis is a descriptive process as opposed to an explanatory one. It allows the researcher to document specific features of large bodies of material that may normally go unnoticed (Lawrence Neuman, 2006). As a method, it was first conducted by Bernard Berelson (1952) who defined it as a "research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (p.147). By the term 'manifest', Berelson is referring to the evident, obvious components of the communicative material being researched. To elaborate, content analysis is concerned with *what* is said, not *how* it is said. David Deacon et al (2007) maintain that the emphasis on objectivity and manifest content, is a particularly defining feature of Berelson's original scientific methodological intentions for content analysis, and furthermore typical of other quantitative techniques applied to social research at the time.

In terms of the research design, content analysis traditionally uses a positivist approach, in which the researcher picks a topic of interest then draws a sample from it as randomly as possible to

maintain validity. However the sample should not be so random that it loses its relevance, the sample has to maintain consistency with the research questions, be representative of the field of interest and manageable for the researcher to analyse in detail (Tonkiss, 2008). Practically, a content analysis typically consists of a researcher identifying a body of material to analyse followed by creating a system or coding scheme to record specific aspects of its content. This coding scheme often consists of systematically counting the frequency of certain word usages or how often specific themes emerge. Firstly, the recording units are defined such as words, sentences, paragraphs or themes. Secondly, the categories which the units are placed into must be defined, taking into consideration the breadth and how mutually exclusive they are to one another. The units are then recorded and coded in accordance to the coding scheme, often adopting a trial run first, using spreadsheets, graphs and charts (Weber, 2004).

There are several advantages of using content analysis in social scientific research. Both Fran Tonkiss (2008) and Robert Weber (2004) claim that an advantageous by-product of content analysis is that it allows for a potentially high degree of validity and reliability in terms of the data obtained and the sample. Weber argues that documents of various kinds exist over long periods, even centuries, therefore any cultural indicators generated from these documents can be rightfully considered as reliable. Another such advantage is that it is a non-reactive method. William Lawrence Neuman (2006) summarises the method, stating that the creators of the content do not know that anyone will ever analyse it, creating a higher sense of truthfulness and validity. It is unobtrusive which means that the act of measurement will not change the data (Weber, 2004). Furthermore it is also useful for answering specific research questions over a period of time due to the method being relatively simple to replicate (Tonkiss, 2008, p.368).

There are however some disadvantages associated with content analysis. These normally emerge from the coding scheme used to categorise the content and infer meaning. This can limit both the reliability and validity of the analysis. In both cases ambiguity can emerge in regard to word meanings and category definitions. One such way of limiting ambiguity in terms of reliability is to limit the amount of human interpreters or coders who categorise the content. In the case of this research, it does not suffer particularly from this disadvantage due to there only being one coder and interpreter of the content.

However, when it comes to the validity of the classifications of the content, it is difficult to assert the truthfulness of the work, for according to Weber "a content analysis variable is valid to the extent that it measures the construct the investigator intends it to measure" (p.119). Therefore if ambiguity arises over the classification of content, the category to which it belongs to is constructed according to the researcher's own personal biases. This therefore makes the process of classification somewhat subjective and questionable in terms of validity. My response to this was to ground the constructions of categories and coding in the historical context of comic racism and other traditional racist discourses, and to justify any decisions made in the content analysis with the in-depth, descriptive, critical discourse analysis.

The content analysis determined how *Sickipedia.org* is structured and how it works as a discursive site of comic racism in the digitalised facets of the cultural public sphere. It addressed how much of the website is devoted to articulating and circulating comic racist discourse. Furthermore, it assisted in determining the historically-situated racialised motifs present in the material in preparation for more in-depth discourse analyses. The sample was selected from roughly half of the body of content disseminated on the site. This is important because *Sickipedia.org* does not exclusively promote and circulate racist comic discourse. The undertones of the organisation's overall anti-political correctness ethos, is to provide offensive material, of all kinds, for those who seek it. The content analysis and subsequent data collection for the critical discourse analyses was conducted over a year-long period between and April 2013 and April 2014. This is because the website does not have a fixed amount of content. It is a live, participatory site which is constantly being added to by its users. Therefore, any data I obtained was subject to change over the duration of the analysis.

Together, these two methods were specifically selected due to how they offset each other's limitations. The content analysis accounts for some of the inherent weaknesses of critical discourse analysis, and vice versa. It was imperative that I did not simply choose at will, the jokes that fitted into the discursive narrative of historical comic racism in British popular culture when conducting the critical discourse analyses. The content analysis was essential for justifying that the jokes selected for the in-depth qualitative deconstructions were representative of the site's logic, its overall content, and discursive agenda.

PART ONE -  
A Historical  
Approach Towards  
Comic Racism in  
British Popular  
Culture

# Chapter 1:

## Literature Review

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Throughout the first chapter of the thesis I will outline the two major sociological approaches which underpin the empirical contributions of this research - *critical humour studies* and 'race' and racism theory. I argue that addressing *critical humour studies*, humour theory and the philosophy of humour is crucial for any sociological study of humour, and therefore I will begin the chapter outlining this area with references to various contemporary humour scholars work, the ethics of humour and the major theories of humour dating back to the seventeenth century and earlier. Moreover, as this work is concerned with comic *racism* specifically, and how racist jokes reproduce ideological representations of various non-white 'races' (promoting social exclusion), it is also imperative, for the purposes of analysis, that one has a firm grasp on 'race' and racism theory, the social and cultural conception of 'race' as a concept, and how racist ideology has been expressed throughout history. However, there is not an inherent relationship between racism and humour, and consequently, for the most part, both have been studied in isolation from one another in scholarly literature. In an effort not to preserve the conceptual distance between these two interrelated, yet removed subjects, this chapter will also discuss how 'race' and humour can, and should be, when relevant, studied in unison.

### Studying humour sociologically

In order to deconstruct and evaluate the discursive components of comic racist content communicated in British popular culture throughout history, it is first necessary to position the notion of humour within the context of sociological enquiry. This requires the identification of the key principles that have rightly justified humour's study within the discipline. Taken together these principles constitute the essence of a holistic critical evaluation of humour in terms of its potential for articulating socially and culturally-situated ethical transgressions, and its existence as a combination of linguistic and cognitive processes based on aesthetics - an approach that this thesis adopts. Simon Weaver (2012) states the collective body of work which has addressed humour in this fashion can be appropriately branded *critical humour studies*.

These principles essentially establish a counter-argument to the common approaches that state the study of humour is frivolous or trivial. To elaborate, Michael Mulkay (1988) stated that, by most people's understanding, humorous and serious discourse have fundamentally different conventions - they are antithetical to one another. Moreover, Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering (2008) ironically contended that "to laugh is to transcend the whole point and purpose of being analytical.

Best, then, to keep humour and social analysis firmly apart" (p.1). These positions can be illustrated by the notion of 'just joking' - the essential counter-argument to the serious, academic study of humour.

The central thesis of the 'just joking' position considers the ethical considerations of jokes as void, because they are just that - jokes. It is assumed that a joke cannot have any wider social repercussions, offend, or reproduce discursive inequalities because it is *just a joke*. Goffman (1974) went as far as to claim that 'just joking' is the most used phrase in the English language. The position can be understood as a let-out clause - a 'get out of jail free' card. It represents a liberation of both producers and audiences who construct and appreciate marginalising humour and jokes, from the implications of their dissemination.

The 'just joking' approach is not just a lay approach in opposition to supposed superfluous academic enquiry, 'just joking' has scholarly support, legitimising its controversial yet widely accepted stance. Christie Davies (1990) has come closest to academically reiterating the most common phrase in the English language in stating "let us not also forget that jokes are first and foremost jokes" (p.119). He argues that stereotypes reproduced in jokes are not necessarily believed by those who tell them, and concludes in reference to comic anti-Semitism that "any contribution that jokes may have made to this vicious history has been an utterly trivial one" (ibid., p. 24). He has argued that the structure and content of a joke does not necessarily reflect the producer's mindset - someone may hear a joke, laugh, and repeat it, but this is not conclusive evidence of an ethical transgression towards a particular group. Howard Jacobson (1997) additionally has claimed that "there can be no drawing of lines within comedy... we shouldn't fear derision, mockery or coarse laughter at our expense because it is this which makes our hearts' strong" (p.37-38).

However, *critical humour studies* theorists believe this counter-argument to be wholly flawed. To quote Simon Weaver (2011a), "humour is far more important for social science than is often recognised...there are serious implications and effects created by joking and these require investigation" (p.1).

Adopting this approach, the first principle that justifies the sociological study of humour is that it is a *universal, social condition experienced by all human beings*. Jerry Palmer (1994) claims that humour "is a serious subject because it is an element of most human communication, listen to any conversation and it is full of jokes, puns, humorous allusions, word play for the sake of it, etc. Moreover, humanity is the only species with a sense of humour, zoologists tell us, confirming Aristotle's insight, that laughter is a distinguishing feature of our species" (p.1). Palmer is therefore not just suggesting that humour is something that all humans engage in, the engagement in humour is something that makes us human. To quote Aristotle, "no animal laughs save Man" (Aristotle, 1990, p.29).

Elliot Oring (2003) provides similar arguments in favour of a critical analysis of humour. He stresses that humour has an inherent relationship to all people and therefore it has a wide socio-cultural significance. He states that "there are no peoples that we know of on earth who do not laugh and who do not engage in speech and behaviour designed to excite laughter. Humour and laughter are cultural universals. They are a condition of our humanity. Humour could be considered trivial only from a perspective that holds humanity itself to be trivial" (ibid., p.x).

The second principle justifying the sociological study of humour is based on the *recognition of humour as a highly contested, social concept*, despite its undeniable centrality in human interaction. This can be qualified as humour being shaped by social, historical and cultural factors. Lockyer and Pickering (2008) argue that "what is found funny, and why, is spatially and temporally specific. Trying to understand this can tell us much about social identities and values in space and across space, and in time and over time" (p.811).

Michael Billig (2005a) suggests that humour helps maintain social order. He sees this as the universal function of humour. He qualifies that all cultures use humour to maintain social codes, but as there are no universal social codes there can be no universal understanding of humour. He argues that this is not just due to differences between cultures, but that even within cultures, there are debates and conflicts about what constitutes appropriate behaviour, morality and the funniness of humour - thus "humour is a matter of moral, political and aesthetic debate" (ibid., p.28).

The third key principle is concerned with the problems that arise with *having a sense of humour*. This is important because the issues surrounding the human sense of humour begin to reveal the potential ambivalence concerning the interpretation of negative and offensive humour, such as comic racism, and why it can be communicated relatively freely and unchallenged in the cultural public sphere.

Several theorists have made specific reference to the significant problems of an individual not having a sense of humour (Lippitt, 1995; Wickberg, 1998; Lockyer & Pickering, 2005). Lockyer and Pickering claim that a sense of humour is what makes a person an integrated person worthy of being known (2001, 2005). Similarly Lippitt argues that the loss of a sense of humour is an efficient way to alienate oneself from primitive social interaction with fellow human beings. He explains that "if you woke up one morning with an uncontrollable urge to make yourself highly unpopular, a good way of achieving this would be to accuse as many people as possible, whenever the opportunity arose, of having no sense of humour" (1995, p.1). He claims that this accusation is often viewed as the most heinous of insults.

Daniel Wickberg has stressed that a person would be "literally incomplete" without a sense of humour (1998, p.85). Furthermore Lockyer and Pickering (2005) have made the important point that addresses humour's limits, and touch upon issues of offensiveness. This argument concerns the ambivalent nature of how people perceive and interpret humour, due to the importance we place on having a sense of humour. They argue that "we are unsure how to respond when a joke

is taken as offensive, we are also unsure how to take offense without seemingly lacking a sense of humour, being moralistic, intolerant and too politically correct" (ibid., p.6). Here Lockyer and Pickering highlight one of the supposed difficulties with the sociological study of humorous content. That is, to challenge or critically analyse humour, regardless if it holds controversial or taboo content, is to abandon one's own sense of humour, something considered especially undesirable. This typifies both the academic and non-academic stance which somewhat inadvertently shields those who engage in offensive humour.

However Lockyer and Pickering (2008) have strongly opposed the assumption that to take humour seriously is to be anti-humour - studying humour is not undertaken with the intention to prevent people from laughing. These three central principles provide the basis of the sociological study of humour and plant the foundations for the core argument of *critical humour studies* - that humour needs to be evaluated *critically*.

Humour is a human condition that can be studied seriously despite, paradoxically, humour appearing to be in binary opposition to seriousness. Oring (2003) suggests that humour should not be perceived as trivial. Often humour can be seen as such, simply because, by definition, it is regarded as non-serious. The implication of Oring's argument and a key component of the critical approach of humour being referred to, is that humour must be studied beyond its aesthetic value. However, Oring notes that humour is seldom addressed in such a way - "a promise made in jest is not a promise, a humorous illustration is not evidence, as a result humour is often considered to be trivial" (p.ix).

Lockyer and Pickering (2005) are advocates of a broad sociological analysis of humour. They stress that in a contemporary mediated context "humour occurs across all formats of contemporary media and is central to our everyday relationships. Humour is not confined to any particular genre or form of narrative. Humour infiltrates every area of social life and interaction, even when it is not appropriate" (p.3). From these statements one can deduce that Oring and Lockyer and Pickering highlight the *gravitās* of humour on both an individual humanistic scale and within a wider social context.

This alludes to the final principle which justifies humour's study - that it must be studied *in terms of its wider social significance*. Having a sense of humour and the collective enjoyment of humour has the potential to socialise, bond and include. However not all humour is collectively enjoyed, some humour is divisive. Forms of marginalising, publicly communicated humour does not include but *exclude*. Some theorists refer to this form of humour as 'offensive'. While this humour unmistakably often intends to offend people, or *does* offend people, or both, this researcher thinks a more appropriate term for this form of humour is *marginalising*. This is because addressing humour in terms of offensiveness, or the groups and individuals it offends, is a simplistic approach to this complex topic.

Simply offending people is not the most problematic implication of circulating marginalising humour in the cultural public sphere, and to adopt the logic of the contrary often causes one to ignore the more important issues - that of the discursive reproduction of ideological perspectives that can contribute to and mirror wider marginalisation and social exclusion of Others in society.

When addressing these types of humour within a sociological context, simply acknowledging the aesthetics of humour is insufficient. Whilst not abandoning the aesthetic components of joking and humour, one must research marginalising humorous content from a more ethical perspective acknowledging several potential negative implications and outcomes. The sociological enquiry into humour is fundamentally grounded in the first three principles, but the fundamental premise of *critical humour studies* is centred on this final value based on the ethical considerations and wider social implications of marginalising humour. As Lockyer and Pickering (2008) argue, the key justification for the sociological study of humour is to challenge the contemporary notion that humour is an absolute good.

## The ethics of humour

Billig (2005a) has provided an important contemporary critique of humour that incorporates this fundamental ethical premise of *critical humour studies* - that not all humour is good. He addresses the question of why offensive humour is socially expressed and circulated from the outset, with his main thesis being that humour's social usage, at its core, is based on ridicule.

He states, "it is easy to praise humour for bringing people together in moments of pure, creative enjoyment. But it is not those sorts of moments that constitute the social core of humour, but, instead, it is the darker, less easily admired practice of ridicule" (ibid., p.2). Aware of the arguments raised concerning theoretical plurality and the broad conceptual nature of humour, Billig makes it clear that his ideas surrounding the subject cannot account for all types of humour.

His work acts as an attempt *towards* a critical theory of humour from a social perspective as opposed to more positive theories that he believes currently dominate humour studies. He argues that humour cannot be considered a unitary entity as it is fundamentally characterised by two paradoxes. The first of these is that humour is both universal and particular (culturally and historically specific), and the second is that humour is both social and anti-social. Humour can both include and exclude. Billig's work is not an attempt to make a "full blown, complete theory that attempts to explain every occurrence of humour" (2005a, p.2) but rather a theoretical contribution that applies to humour which aims to be tendentious, offensive and transgressive of ethical boundaries of discursive conduct.

Billig, influenced by the likes of Henri Bergson (1911) and Sigmund Freud (1905 [1991]), argues that ridicule lies at the core of social life. He suggests that in practice, ridicule "ensures that members of society routinely comply with the customs and habits of the social milieu" (2005, p.2). He suggests that laughter can join people together but it can also divide, and most interestingly it can do both simultaneously when people in a group laugh at others. He suggests that laughter is a

social phenomenon - it is not solitary and it is something that needs to be shared with others. He also sees humour as a form of rhetoric. Rhetorical communication he argues with reference to Fine (1983) can be positive, however it can easily transform into something negative through the use of ridicule in humour. He suggests with examples such as 'playful teasing' and mockery, that rhetorical humour, with ridicule at its heart, is developed in children from a young age because it is subconsciously imitated, and subsequently not countered by parents.

Buss (1980) claimed similarly that "one of the prime means of socialisation is through teasing, laughter and ridicule" (p.232). Billig (2005a) added that the key accompanying concept that helps reproduce the notion of ridicule, is the social practice of embarrassment - embarrassment governs the everyday social codes of behaviour. As a consequence, out-groups and Others can be formed. For example Billig refers to Hazlitt (1987) who claimed there are difficulties in preventing people from laughing at those who are considered deformed or foreign. He stresses that social actors fear being embarrassed, they fear being ridiculed, mocked or teased, and it is this that installs ridicule at the core of social order over time.

Simon Critchley (2002) also adopts this logic in arguing that humour reinforces social consensus, but through reactionary means such as laughing at the supposed stupidity of outsiders. This particular humorous negotiation must be considered an ethical dilemma. Finding humour in another's perceived stupidity is a clear example of humour that is not constructed with the intention to be enjoyed universally. It operates in accordance with the assertion of superiority and inferiority - pleasure for those who are collectively reassured of their own superior intelligence and taste over others (this will be elaborated on in detail in the following section).

Palmer (1994) stated that the basis of a joke's offensiveness is determined by three interlinked variables, "the structure of the joke, considered as a representation of the world external to the joke, the relationship between the joke teller and the other involved with its accomplishment, and the nature of the occasion" (p.164). To elaborate, offensiveness and ethical transgressions caused by humour are not independent from the aesthetics. The linguistic structure of the joke and how it represents the social world are crucial for how humour can be marginalising. How a joke is constructed is essential for how it can produce certain meanings. This will be investigated in detail in Part Two with the analysis of racist jokes. Moreover, marginalising humour is highly dependent on the context a joke is told in, and on the relationship between the producer and audience. Humour can have one meaning when told in private and be essential for a form of social bonding when both producer and audience are conjoined in an interpersonal relationship, but when told in public between anonymous, unacquainted producers and audiences, the exact same joke can be interpreted as offensive (see Chapter Four, Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #3).

Essentially what is at the heart of this form of ridicule-based humour, is the dichotomous relationship between the actors involved - the joke teller and the 'butt' (and the groups both these roles represent). The 'butt' is a representative of a group perceived as inferior to the joke teller in some sense. As Mahadev L. Apte (1985) claimed, the use of jokes to disparage other groups is as

ancient as contact between groups. For example Alison Ross (1998) provided the joke "what do you say to a Liverpudlian in a suit? When's the court date?" (p.55). According to Ross, the butt must be attributed some power to justify the offensive humour, even if that power is just in the mind of the joke teller. Most commonly this power manifests itself within a threat, perhaps a physical or an economic, and if neither of these, a threat to a given insecurity the joke teller feels about themselves. Ross claimed, historically, lower social class groups, women, homosexuals, the disabled, the unattractive, the overweight and ethnic minority groups have been typical focuses of the butts of humour.

Otto Santa Anna (2009) addressed some of these issues in a study into offensive humour in a popular cultural context. In his analysis of several anti-immigration jokes told by American talk show host Jay Leno in 2006, Santa Anna determined that even when jokes are shared with millions of people, offensive humour formulated around inferiorising those already in marginalised positions can be considered socially acceptable. He argues that "pragmatically, this critical disconnection occurs because in order to share a laugh, the members of an audience must align themselves emotionally with the comedian, while distancing themselves from the butt of the joke" (ibid., p.11).

From this theoretical basis, it can be established that humour can act as a social bonding process that can create a sense of inclusion. However, the notion of inclusion for the people 'in' on the joke can at times only work by ridiculing and excluding those who aren't. Lockyer and Pickering (2008) argue in this context that all jokes are in a sense in-jokes. We need to be partially in the know in order to make any sense of them. Humour must be approached with an understanding of this ethically-aware claim, an understanding that humour has the potential to facilitate and express complex power struggles between different groups.

In order to elucidate the seriousness of these power struggles - who is in, and who is out - humour must be placed in the context of the groups that are socially included and excluded. Some power-related conflicts communicated in jokes, for example, will have no wider negative social implications - they can be socially, culturally and politically emancipatory. What remains important is whether humour kicks up or down, "whether comic aggression is directed at those who are in positions of power and authority, or at those who are relatively powerless and subordinated" (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008, p.811).

## Theories of humour

In order to comprehensively investigate contemporary British comic racism in the cultural public sphere, and establish its implications, the major philosophical traditions of humour must be discussed. These traditions are both concerned with not only the social functions of humour but also the core questions of why humans laugh, why humans tell jokes and what features of the social world instigate laughter. Only through theorising these issues is it possible to accurately deconstruct historical and contemporary jokes from a critical perspective that is conscious of the

aesthetic and ethical nuances. In this section, the approaches of superiority theory, relief theory and incongruity theory.

When applying these theories to the empirical content of *Sickipedia.org*, the theoretical perspectives of superiority and relief theories will be drawn on more extensively due to the fundamental nature of the material - 'sick', racist humour. However, the empirical contribution to this study is twofold - to distinguish how contemporary comic racist content operates as rhetoric, but also as humour, and how the two complement one another. While not all three philosophical traditions assist in understanding the expression and appreciation of all marginalising humour, all three provide important contributions to understanding the ways in which humour in general operates and is appreciated, and therefore has important relevance to comic racism's subsistence in the British cultural sphere.

The need for theoretical plurality when addressing humour theory is crucial. Not all forms of humour are researched in this thesis, but marginalising humour does in some cases adopt the structural characteristics of more innocent joking techniques in order to express its abhorrent themes. Oring states that "if humour should prove to be many things, several theories of humour and laughter are going to be needed," (2003, p.11). This was also noted by Billig in claiming "no single theory can hope to explain the complexity of humour" (2005a, p.176).

While I have stressed the imperativeness, in the sociological critique of humour, of illuminating ethical issues that are raised by offensive joking, one must be wary not to overcompensate and so neglect its aesthetic components. Only through the understanding of philosophical contributions which prioritise the linguistic and aesthetic components of humorous language, can one comprehensively address the ways in which racist rhetoric is communicated humorously.

The first philosophical contribution to be addressed, superiority theory, is the most relevant to comic racist discourse. Many traditional racist ideas, external from comedy, derived from the Enlightenment and Western Imperialism, are founded on a core notion of supposed western and white superiority and dominance, expressed through the denigration of perceived inferior Others. Therefore the relevance of this theory derives from its core tenet being "a theory of mockery...it suggests that laughter results from disparaging or degrading others" (Billig, 2005a, p.39).

When applied to comic racist content, superiority approaches directly provide explanations for humour which ridicules, antagonises and offends, as well as theorising personal gratifications for communicating or disseminating such material. Superiority theory addresses more metaphysical ideas surrounding the politics of humour and representation, and how power is negotiated within discourse between those in positions of dominance and those subordinated.

To provide some historical context, while superiority theory is the most relevant to the empirical material in this thesis, it also is the oldest theory. According to Critchley (2002) superiority theories dominated philosophical traditions until the eighteenth century. They can be traced as far back as

classical Greek philosophy from Plato and Aristotle. Plato and Aristotle did not so much formulate a coherent theory of superiority in regard to humour, however certain aspects of their writings indicate an animosity towards laughter and joking, and therefore lean towards a *misogelast* perspective on humour.

Aaron Smuts (2009) claimed Plato's approach towards humour and laughter was that it was "a form of malice, which he defines along the lines of sadism. In comedy, we take pleasure from the misfortune of others through either their ignorance or infirmity" (p.5). This idea surrounding the personal pleasure gained from the ignorance, infirmity or misfortune of others provides the foundation of superiority theory which would later be developed more concisely in the seventeenth century. Philosophers such as René Descartes contributed to the development of superiority theory in claiming that laughing at jokes was an immodest recognition of one's own cleverness (Descartes, 1985). However it was not until slightly later in the seventeenth century that Thomas Hobbes would provide the most influential contribution to the approach in his work *Leviathan* (1651) [1981].

Hobbes addressed laughter in detail and indicated a strong apprehension toward humour and the cause of its arousal, 'sudden glory'. According to Hobbes "*sudden glory* is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called *Laughter* and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves" (1651 [1981], p.125). He also commented: "I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance except they bring with them any present dishonour" (ibid.).

In an analysis of Hobbes' contribution to superiority theory, David Heyd (1982) noted that his view of humour coherently fits into his wider view of human nature, a view that Heyd claims is fundamentally concerned with "the ceaseless competition for positions of power, the unrelenting struggle for self-preservation, and the purely egoistic nature of man, who continuously strives for superiority over others" (p.8). Billig (2005a) similarly reflected on the essence of Hobbesian theory, suggesting that it transcends beyond "a technical hypothesis about the causes of laughter" (p.6), but "was part of a fearful vision of society that emerged from the cruel times of the English revolution" (ibid.).

This idea of humour being centred on the assertion of superiority over others can undoubtedly be applied to many forms of ridicule-based humour - most certainly comic racism. Lipptt (1995) argues that history has shown many cases of people laughing at the infirmities of others. He describes that in the eighteenth century, people would go to lunatic asylums to simply laugh at and taunt the inmates in the most direct manner of creating a human 'butt' to a joke. He also applies superiority theory to racist and sexist humour and provides a plausible explanation that concerns the joke

teller's own insecurities surrounding one's self esteem - a racist or sexist joke from this point of view would help establish and maintain the joke teller's superiority.

It is important in this overall discussion, which is analytically aware of both the aesthetics and ethics of humour, to emphasise that superiority theories do not account for the initial stimuli that create laughter. Therefore the philosophical approach neglects a key dimension of humour - how does superiority account for playful humour or when humour is adopted to ridicule oneself? This question suggests that superiority is not an essential precondition of humour. However this is not a major problem. As previously addressed, no one theory can account for all humour. Superiority is of significant importance to *some* forms of humour. Superiority theories importantly address the construction of inferiority in jokes which in turn create 'butts'. This identifies an important ethical dimension of the types of humour that do incorporate structural relationships of inferiority and superiority, examples of which are manifest in the empirical content of this thesis.

Superiority approaches are therefore crucial for a basic understanding of the power relations and ethical issues associated with marginalising humour. They are also important for creating analytical links between humour theory and the concepts central to 'race' and racism such as representation, stereotyping, Othering, and social exclusion, which are integral to the evaluation of comic racist discourse.

The second theory, relief, also emphasises ridicule-based humour, addressing cognitive, psychological processes that cause a human being to laugh. In a similar manner to Hobbes' superiority theory, relief theory - specifically the version adopted by Sigmund Freud - is a constitutive element of a more holistic theory of human nature. However where Hobbes' idea of human nature was based around the egotistical nature of man and the inherent need for superiority over others, Freud's theory centres on the fundamentally sexual and aggressive nature of man. This results in a theory less formally associated with ideas of power and social marginalisation, but does contribute to one's critical understanding of how content that is taboo - namely the sick jokes of *Sickipedia.org* - continues to subsist.

Freud's theorisation of relief in humour is based around ideas such as aggression and ridicule, but not from the perspective that sees the joke teller provided with a sense of superiority. Therefore this theory provides additional theoretical underpinning for why people wish to engage in humour that is not designed to be universally appreciated.

According to Billig (2005a), the Freudian perspective of humour is based around the self-deceptive human condition we wish to conceal from ourselves, and the dangerous forces that guide our conduct. In this sense then "the joke is seldom 'just' a joke, but it hides secrets even more discreditable than Hobbes ever imagined" (p.139).

Humour and joking in Freudian theory are a representation of his wider theory of cognitive repression in human nature. Freud argues that instinctually a human being's most intense pleasure

is derived from behaviour of a sexual or aggressive nature. These instincts have been deemed anti-social by the structural forces of society. Therefore in subscribing to this logic, it would be impossible for a person to simultaneously engage in a normal functioning social life whilst indulging themselves in these fundamental pleasures. These aggressive temptations are repressed in a self-disciplinary manner so humans can socially function. However Freud claims that the problem of repression is never fully resolved. One cannot ever fully make repressed emotions disappear completely, they re-emerge subconsciously at various times. It is at these moments of re-emergence that jokes and jest can appear. A point when a person's ego and superego (the cognitive control systems that fight our repressed urges) fail and the id (the instinctual desire for pleasure) dominates instead.

Contrary to superiority theory, Freud's work on humour is not *misogelastic* and he acknowledged the broad nature of humour. This differentiation is apparent in Freud's claim that jokes can be categorised into two distinct groups, 'innocent' and 'tendentious'. The innocent joke is one which "is an end in itself and serves no particular aim" (Freud, 1905 [1991], p.132). Its counterpart is where, "a joke does serve an aim - it becomes tendentious" (ibid.). An innocent joke in the Freudian tradition accounts for the humour that is used by a person solely to create pleasure amongst people. Despite his beliefs about humour and jokes representing repressed desires of the mind, Freud does not argue that humour is *always* an example of this. Jokes can be innocent and simply for the sake of instigating innocuous laughter. Freud saw that innocent jokes "bring that feeling of pleasure into connection with the technique of the joke" (Freud, 1905 [1991], p.137).

For Freud it is tendentious humour that embodies the repressed instinctual aspects of human nature. Billig states that the kernel of thought for tendentious jokes is not a banal process as it is for innocent jokes. The content tends to be something "that cannot be directly uttered because there are social restrictions against such expression" (2005a, p.154). The social restrictions tend to be against the hostile, the obscene and the sexual, thus meaning tendentious jokes are traditionally characterised by one of these, or all three. Tendentious jokes "will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible" (Freud, 1905 [1991], p.147), and as Billig explains, because jokes are seen as a non-serious form of discourse, this evasion of restrictions continues. Humans can satisfy their instincts and not be seen as anti-social by the establishment. Adopting Freudian thinking, marginalising humour is often celebrated in spite of marginalising inferior groups because of the safety net provided by jokes being regarded a 'non-serious' discursive practice - "jokes make possible the expression of abuse in the face of the obstacles raised by social proprieties and conventions" (Freud, 1905 [1991], p.103).

Where superiority theory provides a more direct insight into the complex power relations present in some types of humour, relief theory provides philosophical arguments centred on humour which can be more disastrous for the social identities ridiculed. Relief theory indicates that there doesn't necessarily have to be a socially, culturally or politically-centred power struggle present in humour that socially excludes, and humans do not necessarily find humour from stimuli through the positive

reinforcement of their own self-esteem. Freudian relief theory conceives of humour as an inevitable and unconscious process of engaging in socially abhorrent behaviour in order to provide a sense of deep-seated personal catharsis, which furthermore is not inherently attached to any wider issues of entitlement, representation, power and social exclusion.

For this reason relief theory can account for forms of racist humour that do not appear to ridicule non-white groups in terms of the reproduction of negative representations and stereotypes, the kinds of jokes which embody motifs of immigrant bigotry and racist violence for example, which metaphorically violate members of non-white groups, aggressively in a more seemingly arbitrary manner, decontextualised from wider social, cultural and historical significance.

The last theory, incongruity theory, attends closer to the aesthetic dimensions of humour, the links between human perceptions of the world, and the linguistic structures of jokes which in turn create laughter. If, as Critchley claimed, superiority theory dictated philosophical discussions of humour until the eighteenth century, "incongruity theory put an end to this dominance" (Billig, 2005a, p.39). Billig argues that where superiority theories had sought to reveal the motives of people who laugh and joke, incongruity theory aimed to identify the features of the world that provoke laughter.

The theory developed across the work of several scholars during the eighteenth century and can be seen as a reaction to Hobbes' superiority theory. The first incongruity theory of humour can arguably be traced back to Francis Hutcheson's 1750 work *Reflections Upon Laughter*, but the wider approach was simultaneously developed across the works of various eighteenth century philosophers including James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, James Russell Lowell and Arthur Schopenhauer (Critchley, 2002).

The core of the theory can be summarised with reference to Beattie who claimed "laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage" (1778, p.347). The incongruity theory of humour posits that when people perceive a set of 'things' that are out of place with each other, presented together, they find laughter.

In defence of classical humour theorists' efforts to determine a singular, holistic theory of humour, it must be acknowledged that 'humour' as a concept wasn't quite so broad prior to the nineteenth century. According to Billig (2005a) in the eighteenth century, humour had a more restricted meaning - "writers conventionally treated wit and humour as distinctly different phenomena. Wit involved playing with ideas or words, humour occurred when the object of the laughter was a person" (p.61). Thus superiority, relief and incongruity theories addressed the different sides of this distinction - superiority and relief accounting for a theories of 'humour', and incongruity for one of 'wit'. With more contemporary understandings of humour, the concept has expanded and become more convoluted, therefore one must instead refer to superiority and incongruity theories as theoretical contributions in the understanding of different, but inter-related facets of humour.

Oring (1992, 2003) has provided a contemporary extension of the theory through suggesting that perceived incongruities in humour rely on an 'appropriate' relationship. He states that humour derives from "the perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would normally be regarded as incongruous." (2003, p.1) This theory claims that humour does not solely rely on the incongruity present within a humorous expression itself, but the receiver's perception and making sense of the incongruity.

Incongruity theory applies to how jokes *work* linguistically and create humour. For example Oring refers to the joke 'why wear a watch in the desert? Because it has springs in it'. The answer is a play on words because the spring in a watch is literally different from a water spring which would be helpful in the desert. The connection between the two semantic meanings of the same word 'spring' creates an appropriateness to the riddle. He stresses that the appropriate relationship between deserts and watches by the word 'springs' "is not recognised as a legitimate relation. It violates logic, the sense of what we know to be true, or the sense of what traditional behaviours or expressions are supposed to do and mean. Watch springs do not provide water. If they did, there would be no joke" (ibid., p.6).

Acknowledging and understanding incongruity theory is essential for this research as it provides a premise of how jokes can work independently of the discursive elements of the content. Incongruity theory as a philosophical discussion of humour allows for the comprehension of joking that does not centre exclusively on ridicule or power conflicts, but this is not to argue it holds no relevance to this thesis' ridicule-based subject matter. It would be very ill judged to say no forms of marginalising humour and joking feature incongruities. It is imperative to identify and characterise other potential explanations for how humorous discourses, both innocent and tendentious, can make us laugh, and by extension, address the ways in which its dissemination is often justified by audiences.

It would be false to argue, in totality, that all racist humour works solely in accordance to philosophical ideas of human nature based on superiority or relief. No matter how tempting it may be to disregard all marginalising humour as the dated discourse of bigots, one simply cannot argue that everyone who has ever laughed at a racist or sexist joke, has done so exclusively because of the denigration and ridicule of the Other, as opposed to the wit of the language.

As the empirical work of this research will illustrate, in some cases comic racist jokes are constructed in such a way that they aim to create laughter through their linguistic *structure*, in addition to (if not instead of) their ideological content - a deliberate amalgamation of innocent and tendentious components. In most cases, they fail in this attempt. However, the very effort to incorporate notions of sophisticated, linguistic drollery and badinage into comic racism, illustrates that incongruity theory does have an element of importance in deconstructing this material.

The discussion of the success and failure of jokes according to their linguistic structure is of significant importance to the discussion of contemporary comic racist discourse in the cultural

public sphere, as it highlights some crucial points about its communication and dissemination, most crucially, the ambivalence in regard to the consumption of comic racism resulting from an internal conflict. On one side a degradation of the thematic content centred on inequality and marginalisation, on the other, an appreciation of the humorous structure, often presented through linguistic incongruities. This will be discussed in far more detail in Part Two.

## 'Race' as a social construction

Racism is one such form of social exclusion that is often communicated through humour and joking. It often represents inherent social, cultural and political power conflicts between those in positions of dominance over those who are subordinated. It also represents the primary form of identity-based social exclusion addressed in this thesis.

Racist and racialised ideology, in its various forms, must be critically challenged as it reproduces values that have historically articulated notions of white supremacy, and the inferiority and exclusion of non-whites over the past eight hundred years. Furthermore, one must stress the overwhelming concern with such messages due to the fact they have been physically manifested in some of the most morally odious behaviour ever conducted by mankind. Similarly to the discussion of humour in this chapter, 'race' and racism as concepts must be discussed in terms of their wider social, cultural and historical significance, with reference to sociological research and theory in order to identify the discursive and ideological foundations of the power relations represented in comic racist content.

Steve Garner (2010) stressed that "'race' is a fiction we turn into a social reality every day of our lives" (p.ix) - it is not a legitimate way of categorising human physical differences. This is not to say that we should ignore or deny that there is diversity in human appearance in terms of skin colour, complexion, height, body type or hair type for example, it is just that 'race' is not a useful concept to qualify these variations. 'Race' is a structurally bloated concept developed over hundreds of years, which in its essence represents cultural prejudice, social exclusion and white supremacy.

To approach the contemporary sociological perspective towards 'race', I suggest that it can be understood by accepting three central, interlinking principles. The first principle argues that 'race' is *a social and cultural construction that must be addressed in its historical context*. According to Garner, 'race' is often assumed to be a form of categorisation based on physical appearance, biological characteristics and genetic heritage (2010). He is not alone in acknowledging this widely accepted postulation. In reference to this assumption, Ivan Hannaford (1996) stated that 'race' is often seen to be an "all-pervading natural phenomenon, an awesome and mysterious primordial force operating mechanically or organically, materially or spiritually, through all historical and prehistorical time" (p.3). Garner (2010) however provided an essential starting point for arguing that 'race' is a social construction by stating that this widely accepted doctrine that divides humans into races according to shared 'natural' characteristics is invalid in several ways.

From a scientific basis, to fundamentally assume that 'races' are made up of peoples who share a similar biological makeup is incorrect (Jones, 1994). Garner (2010) argued that while each human being has around twenty-five to thirty thousand genes, the largest difference between two people is in the region of one percent. Hannaford too stresses that it is often wrongly assumed that due to humans descending from common material origins, our physical, mental and most importantly *cultural* traits are transmitted biologically, and that therefore it is suitable to classify people into several divisions of 'race' - "each individual is a complex organism of phenetic relationships, and the term 'race' now obscures more than it illuminates" (1996, p.7).

Moreover, objections to a biological categorisation of 'race' is based around the idea that not only is the grouping of individuals according to their genetic similarities based on false scientific assumptions, the process of categorisation itself has never been conducted according to biological factors in isolation. The early developments of the category of 'race' in the Enlightenment always intertwined biological factors with the cultural. Hund (2003) stressed that the social construction of 'race' "does not refer to individuals but to groups, it derives social inequality from natural differences; it emphasizes the visibility of otherness; it combines biological attributes with cultural abilities; it arranges differences hierarchically and classifies them with greater or lesser esteem" (p.7).

To summarise the first premise, Paul Silverstein (2005) states that 'race' is a "cultural category of difference that is contextually constructed as essential and natural" (p.364). Garner stresses that "the interpretations of physical differences that we make in our societies are determined not by the indisputable fact of racial difference, but by the social imperatives that enable us to do so. The social world provides us with tools specific to both our culture and our period of history, which we then use to read 'race' from the bodies of human beings" (2010, p.3).

The second premise argues that the *social construction of 'race' emerged from the normative centre of transparent 'whiteness' and white supremacy*. This asserts that racism operates, particularly in the West, by valuing 'whiteness' over other conceptions of identity (Mills, 2004). Michael Pickering (2004) argues that whiteness is the normative centre in racial classification, it represents the standard and regular. 'Whiteness' is used as a "boundary-maintenance practice, a way of designating and reifying cultural difference" (p.91). Garner argues that "the dominant groups in society, whether by class, 'race' or gender, generate and sustain ideas that justify their dominance and make it natural and normal. Only people whose identities fall outside the dominant group therefore need to be defined differently" (2010, p.119).

In the context of the social construction of 'race', 'whiteness' provides the normative centre from which all other 'races' are compared. However 'whiteness' until more contemporary academic studies has arguably been an invisible construct, positioning white people as 'unraced' and therefore socially dominant. The 'unraced' man, the 'just human', is argued as the most powerful man as 'he' has the authority to speak for all humanity. For example, Pickering (2004) argues that

if an individual is not described in a newspaper as Black or belonging to another non-white race, we can correctly assume that the individual is white.

Dyer (2000) claims that in a joke depicting a 'bloke and a black geezer', there is no need to adopt a race to the 'bloke' in the same fashion as the 'geezer', the 'bloke' is inherently and invisibly white. These examples provide support to the notion that "white remains the key organising centre against which racial differences are noticed and seen as inhabiting a symbolically peripheral area" (Pickering, 2004, p.92). Dyer argues that "at a level of racial representation, whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race" (2000, p.541). Evidence of this statement is present throughout the philosophical, scientific and historical works that constructed 'race' as a concept throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, assisting the maintenance of supremacy and the subordination of non-whites.

Furthermore out of this discussion of 'whiteness' it is important to examine more conceptually the notion of white supremacy. Gerald Horne (2003) stresses the importance of placing white supremacy in its historical context. He argues that when scholars address white supremacy, they should refer to it as a concept which is marked by the global hegemony of Europeans throughout history. He argues that mainstream positions mistakenly apply the term 'white supremacist' to more politically-centred, or extremist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Horne states that white supremacy can be linked to the emergence of the slave trade in seventeenth century but prefers to ally himself with the likes of Charles W. Mills "that would argue white supremacist thinking commenced with the much heralded Enlightenment" (ibid., p.124).

Mills, following on from the notion that 'whiteness' is an 'invisible' construct, asserts that white supremacy is the primary political system that has shaped the world over the last few hundred years yet it goes largely unrecognised, fundamentally because it is not seen as a political system from the outset. He refers to contractarian theory to argue that white supremacy is the fundamental construct within the social contract, arguing that all non-white people are essentially, socially excluded and inferiorised.

He states "the racial contract is that set of formal or informal agreements or meta-agreements between members of one subset of humans, henceforth designated by shifting 'racial' criteria as 'white' and co-extensive with the class of full persons to categorise the remaining subset of humans as 'non-white' and of a different and inferior moral status, subpersons, so that they have a subordinate civil standing in the white or white ruled polities" (1999, p.11). By this Mills argues that the dominance of whites is firmly established in the most primary stages of creating civilisation. In the centuries that have proceeded, whites have developed various methods, both intentional and unintentional, to maintain this dominance as illustrated by Enlightenment thought, Western colonialism and the slave trade.

Embracing what has already been outlined in the first two premises, the third states that not only are 'races' defined in accordance to their cultural practices, these categorisations *are constructed*

*within the context of an uneven power relationship*, one which perpetuates prejudice, discrimination and ultimately subordination against 'non white' peoples. This implies that ideas of 'race' and racism are intrinsically intertwined and not so conceptually distinct - "the two cannot be readily separated" (Bernasconi & Lott, 2000, p.vii).

All three premises can be conceptually expanded upon using the analytical tool of 'racialisation'. Robert Miles (1989) stressed that amongst usages by researchers such as Banton (1977) and Reeves (1983) there was a minimal consensus that the concept is used "to refer to a representational process whereby social significance is attached to certain biological (usually phenotypical) human features, on the basis of which those people possessing those characteristics are designated as a distinct collectivity" (p.74). He asserts further that this process can only occur when these collectivities are exclusively defined as a 'race'.

Others have stated that 'racialisation' is a "sensitising concept that underscores the creation of race as a social dynamic," (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2010, p.133), and that its conceptual meaning plays an important role in reproducing inequality (Murji & Solomos, 2005). Miles (1982) used the term 'racialisation' as a synonym for racial categorisation which he sees as an ideological process of delineating group boundaries and allocating people within these boundaries according to their phenotypical characteristics. However he has since stated that he chooses not to use the concept of racial categorisation at all, in favour of using 'racialisation', in order to highlight that 'it' is a process which has at times throughout history preceded 'race' (Miles, 1989). In this sense, Miles argues that "the concept of racialisation...refers to the historical emergence of the idea of 'race' and to its subsequent reproduction" (1989, p.76).

Stephen Small (1994) sees racialisation as "how groups not previously defined as 'races' have come to be defined in this way" (p.30) through various social factors and processes. Garner stresses that the processes being referred to by Small result in 'race' becoming a "salient factor in the way social resources are allocated and how groups are represented" (2010, p.3). From the social categorisation process of racialising different peoples into groups, some will find they are denied access to social goods and resources while other groups will correspondingly find it easier. Miles stresses that within the process of 'racialisation', which fundamentally refers to the dialectical process by which meaning is attributed to particular biological features of human beings, individuals are assigned to a general category of peoples which can have consequences for the structures and institutions they are associated with and the political and economic relations within them (1989). He states that "issues such as who occupies positions of leadership and the topics that are placed on the political agenda may come to be shaped by the meanings attributed to phenotypical variation" (Miles, 1989, p.76). To summarise, Garner has argued that the social construction of categorising groups into different biological 'races' dictates a complex social relationship based on power and subordination.

## The history of 'race'

In order to fully contextualise the ways in which ideological notions of 'racialisation', 'whiteness' and white supremacy are rhetorically expressed in racialised discourses such as comic racism, one must address the historical formation of 'race' - a category which amalgamated biological, social and cultural characteristics attributed to groups of humans.

Robert Bernasconi and Tommy L. Lott (2000) have stressed that understanding a concept's history is always beneficial, but in the case of 'race', a historical approach is particularly valuable as the social construction of racial classification is not a contemporary notion. The modern understanding of the concept of 'race' was formally introduced in the eighteenth century Enlightenment and was further developed and shaped in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In conducting a historical investigation into the development of 'race', literature provides further support to the three premises laid out concerning the sociological approach towards 'race'. Not only is it wrong to consider 'race' a biological category, 'race' has never been solely based on the supposed biological similarities and differences of humans. 'Race' has always convoluted physical characteristics with cultural attributes. Moreover, the doctrine of racial classification that emerged in the Enlightenment was constructed from a position that centred 'whiteness' and consequentially, was fundamentally discriminatory against 'non whites'.

Firstly, an important point needs to be acknowledged. Bernasconi and Lott (2011) argue that the social, political and economic activities that placed white Europeans in contact with Africans for example, developed a discourse which characterised non-whites from a prejudiced and socially excluding perspective an entire generation before 'race' would be constructed as a concept, and that the reproduction of such interiorising ideas would amplify their potency. In this sense it can be argued that racism precedes 'race'. As Paul Gordon Lauren (1988) iterates, whether it is racial exploitation that causes racial discrimination or racial discrimination that causes exploitation, they are inherently connected and reinforce one another.

According to Hannah Franziska Augstein (1996), eighteenth century philosophy and science's investigation into and its subsequent view of mankind provided various traditions that together in combination paved the way for a formal conceptualisation of 'race'. Enlightenment thought included a liberal, anti-monarchical political outlook, the rise of the nation-state, biological and zoological investigations, and a political interest in finding a scientific justification for slavery.

Furthermore the Enlightenment saw Christianity become polarised - "once natural historians no longer felt obliged to align their tenets to the story of Genesis, the playground for all sorts of racist speculations was opened" (Augstein, 1996, p.xxxii). During this period, human sciences such as medicine, natural history, political science and anthropology became more developed, political and cultural philosophers questioned historically unquestionable laws of civilisation, and naturalists begun the process of systematically assigning humanity's position in relation to the rest of the animal kingdom (Augstein, 1996). Garner argues these political, economic and technological

advancements of the eighteenth century can be summed up by stating "Enlightenment thinkers were engaged in a wide-ranging project of categorisation" (2010, p.14).

Up until this point, human tribes had been divided dichotomously in a somewhat simplistic fashion - civilised and savage. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, questions surrounding human diversity were raised and answering them became a high priority. Questions that hinted towards the merger between cultural characteristics and biological included, for example, why did humans look so different from each other if we derive from a monogenetic act of creation, and, what occurs *culturally* that allows some tribes to civilise whilst others remain socially primitive (Augstein, 1996)? These questions were widely answered in the manner that saw physical appearance becoming the marker that indicates cultural development (Eze, 1997). As a result 'savages' became a legitimate object of study.

Several theories of human variation took this form in the eighteenth century including climatic and environmental theories. Influential theorist Montesquieu saw the climatic theory based on "geographical and climatic circumstances as influences which promoted or retarded the process of civilisation. Climate was deemed to be the source of human physical diversity; tribes living in unfavourable conditions developed in response to their station darker and coarser skin" (Augstein, 1996, p.xiii). In essence, the climatic theory drew causal links between climate, phenotype, intellectual ability and the capacity for civilisation (Garner, 2010). As the theory developed it became more widely known as 'environmentalism', stating that "human physiognomy and civilisation [was] regarded as a function of external living conditions" (Augstein, 1996, p.xiii).

When addressing these theories of human difference that began to emerge in greater numbers across Europe in the eighteenth century, it becomes clearer that the social and cultural aspects of different human tribes have always been intertwined with the biological, even prior to the initial formulation of a concept of 'race'. For example, French naturalist Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, extended the theory of environmentalism to embrace the physical aspects of mankind from a monogenetic perspective. He did not follow polygenistic theorisations, but argued that even though humans can look remarkably different from one another, two individuals can still procreate regardless of the tribe they belong to. This was conclusive enough evidence that all humans belonged to the same species - "in his view, the human mind and physicality were a result of environmental influences; a savage tribe transported to Europe and fed on European food would gradually become not only civilised, but white" (Augstein, 1996, p.xv).

Later theorists such as Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, influenced by Comte de Buffon and other theories that had preceded his work, that I have stressed were unable to address human variation in accordance with biological factors exclusively, would begin to develop anatomical comparisons of physiological differences between humans. With this, in *On the Natural Variety of Mankind* in 1775, Blumenbach formulated one of the first conceptualisations of different 'races'. Blumenbach agreed that all human tribes belonged to the same species, however physical variation was due to varying climatic circumstances (Augstein, 1996). He typologically conjured the fivefold

classification that divided humans into Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American and Malayan races (Banton, 1987).

Blumenbach was soon followed by other scholars such as John Hunter, Immanuel Kant, Johann Christian Polycarp Erxleben and Oliver Goldsmith (Augstein, 1996), who similarly created specific categories to represent the diversity of mankind. Immanuel Kant developed a similar categorical theory of 'race' to Blumenbach between 1775 and 1777 in *Of The Different Human Races*. Debates continue as to who was the first to develop a "rigorous scientific concept of race" (Bernasconi & Lott, 2000, p.viii), Blumenbach or Kant. However, Bernasconi and Lott strongly argue that it was Kant who initially, critically put environmentalist and climatic theories of human difference into perspective. He achieved this through creating a clear and consistent terminological distinction between 'race' and species and an insistence that racial characteristics remain permanent throughout the generations no matter what environment a group may relocate to. Kant defined 'races' as deviations, from a single genus "that are constantly preserved over many generations" (1777 [2000], p.9).

Kant's work however is a prime example of the attribution of human being's mental capacities, academic and artistic abilities and their ability to create stable and civilised social environments to an innate biological determinism, as Paul Gilroy labels it "blending the physical and metaphysical" (2000, p.60). Examples from Kant's work prior to *Of The Different Human Races* such as "someone who is black from head to toe is clear proof that what he says is stupid" (Kant, 1764 [1973], p.113) clearly indicates an early incarnation of a process of 'racialisation'.

Enlightenment thinkers laid the groundwork which fundamentally fixed 'race' and culture in terms of an unequal power struggle, and white supremacy. In deconstructing the concept of 'race', 'race' can be argued as determining culture - which according to some such as Banton (1987) is the very essence of 'racism' - whilst simultaneously culture could be argued as determining 'race'. 'Race' was not an isolated concept based purely on scientific rationalism, the social and cultural characteristics of the members of these 'races' were deeply embedded into the conceptual presentation of them. Furthermore, the concept undisputedly constructed a hierarchy which placed whites in a position of social, cultural and political dominance over 'non-whites'. Garner therefore in reference to this realisation asks the question "if people's abilities were genetically determined and unequal, what was the point of trying to overcome these inequalities? They were natural, normal and must be the basis for the social world" (2010, p.15).

Following the Enlightenment, polygenist theories of 'race' became the norm in the nineteenth century. Polygenism differs from the monogenetic theories that had dominated previously, in that it focused on creation itself. It is based around the idea that humans do not all descend from the same genesis. Smedley and Smedley (2012) state that polygenists argued for multiple creations, and focused this perspective on recording specific differences between racial groups. Polygenism was initially conceived prior to the Enlightenment in the work's of seventeenth century theologian Isaac de La Peyrère with his Pre-Adamite theory, and it was refined by Henry Home Lord Kames in

the mid eighteenth century through combining aspects of environmental with traditional polygenist theories. Kames acknowledged that environmental factors influenced how civilisations developed but disagreed that climatic influences affected human variation in any great way. He contrarily and controversially countered theological positions in stating that human tribes were "engendered in different acts of creation" (Augstein, 1996, p.xiv).

According to Smedley and Smedley (2012) Charles Darwin's 1859 works *Origin Of The Species* provided a significant challenge to monogenetic perspectives with its wide acceptance amongst anthropologists. Furthermore, scholars such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arthur de Gobineau, Robert Knox, George Cuvier, and Jean-Bapiste Lamarck, alongside Charles Darwin, demonstrated that post-Enlightenment theories of 'race' existed in symbiosis with the fundamental premise of a combined biological and cultural racial hierarchy.

Historical philosopher Hegel neglected any historical contributions of races other than Caucasian. Cuvier in his 1817 work *Le Règne Animal* researched the "anatomical differences between the diverse races of man" (Stocking, 1968, p.13), in sub-dividing human beings into three categories of vertebrates, Caucasian, Mongolian and Ethiopian. He also concluded in this work that ancient Egyptians could not have been 'Negroes' as 'Negroes' had a low cranial capacity and were incapable of creating a great civilisation (ibid.). Knox and de Gobineau simultaneously applied racial hierarchies, internally, within the white race as part of a wider analysis which determined that race-mixing would ultimately cause the decline of Western civilisation asserting that "great civilisations were maintained by pure races" (Garner, 2010, p.17).

By the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, movements such as Social Darwinism and Eugenics emerged. Social Darwinism, which according to Pickering (2001) owes little to Charles Darwin himself, but rather the ideas of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Knox, chose to abandon ideas surrounding hybrid vigour as the key for a group to successfully dominate its environment. Instead Social Darwinist's adopted the logic that 'race' governed intelligence and inventiveness and the struggle between races led to backwardness and eventual elimination of those who were lacking the capacity to evolve (Pickering, 2001). Eugenics was founded by Charles Darwin's cousin Francis Galton and promoted the ideas of controlling breeding for desired racially inherited characteristics. This essentially aimed to breed into white Europeans the requirements of civilisation, namely the instinct of continuous steady labour and breed out less desirable characteristics typical of wild savages (ibid.).

These 'race' theories throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were formed "within the contexts of colonial expansion and plantation slavery" (Garner, 2010, p.16), and contributed to the formation of 'race' as a worldview in the nineteenth century - " a product of popular beliefs about human difference" (Smedley & Smedley, 2012, p.24). Audrey Smedley's very definition of 'race' promotes this historical context, describing a power conflict centred on a gradient of superiority, in which Europeans expressed the inferiority of the coloured peoples of the 'New World' (non-white 'races'), and that this notion became more commonly accepted over time. She claimed that as a

worldview, 'race' can be understood as a "cosmological ordering system structured out of the political, economic, and social realities of peoples who had emerged as expansionist, conquering, dominating nations on a worldwide quest for wealth and power" (1993, p.25).

Smedley and Smedley (2012) highlighted that during the early decades of the nineteenth century, the idea of 'race', deeply grounded in colonial English cultural and historical influence, had developed from the scholarly, 'scientific' system of classification, into a folk concept. 'Race' became a concept that was universally understood, regularly used in the English language, and most importantly subject to popular extension and expansion. According to Reginald Horsman (1981), by the middle of the nineteenth century "the inherent inequality of races was simply accepted as a scientific fact in America" (p.135). Garner (2010), agreed with this perspective, arguing similarly that during this period, the central thesis of the Enlightenment stated that the body was key to culture, was expanded into more popular consciousness.

As stated by Smedley and Smedley, these popular attitudes, beliefs and myths concerning the world's 'races' developed during the "greatest period of European expansion and exploitation of non-European lands and peoples" (2012, p.26). This can be understood within the context of colonial discourses and imperialist ideologies. Les Back and John Solomos (2000) argue that "colonialism represented a relationship of domination and subordination, the oppression of one racialised group over another and the production of racialised meanings about both the coloniser and the colonised" (p.253). In reference to Frantz Fanon, Back and Solomos stress that "colonial institutions and the ideologies associated with them constructed ideas about race through representations of 'blackness', the 'negro' and 'the native'" (ibid.) They suggest more importantly, that these ideologies concerned the ways colonised Others saw themselves in colonial societies and their struggles.

Discourse throughout the periods of colonialism and imperialism in the West provide tangible examples that represent the social construction of 'race' from the seventeenth century onwards; the development of racialisation; the creation and application of Othering and stereotyping; and the race relations between whites and non-white 'indigenous' or 'primitive' peoples that were not belonging to the Occident. Homi Bhabha (1983) defines colonial discourse as "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated...as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual licence of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved" (p.18). This notion of 'anxious repetitiveness' in racialised representations of non-whites throughout colonial and imperial discourse is of significant importance. This is because, as will be argued throughout the thesis, racist ideology that found wider popular acceptance post-Enlightenment, has continued to be reproduced in different forms until the present day.

Reinforcing the arguments laid by Smedley and Smedley (2012) and Garner (2010), proclaiming the widely accepted *doxa* of racial hierarchy following the Enlightenment, Lola Young (2000) addressed the relationship between colonial ideas and imperialist texts in the example of early

twentieth-century cinema, a period that she argues coincides with "the peak of colonial expansion" (p.270). She argues in reference to the anti-black focus of many colonial discourses that "much literary production during the late nineteenth century is replete with examples of 'knowledge' about the character of Africans based on white supremacist attitudes towards 'race'. This relates in particular to the notion of atavism - the belief that the 'primitive' people of Africa constituted an earlier stage of human development" (p.268).

Similarly Marianna Torgovnick (1990) argued that the judgements of white Europeans in reference to the intelligence, rationality and sexual practices of Others in colonial times were not acknowledged as ideologically formed but rather factual statements (1990). These negatively formed facts are seen by Torgovnick as a method of normalising whiteness and defining the qualities and boundaries of white identity. To illustrate this point, Young stresses that imperial texts were saturated with anti-black metaphors that associated darkness or blackness with dirtiness, ignorance and evil (2000). Many more examples that reinforce these points will be referred to in Part Two of the thesis, outlining the historical usages of (anti-black) racialised motifs in Western discourses that are also present in comic racist texts.

## Key features of racism

From the account provided in this chapter, one can infer that racism is conceptually very complex - it is perpetually connected to the concepts, 'race' and racialisation. I have established that 'races' have been historically constructed, socially, through processes of racialising people into different phenotypical groups according to a combination of several perceived shared cultural and biological characteristics.

The term 'racist' is referring to the formation of racial categories in concurrence with pre-existing power relations that positioned 'non-whites' as intellectually and culturally inferior to 'whites', therefore assisting in the maintenance of the social hegemony of 'whites' who were already in positions of dominance. From this I am establishing that racism, as a set of principles and values, both precedes and proceeds the concept of 'race'.

Racism can be defined as "a belief system or doctrine which postulates a hierarchy among various human races or ethnic groups. It may be based on an assumption of inherent biological differences between different ethnic groups that purport to determine cultural or individual behaviour" (Garner, 2010, p.7). This section will identify the key defining features of racism which will illustrate the ways in which it has operated in society, physically, institutionally and discursively - features that can be recognised in some contemporary comic discourses.

Firstly, the theoretical notion of 'order building' formulated by Zygmunt Bauman (1991) is of significant importance for understanding racism. This is because it can be argued as the fundamental basis of which racist thought and discourse emerges from. It draws similar comparisons to the earlier mentioned simplistic dichotomy that preceded ideas of 'race' before the Enlightenment, a dichotomy which divided humans into 'civilised' and 'savage'. However, Bauman's

'order building' or 'quest for order' is not concerned with how humans are categorised as such, his work comes from a more theoretical and abstract approach, which can be applied to 'race' and racism.

'Order building' is based around a central conflicting dichotomy of modernity. This dichotomy can be interpreted in several ways, such as a conflict between order and chaos, language and ambivalence, civilisation and nature. Within this dichotomy, nature will always be seen as representing ambivalence. The ambivalent is contrary to what is needed or desired by humans. The natural must become "something to be mastered, subordinated, remade so as to be readjusted for human needs" (ibid. p.7). Bauman argues that the substance of modern politics, intellect and life is an effort to exterminate ambivalence and eliminate everything that cannot be precisely defined. Drawing from Bauman's theory, anything that can be identified as being associated with the natural or more appropriately the 'non civilised' is tarnished with the same mark of ambivalence - "intolerance is, therefore, the natural inclination of modern practice" (ibid., p.8).

Theoretically Bauman's work can be applied to the social construction of 'race' and the genesis of intolerant views in application to it. 'Races' were constructed due to a desire to categorically identify peoples in the world that had not developed culturally in the same way as white Europeans. In this way, 'non-whites' could be seen as representative of nature and therefore ambivalence/chaos. Bauman's work, which states that the maintenance of order is of crucial importance for humanity in modernity, provides a theoretical basis for explaining why non-whites were mastered, subordinated and remade using the construction of 'race', and furthermore with intolerance being the natural inclination of practice, this construction was built from a prejudiced perspective. When adding the concepts already described in this chapter so far, such as 'whiteness' and white supremacy, to this key foundation of human nature in modernity, it becomes more clear how racism can be identified as it was in Garner's (2010) earlier stated definition.

Additionally, key features of racism are the interlinked concepts of Othering and stereotyping. Elisabeth Bronfen (1992) has referred to the interconnected relationship between order building, stereotyping and Othering in claiming that "the stereotype of the Other is used to control the ambivalent and to create boundaries. Stereotypes are a way of dealing with the instabilities arising from the division between self and non-self by preserving an illusion of control and order" (p.182).

The creation of the Other is essential for understanding social exclusion. According to Pickering (2001), the Other is a denial of history, an obstacle that stands in the way of change and transformation. As a key process of social exclusion, Othering is a rhetorical strategy made in the interests of the dominant group's identity, and aims to separate and distance that group from subjugated Others. Pickering stresses that formally constructing Others has as much to do with creating identity for those in the dominant group (those included) as it does for those excluded - "the ritualistic process of social exorcism it performs attempts to contain the Other in its place at the periphery. Identity is in this way dependent on the difference that has been translated into Otherness" (2001, p.49).

As has been suggested throughout this chapter so far, the various components of 'race' and racism are extremely intertwined. In the case of Othering, Pickering further stresses the interconnections between these two core concepts in arguing that "although theorisations of the Other are relatively recent, representations of the Other go back much further" (ibid.). He argues that representations of Others are deeply rooted in the sedimented layers set down by past cultural practices and have become entrenched as powerful social myths. This further emphasises that one can address racism as a process which both contributed to the formation of 'race' and was a direct result of it.

Pickering asserts that Othering is a process that occurred parallel or in concordance with other products of modernity and modern imperialism. In this sense he is arguing that the materialisation of Others occurred during the historical period that saw the construction of 'race', colonial expansion, the slave trade and the emergence of a newer scientific, progressive thinking. He stresses that the processes of becoming modern and building empires changed the ways Europeans questioned cultural difference - "Western societies classifying themselves as modern and civilised relied heavily on the contrast between their own sense of advancement and the idea of racially backward and inferior societies" (ibid., p.51).

What is of significant importance to the concept of racism is the idea of inferiority inherent to Others. As Pickering puts it, "those who were conceived as *inferior* in this way became *interior* to national identity in the West by becoming its Other, its decivilised counterpart" (ibid.). The ways in which Others were represented as inferior has ranged in a great many ways and differs depending on which group is being Othered. For example, black Others' characteristics that are supposedly inherent to them, range from being primitive, savage, having more in common with apes and monkeys than white humans, infantile, sexually libidinous and criminal (Pickering, 2001).

The method by which these characteristics are firmly fastened to Others can be explained by the feature of racism - stereotyping. The concepts of the stereotype and the Other are analytically symbiotic. Pickering argues that at their core, the representative acts of stereotyping and Othering are based around the "symbolic operation of expulsion; they serve to externalise, distance and exclude those who are labelled negatively" (p.48).

Pickering argues that it is primarily important to distinguish between 'categories' and 'stereotypes' in order to assert their significant conceptual differences. He argues that processes of categorisation and stereotyping are often interlinked but are conceptually distinct and should be analytically treated as such. The fundamental difference between the two is that categorisations are essential for making sense of the world and organising our understanding of it, whereas stereotypes are more formally deployed as a rhetorical strategy. He states however that the importance of categories should not be over emphasised, because conceptually categories are flexible and change over time. Conversely stereotyping is a concept which "attempts to deny any flexible thinking with categories. It denies this in the interests of the structures of power which it upholds" (2001, p.3).

To provide a definition, Pickering denotes stereotypes as a way of portraying or representing a social group or category:

"certain forms of behaviour, disposition or propensity are isolated, taken out of context and attributed to everyone associated with a particular group or category. Stereotypes render uniform everyone associated with a particular feature, such as a woman being blonde-haired or a man who is black-skinned; they are reduced to the characteristic isolated by the stereotype in its designation of what being blonde or black means" (ibid., p.4).

When applying stereotyping to 'races', these 'fixed' ideas are typically associated with the racialised characteristics attributed to non-whites in discourses that emerged in the Enlightenment and colonial times, and have since been reproduced in different forms until the present. For example Kimberlé Crenshaw (2000) provides several proposed oppositional dualities in regards to black and white stereotypes that have been installed into public consciousness. While whites have often been represented as industrious, intelligent, moral, knowledgeable, law abiding humans, blacks are, she argues, contrarily positioned as lazy, unintelligent, immoral, ignorant criminals.

Pickering (2004) notes that within the context of work or leisure, these characteristics are represented with an image of a servant or manual labourer, implying that black people are nothing more than "exotic entertainers for white people" (p.92). By exotic entertainers, Pickering is referring to the more physical attributes black people became stereotypically associated with and how they apply them culturally. For example the notion that black people are naturally body-centric, making them naturally rhythmic in dance and also adept at sporting activities.

There are of course many examples of stereotyping and Othering towards other 'races' than black, alongside prejudice in different forms of social exclusion such as gender, nation and class. Britain has a history of anti-Asian and anti-Irish stereotypical discourse for example. These will be looked at in more detail with examples in Chapter Two.

In summary, all three features of racism can be argued as contributing to formulating 'race' and establishing white supremacy during the centuries where genuine threats to it emerged as a result of colonial expansion. However it would be reductive to simply argue that racism precedes 'race'. This ignores the complexity of the two concepts. 'Race' and racism are continuous concepts. They are both constantly reproduced. 'Race' is still a highly used concept, racism is still present in contemporary society, and processes of order building, Othering and stereotyping in various different forms continue to be at the forefront of this reproduction, particularly in comic racism.

## Racism in humour

At this stage of the literature review, the more broad theoretical and philosophical debates surrounding the two overarching topics of the project, 'race' and 'humour' have been covered in detail. The final major segment of this chapter will return to the field of *critical humour studies* and

address the relevant scholarly contributions concerning these two topics' conceptual alignment - comic racism.

Elizabeth Sullivan (2000) states that humour is "a powerful communicator of prejudice" (p.47). Adopting this logic, racist humour or comic racism can be defined as a particular strand of humour described by Lockyer and Pickering (2008) in the following quote - "[there] are times when humour, or attempted humour is not only inappropriate but also disastrous for the various social identities and relations that are drawn into it" (p.808).

From these statements, one can deduce comic racism is a subcategory of wider marginalising humour, that is inherently saturated with ethical issues. It is socially, culturally, politically situated, and most importantly has a wide historical significance, and this means it has the potential for serious implications. It is a strand of humour and joking that can be devastating to the social identities of 'races' and ethnicities that are targeted and ridiculed. In Great Britain, both in contemporary and historical examples, these 'butts' have predominantly been ethnic groups that are already positioned on the margins of society.

Weaver (2010, 2011a, 2012) argues that comic racism's primary function is to act as a rhetorical device - to communicatively encourage racist thought in a persuasive manner and ambivalently alter our perceptions of truth. He counters both the lay and scholarly critiques of treating humour seriously, in arguing that humour operates using rhetorical devices in a similar fashion to serious and political discourses, therefore its implications must be treated in the same serious manner.

Thomas Ford and Mark Ferguson (2004) researched racist (and sexist) disparagement in humour and how it can create and reproduce prejudiced stereotypes in regards to a target group. They stress that racist humour does not simply reinforce attitudes that currently exist, it increases tolerance of other instances of discrimination against a targeted group, especially for individuals and groups who already hold high levels of prejudice towards the disparaged group. Their conclusion provided further justification for the results of a study conducted by Ford alone (1997) on the stereotypical portrayals of African Americans in television. This study consisted of viewers watching four variations of a comedy skit featuring one lead character who might have hurt his roommate. Ford's viewers more often judged guilty an African-American when his character was portrayed stereotypically, while judging the white characters guilty at the same rates, whether portrayed stereotypically or neutrally. Ford concluded that the disparagement of social groups through humour increases tolerance and acceptance of out-groups because humorous communication is so often not considered seriously or critically.

David Benatar (2002) provides a theory of harm in relation to racist humour, arguing that racist jokes can directly damage non-white cultural values. He states that racist jokes can harm in a subtle way not too dissimilar from damaging someone's reputation by spreading of rumour or conjecture. He argues that there is not such a great distinction in terms of racism manifest in physicality than in thought or discourse. He stresses that mere beliefs can cause harm, even if they

never result in any harmful actions - "if I believe negative rumours about somebody, that person is harmed by my having the belief even if I fail to act on it. His reputation is damaged" (p.42).

In some places comic racism is used to express and disseminate clearly politically motivated rhetoric, where white supremacist intentions are overt, without any deep interpretation of the discourse. Elliot Oring (2003) on this subject has noted that racist humour is often not representative of offensive humour but rather the humour of hatred. To illustrate, he addresses the American example of the White Aryan Resistance (WAR). He irrefutably stresses that the WAR are a self-admittedly neo-Nazi, anti-immigration, racist group who both deny the Holocaust and are intensely dedicated to restoring white supremacy through defending themselves against the destructive non-white invaders of America. Specifically this non-white animosity is aimed at blacks, Jews, and Mexicans and its rhetoric also intersects with social exclusion based on homosexuality.

Oring reveals that "whilst WAR is primarily a political publication promoting a serious racist ideology and agenda, instances of humour are common - indeed prominent" (Oring, 2003, p.44). The humorous discourse includes over-exaggerated caricatured illustrations, word puns such as the 'Jewnited States', and more familiar joke structures such as 'how do you stop five niggers raping a white woman? Throw them a basketball'. Oring's brief case study provides empirical backing to Mulkey's argument that "comic discourse uses the symbolic separation from the realm of serious action that enables social actors to use humour for serious purposes" (1988, p.1). This statement hints at the discursive depth of comic racism - that it is not an arbitrarily constructed piece of language that can only be discussed within the narrow paradigm of individual offense. Comic racism can be used to circulate extremist and politically-centred, ideological perspectives, and reproduce racialised values in a contemporary context - both ultimately serving to mirror and reinforce subordination of non-white 'race's.

An important issue to raise concerning comic racism and its subsistence in the British cultural public sphere is the discursive boundaries of humour and comedy. For aforementioned reasons stated in this section, racism in humour, alongside sexism, homophobia, class and disability-related prejudice, are widely considered as subjects not fit for public dissemination and consumption. This is because they cross a metaphorical boundary of what is considered moral and ethical, public practice, and racism more so than any of the other forms of discursive social exclusion is considered the most highly duplicitous and taboo.

However, as will be identified in Chapter Two and the empirical data, racism has had a plethora of appearances in the British cultural public sphere. In this regard one can establish that racism in the context of humour has not, and does not have a fixed moral position in discursive space. Its communication has been constantly in flux and is fundamentally associated with issues of boundaries and offensiveness. To quote Lipman (2000) "there is a fine line between the humorous and the offensive" (p.216).

Richard Howells (2006) and Weaver (2011a, 2011b) have extensively discussed this topic, referring to how comic racism is circulated in contemporary comic media, with reference to fluid social constraints that both alleviate and hinder its articulation. Both Howells and Weaver refer heavily to the specific case study of Sacha Baron Cohen's comedy character *Ali G*, and the polysemic meanings attached to the use of 'race' as the subject matter of comedy in contemporary British popular culture. Weaver argues that contemporary media and comic racism are subject to conceptual implications of Bauman's (2005) liquid modernity and appropriately labelled the notion, liquid racism. The concept concerns the ambivalent meanings of humorous discourse in contemporary comic media, that it is in a constant state of flux. He argues that audiences struggle to interpret the racist dimension of comic racism, subconsciously questioning whether it was ever there.

Weaver addresses liquid racism and the polysemiology of *Ali G*, in claiming that a multitude of racisms are presented in the text that erase one another. They are liquid and slippery and difficult to establish as a concrete form of racism. In this respect the character has been described by commentators as both racist and anti-racist (Malik, 2002, Alturi, 2009), making it difficult to analyse and critique. None of the individual meanings gain any unanimous dominance, and consequently serious racism is not supported as uniformly in this type of comedy. Comedy, Weaver stresses, is a key site for liquid racism. Humour, by its nature, as I have already established throughout this chapter, is highly polysemic - it involves multiple interpretations, contradictory positions and ambivalence or ambiguity (Mulkay, 1988).

In reference to liquid racism, Weaver (2011a, 2011b) acknowledges the sharp contrast between contemporary comic racism and its older forms. As stated, Weaver believes comic racism can act as a rhetorical device that supports racism in a fairly straightforward manner. His conceptualisation of liquid racism provides a far more complex understanding of racialised humour that requires the grouping or layering of signs that produce multiple racist and non-racist meanings.

Weaver's contribution is of great importance to this research despite the fact that the empirical data provided and analysed in Part Two somewhat contradicts his conclusions concerning comic racism's current position within popular culture. This is not to argue that Weaver's observations are incorrect regarding contemporary comic racism, particularly that which is communicated on mainstream platforms such as television. However, this thesis' empirical contribution signals a popular cultural return to more solid forms of racism expressed in comedy, as *Sickipedia.org* does have a somewhat mainstream appeal. This research therefore provides an alternate take and continuation of his contemporary observations, aiming to complement his thoughts on liquidity rather than oppose them.

To apply humour theory to comic racism in general, Critchley (2002) and Stott (2005) have argued that manifestations of racist humour can be analysed in Hobbesian terms as a representation of the sudden glory of superiority theory. Billig (2005a) believes comic racism can be understood in accordance with his ideas surrounding ridicule, and Oring (2003) stresses that it can be analysed

in terms of Freudian theory. One must agree with these analytical contributions but I must stress that different aspects of humour theory can be applied to the various manifestations of comic racism and the motifs it focuses on. Different jokes can function and insight laughter in accordance with various different philosophical justifications - superiority, relief, incongruity, and all in combination.

## The racist joke

The racist joke is the primary subject of the empirical dimension of this research. It is a broad linguistic device that is constructed in various different forms and disseminated across a diverse range of communicative platforms. I argue that the racist joke, specifically in the context of anti-black racism, can be divided into three rough categories: latent racialised motifs, explicit racialised stereotypicality, and racial hatred. All are connected by the general communicative and discursive ethos of comic racism - an ethos formed of deeply embedded, intertwined ideas of stereotyping and Othering, but also wider ideological constructs of order building, social inclusion and social exclusion through ridicule.

Though racist jokes have not been categorised in such a fashion in the existing academic literature, this arrangement is supported by scholarly work on the subject. The first two categories, latent racialised motifs and explicit racist stereotypicality, are fundamentally based on racialised stereotyping. The distinction between the two is purely based on the form and explicitness of the stereotypes.

Simon Weaver (2011a) has referred to the different components and features of racist jokes based on rhetoric and the presence of stereotypes. His distinction between different forms of jokes depends on what he refers to as the usage of embodied or cultural racism - embodied racism representing the final remnants of what he considers the biological racism of the Enlightenment. Despite the inherent similarities and the influence Weaver's ideas have had on *critical humour studies* and this thesis especially, I do differ in opinion in regard to his categorisation of racism in jokes. I argue that racist jokes cannot be thematically separated in terms of biological and cultural racism, as all racism, whether physically, institutionally or discursively expressed always amalgamate the cultural and biological. Even if a specific example of racist rhetoric reflects specifically on either the biological or cultural, one cannot compartmentalise the social, cultural and historical contexts in which 'race' was formed, a process which at its core, attributes supposedly inferior social and cultural behaviour to the natural 'racial' traits of non-whites. Therefore within my own discursive categorisation of racist jokes, the distinctions are made in terms of different yet interconnected racist motifs based on combined biological and cultural stereotypes.

Other humour scholars have argued that the defining feature of the racist joke is stereotyping. Kwame Owusu-Bempah (1994) stressed that stereotypical humour is prevalent in western society. He argued that in western civilisations such as Britain and North America there is an ease with which people can evoke lists of stereotypes, therefore stereotypical jokes are very familiar.

Moreover, Dennis Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (2005) expanded upon this in arguing that inferiorising racial stereotypes have to be present in humour in order to establish that it reinforces racist ideology. They state that these stereotypes act as a method of homogenising every member of a group with the characteristics of only a small portion of that group. They argue that stereotypical humour amounts to the same system of ideas that support the political ideology of racism. Additionally Charles Husband (1988) studied television audiences and argued that ethnic humour in Britain is distinctly racist in cultural as opposed to biological terms and that the stereotypes present in humour often appear as binary oppositions. He further argued that the repetition of racist jokes reinforces and reinvigorates stereotypes through cementing them in the public's mind.

The final form of racist joke that is discussed in this research are jokes based on racial hatred. These types of jokes are often based around a form of bigotry against immigrants or non-white 'races' without ever outlining specifically the reason for the prejudice. These kinds of jokes do not prioritise the need to present racialised stereotypes but focus on the pleasure to be had from socially excluding the Other. This form of joke is based on what Weaver identifies as "exclusionary jokes" (2011a, p.68), which are focused on ridding society of Others. They also incorporate violent racist jokes, which have been extensively researched by Billig (2001, 2005b), specifically Internet based jokes from Ku Klux Klan affiliated websites (this will be summarised in Chapter Six).

It must be acknowledged that across all three categorisations of racist joke addressed in this study, explicit racist terminology is used extensively. Importantly its usage is a binding feature that indicates that the different forms of comic racism are intertwined. Racial hatred, biological or cultural stereotyping, explicit and implicit stereotyping: these cannot be decontextualised from each other - they are meshed in a complex process of discursive Othering in a humorous context and depend on one another to create the overarching ethos of comic racism.

Billig (2001) argues that within the context of the Ku Klux Klan, who predominantly aim their racism at blacks, the jokes they promoted on the Internet had an excessive use of the word 'nigger'. Billig suggests that the term 'nigger' is the ultimate term in the racist lexicon and that there is no stronger term of hatred. The use of 'nigger' in a joke identifies that this is the depicted world of racist hatred. It unambiguously connects the jokes to a racist perspective (Billig, 2001). He stresses that "the ultimate hate word...not only expresses dehumanization but also, in the context of these joke pages, signifies dehumanization" (p.268). He then provides further deconstruction of the latent meanings behind racist terminology to argue that in this particular context, 'niggers' cannot be considered fellow human beings - "the word is used like a chemical formula to extract the humanity from the target, rendering the joke pitiless" (ibid., p.269).

### I'm not racist, I was 'just joking'

At this stage, it is appropriate to provide some of the contrary arguments in regard to the severity of comic racism and a return to the earlier mentioned approach of 'just joking'. As Lockyer and

Pickering (2008) observed when applying the 'just joking' logic to racist humour, "only joking' is the classic let-out clause when a racist joke falls on unreceptive ears" (p.811). They argue that this defence assumes that a racist remark in a joke cannot be genuinely racist, and defines the rhetorical effectiveness of offensive comic discourse, as it forces critics to question their objections. Racist jokes are legitimised by their producers and audiences by claiming that humorous discourse is fundamentally *not* serious, concluding that racism ceases to have any of its *seriousness* attached to it when it is used in a *non-serious* humorous context. This is a paradox which needs to be contested, as this thesis asserts that there is no question that racism is the subject of *serious* discourse.

To refer in more detail to Christie Davies (1990), he argues that ethnic jokes are just jokes. He does not label comic racism as racist as he argues that racists have other preferable ways in which to covertly spread racist ideology as opposed to humour. Davies stresses that joke tellers do not believe in the racialised stereotypes they present, and most likely, neither does the reader. He does however agree that there are usages of stereotyping in ethnic (not racist) jokes. He states that stereotypes are used to constitute the basis of an ethnic joke, "pinning an undesirable characteristic on a group to a ludicrous extent" (ibid., p.4). However, he asserts that this ludicrousness counters the racist undertones.

Similarly, Lawrence Blum (2002) discusses expressions of racism in contemporary society and the notion of conceptual inflation. Blum's perspective on racialised humour is that a person who tells a racist joke is not necessarily 'a racist' in the sense of a person who harbours pervasive racial animosity or inferiorising attitudes toward a racially defined group. By conceptual inflation Blum, with reference to Robert Miles, explains that any morally suspect behaviour, attitude, and social practice regarding race is often mistakenly labelled as racist. He asserts that in contemporary society a great deal of confusion surrounding the meaning of racism has occurred. He argues that the term 'racist' has become the standard way to condemn people's actions, policies, symbols, and institutions that deal with anything racially-centred. He stresses "not all racial incidents are racist incidents. Not every instance of racial conflict, insensitivity, discomfort, miscommunication, exclusion, injustice, or ignorance should be called racist" (ibid., p.9).

In the context of humour, Blum argues that a person can tell racist jokes without sharing the racist sentiments it expresses - "people often tell jokes as a way of trying to win acceptance; they might tell whatever they think will bring a laugh. The joke is racist, but the teller of the joke is not. Of course, this does not mean that, as long as one does not share the racist views a joke expresses, it is perfectly fine to tell such a joke" (p.6). From this one may conclude that that even if the person who tells the joke does not share the view, it does not absolve a joke of its racist content. This point will be developed far more substantially throughout the thesis.

In conclusion, this chapter has crucially laid the foundations for the historical, empirical research of comic racism in British popular culture, centrally positioning the approach of *critical humour studies*. As has been maintained throughout the chapter, all humour expressed in public that is based on

ridicule is worthy of critical enquiry. This is due to these forms of joking and comedy having the potential to breach the ethics of humour, particularly if the joke's butt has historically been the victim of social subordination. On the basis of the various studies that have researched racist humour and 'race' and racism theory, I argue that racist jokes, disseminated publicly, reproduce ideological representations of non-white 'races' and promote social exclusion. They do this using techniques of stereotyping and processes of Othering. Moreover, they act as contemporary forms of traditional racialised discourses, originally conceived during the Enlightenment, alongside the conception of 'race' as a biologically and culturally-situated categorisation of human beings. When these representations are reproduced in contemporary joking, they raise doubts as to whether what is being said, is really meant, and consequently the promotion of widespread critique and condemnation is weakened. As a result, comic racism can be very damaging to the ethnic identities and positions of power for the groups who are targeted.

# Chapter 2:

## The History of Comic Racism in British Popular Culture

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### Historically positioning Sickipedia.org

This chapter builds on the theoretical foundation addressed in the first and provides the historical context of the thesis, documenting comic racism's manifestations in British popular culture throughout the last fifty years with a particular focus on anti-black humour. This includes its early manifestations in television and radio-based blackface minstrelsy; the 'clubland' comedy of the working men's clubs in the 1970s and its transition onto television; the aesthetic and ethical backlash against 'clubland' comedy in the 1980s with alternative comedy; and finally the processes of mass commercialisation and artistic diversification throughout the 1990s and 2000s which saw comic racism re-emerge on the fringes of the cultural public sphere. These examples will provide an understanding of both the communicative and thematic issues which underpin comic racist discourse expressed in the cultural public sphere, so that comparisons can be drawn with its contemporary counterparts on *Sickipedia.org*.

This chapter tackles forthright some of the key questions of the thesis, illustrating on what historical basis comic racism has undertaken a process of discursive and communicative transformation. Specifically, this chapter descriptively accounts for the historical narrative of comic racism in British popular culture outlining its various manifestations in mainstream media, its period on the margins of popular culture, and what has influenced its transition into its new home on digitalised platforms.

As stated in the introduction, the empirical focus of the research is on anti-black comic racism more so than any other ethnic target, due not only to its overall predominant presence in comic racist discourse, but also to its wider social, cultural and political significance. For this reason this chapter will centre on anti-black prejudice in comedy, but will not overlook wider ethnic targets ridiculed in comic racist discourses in British popular culture. To neglect anti-Asian, anti-Irish and anti-Semitic jokes, would provide a misleading account of British, public comic racism and fail to provide an overall comprehensive historical description.

## Blackface minstrelsy

The initial popular cultural practices and processes in Britain which solidified anti-Black stereotypicality and prejudice as a prominent form of comic racist expression, and more widely contributed to the general aesthetic of comic racism, was the phenomena of blackface minstrelsy. Blackface minstrelsy was typical of various communicative forms of public popular culture, from the early nineteenth century such as music hall and later vaudeville variety acts, through to the early 1970s on British television. Victorian music hall and vaudeville variety (not necessarily manifesting in blackface), acted as both the performative and discursive precursor to the development of stand-up comedy - initially the most defined form of public *comic* expression that presented ridicule intertwined with racialised prejudice in the twentieth century. Without the phenomenon of blackface minstrelsy it is difficult to conceptualise a more exclusive notion of comic racism in the cultural public sphere in the British context, and this is supported by continued discursive racist themes and strategies embedded within its various forms of content.

An important point which illustrates the thesis' focus on anti-black comic racism is that blackface minstrelsy - which I argue is the foundation of British comic racism in popular culture - was undoubtedly centred on *black* racialisation from a white approach. This provides an important social context concerning the establishment of anti-black prejudice in publicly communicated comic racist discourse and its continued emphasis across racist humour's, comic communities.

Blackface minstrelsy was typically performed on stage and consisted of white entertainers 'blacking up' their face and hands, and painting their lips and eyes, in the gaze of making themselves appear as a physical caricature of members of the black 'race'. The clothes they would wear would be typical of formal evening wear worn by the upper classes. They would then sing humorous songs that were in themselves ridiculing African heritage or satirical tributes to songs sung by African slaves on plantations.

It operated across various contexts, across different historical periods via different forms of media, including radio, with shows such as *The Kentucky Minstrels* (1933-1950), and television's *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (1958-1978). At its core, Pickering (2008) has stressed that blackface minstrelsy served as a means of ideologically fixing the black person as an intrinsically inferior and culturally restricted being whilst enhancing the value of white racial capital. In general Pickering argues minstrelsy conformed to notions of white racial and cultural superiority, and can be explained in part as representing a process of primitivisation of black people. Whilst some critics such as Felstead in the 1940s claimed blackface minstrelsy to be the "oddest form of entertainment imaginable" (1946, p.55), Pickering (1997) has stated that this perspective was one very rarely felt during this period.

Blackface minstrelsy gained more of a mainstream appeal on BBC's *The Black and White Minstrel Show* between 1957 and 1973, but towards the end of its run and removal from the air "in response to heightened awareness of its racist associations" (Pickering, 2008, p. 186), its more

explicit representations of processes of Othering had become somewhat ambivalent and attenuated. However, even during these final stages of ambivalence concerning its explicit racism, its mere presence in mainstream media still reproduced the legacy of its more clearly defined racist, earlier iterations - a discursive legacy that would continue to be reproduced throughout the various forms of comic racism in British popular culture, including, loosely connected expressions on present day *Sickipedia.org*.

## The seventies & 'clubland' comedy

Following on from blackface minstrelsy, more formulaic manifestations of comic racism, in terms of joke telling, became more fashionable in British popular culture. Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, the working man's club (WMC), stand-up comedy and televised comedy combined to produce the heyday in comic racism's mass popular acceptance and cultural significance in British society. This was due to a more specific comic structure, strategy and rhetoric, both stylistically and discursively, which would be imitated by many comedians during this period. In this era, the black 'race' remained a central 'butt' of humorous ridicule, but it was placed in a larger context alongside other ethnic targets specific to British social and cultural history.

It is important to acknowledge that though there is nothing inherently racist about stand-up comedy, working men's clubs, or their combined manifestations on televised comedy, the public comic discourses communicated on these platforms during this era were defined by their racial and gender-based prejudices (Littlewood & Pickering, 1998).

The first working men's clubs began to arise around the mid-nineteenth century as non-profit organisations to provide recreation and entertainment for working class citizens. From a sociological perspective, the working men's club provided a significant sense of home and community, blurring the realms of public and private. Although the clubs were firmly public, "they provided their members the intimacy and privacy ideally located at home" (Milne-Smith, 2006, p.767). At first they were not intended to provide entertainment for commercialised purposes as this was the role of music halls (Beaven, 2005), however WMCs needed to attract a clientele. Due to an emphasis on providing a "range of political, educational and recreational activities" (Ashplant, 1981, p.241), tensions between "competing cultural policy agendas" (Cherrington, 2009, p.191) arose on how to fit all three activities under one roof.

By 1867, working men's clubs had lost their reputation as "hotbeds of political radicalism" (Double, 1997, p.96) that allowed for the planning of the 'Bloody Sunday' march on Trafalgar Square for example, in favour of both entertainment in the form of concerts and comedy. By the end of the First World War there was a boom in the opening of working men's clubs, which was followed by another in the 1960s, as a way to generate a sense of community in a number of new estates built in the UK (Double 1997). This along with the emergence of privately owned social clubs with larger capacities and the tendency to attract big name stars, led to the point where working men's clubs and its most popular form of entertainment, stand-up comedy, were at the forefront of many

people's leisure and recreation. In the seventies, stand-up comedy would be inducted into mainstream popular culture and mass media, most significantly on television.

In the 1970s, the 'clubland' comic was the most dominant form of stand-up comedy performance in the live arena. Stylistically, the performance would typically consist of a white, male comic reeling out a number of short, quick-fire, aggressive, narratively unconnected, often second-hand gags (Littlewood & Pickering, 1998). According to Oliver Double (1997), a typical stand-up comic performance that took place in a working men's club would take around fifteen minutes for the comedian to use the word 'coon'. He explained in reference to a performance he witnessed that material began relatively light heartedly, but swiftly moved on to more savage content with joke topics ranging from the physical castration of a Pakistani man; tricking twenty Pakistanis into plummeting to their deaths; and pharmacists purposely giving Pakistanis cyanide tablets.

According to Double (ibid.) what was particularly striking about the experience of 'clubland' comedy was not so much what the comedian joked about, but the cultural acceptance of the discourse from the audience. He claimed that evenings of this sort were representative of the nights out of thousands every day, witnessing, accepting and enjoying identical marginalising humour.

## Transition to the small screen

The popularity of comedy in variety theatres and working men's clubs around the country did not go unnoticed by the increasingly popular and dominant media platform of television, with its three working channels at the time, BBC1, BBC2 and ITV. Jane Littlewood and Michael Pickering (1998) stated that during the 1970s racism and sexism became common elements of prime time television, radio comedy, tabloid cartoons and comic strips. On television this was predominantly through the incorporation of the 'clubland' stand-up comedy aesthetic and situation comedies, which amongst others, positioned anti-black themes as a core motif of ridicule.

In terms of blackness in televised comedy, Sarita Malik (2002) claims that there has been ambivalence dating back to 1936 when the BBC produced their very first broadcast with the entertainers Buck and Bubbles. Unlike blackface minstrelsy, Malik claims these types of entertainers *were black* and had (usually musical) talent, but were also "cartoonish objects of fun" (p.92), highlighting that, rather than being appreciated for their talent, these figures were targets of ridicule - the butts of the joke.

The first 'clubland' stand-up programme was broadcast in 1971 on ITV, entitled *The Comedians*<sup>2</sup>. It provided a showcase for names that would go on to be stars in British entertainment including Roy Walker, Mike Reid, Jim Bowen, Russ Abbot, Lennie Bennett, Bernard Manning, Colin Crompton, Frank Carson, Charlie Williams and Ken Goodwin. Notably there was a clear omission of women

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<sup>2</sup> The Comedians - Prime time pre water-shed show featured up and coming stand-up comedians that had made their name on the working men's club scene and was filmed in front of a live audience in Manchester. It had the bulk of its series' in the early seventies with seven being shown between 1971 and 1974. Its remaining five series were distributed over the latter half of the seventies and the eighties with one attempt at a reprisal in 1992, finishing with showing seventy-seven episodes ([www.imdb.com/title/tt020](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt020)).

comedians during this period, with the televised 'clubland' comedy trend of the 1970s being an almost entirely male phenomenon.

The following are some direct examples of jokes told on the show during this period illustrating the manner in which explicit racist content was expressed to the acceptance and enjoyment of audiences. The first is particularly striking due to the harshness and implicit violence attached to the humour. To further stress the discursive complexities surrounding comic racism in this period, this example was told by mixed-race (half-Barbadian, half-white) comedian Charlie Williams. Williams was well known for ironically making light of fears of a supposed black immigrant invasion in post-war Britain. For example, he would joke with crowd hecklers by saying "if you don't shut up I'll move next door to you" (telegraph.co.uk). However the following joke arguably reproduced and reinforced those concerns in a humorous context towards Pakistani targets.

It's these Pakistanis you know they frighten me. Eh ent there alot ent there, they're coming over here aren't they on barrows, camels, oil slicks, all t'they can get on ent they."

[Big laugh from the audience]

Eh you shouldn't laugh! I'm fighting like hell me to keep 'em out, I'm fighting! And you're not bothered you laugh you think oo come in, come in. I'm fighting for you, Me! I'm safe, I mean once they take over I can go on t'their side!"

Eh did you read about that forty, did you read it in t'paper, in Bradford there were forty in the cellar weren't there, all piled up like a bales of straw they were. Forty! Forty, there were forty one really, one got away, he did he got away, he went to labour exchange, he said (puts on a Pakistani accent) "I'd like to be a conductor"... So they nailed him to a chimney!"

[Huge laugh from the audience]<sup>3</sup>

These jokes do seemingly make genuine light of irrational fears of perceived immigrant invasions of Britain, proclaiming that as a black man, Williams would not be in any danger. However they also have a more sinister tone involving fantastical 'race' related violence and cater to an overall anti-immigrant rhetoric not unfamiliar at the time. With the symbolic murder of the illegal immigrant Other, the audience's fears concerning mass immigration and the eventual loss of jobs for the 'native' British are relieved. This joke provides a humorous take on what Errol Lawrence (1982) stated in reference to 1970s Britain - "the fear that society is falling apart at the seams has prompted the elaboration of theories about race. The 'alien' cultures are seen as either the cause or else the most visible symptom of the destruction of the British way of life" (p.47). This joke and statement from Lawrence references the increased concern regarding immigration to Britain since the end of the Second World War (Solomos, 1993) and political rhetoric from the likes of Enoch

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3 [Retrieved 18/03/12] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jn2WTi5AHU>]

Powell who explicitly voiced proclamations of the government's failures to control immigration in Britain and how Britons would become "strangers in their own country" (ibid., p.67).

Initially, these worries were focused on black migrants entering Britain post-war, and fears surrounding the loss of jobs for British people, in addition to increased crime and deviant activities (ibid.). Soon after, concerns spread to the 100,000 Irish people that had entered Britain between 1945 and 1951 as well as Asian immigrants from countries in the Commonwealth and Pakistan who had sought lives in Britain (ibid.).

After Charlie Williams' joke, the broadcast cuts to comedian Frank Carson who changes the ethnic target and positions blackness as the subject of ridicule, quipping:

I must say I love bringing him [Williams] home with me, my kids always love something to chalk on.

[Huge laugh from the audience]<sup>4</sup>

This joke, while seemingly widely acknowledged by everyone in the studio (including Charlie Williams and fellow black comedian Josh White) as completely inoffensive and just friendly banter between contemporaries, serves no other purpose than to solidify the representation of the dehumanised black Other. This joke specifically will be analytically discussed in far more detail in Chapter Five due to a highly similar contemporary retelling on *Sickipedia.org*.

Bernard Manning was a prominent figure during this period, one of the original *Comedians* of ITV's landmark show, and a particular audience favourite whose influence was celebrated long after the 1970s. The supposed basis of his comic aesthetic was that no target was too taboo for ridicule. Despite caveats from himself and praising contemporaries, who vindicated Manning's prejudice and celebrated his 'anything goes' approach to humour, his jokes centred on ridiculing marginalised social groups - non-whites, the Irish, Jewish people, homosexuals and women. An anti-black example from this era reproducing notions of alleged black intellectual inferiority was:

Coloured couple talking, she say's [in an exaggerated southern North-American black accent] why don't you go see the doctor about our sex lives, she says you ain't half as good as you used to be. He says I gon' see the doctor, I gon' see him. He comes back a couple of hours later Stetson hat, rolled umbrella, pinstripe trousers, fancy waist coat, gold guard, spats, she' [back in accent] what you dressed like that for man? He says I'ze been to see the doctor, and the doctor says I'ze impotent, and in future I'ze gonna look impo'tent.

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4 [Retrieved 18/03/12] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jn2WTi5AHU>]

5 [Retrieved 21/03/14] [Box of Broadcasts – Heroes of Comedy 13th August 2010] [Extract taken from Best of Manning 2008]

During interviews at the time, Bernard Manning would freely admit that the racist ethos that in part focused on black stereotypicality was a key component of his, and by extension his comic community's comic strategy. During an interview with Michael Parkinson in 1971, for example, Manning was challenged by British journalist and television presenter Esther Rantzen over the racist and anti-black nature of his jokes.

Esther Rantzen - "When you make a joke about black or coloured people to a white audience, suddenly the prejudice they don't dare admit to is respectable, suddenly they hear each other laughing, and its comfortable".

Manning - "Ooh you're breaking my heart here, [gets out his handkerchief, wipes his head and pretends to dry his eyes from crying] you should have had a violin playing there".

[The whole audience laughs hysterically including Michael Parkinson]<sup>6</sup>

However, it was not just black and Asian groups who were the butt of the jokes on *The Comedians*. Irish stereotypes were also commonly portrayed. The primary negative stereotype perpetuated represented the Irish as intellectually challenged, one of two motifs the anti-Irish stereotypicality shares with anti-black (the other being simianisation, see de Nie, 2004). Manning was somewhat expertly practiced in the anti-Irish joke:

The Irish just invented a new parachute, opens on impact.<sup>7</sup>

These two Irish always used to knock about with this Paki and the Paki got knocked down, killed stone dead. The copper said "what was his name?" they said "we never knew his name sir we just used to booze with him you know." He said "where did he live?" they said "we knew fuck all about the man," they said "the only thing we knew about him was he had two arse holes," he said "how do you mean?" he said "every pub we went in they used to say here's that Paki with them two arseholes."<sup>8</sup>

To contextualise, anti-Irish racism - like anti-black - is socially, culturally and historically positioned within British society, and its manifestations in 1970s jokes is but one example of a long list of discourses representing the Irish as a socially and culturally inferior group of people. Liz Saxon (1984) claimed that anti-Irish prejudice, and its humorous expressions, is an old theme in English culture - "It is one of the oldest manifestations of the pervasive delusion that the English are culturally and physically uniform people - white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant - who are 'superior' to every other kind of person" (p.4). Patrick de Nie (2004) refers to seventeenth and eighteenth plays as early ridicule-based accounts of Ireland where the Irishman was depicted as the "bumbling drunkard or fool" (p.6). He further explains that as a consequence of the polygenist development of

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6 [Retrieved 21/03/14] [Box of Broadcasts – Heroes of Comedy 13th August 2010] [Extract taken from *Parkinson* interview 1971]

7 [Retrieved 15/04/12] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2q0gVnKy8DY>]

8 [Retrieved 21/03/12] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIHN1UkcSGo>]

'race' throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Western thought, negative stereotypes of the Irish became more severe materialising in a fixed representation of the violent and alien, Irish Other. Through the introduction of ethnology and anthropology, racialised conceptions of the Irish formed, which allegedly proved that Irish were naturally inferior to Anglo-Saxons – "the cultural differences and violent outbreaks that marred Anglo-Irish relations for hundreds of years could now be explained by supposed scientific reasoning" (ibid., p.6).

According to Saxon (1984), the English notion of the inferior Irishman dates back to as far as the twelfth century and has materialised in many different forms of discourse from poems and newspaper articles to paintings and books over the subsequent eight hundred years. Most relevantly, when discussing the latter half of the twentieth century in her historical account of anti-Irish racism, Saxon stresses that despite the core of British racism being aimed at blacks, "the old hostility towards the Irish lay just beneath the surface" (ibid., p.78), particularly when conflicts between the English and Northern Irish resumed in 1969. Therefore the political conflict of the Troubles throughout the late sixties and seventies, acted as the social context for the re-emergence of anti-Irish racism and 'paddy' jokes in popular culture. The anti-Irish jokes present on *The Comedians* and told by 'clubland' comics, can be argued as a further example of the racism Saxon speaks of that returned to mainstream forms of discourse in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In 1974, ITV provided a spin-off from *The Comedians* and in turn created perhaps the most nuanced translation of a working men's club on television with *The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club*<sup>9</sup>. Unlike *The Comedians*, *Wheeltappers* presented every aspect of the working men's club. It continued to portray comic racism, but due to their being a less direct focus on stand-up comedy (*The Wheeltappers* instead showed a far more varied selection of entertainment including dancing, live music, impressionists and magicians), the comic racism was far more subtly articulated. One such example came in a small stand-up set from comedian Duggie Brown:

I've just been abroad, I've been in Bradford for two weeks.<sup>10</sup>

In parallel to the attempts to recreate the experience of a working men's club on television, comic racism also featured heavily in sitcoms. In as much as a decade before 'clubland'-based television shows reached their peak, negative racialised portrayals of non-British groups, particularly black, were familiar in British popular culture.

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9 *The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club* - The show ran until 1977 and featured 48 episodes each with a running time of 40 minutes. The show aimed to emulate the exact experience of the working men's club, yet on the television and filmed in a studio. The audience was made up of members of the general public who interacted in the show by taking part in typical activities such as bingo and drinking. *The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club* was of course a fictional club with the tongue in cheek tagline labelling it 'the friendliest working men's club in the north'. The show had two regulars in its compère and chairman, both already famous from *The Comedians* Bernard Manning and Colin Crompton respectively.

10[Retrieved 09/04/12] [*The Wheeltappers and Shunters Social Club - The Complete Second Series DVD (2010)*] [Original ITV Transmission 27 July - 31 December 1974]

Between 1965 and 1975, the BBC aired *Till Death Do Us Part*, a situation comedy "determined to present an untouched picture of working class life" (Wagg, 1998, p.10). Wagg claims it to be "one of the most controversial sitcoms in the history of British television" (ibid.) *Till Death* was set primarily in the home of its central character, Alf Garnett, played by Warren Mitchell, his wife Else, their daughter Rita, and her socialist husband Mike Rawlins. Alf Garnett was in essence "a working-class bigot, an unapologetic racist, passionate super-patriot, aggressive anti-trade unionist and monarchist, he was the expression of the most appalling rightwing views that Speight [Johnny]<sup>11</sup> could dream up" (screenonline.org.uk).

In a similar vein, *Love Thy Neighbour* was commissioned in 1972 by ITV and lasted for just four years. *Love Thy's* premise was that of a white-working class couple, Eddie and Joan Booth, living in Twickenham coming to terms with a young black couple from Trinidad, Bill and Barbie Reynolds, moving into the house next door and the interactions between the two. Where *Till Death Do Us Part* had quite a general focus in which many ethnic targets were ridiculed, *Love Thy Neighbour's* comedy often derived from the explicit reproduction of anti-black stereotypicality from a perspective of white normativity. The following are some transcribed excerpts from *Till Death Do Us Part* and *Love Thy Neighbour* which illustrate their comic racism.

The first two extracts depict typical racist rants from Alf Garnett and his targets of people from African, Caribbean and Asian descent.

#### **Till Death Do Us Part Extract 1**

Alf Garnett - "The British Empire, that you're bloody Labour rubbish give away to..."

He is interrupted by his son-in-law Mike

Mike Rawlins - "To the people it belonged to!"

Garnett - "To a load of bloody coons and wogs!"

[Big laugh from the live studio audience]

"Made such a muck of it they have to come over here and scrounge off of us!"

[Another big laugh]<sup>12</sup>

#### **Till Death Do Us Part Extract 2**

Garnett - "It's a pity old Enoch ain't in charge mate. Yeah he'd have the solution don't worry about that. He'd put the coons down the pits that's what he'd do. Trouble is they'd all be bashing into each other in the dark! Well it's a fact innit, That's a point, that's why they

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11 *Till Death Do Us Part* creator and head screenwriter

12 [Retrieved 13/03/12] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOhXpmozpbE>]

wear all that war paint innit so they can see each other in the dark see. I suppose if he did put the coons down the pits (laughs) he could always white wash their faces first (laughs)"

13

The following extracts are taken from *Love Thy Neighbour* and portray some of the conversations between the major characters and actions of some minor. They clearly express various racialised stereotypes of particularly black people.

### **Love Thy Neighbour Extract 1**

[Eddie Booth walks up to a woman at a bar from behind.]

Eddie Booth - [in blackface and in an exaggerated perceived black Mississippi accent] - "Ello der 'unny child"

Woman - [screams and drops tray]

Bartender - "What's going on?"

Eddie [normal accent] - "It was an accident"

Woman - "He tried to rape me!"

Eddie - "You should be so lucky!"

Woman - "You're all the same you coloureds sex mad!"

### **Love Thy Neighbour Extract 2**

Bill Reynolds - "I don't blame you, you know. You've been conditioned by your society."

Eddie - "Ye- Just a minute, what's wrong with our society?"

Bill - "It supports discrimination against black people."

Eddie - "No more than you do against us whites!"

Barbie Reynolds - "Well...have you ever seen a black MP?"

Eddie - "No but I've never seen a white witch doctor either!"

[Huge laugh from studio audience]<sup>14</sup>

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13 [Retrieved 20/03/14] [Scene taken from Series 5 – Episode 3: 'Strikes And Blackouts' Broadcast on BBC1: 23rd January 1974] [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3Jd70oN9IE>]

### Love Thy Neighbour Extract 3

Eddie - "Are they just for show then or what?"

Joan Booth - "They are for our guests. I've invited Bill and Barbie 'round."

Eddie - "Oh what did you do that for?!"

Joan - "Somebody's got to make a friendly gesture after all the trouble you caused!"

Eddie - "He started it –"

Joan - " Yes and I'm finishing it! It's about time we learned to live in peaceful coexistence instead of being constantly at loggerheads!"

Eddie - "It was Sambo's fault!"

Joan - "And don't call him Sambo!" [Barely audible over audience laughter from previous line] "Just see if we can get through one evening without you rubbing him up the wrong way, try treating him like a normal human being"

Eddie - "Alright, alright, I'm no trouble maker, 'he genuinely wants to be friends I'll meet him half way."

Joan - "Good"

Eddie - "By the way love, he might not like these crisps. Perhaps you ought to get some monkey nuts!"

[Huge audience laugh]<sup>15</sup>

Karen Ross (1995) stated that comedies which featured black actors such as *Till Death...* and *Love Thy...* often "irresistibly" featured "the twin themes of mainstream white xenophobia and concomitant black subservience" (p.99). However, there have been substantial caveats and debates in regard to the intentions of the situation comedy's comic racist content. It was made very clear by Johnny Speight that *Till Death Do Us Part* was created with the intention of both celebrating and ridiculing the reactionary elements of working-class life (Wagg, 1998). In defence of the language and views Garnett upheld, Speight claimed "if portraying a typical working-class character, and referring to coloured people as 'them coons' and 'nignogs' in the way Alf Garnett does, he could have had the stigma of racial prejudice attached to his own name. Whereas when Alf Garnett says it, no blame can be attached to Warren Mitchell"(1973, p.232).

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14 [Retrieved 12/03/14] [Scene taken form Series 1 – Episode 6: 'Refused A Drink' Broadcast on ITV: 18 May 1972] [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPQgnDP29ek>]

15 [Retrieved 12/03/14] [Scene taken form Series 1 – Episode 6: 'Refused A Drink' Broadcast on ITV: 18 May 1972] [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPQgnDP29ek>]

His argument makes the statement that any racism or other prejudice transpired in the show, belongs to the *characters*, it does not characterise any deliberate latent messages of the show. However, Mark Duguid, a writer for the British Film Institute's *Screen Online* website stresses that fiction has power beyond the control of its creators. By this, he means that despite the intentions of Speight, audiences experienced different gratifications from the programme. They rather saw Alf Garnett's "declamations on coons, wogs and immigration a courageous expression of their own views" ([screenonline.org.uk](http://screenonline.org.uk)), and this argument is justified by the frequency of live-audience laughter heard during the Garnett's rants. As Malik (2002) describes, Mitchell would often be told by members of the public they loved it when he 'had a go at the coons'.

This highlights a central issue this thesis raises concerning the dissemination of public comic racism. Producer intentions and audience gratifications, or offense, can be prioritised in critical reflections of comic racist content. What needs to be significantly focused on instead is the *messages* that are conveyed in this material. Unless jokes are articulated from a clearly satirical or anti-racist approach, they can have the potential to influence audience's opinions in a socially, culturally and morally detrimental way.

As stated in Chapter One, humour is a useful rhetorical device that is adopted by genuine racists to disseminate their social, political and in some cases natural beliefs. Therefore it is very difficult to ascertain a joke producer's exact intentions if what is presented *are* clear reproductions of negative racial stereotypicality and white superiority - a confusion as to what the humour represents discursively. Thus some audiences can take the gratifications from the discursive aspects of the racism and ignore the humorous or creative context in which it was presented. This is a far more prevalent issue with the more decontextualised, decentralised contemporary comic racism of *Sickipedia.org*, but as these situation comedies illustrate, has relevance within the historical context.

Even despite Speight's claims and the supposedly innocent intentions of his humour, evidence suggests that it is not just the views of the characters that reproduce forms of racialised prejudice. In one episode, where Garnett is attending a Christmas dinner put on by a local church authority, the scene is set by the priest approaching a table being occupied by a Jewish family (characterised not by any dialogue but by the orthodox Jewish attire, Israeli accents, skullcaps and large beards on the men) eating their dinner who asserts "you shouldn't be eating that Mr Rabinski, it's not kosher." Mr Rabinski replies fulfilling a negative, frugal Jewish stereotype "it's nicer than kosher, it's free", followed by a loud, live audience laugh.

I would argue that the line said by the Mr Rabinski character, embodies the kind of anti-semitism that Julius (2010) claims defines British anti-Semitism, a prejudice which "demoralises Jews, encouraging them to accept they have certain talents, certain resources, the possession of which is not quite consistent with an ideal conception of what it is to be English" (p.349). One *can* adopt this rationale because of *where* the joke is situated in the episode's narrative, and that the stereotype-based racist humour present does not derive from the opinions of a character.

The representation derives from an unknown character who self-perpetuates, accepts and thus rhetorically reproduces a racialised stereotype that holds no greater significance to the narrative - it is merely used to gain a quick, ridicule-based laugh from the audience mid-scene. Furthermore whilst it could be argued that this stereotypical representation is fairly mild in spite of its widely-acknowledged usage throughout cultural history, its presentation in this example contributes to the overall prejudiced context of the show's humour. It creates ambiguity in the narrative and its discursive elements - how are audiences able to distinguish between the racist humour which is derivative of bigoted characters, and the possible racist humour of the producers? What are audiences supposed to laugh at, and what are they supposed to condemn? In the case of *Till Death's* audience, reactions indicate that this ambiguity is not resolved and there is a more general acceptance and celebration of comic racism in all its forms.

Speight would go on to follow up *'Till Death* with 1969 sitcom *Curry and Chips*. *Curry and Chips* featured a 'blacked up' Spike Milligan (a literal throwback to Victorian blackface minstrelsy, a feature that still occurred very recently in shows such as *Little Britain*, and also attempted symbolically with Sacha Baron Cohen's *Ali G*) play the Pakistani-Irish Kevin O'Grady. The show, like *Till Death*, supposedly attempted to confront and raise important social questions surrounding 'race' and racism, but in context did not translate effectively due to the fundamental essence of the comedy coming from racial abuse from the supporting characters aimed at Milligan's "highly caricatured" (screenonline.org.uk) performance incorporating Asian and Irish stereotypes. *Curry and Chips* arguably caused more controversy than Speight's previous creation on both the right and left, with it subsequently being removed from air after just one series (Duguid, 2004).

The late sixties and seventies provided clear examples of comic racism in popular culture that voiced racialised attitudes, values and perspectives, illustrating a wide range of articulations which positioned non-white 'races' as biologically and culturally inferior to whites. However by the end of the seventies, public controversies concerning this material became more common (eg. *Curry and Chips*), which would force these explicit manifestations of racist jokes out of the televised British popular cultural mainstream.

## Alternative comedy & anti-racism

According to William Cook (1994), two events occurred in the summer of 1979 "which were to shape British cultural life throughout the 1980s. Mrs Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the Comedy Store - the UK's first Alternative comedy club opened in an attic above a Soho strip club" (p.1).

The late 1970s in Britain were marked by significant social changes, including changes in politics, fashion, music and comedy. The most obvious social representation of this change when addressing the 1980s historically was the election of the first women Prime Minister in British history in 1979: Margaret Thatcher, with 'change' being a leitmotif of her career (Evans, 1997).

The changes of the Thatcher regime were often criticised both politically from the left and academically from theoretical formations such as Marxism. The former's criticisms related to Thatcherism's alleged relentless adherence to monetarism (Gilmour, 1993), and the latter's claimed Thatcherism represented a campaign solely committed to the interests of the capitalist rich and powerful and creating new forms of political and cultural domination over the underprivileged (Hall, 1988).

Thatcher was also aggressively attacked in several public discourses belonging to the realm of popular culture. 'Alternative comedy', was one such discourse, others included satirical comedy television shows such as *Not The Nine O'Clock News* and *Spitting Image*. According to William Cook (2001), alternative comedy formed an unusual relationship with Margaret Thatcher. He argues that "Thatcherism gave alternative comics a focal point, a sense of common purpose, and The Comedy Store [influential alternative comedy venue] vented its collective spleen against Thatcherite values in a way that neither Rosengard nor Ward (the two co-founders) could have ever conceived" (p.13).

Anti-Thatcherism for alternative comedy provided the political and thematic genesis of a radical, subversive comedic subgenre. As Cook argues, while Thatcher's government provided a focal point, alternative comedy's wider ethical and aesthetic ethos broke away from the conservative mainstream that had preceded it in the previous decade, and was highly critical of sexism and racism. With alternative comics being highly critical of Thatcher's accused methods of politically dominating the underprivileged, it is unsurprising that they were so critical of the comedians of the prior generation that did much the same, *ridiculing* underprivileged minorities.

Don Ward claimed that "the whole comedy ethos...was launched on the basis of a non-sexist, non-racist joke" (BBC Two - Story of Light Entertainment: Episode 4 - The Comics<sup>16</sup>). Thus, alternative comedy provided a stark contrast to the racism of the seventies 'clubland' comedians and sitcoms. This was (and remains) characterised by alternative comedy's inherent relationship with anti-racism. According to Aptheker (1993), anti-racism can be defined as the "conscious rejection of the belief in any one race's inferiority or superiority, which in turn leads to a rejection of the necessity for institutional reinforcement of racism and for personal acts of prejudice and discrimination to affirm racial superiority" (p.17). In the most broad recollection of alternative comedy, it can be understood as a collection of young, anti-racist, anti-sexist and broadly, left-wing comedians (Duguid, 2005) and the genre itself importantly raised awareness of the prejudice of much mainstream comedy, and contributed to audiences' intolerance of it (Stott, 2005; screenonline.org.uk).

In reference to the comedy that had preceded the eighties, "Marxist-Leninist comedian" (Don Ward quoted on 100 Greatest Stand-Up Comedians<sup>17</sup>) Alexei Sayle claimed "comedy had lost its way

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16 [Retrieved 20/03/12] [Extract taken from Story of Light Entertainment: Episode 4 - The Comics] [Broadcast on BBC Two 17/03/12]

17 [Retrieved 20/03/12] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qryg5UEFT34&index=15&list=PL65548F7130003CEB>]

really. Comedy before alternative comedy, I think was either drunken racists in working men's clubs or whoever went to see Billy [Connolly] or Jasper [Carrott] " (Alexei Sayle quoted on 100 Greatest Stand-Up Comedians<sup>18</sup>).

Alternative comedy developed in the very early 1980s, and can be argued initially as the comedic form of other backlashes that occurred at the time in protest of 'Thatcher's Britain' (most notably the 1981 riots). Cook (2001) describes 1980s Britain as a "nation teetering on the brink of a collective nervous breakdown" (p.27), and this provided the perfect focus for a new generation of comedians. However, to see alternative comedy as solely anti-Thatcher is reductive to both its wider aesthetic and ethical values.

'Alternative' comedians, from the perspective of humour's aesthetics, rejected the fast delivery of the gag comic with a revised form and content and in its place they pioneered a newer, more sophisticated approach (Stott, 2005; Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989) The aesthetics though did not outweigh the ethical considerations of the humour - this new "radical form of social communication" (Garner Jr., 1999, p.133) that alternative comedy demonstrated, was according to Littlewood and Pickering (1998) a simultaneous reaction to "easy, repetitive, stock one-liners of comedians like Jimmy Tarbuck, and more self-aware of its ethical and political implications" (p.297).

The central performers at the heart of this new generation included Alexei Sayle, Ben Elton, Tony Allen, Keith Allen, Rick Mayall, Dawn French, Jo Brand, Jennifer Saunders, Nigel Planter, Peter Richardson and Adrian Edmonson. Tony Allen emphasised the alternative, anti-racist perspective these comedians had in common when claiming there "was a generation that didn't have mothers-in-law, there was a generation that weren't racist, there was a generation that had grown up with a whole different perspective" (Tony Allen quoted in Cook, 2001, p.27).

In reference to the thematic core, Clive Anderson, a comedian on the circuit at the time, claimed "it was inherently obvious you weren't going to be making jokes that poked fun at people simply because of their racial origin. Did we really laugh at jokes that just said aren't poofs funny, aren't women weird and aren't these black people rather odd?" (Clive Anderson in Cook, 2001, p.72). Similarly, Double (1997) stressed alternative comedy's separation from the racist tradition of British comedy when describing alternative comedians as "a whole new breed of comics that threw aside the stolen Pakistani jokes of their predecessors and instead lashed out at the mood of the times, attacking wine bars and Sony Walkmans with as much venom as they did the newly elected Thatcher government" (p.165).

When addressing the origins of alternative comedy, Stott (2005) claims that arguably the first popular cultural expression of an 'alternative comedy' that was consciously aware of the racism that was so ever present in 'clubland' comedy of the seventies, in fact preceded Sayle, Elton and The Comedy Store by several years. The 1976 play *Comedians* written by Trevor Griffiths was set as a night class for aspiring young male stand-up comedians about to undertake their first show.

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18[Retrieved 20/03/12] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qryg5UEFT34&index=15&list=PL65548F7130003CEB>]

The central lesson being that they would be taught by their tutor the uses of bigotry in comedy. The tutor character Eddie Waters would then go on literally listing stereotypes that could be associated with the Irish, the Jewish, black people, the disabled and women using the most explicit of terminology. The list was essentially "invoking the spirit of club comedy without the punchlines" (Stott, 2005, p.115) in an attempt to expose the bigotry of their humour.

Another early example of an anti-racist ethic from the post 'clubland' comedy era can be located in the aforementioned *Not The Nine O'Clock News*<sup>19</sup>. *Not The Nine O'Clock News* is not considered part of the alternative comedy grouping as it first aired before The Comedy Store opened, and its foundations are not based in stand-up comedy, it was a sketch show. Its central focus was on satire as opposed to the more transparent forms of anti-racism that featured in alternative comedy. This example provides further evidence of an anti-racist ethic present in forms of popular comedy shortly before alternative comedy became influential.

The sketch merges real footage of a conservative party conference with studio footage of Rowan Atkinson, playing a conservative representative making a speech. The theme of his speech surrounds the return to power for the Tories and the issues they aimed to tackle. The speech ironically represents a satirical attack on the conservative party and the alleged anti-black, Indian and Pakistani views they hold:

Firstly immigration, now people do really get this party wrong every time on this issue, don't they? We don't think immigrants are animals for god's sake! I know a lot of immigrants personally and they're perfectly nice people...They're black of course which is a shame. But honestly some of them can do some jobs almost as well as white people and we acknowledge this. Now a lot of immigrants are Indians and Pakistanis for instance and...I like, curry, I do, but now that we've got the recipe...is there really any need for them to stay? Conservatives understand these problems...If it doesn't work then of course we will be more than prepared to revert to the old liberal, wishy washy, socialist, nigger-loving, red, left wing, homosexual, commie ways of the recent past."<sup>20</sup>

In this extract, there are no direct critiques of the conservative party and its perceived social, cultural and political values. Therefore, one could argue if one only focused on the dialogue, this extract is impossible to distinguish from a racist Alf Garnett rant for example. In response to such an argument, publicly humorous content *can* be separated from its producer, as the producer can be an invisible construct, entirely detached from the process of audience consumption. However, it cannot be completely decontextualised from the content it was presented in conjunction with.

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19 Not the Nine O'Clock News – Satirical sketch show 1979-1982. It had four series and starred Mel Smith, Rowan Atkinson, Griff Rhys Jones and Pamela Stephenson in relatively early roles for their prospective careers (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt008>).

20 [Retrieved 03/04/12] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sg-4ATrE8n0>]

Whilst there are other, more politically correct characters in *Till Death*, Alf Garnett was still the programme's protagonist - the imperfect, yet celebrated hero of the piece. Much like Basil Fawlty, Del-Boy Trotter, and David Brent, Alf Garnett is presented as the flawed, down on his luck, British sitcom archetype, often laughed at, rather than with. But he *is* clearly intended to be met with warmth from the audience as opposed to critique or acrimony. Audiences are presented with a paradoxical dilemma in which they are encouraged to adore the protagonist yet disdain his politics and worldview. This is what makes Garnett's racism and bigotry ambivalent in terms of how it is interpreted by audiences and *does* require critical reflection from scholars. Furthermore, as illustrated there were examples in *Till Death* that in spite of Johnny Speight's justifications of the show's content, portrayed racialised stereotypes that cannot be attributed to an individual character's views. Despite the ambiguous intentions of the creators, the *Till Death*' and *Love Thy*' content aligns itself more so with racist rhetoric, than anti-racist.

With the *Not The Nine O'Clock News* sketch, it too *has* to be addressed within the context of the rest of the programme. In this case, (unlike *Till Death*' and *Love Thy*') the programme was satirical. When placing this example into the thematic and aesthetic context, it *clearly* opposes racist views and is critiquing the conservative party and its policies using humour. This example is therefore far more representative of the new 'alternative' ethos of the 1980s than the mainstream comedy of the decade that was coming to a close - it was emancipatory as opposed to marginalising.

The collective term 'alternative comedy', used to describe the new generation of comedians, developed due to the creation of its spiritual home - The Comedy Store. The Comedy Store was (and still is) a venue that followed a very similar format to the working men's club, except for being solely exclusive to stand-up comedians and having a considerably different ethos.

The Comedy Store was founded by life insurance salesman Peter Rosengard, and sometime entertainer Don Ward in 1979. The two men had a shared dislike for the comedy that was present in the mainstream (Cook, 2001). Ward stressed that it was not just the structure of 'mother-in-law' jokes that frustrated them, but the content of a nationalist and racist nature that dictated the humour - "I found them all so boring, it was all the same. Englishmen, Irishmen, Scotsmen, the mother-in law or derogatory gags against black people" (Don Ward quoted in Cook, 2001, p.22).

At the Comedy Store's first press conference, Rosengard strongly stressed the importance of the anti-racist and anti-sexist character of the comedy club he was opening. When asked by a journalist if there would be any censorship, he replied that anything went, so long as it wasn't racist or sexist (Cook, 2001). Today, The Comedy Store's official website from the outset stresses that the ethics of the comedy represented a "new more politically-aware environment...[where] comics with racist, sexist and outdated jokes were often gonged or booed off quickly, making room for performers of the new "alternative" genre" (thecomedystore.co.uk).

The first Comedy Store event took place in 1979 where according to Wilmot and Rosengard (1989), the comedians themselves made a conscious effort "to avoid the easy but offensive laugh" (p.xiii).

It was compered by Alexei Sayle, who proved to be integral to alterative comedy's materialisation and success. Ward claimed that Sayle's act was refreshing, in that his routine possessed nothing sexist or racist (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989).

It was quite clear from the themes present in the comedy and the statements made in interviews with the comedians, that anti-racism and anti-sexism were very much at the forefront of the 'alternative' mindset of this new generation of comedians. Evidence suggests that alternative comedians aggressively imposed their views on the audience leaving little room for them to reinforce racial prejudice through intolerant laughter (Stott, 2005). For example, Alexei Sayle once opened his act by proclaiming "I'm a non-sexist, non-racist, so if you don't laugh at me, you're a fucking Nazi shit bag!" (Sayle quoted in Cook, 2001, p.53).

In an interview concerning the origins of alternative comedy, Alexei Sayle stressed the importance of The Comedy Store as a forum for comedians that shared a new critical perspective, one that was different from the 1970s mainstream comedy - "I didn't know anybody else who had the same ideas as me. It was through The Comedy Store opening that I first started to meet, first of all Keith Allen, Tony Allen, Andy Delatour then slightly later on Rik [Mayall] and Adrian [Edmonson] and Peter Richardson and Nigel Planer" (Alexei Sayle quoted in *The Story of The Young Ones*<sup>21</sup>). When asked in a separate interview about these ideas he held and shared with other comedians, he expressed his absolute disassociation with racist material and most importantly a more intellectual association with an anti-racist doctrine - "the important thing about racism is oppression - I won't do stuff about the Irish or Pakistanis because they are oppressed, and I don't want to make the oppression any greater" (Alexei Sayle quoted in Ross, 1998, p.104).

In stand-up sets, in reference to his frustration of the bigoted general public that he had to endure during his work on a commercial radio station, Sayle demonstrated a critical attitude towards racist bigotry showcased on British radio. He also satirically critiqued comic attacks on ethnic minorities labouring in Britain:

I think they're wonderful commercial radio stations, they have nine hour phone ins about some new shoes someone bought in a sale. (imitates a person ringing in) 'could I say something vicious about racial minorities?' No bugger off boom (imitates slamming the phone down).<sup>22</sup>

There's obviously no Albanians in tonight. Good! This Albanian goes for a job on a building site right. Excuse me I'd like a job as a racial stereotype please.<sup>23</sup>

Typical of Alexei Sayle's "full-frontal comedy attack" (Mark Leisohn quoted in Cook, 2001, p.31) style, the examples do not comprise jokes, certainly not in terms of both the philosophical and

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21 [Retrieved 03/04/12] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4P96rZseF4>]

22 [Retrieved 06/04/12] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SKgSe6ermkY>]

23 [Retrieved 05/04/12] [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TctA0EG2VNI>]

structural components of joking and humour discussed in Chapter One. Rather these examples constitute an observational, anecdotal, opinionated, critical account of something that frustrated the teller, told within a specific, aggressive comedic style. As alternative comedian Arthur Smith proclaims, "he [Sayle] did not care if he alienated people. He had a view of the world and he was going to tell you. If you didn't like it then fuck you" (Arthur Smith quoted in Cook, 2001, p.31). What Sayle was angered by, as illustrated in these jokes, were his perception of the general public's dislike of racial minorities, and he used televised stand-up comedy as a way of declaring his anti-racist view of the world.

Tony Allen provided a similar joke to the above joke referenced from Sayle, which characterised the anti-racist and anti-sexist ethos of the alternative stand-up comedian:

There was this drunk, homosexual, Pakistani, squatter, trade unionist, takes my mother-in-law to an Irish restaurant...says to the West Indian waiter, 'waiter, waiter, there's a racial stereotype in my soup. No, no, no...that's not to say that I haven't got my prejudices, 'cos I have. There's one minority group I loathe...the Metropolitan Police".

(Tony Allen quoted in Ross, 1998, p.103)

In this joke Tony Allen directly criticises the stereotypical humour present in seventies humour by satirically referencing the racist, sexist and classist stereotypes it promoted and ridiculing these in a joke. Allen subverts the dynamic in which seventies comedians would place the marginalised Other as the punch-line and replaces them with a small group that still held a significant amount of institutional power - the Metropolitan police (all the more fitting that a decade later the Metropolitan police would be publicly investigated for institutional racism). Echoing Sayle's critique of humour targeting the oppressed, Allen's joke is targeting those in power, and stresses that the powerful are most deserving of 'loathing'.

In terms of documenting anti-black racism's position within the developments of alternative comedy - similar to the comic generation that preceded it - alternative comedy's anti-racist tradition was not solely concerned with discursive manifestations of the marginalisation and emancipation of the black 'race' specifically. It is relatively simple to create a joke centred on ridiculing a specific racialised target, as highlighted by the numerous examples of this thesis. Conversely, it is somewhat difficult to create a joke about a specific ethnic group from an anti-racist perspective, free of ridicule. A comic is faced with several discursive and semantic challenges in order to establish anti-racist humour on a specific 'race' without racialising the targeted group.

This meant that the anti-racist jokes from 1980s alternative comics that were specifically centred on either black, Pakistani, Indian, Chinese, Jewish or Irish people for example, individually, independent from the others, were actually quite rare. Jokes that did actively identify specific 'races' would often address several in conjunction, or satirise perceived racialised stereotypes ironically (such as the Rowan Atkinson sketch). These kinds of jokes were part of an overarching

rhetorical commentary that critiqued dominant groups who were perceived to initially incite the ridicule against minority groups - namely comics of the previous generation, the conservative government, or the National Front.

The anti-racist ethos of alternative comedy did not abandon ridicule, it just altered its aim from down to up. Therefore, it most commonly manifested itself in the form of jokes that *ridiculed* the perceived racist elite - a group who situated blackness as a central target. Anti-racist jokes rarely concerned 'races' but rather attempted collectively, between producer and audience, to laugh at the idea of being racist.

However, I do uphold that alternative comedy inadvertently maintained the discursive stability that continued to position black people as a core target of ridicule in comic racist discourse - a status that *Sickipedia.org* indicates still remains secure today. This was not carried out consciously or negatively in terms of any prejudiced intentions of alternative comics, it was an after-effect of the racism from stand-up comedy's previous generation.

This argument is supported historically by comic racist discourse in the British cultural public sphere. As the racist humour of the 1970s identified the black 'race' as a prominent target for ridicule, alternative comedy's counter discourse implicitly centred the black 'race' as a central target for emancipation in their anti-racist humour. An artistic revolution in opposition of the performative, thematic and discursive traditions of that given art-form's current hegemonic elite cannot abandon the context which provided its genesis. In discussing a distain for the comic racist rhetoric of the 'clubland' comedians, alternative comedy's discourse highlighted a distain for *anti-black* comic racist rhetoric, symbolically cementing the black 'race's centrality in prejudiced humour.

## Lenny Henry - a case study

From the narrative provided thus far, I have described how comic racism in British popular culture experienced a major subversion between the late 1960s and mid 1980s - the explicit racism of the 'clubland' comics met with the sharp contrast of the anti-racist ethic of alternative comedy. A relevant case study to illustrate this contrast, and a documentation which emphasises the chosen anti-black focus of the thesis, is the early career of black comedian Lenny Henry.

Lenny Henry was not part of the alternative scene due to his comic career pre-dating its formation by around four years. Lenny Henry started his career in stand-up comedy in 1975 by winning ITV talent show *New Faces* when he was just seventeen ([www.lennyhenry.net](http://www.lennyhenry.net)). He then soon began working on the touring version of the earlier mentioned *The Black and White Minstrel Show*. According to Wilmot and Rosengard, Henry conformed with the comedic ethics and aesthetics of the times and performed "some fairly racist material - standard enough fodder, and no less offensive for being performed by black man" (1989, p.239).

An example of this was on a Christmas special of the show. A small skit depicts two attractive white women in Christmas elf outfits facing the camera singing Irving Berlin's *White Christmas*. In

front of the two women is a hooded figure in a Father Christmas outfit facing in the opposite direction so that the audience can only see his back. At the point of the song when the lyrics "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas" are sung, the hooded Father Christmas suddenly turns around to reveal Lenny Henry with a fake white wig and beard on. He shouts with a large grin "You've got no chance!" in a strong Jamaican accent before taking off the Santa outfit.

By 1979, Henry explains that he had become frustrated with his role in *The Black and White Minstrel Show* and the banal racism present in the humour - "the jokes were boring - 'And now the only one of 'em who doesn't need make up', 'when Lenny cries he gets little white lines crawling down his face,' etc. I partook in these jokes because I didn't really know any better; it hurts thinking about it now" (lennyhenry.com).

With this frustration, Henry slowly began to disassociate himself with this type of humour as he developed his own style as a comedian. In the late 1970s, after a role on the failed sitcom *The Fosters*, Henry made a name for himself on Saturday morning children's television show *Tiswas* (An acronym for This Is Saturday What A Show). His 'race' was still clearly a prominent feature which dictated much of the character-based comedy. For example he would sometimes wear a large Rastafarian hat made up of the colours of the Jamaican flag and speak in a thick Jamaican accent instead of Henry's own natural Birmingham accent. On other occasions he would impersonate Black News reader Trevor McDonald with his character Trevor McDoughnut.

After *Tiswas*' cancellation he then featured on what was regarded as the adult version of *Tiswas*, *OTT* in which Henry would still often be in his Jamaican-themed costume. *OTT* is where Lenny Henry earned his initial connection to alternative comedy with the show featuring several 'alternative' comic suchs as Alexei Sayle. Through this transitional period in the late seventies to early eighties, Henry's comedy was very much centralised on his West Indian cultural heritage, but without the added acceptance of prejudiced and racialised stereotypes that had occurred in his *Minstrels* days.

By 1984, around the time Henry was being commissioned his own series *The Lenny Henry Show*, one could argue that it was Lenny Henry's characterisations of cultures which were relatively poorly represented in mainstream popular culture at the time, that made him such a popular and attractive prospect to audiences. The characterisations and themes surrounding life as a black individual in post-War Britain, in this new show were not that far removed from what was present in the poorly received 1976 sitcom *The Fosters*. One could argue that during the eight years in which the anti-racist ethic of the alternative comedy scene had been influential on popular culture, audience expectations had changed significantly. Now audiences craved complex portrayals of different cultures in a humorous context, as opposed to the crude one liners in which these minority groups were simplistically ridiculed.

However, *The Lenny Henry Show* did not mark the new dawn in which racialised portrayals of minority cultures in popular culture completely vanished. Henry did portray a wide array of

characters including an inept, *Red Stripe* lager-drinking, dreadlocked, West Indian handyman who conformed to many negative black stereotypes, to the horror of his middle-class white employers. This was performed in such a way that it is unclear as to whether the approach was satirical. Perhaps the most famous creation during this early era of Henry's career was Delbert Wilkins - "a street wise Brixton hustler who runs a pirate radio station, dresses 'real sharp' but underneath it all is insecure and a bit of a loser" (Willmut & Rosengard, 1989, p.241). Ross (1995) states that despite alternative comedians' tendencies to comedically investigate issues of racism, newer negative stereotypes emerged as a consequence. In reference to Lenny Henry's Delbert Wilkins character she recounts critics claiming he represented "stereotypical images that white people have of the black community, with associations of criminal activity, sharp clothes and a pseudo-black linguistic style" (p.105).

However there are examples of more complex themes that were present in this character, illustrated by a later episode of *The Lenny Henry Show* in 1987. By this time the show had changed its format from a stand-up/sketch show to a more standardised situation comedy based around the Wilkins character ([www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/thelennyhenryshow/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/thelennyhenryshow/)). In the episode Wilkins is reunited with his father, who had abandoned him as a child. The episode whilst always remaining comical rather than topical, did address several issues surrounding the working class afro-Caribbean community in Brixton, such as unemployment and the breakdown of the nuclear family. I would argue that with the character of Wilkins and others, Lenny Henry simultaneously portrayed and provided insight into black culture (and sub-cultures) within a humorous context to mainstream audiences in ways that would never have been achieved a decade earlier.

Since then Lenny Henry has gone on to become one of the most successful live and television comedians in Britain, still working and remaining popular to this day. In this respect, Lenny Henry is much respected in the same way that Charlie Williams is too, but he provides a sharp contrast to Williams in the context of comic racism. Henry, unlike Williams, can provide an illustration of the changes that had occurred in comedy in British popular culture from *The Minstrels* through to alternative comedy. Whereas Williams' popularity was exclusive to the height of 'clubland' comedy's prominence in the seventies, Henry only started out at the tail end of the decade and his success occurred later. The changes that occurred in the eighties, influenced by alternative comedy's benefactors, artists and audiences, and the prominent assertion of anti-racism, provided comedians like Lenny Henry with the agency to create comic expression free of homogenous racialised stereotypes, and most importantly be successful in doing so.

## Commercialisation, diversification & the downfall of the 'alternative' ethos

Earlier in the chapter, William Cook was quoted stressing two things that changed British cultural life throughout the eighties. The first being Margaret Thatcher's election victory, and the second was the birth of alternative comedy. Alternative comedy changed popular comedy with a revised

ethos that condemned racist and sexist comic material, but arguably this is not what changed British cultural life. Cook is referring to alternative comedy revolutionising comedy's overall influence and commercial potential in British popular culture.

Cook (1994) stressed that The Comedy Store led to "dozens" (p.1) of imitating seven-day-a-week comedy clubs around the country; alternative comedy stars "seizing" the light entertainment means of production at BBC1, BBC 2, Radio 1 and 4 and Channel 4; its main player's becoming international stars; its comedians becoming the faces of advertising campaigns and finally its comedians "rubbing shoulders" (ibid.) with politicians at election rallies.

Arguably, alternative comedy's success and incorporation into the mainstream had similarities to what occurred with 'clubland' comedy in the seventies. However unlike 'clubland' stand-up comedy's mainstream existence consisting of televised imitations of the working men's club experience with the likes of *The Comedians* and *Wheeltappers*, alternative comedy's incorporation into mainstream popular culture was far more diverse and complex.

After a few years within the domain of stand-up live entertainment at The Comedy Store, alternative comedy found itself in the midst of mass accepted popular culture on the television screen. Alternative comedians had incorporated new non-comedic elements in their performances including intellectual critiques, surrealism and politics (Stott, 2005), and as time went by, their position got stronger, due to popular cultural critics and television producers noticing the value of the new comic styles (Double, 2005).

By the mid-1980s, The Comedy Store had changed venue to a new spot in the West End of London and with alternative comedy already having a good reputation as being the place that *Saturday Live* star Ben Elton had 'cut his comic milk teeth' - "the Store was the club where telly people went to trawl for comic talent" (Cook, 2001, p.101). This though is where the similarities with 'clubland' comedy's journey into the mainstream ends. This is because alternative comedy's transition into the mainstream over the course of the decade led to the essence of the initial alternative comedy group to become somewhat stretched and diluted. As Littlewood and Pickering (1998) have stated, an opinion also shared by comedian Stewart Lee (2002), "the degree to which it [alternative comedy] was politically oppositional was relatively short-lived, and confined more to its initial movers and shakers" (Littlewood & Pickering, p.298).

Cook (1994) further reinforces this position in arguing that the alternative was founded on the twin axioms of non-sexism and non-racism, but this ethos quickly became both simplified and exaggerated. He argued that the centrality of the ethical dimensions of the alternative ethos was, from the perspective of the audiences, debatable, highlighting that audiences cared more about an aesthetic revision of comedy than a moral - "punters weren't so much shocked by the sexist and racist material as bored rigid by its monotony and repetition [of 'clubland' comedy]" (Cook, 1994, p.11).

By the end of the 1980s, comedians which embodied the vanguard of alternative comedy, Alexei Sayle, Rik Mayall, Ben Elton, Keith Allen and French and Saunders, had all gone on to become huge television stars. Mayall, Edmondson, Sayle, Elton and Nigel Planter had all worked together on the BBC sitcom *The Young Ones* between 1982 and 1984. Mayall both provided writing for the show as well as playing the lead role Rick making him a household name (Cook, 1994).

Edmondson and Planter played the other lead roles Vyvyan and Neil respectively, Sayle played various recurring characters across the series and Elton's involvement was much more behind the scenes with contributions to writing.

Mayall and Edmondson had also featured on *Saturday Live* as 'The Dangerous Brothers' (Cook, 2001), the same show that I have already mentioned Elton compered for two seasons, catapulting him to superstardom. Mayall and Edmondson had also contributed to *The Comic Strip Presents...* in 1983, which also featured Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders' aptly named act French and Saunders. To illustrate the growing diversity in format, *The Comic Strip...Presents* consisted of films for television rather than a more normal television format such as a televised stand-up, a sketch-show or a sitcom. Before long French and Saunders broke away from The Comedy Strip and they found themselves on the small screen with their own show *Girls on Top* in 1986.

Alexei Sayle too was well-known throughout the eighties, with appearances on *The Young Ones* and *OTT* as mentioned. With another example of the diversification that was beginning to characterise mainstream comedy in the mid to late eighties, Sayle had a hit pop music single that reached number fifteen in the official UK charts, 'Ullo John, Gotta New Motor' in 1982. Finally in 1986, Sayle was commissioned his own sketch show *Alexei Sayle's Stuff*.

At this time, with alternative comedians becoming mainstream stars on television and even feature films, other names would be placed into the 'alternative' category without ever really being formally associated with The Comedy Store or the alternative comedy ethos. Among them were comedians such as Billy Connolly, Stephen Fry, Ruby Wax, Harry Enfield, Hugh Laurie, Griff Rhys Jones and the aforementioned Rowan Atkinson and Lenny Henry. These figures all found mainstream homes on prime time television, and subsequently found great success with shows such as *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*, *Blackadder*, *Don't Miss Wax* and *The Lenny Henry Show*.

In some cases, even comedians that were considered central to alternative comedy, did not ever particularly wish to be associated with it from the outset. Dawn French was quoted as saying "you couldn't have had a group of people more offended by being called 'alternative' because we hadn't invented the phrase, the press had decided this is what we were" (Dawn French quoted in Wilmut & Rosengard, 1989, p.100).

Therefore while alternative comedy was not formally incorporated into the mainstream - at least not alternative comedy MK1 that characterised the early days of The Comedy Store with its strict political dimension and its anti-sexist and anti-racist components - its performers did act as a catalyst in which a process of commercialisation and diversification could develop. This process

revolutionised the light entertainment industry, realigning comedy in a new spot in the hierarchy, one of a far higher status.

Throughout this process of diversification into the commercial mainstream, the anti-racist, anti-sexist and wider anti-prejudiced morale of alternative comedy, for the most part remained fairly entrenched in the more general ethos of comedy in British popular culture. Alternative comedy should always be seen as positively changing popular comedy on a wide scale from the late 1970s onwards - "by the Nineties, the anti-racism war had been largely won" (Cook, 2001, p.104). When it comes to progress in terms of themes of bigotry and prejudice in popular comic performance, one only has to look towards *Comic Relief*, which originated in 1986, linking mainstream comedy with altruistic, charitable acts.

Another relevant example of the long-term ethical victory alternative comedy achieved in terms of anti-racism was when Granada in 1987 removed all racist jokes from repeats of *The Comedians*. Cook (2001) addressed this, as did Stewart Lee (2010) in his autobiography. Moreover, I too am able to verify the long-lasting implications of such an achievement when I personally purchased a copy of *The Best of The Comedians* on DVD for research purposes, only to find all racist material had been removed.

In spite of these mainstream victories, one would argue alternative comedy did not quite fulfil its unofficial objective of abolishing racism and sexism from popular comedy. History can now demonstrate that comic racism and sexism would not be completely eradicated from popular culture. Ironically, alternative comedy's precursory instigation of popular comedy's transition into a hugely commercialised popular cultural product ultimately undermined alternative comedy's ethical victories. The success of the comedians, who had emerged from the alternative comedy of The Comedy Store, indirectly, yet strongly, coincided with the downfall of their initial ethos.

Littlewood and Pickering (1998) argued that by the time of the second generation of alternative comedians in the mid-eighties, the first generation began to distance themselves from the political and ethical side of alternative comedy and focus solely on the humour instead. Martin Soans argued that alternative comedy did not even survive the break from the original home of The Comedy Store at the Gargoyle Club to its new residence in Leicester Square - "when the first store died, that whole era died with it" (Martin Soans quoted in Cook, 2001, p.80).

## The backlash towards political correctness

Signalling a somewhat cyclical pattern, the generation of comedians who took up residence in the new Comedy Store in Leicester Square in the late 1980s - like the alternative comedians that preceded them nearly a decade before - found themselves comedically frustrated both in terms of aesthetics and ethics.

Alternative comedians fundamentally opposed the 'clubland' comedians' routines from both an ethical standpoint and an aesthetic. They simply did not wish to continue spouting racist and sexist

jibes, and both comedians and audiences were uninspired by the tired stylistic presentation of the one-liner gags. By the late eighties the newer, younger comedians of The Comedy Store experienced somewhat similar emotions, yet the notion they found themselves opposing was the political correctness which was essential to alternative comedy's anti-sexism and racism.

Littlewood and Pickering claimed "politics and humour are an unpredictable, hazardous mix. The message can easily override or annul the funniness of an act, lead to charges of preaching, self-righteousness and sanctimony" (1998, p.298). In this vein, Jerry Palmer stated "excessive contentiousness produces offense instead of humour, excessive politeness produces boredom" (1987, p.175). Evidence suggests that from the perspective of several comedians on the stand-up circuit shortly after Sayle et al graduated into the mainstream, comedy in British popular culture slipped into a point where the ethical message had stunted the humour from being funny.

Comedian Helen Lederer explained in reference to Ben Elton's influence on alternative comedy and its ethical appeal, "although Elton's influence was immense, the sheer success of his anti-Thatcherite rants transformed political stand-up into a ubiquitous cliché" (quoted in Cook, 2001, p.104). The mainstream incorporated the political dimension of alternative comedy and it was successful, and as stressed, this political dimension was fundamentally centred on anti-racism and anti-sexism.

Cook argued that during its first decade, alternative comedy fashioned a set of ideological restrictions, yet, the radical values that "freed comedy from reactionary atrophy ten years before now threatened to stifle it with a different set of prejudices, not nearly so pernicious as those they ousted, but equally as monotonous" (2001, p.102). He stressed that where the likes of Manning, Crompton and Ward a decade earlier focused their ridicule on black, Irish and mother-in-law stereotypes, the alternative comedy group replaced these with policemen, Ulster protestants and the politically correct mother-in-law, Margaret Thatcher. The distinction between the two remains: alternative comedians attacked the dominant majorities as opposed to marginalised minorities, but nevertheless from the point of view of the newer comedians, the original alternative comedy characterised its own unique form of irksome, elitist bigotry.

Cook explained that by 1989, alternative comedy had embraced a wide range of perceived pompous, leftist regulations that formulated taboos out of far more subjects than their original anti-racist, anti-sexist ethos had ever wished to. Comedians Jeff Green and Steve Frost explained that by this point, it was unacceptable to talk about women at all in humour, not even one's partner or spouse (Cook, 2001). Cook labels this metaphorical regulatory board of norms and customs for stand-up comedy in the late eighties as the 'PC Police'. Comedians such as Sean Lock and Phil Jupitus explained that in order to satisfy the rules of the 'PC Police', one would have to throw "political gags into every set to fulfil the brief", (Sean Lock quoted in Cook, 2001, p.102) and finish an act by "saying the government were evil" to get an encore (Phil Jupitus quoted in Cook, 2001, p.102). This is where the initial strands of so-called 'lad' comedy started to emerge in The Comedy Store and prevented the further augmentation of the process of politically correct stagnation.

By 1990, the primary catalyst of alternative comedy's initial genesis, Margaret Thatcher, resigned as Prime Minister and was replaced by John Major. William Cook suggested that following this event, the radical acts like Elton and Sayle were replaced by younger, and in terms of commercial success, "more ambitious comics less bothered by social injustice and more interested in number one" (Cook, 2001, p.104). Phil Jupitus and Lee Hurst were such examples, who Richard Morton (Cook, 1994) described as comedians who told very laddish gags. He explains that stand-up comedians would once again make jokes concerning the battle of the sexes, that a few years earlier would have been considered sexist.

What followed was a change in attitude from both comedian and audience, explains Cook. According to Sean Lock during one set he was wrongfully accused of homophobia by a pair of hecklers, so he decided to humorously explain to them why he was not homophobic to a positive reaction from the audience. Happy about this Sean Lock returned to The Store the following evening for another set only to be cornered by a man who had seen him the night before and told him "I saw you last night, I brought my mates down to see you because you were brilliant. The way you dealt with them poofs" (Sean Lock quoted Cook, 2001, p.104).

With the 1980s over, the new group of comedians - who had instigated a loose backlash against political correctness - in concordance with comedy now taking up far more of a share of the light entertainment section of television broadcasting spots, were starting to be accepted by the mainstream too. The simultaneous commercialisation and diversification process which inducted alternative comedy into the mainstream, as well as a thematic backlash against the political dimension of the alternative ethos, completely revolutionised the way comedy operated in popular culture. From this point on, a cyclical model where a particular comedic movement with its own aesthetic style, common themes and ethical outlook, would then be attacked and replaced by a new movement with its own aesthetic style, common themes and ethical outlook, ceased.

From the early 1990s and progressively until the present, audiences were provided with opportunities to now pick and choose from a wide variety of different comedic styles, and consume accordingly to what befitted their own personal tastes. However some of these personal tastes, in spite of the general eradication of racism and sexism from mainstream comedy, still yearned for marginalising humour and due to there being a less focused anti-racist and anti-sexist ethos central to popular comedy, these tastes could be catered for.

### On the fringes of the mainstream - where comic racism went

Thus far I have attempted to avoid the simplistic assumption that the diminished anti-racist ethos of alternative comedy was due to alternative comedy *becoming* mainstream comedy, or that its comedians consciously abandoned both their stylistic and moral values in an effort to become successful. The actual transition in reality was far more complex. Historically, I would argue that alternative comedy can be seen as the last significant *independent* comedic regime that defined

comedy in popular culture before the major process of commercialisation and diversification took place.

After this process of diversification, alternative comedy and also the remaining strands of 'clubland' comedy were incorporated into smaller sub-strata of a heterogeneous comic sphere in British popular culture. 'Clubland' comedians for example have survived at subsistence level over the past twenty years. Cook (1994) suggests that the resurgence of the anti-alternative comedian had an important role in converting comedy into the culturally dominant phenomenon it became in the nineties. New formats for popular cultural consumption, in particular VHS sales in the nineties, DVD sales at the start of the twenty-first century, and the Internet, have been hugely influential for the continuation of 'clubland' style, ridicule-based humour with its inherent comic racism, long since its heyday ended in the late 1970s.

There was a short period during the initial alternative breakthrough that genuinely forced 'clubland' comedians into cultural exile. Les Dennis made reference to the short-lived reign of alternative comedy, and the affect it had on comedians like himself and Jimmy Tarbuck, who had no political dimension to their humour, and more stylistically represented 'clubland' comedy - "Jimmy was the traditional variety comic and in the eighties for a short while it became unfashionable. We all had to keep our heads down in the eighties" (Les Dennis quoted on Piers Morgan Life Stories: Jimmy Tarbuck). Jimmy Tarbuck, on the subject of the alternative comedian backlash of the early eighties claimed "it didn't hurt me at all, I couldn't give a monkeys uncle about them, you know. Funny, whenever I met them, they'd say 'how are you sir.' Ben Elton, all of them. I was on *Spitting Image*, and the people either side of me were Mrs. Thatcher and the President of the United States" (Jimmy Tarbuck quoted on Piers Morgan Life Stories: Jimmy Tarbuck). Tarbuck was asked by interviewer Piers Morgan if he had to tone down his act in the contemporary context. To illustrate, Morgan provided an example of an old anti-black joke Tarbuck once told:

Piers Morgan - "You said to Kenny Lynch [a black entertainer], last time you danced it rained for three days."

Jimmy Tarbuck - "What's offensive about that for god's sake!"

Piers Morgan - "Would you tell that joke on television today?"

Jimmy Tarbuck - "Of course I would! I'll give you an example of offensiveness. This Jewish guy met his pal, if you were to say two Yids are talking to each other, I'd take great offense of that, the 'n' word with black people, you'd never say that. Are you trying to tell me if two black guys were having a talk, what black people don't laugh! They've got wonderful sense of humours. Irish people, It's how you phrase a gag isn't it, but the Irish sense of humour, the Jewish sense of humour, the black. Humour is humour." <sup>24</sup>

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24 [Retrieved 05/05/12 from ITV iPlayer] [Taken From Piers Morgan Life Stories Series 7 Episode 6: Jimmy Tarbuck First Broadcast: 25th May 2012 ITV1]

These comments from Tarbuck and Dennis imply that after the eighties, 'clubland' comedy was allowed to re-emerge - its aesthetics seemingly have a timeless quality. It was only during the initial alternative comedy backlash and subsequent boom that 'clubland' comedy was seriously hindered.

Les Dennis more innocently appears to refer more to the aesthetic nature of 'clubland' comedy, and how it was for a short time stylistically outcast by a new wave of comics. However, Tarbuck made reference to some of the ethical issues of racial and sexual discrimination that is inherent to the 'clubland' style. He displays no remorse towards his act and cannot notice any offensiveness, or further implications of telling his jokes, proclaiming no issues with telling them on television today. Despite the years of progress in publicly disseminated comic discourse, Tarbuck is unable to attribute the aspects of racialised humour to a joke - that in referring to Kenny Lynch as a 'rain dancer', he is reproducing racialised representations of the primitive black Other, and in turn provides a situation in which several other interlinked negative stereotypes of black people can be expressed. He simply does not perceive a joke to be problematic, or in this case, racist, as long as no racist terminology, such as the words 'nigger' or 'yid', are present.

Furthermore, the most important aspect of these comments from Dennis and Tarbuck is the very setting of the interviews themselves. They come from a contemporary celebration of Tarbuck's career, which implies a nostalgic yearning for a British society freed from the discursive constraints of political correctness:

Piers Morgan - "Has Britain become too P.C.?"

Jimmy Tarbuck - "Oh ay. There's certain words. Politically correct? And what about health and safety what about that?" [huge audience cheer and clap]<sup>25</sup>

From the broadcast, it is made clearer both how and why the prejudiced humour of the 'clubland' comedians was not completely wiped from the slate of British popular culture - the original, potent anti-sexist, anti-racist alternative comedy movement was too short-lived to provide a long-lasting effect. Certain comedians still wished to express the kinds of jokes that both ethically and stylistically resembled 1970s 'clubland' comedy, and some contemporary audiences still wish to consume them.

Bernard Manning is a representative case study of 'clubland's' continuation, and comic racism's subsistence in the nineties. Manning's success post-alternative comedy was most definitely stunted, but he did still perform live, and while rarely appearing on television for interviews, sold lots of VHS copies and DVDs and had lots of videos of his performances preserved on the Internet. All of these continued to disseminate his racist jokes up until (and beyond) his death in 2007.

Fascination has surrounded Manning for years, with debates amongst fellow performers, authors, journalists and academics concerning whether Manning was in fact a believer of the messages he

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<sup>25</sup> [Retrieved 05/05/12 from ITV iPlayer] [Taken From Piers Morgan Life Stories Series 7 Episode 6: Jimmy Tarbuck First Broadcast: 25th May 2012 ITV1]

articulated, and if he wasn't, why did he produce such offensive material - especially considering that he was widely regarded as being "one of the few comedians able to make the art [of stand-up] look so simple" (Stephen Fry quoted in Margolis, 1996). Many have condemned Manning and his performances (journalists such as Jaci Stephen, or comedians such as Stewart Lee), and if not, at least acknowledged the racism of his performances (Littlewood & Pickering 1998; Stott, 2005; Cook, 1994, 2001). However, some have defended him, providing evidence of why comic racist discourses did not disappear after the 1980s.

Journalist Jonathon Margolis (1996) claimed that despite being "effectively expelled from television and show business" in the nineties, people would still come in their hundreds to see Bernard Manning each night, and buy his videos. Margolis reflected upon why the market for 'clubland' humour would remain profitable, referring to audiences' pleasure in witnessing the taboo - "the forbidden (if rotten) fruit". After several interviews with Manning, Margolis made the bold claim that "Manning fans don't *expressly* want racist material, but there is some naughty amusement to be had when he uses such comedy". Margolis (a Jewish man) stated in reference to a joke about killing Jews in the holocaust - "to me the joke mocks convention, dissipates contemporary niceties, and toys with clichéd emotions". Supporting the earlier points concerning the nostalgia and anti-political correctness the 'clubland' comedians represented, highlighting comic racism's marginal, yet persistent existence, Margolis' stated "Bernard Manning's act is as much about history as it is about comedy. It is about an England of forty years ago, a constant comment on how things have moved on. Manning is intent on preserving the past".

In 1998, Manning was interviewed by Caroline Aherne's character Mrs Merton on BBC's *The Mrs Merton Show*. This interview seemingly confirmed the contrary of Margolis' defences of Manning, with him revealing himself to be a self confessed racist.

Caroline Aherne - "The thing about you is Bernard, there's no getting away from it, you're a very good comedian but you are racist aren't you Bernard?"

Bernard Manning - "Yes. You see some people I like, some people I don't. People get upset about stuff. These people think they're English cause they're born here, that means if a dog is born in a stable it's a horse." <sup>26</sup>

There are also other comedians who have found commercial success continuing performing the 'clubland' style of comedy post-1980s. In some cases, after alternative comedy's formation in 1979, comedians did tone down their humour so that they could find a home on mainstream television such as Jim Davidson. Davidson is a particularly intriguing case study in this regard due to the dichotomous nature of his humour and comic persona. Jim Davidson found mass notoriety in the nineties hosting both *The Generation Game* and snooker based game show *Big Break*. Alexei Sayle acknowledged this toning down of Davidson's style, but stressed he had been both sexist and racist before alternative comedy's success (Cook, 2001).

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26 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsLxezr7h6Q>] [Retrieved 16/03/12]

Davidson's game shows were mainstream, primetime BBC programmes in a popular cultural landscape that no longer broadcast comic racist or other marginalising humour. Consequently, Davidson's persona in these contexts were befitting of the thematic requirements. His on-camera actions, and jokes told did not instigate controversy. However as time passed, Davidson was eventually edged out by the BBC in 2002 and quit as the host of *The Generation Game* "after it became clear that his racist and sexist image was at odds with the BBC's attempts to be more inclusive" (Wells, 2002). In contrast to his mainstream image, Jim Davidson continued to revel in older, prejudiced themes of humour in the stand-up arena, telling jokes that relied heavily on racism, sexism and homophobia (Wells, 2002).

Examples of this included a performance Davidson conducted to British troops who had served in Iraq ([amazon.co.uk/Jim-Davidson](http://amazon.co.uk/Jim-Davidson)). Dressed in camouflaged combat attire, he referred to black gangs and their relationship to crime problems in Britain.

"I think we should recruit more people, if you look at the crime in our country, we've got for instance some of the best black gangs in the world. I'm not glamorising gangsters but they are fucking scary motherfuckers. ]imitates shooting a gun twice puts on an African-American accent] 'ehhh motherfuckers, motherfuckers'. I don't mean to be racist, there's been constitutional racism in Britain for years and years and years, and that's gone now. My generation was 1971's Love Thy Neighbour, you know Snowflake and all that bullshit that no one really needs anymore.

You have to say as soon as you get everyone down, you get people come over from Africa, and of course we like them because we're not racist, and then what do they do, they make them fucking traffic wardens! They earn more than soldiers apparently, did you read that in the paper? They fucking deserve it as well, they come near fucking death when they come near me the motherfuckers. Stick that on my fucking car [puts on a generic black, African accent] 'you are parking in the wrong place'. Fuck off back to Kenya! [puts the generic black, African accent back on and a confused facial expression], 'I am from Watford'."

"Let's get these guys from, Manchester, Birmingham wherever these young black guys are. They fucking look scary don't they? They've got the fucking hoods, wouldn't need any of this shit fucking uniform we've got here now, hoods, they've got their own guns, that don't jam.

Imagine old Terry Taliban coming down the old [starts to imitate a Taliban soldier making inexplicable sounds in a Middle Eastern accent], 'let them out!', [puts on an stereotypical African American gangster voice] 'hey motherfucker, motherfucker, hey you motherfucker I'll put a cap in your fucking nose', and when they run out of fucking bullets, [puts the African-American accent back on] 'yeah fucking choke on this' [imitates the black gangster getting out his penis and chasing the Taliban soldier away, Davidson

puts back on the Middle Eastern accent and screams]. Yes that's what you want, [puts on the Middle Eastern accent] 'we give you opium?', [replies in the African American accent] 'we've got our own.' That's what you call a fucking crack regiment [puts on a generic, black, African accent] 'okay stand by to go to battle!' [then imitates snorting an amount of drugs before putting the African-American gangster accent back on and begins to walk like a stereotypical gangster] motherfucker, motherfucker, motherfucker." <sup>27</sup>

In this confused and contradictory approach, Davidson reproduces negative, racialised stereotypical themes surrounding several different minority groups. Predominantly the jokes are anti-black, but they are also nuanced in their anti-British Black, anti-African American, anti-African immigrant and Islamophobic views, positioned as an ambiguous agglomeration of comic racism, particularly reinforcing racialised motifs of black criminality and violence, black sexuality and sexual violence, black dependence on illegal narcotics, and anti-black immigrant bigotry.

Similarly Roy 'Chubby' Brown is a figure who has caused much controversy in the contemporary landscape of British popular comedy with his uses of marginalising humour. Brown has had a lengthy career in comedy, but did not become popular until the early 1990s, defining the anti-political correctness backlash that was occurring at the time. Brown started out much like other stand-up comic's born before 1950. He began performing on the working men's club circuit in the sixties and seventies with an act "like a thousand other clean and silly comics" (Brown quoted in Yates, 1993). He started to develop the 'Chubby' Brown character at the end of the seventies. 'Chubby' Brown should not be categorised quite in the same group as the 'clubland' comedians, he is more appropriately labelled as a 'blue' comic (Yates, 1993) due to much of his humour being derived from explicit language and sexual scenarios. Whilst he does share some aspects of the working men's club style, in an aesthetic sense 'Chubby' Brown is fairly different from Manning for example. Brown commonly has a recurring theme in a show, or having a show resemble a play with a narrative and dialogue. Also, as a talented pianist, he often performs comedic musical songs.

According to journalist Robert Yates, in 1993 Brown's publicity team decided to nationally promote his shows and videos for the first time. Yates argues that this period was an appropriate time to promote Brown, as he could be considered a part of "a national backlash against political correctness" (Yates, 1993). However Brown's personal comic anti-political correctness was not quite as subtle as the lad comedy characterised by the likes of Phil Jupitus and Frank Skinner.

'Chubby' Brown's humour was (and remains) far more explicit in terms of comic racism and sexism, resulting in a permanent expulsion from the televised mainstream, limiting his success to live performance, VHS and DVD sales. Importantly, the commercial success of 'Chubby' Brown is a result of the audiences that consume his products. Sources claim that Brown is a multi-millionaire, implying that in the 21st century, forty years since racist and sexist humour was largely eradicated from British popular culture, there remains a significant audience and market for comic racism.

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27 [Retrieved 06/05/12] [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nKKPbNhTkL4&feature=related>]

[Extract taken from DVD *Jim Davidson On The Offensive 2008*]

Yates reported that from Brown's live shows alone, five million pounds were generated in revenue. He also at the time had three VHS recordings of his shows, each selling 300,000 copies, outselling his nearest rival at the time (fittingly Jim Davidson) three to one (Yates, 1993). Since his initial breakthrough in the early 1990s, Brown has released twenty-four video and DVD releases, roughly one a year (chubbybrown.biz).

Yates, in 1993, labelled Brown as the "rudest and crudest" comedian in the UK. It could be argued that Roy 'Chubby' Brown is a character and that his comic racism is characteristic of 'Alf Garnett syndrome' (Lockyer & Pickering, 2005, p.16). Littlewood and Pickering (1998) claimed that "a strategy adopted in media and stage comedy is the modification or softening of the negative stereotyping of minorities by the tellers of jokes presenting themselves as stupid, this is something that distinguishes Roy 'Chubby' Brown from Bernard Manning" (p. 299). However, Roy Brown is more than just a character, it is the name Royston Vasey (his birth name) has adopted. At most 'Chubby' Brown can be considered a persona, or an alter ego. It is in this persona that Brown expresses his prejudiced comic performances which project racialised stereotypes and a bigoted, anti-multicultural mentality. One only has to watch clips of his performances to assert that it is irrelevant whether the views being portrayed in his act are representative of a character or his own personal perspective - the audience are in agreement with him, collectively celebrating and reinforcing the racism.

Several of Brown's examples fixate on anti-black racism, again illustrating its continued prominence in publicly disseminated comic racist discourse, and analytical centrality in the thesis.

We live in a sensitive world now everything's politically fucking correct, you can't fucking say 'owt. I said to small bloke' now then short arse,' 'don't you fucking call me short arse, that's like calling me midget, dwarf, Lepicorn,' I said 'is it fuck', he said 'yes it is it's like calling a black man a nigger,' I said 'oh no it isn't, if you call a black man a nigger he'll stab you, what are you going to do bruise my fucking knees.

I've got a black friend called Russell and he was pissed off when they took the golliwog off the Robinson's jam jar, they were using it as a bus pass.<sup>28</sup>

We all thought things were gonna change once Barack Obama got into power. Barack Obama, put an 's' on the end, spell it backwards...Sambo. Mind you since he's got into power, this has had to go out the act, my friend Sooty (points to his Golliwog doll), now before you're up in arms this is a child's toy. It's a fucking doll. If you're a West Indian with an afro and you're on drugs I can't help it if you look like that.

### The Golly Song

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28 [Retrieved 05/05/12] [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIA9vkM4K1cv>]

(Caribbean style music, with Caribbean sounding backing vocals singing 'ooo golly, golly wolly')

My little girl's dolls are now not politically correct

She'll have to watch her p's and q's at something I suspect

The Chinese doll's not a chink the Indian one's slumdog

She can't pick up the black one I said good golly it's a wog

Sooty's out, Fluffy's gone the heads off Goldie Locks

Princess, Shrek and all the rest have gone back inside the box

She can't pick up the black one said good golly it's a wog

It's a golliwog! It's a golliwog!

For years on the jam jar we called it Niggy-Nog!

Not jungle bunny, fuzzy wuzzy just black from the sun

It's a fucking golliwog! it's a child's bit of fun!<sup>29</sup>

From these examples it is clear that Brown often uses severe racist terminology such as 'nigger', 'Sambo', 'gollywog', 'jungle bunny' and 'niggy-nog' for no discernible purpose. He also reproduced several negative black stereotypes such as violent criminality through his insinuation that offending black people would result in homicidal violence. Moreover, there are representations of black people as having gross physical characteristics, and being idle in the jokes.

While 'race' as a subject was not omitted from mainstream comedy in British popular culture throughout the nineties and into the twenty-first century, it did not materialise in a coherent comic community based on a particular aesthetic and ethical style which explicitly articulated racist rhetoric and reproduced ideological perspectives and stereotypes. Jim Davidson and 'Chubby' Brown and their comic racism remained and remain to this day firmly on the outskirts of the popular cultural sphere. Examples such as *Little Britain*, *The Office*, *Brass Eye* and *Da Ali G Show*, would all use issues and representations of 'race', including black, within their humour. However these examples are more befitting of Weaver's theoretical contributions regarding liquid racism discussed in Chapter One, where the potential racist expressions are highly ambivalent and are often presented in conjunction with satire or anti-racist intentions. They often lack the transparent ridicule of non-white 'races' while perpetuating an ethos of white superiority or dominance that was so clear in the 'clubland' style of humour and joking.

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29 [Retrieved 05/05/12] [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63RcGJJ463s>]

This type of explicit comic racist content has not come to the forefront of British mainstream media as of 2014, but in the first decade of the twenty-first century, very similar jokes to those voiced forty years prior by the 'clubland' comedians would find a new, public discursive space for circulation, that with the transformation of consumer practices in terms of digitalised media can be considered a legitimate part of popular culture. Moreover, within this space of *Sickipedia.org*, the jokes disseminated - this time undoubtedly centred on anti-black stereotypicality - could be radically more extreme and explicit in terms of presenting racialised values and racist rhetoric than what had preceded them, free from the constraints of political correctness, social and discursive censure, and overt producer and audience identities.

# Chapter 3 :

## Comedy, Culture & The Public

### Sphere

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The third chapter addresses solely the communicative aspects of comic racism in popular culture, documenting the most significant aspects of its transformation over the past fifty years. In order to map this transformation comprehensively, I argue that it is necessary to conceptualise comedy as a legitimate communicative practice within the public sphere. This may, at first, seem to be a somewhat ill-conceived notion. However, this chapter will strongly argue that by redefining the public sphere as a fluid, ever-expanding discursive space, with reference to the contributions of the cultural, televisual, networked, and counter-public sphere models, comedy, and by extension comic racism, can legitimately be considered a part of it. The scholarly reasons for adopting this strategy is because comedy has clearly been historically shaped by external communicative structures and processes, while simultaneously illustrating that it somewhat paradoxically has deliberative functions and can express 'serious' social, cultural and politically-situated ideas. Moreover, I argue that this provides an original contribution to *critical humour studies*. This chapter will complete the historical narrative of comic racism in British popular culture in outlining the most recent communicative developments, which can be illustrated by *Sickipedia.org* and its networked, archival logic.

### Conceptualising comedy as a feature of the public sphere

As stated in the introduction, the first aim of the thesis is to examine the transformation of comic racism in British popular culture, in terms of both its communicative form and its ideological content that has led to its contemporary manifestations on *Sickipedia.org*. This narrative has been outlined in terms of a descriptive account of historical popular cultural examples in Chapter Two, focusing predominantly on content, with a particular emphasis on the centrality of anti-black prejudice and stereotypicality. This has provided an overall sketching of comic racism's materialisations in British popular culture, however, without a significant analytical insight.

Chapter Two showed that comic racism in terms of content - the ideological values represented in racist jokes - has never fully disappeared since racism's early manifestations in entertainment with blackface minstrelsy. The discursive components of the racist rhetoric and the stereotypes drawn upon remained relatively stable. It was the discursive space in which they could be articulated that provided change, due to the aesthetic and ethical developments of popular comedy. This finding,

concerning the discursive rigidity of the content, will be illustrated significantly in Chapters Four, Five and Six with the analysis of contemporary racist jokes on *Sickipedia.org*.

This chapter will address this notion of transformation more thoroughly in terms of communicative form, and flesh out the notion of publicly articulated comedy and its relevance, documenting how comic racism as a form of comedy - a public, artistic expression of communication - has been shaped by external communicative structures. Placing comic racist discourses into a more complex *conceptual* framework than the general theoretical approach discussed in Chapter One, will allow for a more comprehensive evaluation of the content's various thematic, discursive and communicative dimensions. Discussing British comic racism in this more elaborate context will fill in the gaps in the historical narrative of its movement from subsistence on the margins of popular culture to a more prominent contemporary role circulated on the Internet and other digitalised platforms with *Sickipedia.org*. Additionally, this chapter will highlight the positive contributions public sphere theory can provide to *critical humour studies*.

Comic racist discourses are a feature of public communication and have been historically shaped, in terms of both form and content by social, cultural and technological contexts. The conceptual framework most appropriate for analysing the changing nature of public communication over time is the public sphere model. Throughout the chapter, public sphere literature will be discussed in terms of social, cultural, political, and communicative processes as opposed to exclusively discursive space. The examples of contemporary comic racist discourse that will be deconstructed in the analysis chapters, will be evaluated conceptually in accordance with its unique constituency within this more progressive conceptualisation of public sphere.

Throughout academic literature on the public sphere, there are models and conceptualisations, that when applied appropriately, can outline comedy's position within this discursive *process*. Some are normative, others are illustrative, many are developed out of contrasting political traditions throughout the fields of sociology, political and communications studies (Downey, Mihelj & Konig, 2012). In terms of communication, comedy has a unique and distinctive set of features, in terms of both form and content, that separates it from other kinds within the public sphere. Furthermore, communicatively and thematically, comic discourse has changed over the past fifty years.

Aware of the danger of proliferating public sphere(s) and subsequently reducing its conceptual value, I am not claiming that these features are so idiosyncratic that there is justification for a model specifically formulated to account for comedy exclusively. It is however difficult to analyse humorous communication solely through singular pre-existing conceptual iterations of the public sphere. Comedy is therefore discussed as a feature or facet of a broad and complex conceptualisation of the public sphere that incorporates various discursive spaces characterised by different social, cultural, political, and communicative processes.

Outlining the features of, and related changes to humorous communication, instigated by these processes within a framework of the public sphere, requires the discussion of various different models. These include Habermas' normative ideal of deliberative democratic communication based on politics and citizenship, a redefinition based on discursive extensions into culture and popular culture, historical accounts of changes in communicative forms, and publics conceived as counter or alternative.

Together these conceptual models provide a considerable contribution to understanding the way humorous communication operates in the public sphere - a fluid, complex arena. These models drawn upon within the context of this research, are not argued to represent distinct normative public sphere frameworks, even if that is their author's original intention. Rather in this work they are discussed (and if necessary re-interpreted) due to their specific relevance for understanding the extension of the perimeters of public discursive space. Discussing these different models, holistically and as part of an integrated discursive process, helps address both the conceptual and communicative complexities of publicly circulated comic discourse over the past fifty years without proliferation of the public sphere concept.

It is necessary to evaluate humorous communication in accordance with the public sphere because it discursively contributes to the formation of actually existing publics - comic communities. The concept of the public sphere explores the ways in which public communication, deliberation and debate contributes to the formation of these publics. Acknowledging contributions from scholars like John Dewey (1954), publics are conceived as discursive interactional processes, not as a synonym for 'media audiences'. In relation to this, Peter Dahlgren (2005) argues that "atomised individuals, consuming media in their homes, do not comprise a public" (p.149). Comedy-based publics therefore will be referred to from the fundamental approach provided by Habermas that accounts for the democratic process of citizens discussing matters with one another in public.

According to Dahlgren (2005) the discursive interactional processes of the public sphere are fluid and sprawling. They consist of a citizen's direct perception of media and the interpretation of its output, but also the interactions between citizens - the point where discussion can be formalised as deliberation, and issues are discussed in a broader social context. Moreover, John Durham Peters (1993) stressed that the German term *Öffentlichkeit*, used by Habermas to refer to the public sphere, was firstly used in the political sense but came more and more to adopt the semantic territory of the audience. Durham Peters claimed that the political principle of *Öffentlichkeit* refers to the political principle of openness, the means of publication and the body of citizens which engage with that publication. Publicly communicated comedy follows this notion due to its content being distributed by a range of media for audiences to assertively consume.

Humorous communication also is formally constructed by individuals perceiving, interpreting and discussing aspects of social life before communicating related information humorously, to an audience. Audiences subsequently engage and interpret the humour, judge its merits, and if they so wish, re-circulate. This interactive process constructs a 'public'. Comic communities therefore

consist of both those who produce content and those who consume it, and as *Sickipedia.org* illustrates, both of these roles can be filled simultaneously. Comic communities, bound by public humorous communication, are extremely diverse in terms of the platform within the public realm from which they are communicated, their communicative form and their subject matter. Thusly, actual existing comic communities are part of the same discursive context, yet they are individualised and distinct from one another.

This idea of the comic community is not an entirely original conceptual contribution of this thesis. However, they have not been discussed in the context of the public sphere previously. Amy Carrell (1997) conceived of the notion of 'humour communities' which was essentially a collective term for audiences of different television situation comedies such as *All In The Family* (the American adaptation of *Till Death Do Us Part*), being representative of individual discourse communities. Ken Willis (2005) criticised Carrell's concept claiming that the very notion of 'community' is problematic in the context of humour, particularly arguing that within Carrell's conceptualisation, audiences with different attitudes and interpretations of a text would be considered part of the same, one 'community'. He specifically discussed this in relation to anti-racist and racist interpretations of comic racism. Conversely, Willis suggested the notion of 'humour networks', which took into consideration people's social relationships and conceptions of self-identity. Within Willis' model more attention is paid to the specific relationships members of the network have with one another, suggesting that shared membership to a network may be based on more than similar taste's and interpretations of humour, but also other cultural and intellectual interests.

However, in order to maintain conceptual distance between these two already defined terms, I will adopt the term comic community, referring to the communities that form around the production and consumption of public humour and comedy. As stated, public humorous communication is distinct from other forms of public deliberative communication. By deliberation, I am referring to the form of participatory civic communication within an interactional public sphere. Deliberation acts as a way of providing reasons for political decisions taken, questioning the justification and the legitimacy of them, "thereby enhancing the vitality of democratic institutions" (Dahlgren, 2009, p.87). Dahlgren (ibid.) argues that deliberation often takes the form of argumentation, and in this opponents can learn from each other and expand on their own perspective. Ultimately this encourages public-spirited perspectives of politics creating a generalised moral sense of collective good. When applying deliberation to humour and joking, I do not consider it to only apply to political humour, but also to humour that concerns social and cultural issues, including most notably for this research, the production and reproduction of perspectives on 'race' and ethnicity.

Humorous communication at a glance may seem ill-equipped to constitute deliberation, but with closer inspection one can identify that it commonly acts as a discursive structure that questions the legitimacy of social, cultural and political norms and values. As previously asserted in Chapter One, humour infiltrates every aspect of social life. For example, Sam Friedman (2011) has claimed that comedy has been neglected in even the most comprehensive assessments of British cultural

practices. He asserts that it must be acknowledged in academic enquiries as comedy is used in the negotiation of cultural capital amongst the privileged and powerful in society.

These notions, in combination with the assertion that humour is commonly regarded by the majority as non-serious and trivial as addressed in Chapter One, leads to the prominent presence of humour in public deliberation, without intervention from social authorities or institutional actors. Examples show that publicly communicated comedy does at times directly critique or attack social, cultural and political issues such as governmental policy, corrupt institutions, war, racism, sexism, religion and sexuality in an emancipatory fashion - beneficial to a perceived, liberal collective good. This form of humour often characterises specific comic communities, as illustrated in Chapter Two with alternative comedy in the 1980, defined by its intellectual approach to joke-telling, attacking Thatcherism, and a more general social critique of racism, sexism and homophobia. Other examples may address these issues, but not overtly - their presence in a joke may require a more in-depth interpretation.

To elaborate on discussions in the opening sections of Chapter One, public humorous communication and its respective comic communities can promote marginalisation and subordination, and addressing their discourses in terms of the public sphere framework can provide a fresh approach to *critical humour studies*. Comedy can address, and be explicitly and implicitly critical of social, cultural and political issues, but in a non-emancipatory manner. It is these forms of comedy that are at times constructed using prejudicial or what is regarded as offensive humour, and most importantly to this work, racist humour, with its inherent reproduction of ideological values.

As earlier stated, Lockyer and Pickering (2008) assert that the imperative crux of a critical approach to humour is to establish whether ridicule is directed at those who are in positions of power and authority or at those who are subordinated - up or down. This distinction can be labelled as emancipatory and marginalising, ridicule-based humour respectively. Marginalising humorous discourse cannot be regarded as contributing towards a collective, liberal good, however its consistent historical manifestations in the public arena and the comic communities which continue to circulate it (as illustrated in the previous chapter), indicate that there are groups and individuals in society who appreciate and promote its ideological values - actively contributing to its public reproduction.

In either case, whether the humour is explicit or implicit, emancipatory or marginalising, joking and comedy can integrate individuals into specific public communities based around a shared interest, whether that be in terms of subject matter or communicative platform. Furthermore within these communities, humour can act as a form of public deliberative discourse, scrutinising the social status quo, with a central function of publicly distributing socially, politically and cultural information, regardless of whether this is sensitive to political correctness or not. It is for this reason that it is important to discuss humorous communication in terms of a progressive public sphere conceptual framework.

Comedy and humour communicated publicly operates in accordance to a very different set of norms and practices than that of private, and this must be acknowledged when addressing what forms of humour require critical intervention. Humorous communication in the public sphere is as stated very diverse - it is presently multi-faceted. The various public sphere models discussed in this chapter apply to all humorous communication present in the contemporary public arena as opposed to each model accounting for a specific form of historical public humorous communication. Each model contributes to the understanding of the discursive processes and extensions of the public sphere.

Humorous communication is circulated today across a variety of cultural arenas. Publics co-exist with one another, they do not necessarily substitute each other over time. Currently stand-up comedy is distributed live in arenas, theatres, pubs and working men's or social clubs. Friedman (2011) claims the current live circuit to be a "booming" (p.347) multi-million pound industry. He also refers to stand-up's contemporary resurgence on television. Comedy has arguably never been more popular on television than it is today across a range of different genres, not to mention its stature in film. The Internet has provided a new, vast discursive space for public humorous communication on a multiplicity of topics. The conceptual model of the Internet-based, networked public sphere explains the most contemporary illustrations of comic public communication, most notably in terms of this research, *Sickipedia.org*. But, Internet-based comedy has not replaced what preceded it. Instead each model discussed in this chapter illustrates extensions and alternatives to the discursive perimeters of public space, specifically in reference to comedy, highlighting the fluid process of expansion in the public sphere to new sites of democratic communication. In positioning comedy and its plethora of iterations in this conceptual model, *critical humour studies* can progressively account for the societal implications of marginalising joking such as comic racism with heightened clarity.

## Identifying the foundation of the public sphere

To identify the space within the public sphere where humorous communication can be appropriately positioned, it would first seem appropriate to identify the defining attributes which characterise both the "ideal and actuality" (McGuigan, 2005, p.427) of the public sphere.

Dahlgren (2005) claims that "in schematic terms, a functioning public sphere is understood as a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates - ideally in an unfettered manner - and also the formation of political will (ie. public opinion)" (p.148). In this researcher's opinion, comic discourses in British popular culture correspond to this definition in many ways. Despite its non-serious demeanour, comic discourse circulates information, ideas and debates, and assists in the formation of public political opinion (in addition to reflecting it) regardless of whether those views are widely considered as morally abhorrent.

Although scholars who adopt the public sphere model are often criticised for an over-reliance on the Habermasian model, I will initially refer to Jürgen Habermas for guidance in identifying the foundation of the public sphere's discursive processes. This is not to assert that humorous communication can be most directly conceptualised in accordance with Habermas' work, rather to the contrary as will be explained throughout this chapter. The Habermasian public sphere is used here due to its status as representing "the benchmark against which to judge actually existing societies" (Downey, Mihelj & Konig, 2012, p339). The Habermasian public sphere provides the starting point to evaluate the discursive processes which have come to characterise humorous communication in the public arena, and will need the application of other public sphere models in order to be comprehensively realised.

Habermas defined the public sphere as:

"a social phenomenon just as elementary as action, actor, association, or collectivity...The public sphere cannot be conceived as an institution and certainly not as an organisation. It is not even a framework of norms...The public sphere can be best described as a network for communication information and points of view (ie. opinions as expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in process, filtered in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specific *public* opinions" (Habermas, 1996, p.360).

In reference to this definition Nancy Fraser (1990) stresses that Habermas' work remains an "indispensable resource" (p.56) for discussing the public sphere. She claims that the Habermasian public sphere is a space of discursive relations - "an institutionalised arena of discursive interaction" (ibid., p.57). It provides a space in modern societies where political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. She argues that Habermas' public sphere is a conceptual domain separate from both the state and the market-economy (which are in turn distinct from one another), and furthermore it is critical of them as the public sphere provides an area in which citizens can deliberate about their common issues and affairs.

Angela Crack (2007) states that Habermas' public sphere model can be divided into three structural preconditions: the media institutions it *relies* upon, the governmental institutions it *rests* upon and the civil society institutions it *consists* of. The first accounts for both physical and virtual (text-based) media spaces that allow for public debate to manifest. The second asserts that the sovereign state acts as the addressee of public opinion whilst still maintaining that the public sphere remains independent from it. This accredits public deliberation with a degree of political effect. The third states that all citizens, regardless of social status, are affected by governmental decisions and accordingly have the civil right to participate in public deliberation. These preconditions together formulate an additional distinctive feature of the public sphere - its institutional structure is intrinsically domestic, and tied to nation. Crack argues that "the domestic public sphere relies on several presuppositions: for instance, that the state has sovereign authority over its territory, that there is a national communications network and a national media...Habermas

and many of his critics share an unquestioned assumption: all accounts are similarly predicated on the institutional framework of the nation state" (annotated quote 2007, p.345).

To illustrate, Habermas outlined his public sphere model in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) in accordance with a geographically, historically and politically specific existing public sphere, delineating its rise and subsequent demise (resulting in criticism due to its homogenous limitations and subsequent revisions from Habermas himself). This model was conceptualised around the eighteenth century European bourgeois public spheres typical of London and Parisian coffee houses and *salons* respectively. The ideal being that middle class males, or 'private persons' as Fraser (1990) puts it, independent from politics, government and big business, would assemble to voice their opinions on current affairs in public forms of communication (Fraser, 1990, Durham Peters, 1993, McGuigan, 2005). According to Fraser the bourgeois public spheres acted as "counterweights to absolutist states" (1990, p.58) providing a form of mediation between society and the state, holding the state accountable for society through public expression. The public sphere could be defined as representing an open and accessible "ideal of unrestricted rational discussions of public matters" (ibid., p.59).

The essence of this utopian ideal was based on an egalitarian political view which promoted expression and freedom of speech in public forms of communication. According to Downey, Mihelj and Konig (2012), the Habermasian deliberative public sphere emphasised popular inclusion and civility allowing for the creation of better arguments to defeat opponents. This strongly promoted that "everyone should be able to participate in debate and decision making" (ibid., p.339) - individual interests should be put aside and the attention should instead be focused on the universal. This optimistically aimed for a general consensus amongst the whole of society that decisions should be made for the greater good, these taking material form in legally guaranteed free speech, a free press, free assembly and representative government (Fraser, 1990).

Habermas (1989) explains that the European bourgeois public sphere failed for a variety of different reasons including non-bourgeois members of society infiltrating the public sphere; the public sphere becoming saturated with a multiplicity of different interests primarily defined by an emerging class struggle; and the emergence of the welfare state. Each of these problematic circumstances represents an overall failure of the separation between society and the state. Despite the failings of the existing European public sphere of the eighteenth century portrayed in Habermas' work, the concept was not formulated in vain, as demonstrated by Habermas' long sustaining influence on sociological, democratic theory.

Many theorists agree that the value of the Habermasian public sphere is that it provides an evaluative measure of communications in societies whereby critical theorists can identify deficiencies of democracy (Downey, Mihelj & Tonig, 2012). The work of Habermas also has a direct influence on this thesis. Although humorous communication is somewhat removed from the political disputation Habermas illustrated, it importantly provides what can be considered an essential starting point for discussing the complex processes which have characterised public

communication in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Lincoln Dahlberg (2004) iterates, Habermas was not addressing a specific public, but a "whole array of complex networks of multiple and overlapping publics constituted through the critical discourse of individuals, community groups, civic associations, social movements, and media organizations" (p.6).

Humorous communication clearly does not fit into the Habermasian public sphere framework or, indeed, any normative model. It does not act as or exist within a specific discursive space, independent from the state or economy, where actors clearly deliberate on social, cultural and political affairs in the public arena. Public comedy simply cannot be argued to be a form of communication where individuals rationally and critically discuss matters of the day in the manner Habermas outlines in his work, for it has not historically been communicated in public in such a way.

This does not mean that public humorous communication cannot be conceptualised within a formulation of the public sphere, or that Habermas' iteration holds no relevance, it is just that humorous communication cannot be fully framed within this liberal, utopian ideal. The Habermasian model of the public sphere provides the *conceptual foundation* of understanding the public sphere as a process (or processes) which humorous communication is a part of. Comedy does comprise a specific form of communication within discursive space supporting *some* of Habermas' ideal features.

Comedy *can* be deliberative, it *can* be democratic and it *can* promote freedom of expression independent from the state. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the complexities that prevent its conceptual framing within the Habermasian model. Comedy is embedded within various social, cultural, political, and communicative structures and processes which prevent its discussion within anything remotely resembling a normative conceptualisation. Humorous communication therefore inhabits a small and specific facet of the public sphere. It is inherently connected to the normative ideal of communication in the public sphere, but it exists within an extension to the perimeters of public discursive space initially determined by Habermas.

The remainder of this chapter will outline humorous communication and its publics in terms of these processes. Humorous communication as a part of the public sphere is ineluctably integrated with, most importantly and predominantly, culture and popular culture, but also the communicative forms typical of the mass media and the structural features of a networked society.

## Redefining the public sphere as aestheticised & cultural

The first and most important progressive extension to the perimeters of the public sphere in terms of identifying publicly communicated comedy is the notion of an aestheticised (Jacobs, 2007) or culturally (McGuigan, 1996, 2005) situated conceptual model. The key issue in discussing comedy as a part of the public sphere is that it is fundamentally embedded within the cultural and popular cultural aspects of society and critical debate, as opposed to the political (though the two can converge). Habermas' normative framework, which forms the foundation of the public sphere

concept, would not include comedy, due to its existence as an overly-cultural form of communication. Echoing the common criticism towards, and the lay perception of, the academic study of humour, comedy would frankly be considered too trivial for the public sphere in its Habermasian vision. Scholars have been critical of Habermas and his contribution to public sphere theory due to the limitations of its conceptual discursive space in terms of incorporating culture. Jonathon Roberge (2011) argues that developments of aesthetic and cultural public sphere models are promising for providing a more complex account of rational-critical discourse and debate, including culture, where "nothing is too trivial or mundane" (p.436).

It is important to stress that Habermas (1989) did not state that the cultural and political aspects of the public sphere do not correspond. Rather to the contrary, it was the culturally situated, yet politically engaged citizens who occupied the *salons* and coffee houses that provided the foundation of his actually existing bourgeois public sphere. The critique outlining the Habermasian public sphere's inadequacies in regard to its cultural dimensions are due to Habermas' assertion that the cultural eventually outweighed the political, signalling the public sphere's demise. His argument was that citizens progressively became more interested in apathetic concerns, deliberation was left to politicians, and within culture, the public sphere descended into the abyss, as mass-media-centric entertainment rose in its stead, with its inherent ties to commercialisation, capitalism and the market-economy (ibid.). Criticism of Habermas stresses that his historical narrative in *Structural Transformation*, specifically in regard to the public sphere's demise, is somewhat overstated (Calhoun, 1992), and that within contemporary public spaces, cultural products can still fulfil a deliberative role.

Jim McGuigan (2005) summarises aspects of Habermas' definition of the public sphere by drawing specific attention to the distinction between what he identifies as the literary and the political public sphere. McGuigan stresses that the literary public sphere was a key area in which writing and literary comments would "transcend fleeting topics of conversation" (p.429). He stresses the distinction between journalism and the presentation of news, and the subject matter typical of the literary public sphere, which was characterised by a more in-depth critical assessment of events, with ideas more typical of Enlightenment philosophy. The communication emblematic of the literary public sphere was more common in novel-based literature and art than journalistic output such as newspapers and maintained a social role that "prepared the ground for legitimate public controversy over current events" (ibid., p.430). Journalism and the reflection of 'transient' news were more associated with the political public sphere. McGuigan therefore begins to develop the notion that culturally and popular culturally situated discursive spaces such as the literary public sphere could represent a more complex reflection on the problems of life, meaning and representation. This contribution from McGuigan importantly highlights an extension to the public sphere which could potentially include humorous communication and its respective publics.

McGuigan argues that within the Habermasian conceptualisation of the public sphere, artistic and literary forms of communication provided equal or in some cases unrivalled sites of disputation in comparison to the more formal products typical of the political public sphere. He claims that

nineteenth century realist novels provided more sociological insight than any *Times* editorial, and that the history of arts in general can attest to providing valuable examples of social, cultural and political debate (McGuigan, 2005).

McGuigan's key argument surrounding the public sphere stresses that critical social, cultural and political commentary in the public domain historically is in many ways aestheticised with a strong affective appeal. He argues that no form of representation is ever entirely rational or cognitive (accurate information favourable to dialogic reason). In practice the wide array of representational forms in the cultural domain, whether factual or fictional, provide a blend of affective and cognitive elements. He states this blend of aestheticisation, critical-rational debate, politics and popular culture provides a shift away from the Habermasian normative model of the public sphere, unveiling McGuigan's contribution - the cultural public sphere.

McGuigan defines the cultural public sphere as including "various channels and circuits of mass popular-culture and entertainment, the routinely mediated aesthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine the good life. The concept of a cultural public sphere refers to the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain of affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of communication" (2005, p.435). Roberge (2011), in reference to McGuigan's model argues that his contribution does not imply that culture, aesthetics and affective appeal are merely dimensions of the public sphere culture. Aesthetics and affective appeal are *constants* in the public sphere, continuously interacting with the public sphere's other dimensions, richly and meaningfully. Culture and popular culture act as processes which enhance and extend Habermas' initial ideal, and it is within this remodelling of the public sphere that one can situate humorous communication.

McGuigan provides a succession of cultural and popular cultural examples that have provided information, debate and ideals in the public domain - aestheticised examples which he states act as an 'extension' to the Habermasian public sphere. For example, he discusses the "space for experimentation and critical argument" (p.432) in British public service broadcasting on the BBC, highlighting several social (including feminist) issues represented through the means of melodrama and soap opera. He argues fittingly within the British context, that televised soap operas such as *Eastenders* and *Coronation Street* (the latter of which was initially influenced by Richard Hoggart's early cultural studies writings) act as cultural institutions that engage with issues representative of various social categories.

Due to both the communicative and discursive similarities, I argue that comic discourses can be discussed equivalently within this cultural remodelling of the public sphere. McGuigan's critical interventionist stance of the public sphere provides a way of conceiving comedy as a public form of communication. He refers to the public sphere as a discursive space constituted by popular cultural forms within which critical argument can still occur. McGuigan refers specifically to how British comic discourse (for example *Bremner, Bird & Fortune's* satirical interpretations of the Gulf War II) can act as a form of radical analysis, and furthermore recognises that the humorous dimension of

such critical inquiries is a key dimension for its permissibility in the British media without a formal backlash.

Other historical examples that can expand on this notion include 1980s alternative comedy, political satire from the likes of Armando Iannucci in his critically acclaimed television series *The Thick Of It* and its accompanying feature-length film *In The Loop*, and the British answer to *The Daily Show*, Channel 4's *The 10 O'Clock Show*. More recently there are the likes of Russell Brand, a commonly regarded shallow comedian well known for his flamboyant appearance and humorous autobiographical accounts of his sexual and drug-taking exploits. Recently, he was provided with an influential platform by the *New Statesman* (guest editor) to extensively critique the current political regime. Brand simultaneously promoted a complete revolution of British democratic and political practices in favour of a utopian alternative based on neo-socialist values. Throughout both the *New Statesman* article and a subsequent interview with Jeremy Paxman on BBC2's *Newsnight*, Brand attempted to promote and support his views with consistent humorous allusions and references to humour throughout:

Russell Brand: "Why vote? We know it's not going to make any difference. We know that already. I have more impact at West Ham United cheering them on...and they lost to City, unnecessarily Saturday (tuts)"

Jeremy Paxman: "Now you're being facetious"

Russell Brand: "Facetiousness has as much value as seriousness"

Paxman: "You're not going to solve the world's problems by facetiousness"

Brand: "You're not going to solve them with the current system, at least facetiousness is funny. I don't mind if you take me seriously, I'm just here to draw attention to a few ideas. I just want to have a little bit of a laugh. I'm saying there are people with alternative ideas that are far better qualified than I am and far better qualified more importantly than the people that are currently doing that job [the government]".<sup>30</sup>

This transcript highlights a few key points concerning humour and the public sphere. Despite its obvious distinction from Habermasian principles, comic discourse can address serious political issues and, in the public sphere, it is characterised by a relative lack of authoritative intervention as institutional reaction appears to be less severe for supposed non-serious (humorous) deliberation regardless of whether it is emancipatory or marginalising. This notion expressed by Paxman epitomises ambivalent interpretations of 'serious' subject matter discussed in a humorous context that is just as relevant to comic racism as it is to Brand's facetious approach to revolutionary politics.

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30 [Extract taken from BBC Newsnight October 23rd 2013] [Retrieved 14/09/13]

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YR4CseY9pk>]

In the interview Brand attempts to communicate what he considers serious political rhetoric in his responses to Paxman's questions. However despite the "seriousness" of the subject matter, he makes a humorous comparison between participating in the current voting system and "cheering on West Ham", implying that participating in the ballot box has as little significant implications for social, cultural and political change as cheering on a football team can contribute to them successfully scoring goals.

His quip is constructed on the foundation of two separate and conflicting notions, incongruous from one another - politics and football. Therefore it is widely considered inappropriate that they be legitimately compared. Brand knows that this comparison is an exaggeration and it is mentioned purely for comic effect, highlighted by his smiles and facial expressions whilst talking. Paxman immediately accuses Brand of trivialising their discussion (already in the interview Paxman had labelled Brand "a trivial man" for commenting on Paxman's "gorgeous" beard) essentially asserting and reinforcing the common perspective - two parties cannot have a serious discussion about a serious subject if one party is going to use humour. Society will not and should not take seriously anything communicated humorously or through jokes. At this point Brand almost angrily responds by questioning why seriousness and facetiousness must be addressed as such antithetical constructs.

This highlights a general point being asserted throughout this chapter and the thesis, contributing to the foundations laid by *critical humour studies* that humour can be interpreted in regards to deeper meaning and representation - in some cases it is a necessity. Communication regarding serious sociological, political or cultural topics, in jest, does not automatically trivialise its existence - its rhetoric is not immediately deemed void. However, this thesis aims to build on these grounds to discuss the notion of humour as a valid component of the public sphere, and the complexities that subsequently become associated with its critique.

Whether humour is used in public for example to critique social and political institutions that are perceived to hinder liberal democracy due to an alleged over-emphasis on self-preservation and dominant interest, or contrarily to re-establish stereotypical ideals and racial hatred which states that all black people are primitive criminals who should be hung from trees, to provide an extreme, yet valid example, one cannot ignore the other publicly communicated, historical social, cultural and political contexts which underpin that particular discourse. One cannot assume that the presence of humour exonerates discourse of its wider social, political and rhetorical significance. Comedy *can* hold values and messages which are suitable for legitimate critical enquiry, highlighting its position within the public sphere, and within this framework, it is possible to contextualise humour both in terms of its communicative developments and its wider discursive issues.

Therefore I argue that while humorous public communication is not the primary object of McGuigan's conceptualisation of the cultural public sphere, it can be considered as part of it. McGuigan (2005) provides several media-based and popular cultural examples of sites where

social, political and cultural opinion, ideas, attitudes or debate can be communicated. These did not necessarily have to be politically motivated - they range from nostalgic, functional and sentimental. The common factor among all is that they are socially conscious, educational and fundamentally distribute information in an entertaining manner. Similarly, the comic texts analysed in this research circulate specific ideas and opinions concerning 'race', ethnicity, nation, gender, class, and sexuality, publicly circulating cultural representations in a subjectively entertaining way - they are a part of the cultural public sphere.

In this manner, I have begun to outline the processes derivative of the public sphere which highlight comedy's place within it. In part, the idea of a cultural or aesthetic public sphere provides a conceptual framework that extends the perimeters of Habermas' liberal model in order to assess comic racist discourse. Nevertheless the extension of the concept to account for popular culture does not in itself clarify these processes in sufficient detail for evaluation.

### Processes of communicative change

Certain processes, that can in isolation be treated as external to the public sphere, can also be seen as integral to how forms of humorous communication are shaped and function in society. The first of these processes are the technological changes that have occurred within the communicative forms of media through which comedy has been distributed. John Thompson (1993) argued that modern media and communication technologies provided opportunities for informed public discussion on serious issues. For this reason television, and more recently the Internet, are very important dimensions of the cultural public sphere model that need to be investigated more thoroughly in terms of their respective communicative forms and modes of address. It is necessary to discuss the ways in which television and the Internet effect humorous communication in the cultural public sphere because it quite transparently has a continuous presence on both platforms across several genres such as situation comedies, panel shows, sketch shows, chat shows, stand-up comedy, satire and joke sites. Furthermore each of these genres of media-based comedic output contains different approaches to and styles of humour, both marginalising and emancipatory, historically providing examples of comic racism and anti-comic racism, forming respective televisual-based comic communities.

Television's effect on the public sphere according to Dahlgren (1995) can be described as a prism that constitutes simultaneously an industry, sets of audio-visual texts and most importantly a sociocultural experience. He stated that the political economy of the industry of television is "central to the media institutional dimension of the public sphere, and the television industry itself is obviously shaped by the structural features of society; its audio-visual texts of television are key elements of the public spheres representational dimension; television as a sociocultural experience correlates directly with the dimension of sociocultural interaction" (p.25).

By sociocultural experience and interaction, Dahlgren argues that what is on a television screen is interpreted by viewers, entering their individual social worlds where they are subsequently

reinterpreted and placed into a wider range of discourses through processes of social interaction. He states "television links the everyday world to larger symbolic orders of social and political life" (ibid., p.39), implying its importance for forming publics - television is a part of our daily lived reality and it penetrates into the microcosms of our social world. He argues that "television as a sociocultural experience would strengthen public culture and democratic participation" (ibid., p.46). He elaborates on this by stressing that within the political system, participatory democracy is limited - our perception of the political world around us is through representation. Whilst we cannot be present for all events in the world which affect our political and social judgements, television can provide a site for representation. Television allows us to become informed on both national and international issues and questions.

From a more practical perspective, television has had implications on humorous communication's production and consumption. Klaus Bruhn Jensen (2010) has accounted for the communicative transformations provided by the mass media which includes all analogue technologies including printed books, newspapers, film, television and radio, all of which can be integrated within the public sphere conceptual framework. He argued that mass media such as television extended the potential for the dissemination of and access to information across space and time. Dahlgren (1995) claimed that Habermas' actual existing bourgeois public sphere consisted of small-scale printed media and conversational interaction, but in contemporary society the role of the public sphere is dominated by the vast terrain of mass media. Comedy's induction into the mass media through television broadcasts (and film) in the mid-twentieth century provided a space where its content could be circulated to a much wider audience, restricted far less by time and space. This subsequently allowed for, and continues to allow for, the widespread distribution of socially, culturally and politically oriented views on a wide range of topics, which at times include ideas of subordination and marginalisation.

There is one central issue concerning television's communicative shaping of comedy in the cultural public sphere, and this concerns the question of who can engage in debate, discussion or deliberation. Television in the public sphere may represent a sociocultural experience, and televised manifestations of social, cultural and political discourse, humorous or not, may contribute to the wide-spread distribution of socially relevant issues publicly. The original text presented is selected by individuals who are not directly representative of the public who interpret it. Television is a mass-medium, indicating that its communicative form works on a one-to-many dynamic - there are only a small number of people bringing topics to the attention of a comparatively huge audience. The interactive dynamic between members of a televisually-based comic community is restricted - there are strict limitations on who can actually participate in the initial discussion of social, political and cultural matters.

These issues of participation and production in the cultural public sphere are transformed with the development of the Internet and new digital technologies. Online communication, particularly Web 2.0 no longer conforms to prescriptive limitations of one-to-many broadcast media in this regard creating multiple opportunities for new producers of comic discourse. The features of networked

aspects of the public sphere provided by the Internet serve to explain the most recent communicative developments in comedy. Roberge (2011) argues that it is important to develop a nuanced understanding of the Internet and its relationship to the aesthetic public sphere, and that despite valid criticisms, the Internet undoubtedly needs to be acknowledged as contributing towards a broader participatory culture.

Dahlgren (2005) discussed the Internet and its impact on the public sphere, contemplating what bearing it has on democracy. He stressed that the Internet further pluralises and extends the public sphere - it is at the forefront of the evolving public sphere. He claims that publics formed on the Internet allow engaged citizens to play a role in the development of democratic politics. He further asserts that this is where the Internet most obviously makes its contribution to the public sphere, with the thousands of websites, blogs, discussion groups, chat rooms, journalism, civic organisation groups that provide sites of public deliberation on topical matters in a symbolically democratic fashion. Moreover, Sinnreich, Graham and Trammell (2011) typologically identified the social specifications for a democratised network. They claim that it must be decentralized, universally accessible, censor-proof, surveillance-proof, secure, scalable, permanent, fast, independent and evolvable. These key features are also applicable to the Internet-based public sphere even if the topics of debate are not explicitly political, like much of the comic content discussed in this work, specifically *Sickipedia.org*.

The approach of this thesis differs from Dahlgren's in that while it adopts the democratic foundations of the public sphere concept, it is not limited to solely evaluating politically-based discourse. This is because contemporary examples of comic racism account for social and cultural discursive elements, in addition to political.

Bruhn Jensen (2010) stated that new media including the Internet gives rise to utopian perspectives on the role of communication in society. The Internet can be generally regarded as an important tool in spreading global thinking, universalism, and equality (Caiani & Wagemann, 2009). Bruhn Jensen (2010) stressed that digitalisation, a key dimension of the network society and communicative forms of the networked dimensions of the public sphere, has called the idea of communication into question. He stated that the new possibilities provided by the Internet and digitalised technologies have signalled the end of communication as concrete discursive structures. Angela Crack (2007) is one such theorist who has theorised new digitalised media within the context of the public sphere concept, identifying the emergence of what she refers to as the networked public sphere. Her argument is theoretically grounded within the literature of the network society, a term originally coined by Manuel Castells (1997). It must be stated that within the context of this chapter - which is shaped around discussing humorous communication and has argued against the proliferation of public sphere models - the networked public sphere is interpreted as the networked *dimensions* of the cultural redefinition of the public sphere, rather than a separate framework.

The networked society in its most crude definition depicts the social transition the world experienced in the late-twentieth and early twenty first centuries as a result of a technological revolution, a restructuring of capitalism, an individualisation of labour, a real virtuality constructed by the media and a transformation of the material foundations of life, space and time (Castells, 1997).

Core to Crack's work (2007) is her identification of a key aberration from Habermas' ideal - its intrinsic ties to the nation-state. She argues that the contemporary transition into the networked society breaks down this relationship. Her work theoretically aligns itself alongside Castells and Jan Van Dijk in claiming that the network society marks a trend towards individualisation, social fragmentation and new forms of mediated community. Crack refers to Van Dijk (2006) who asserts that network structures pervade all areas of society, including politics, government, the economy, technology, and the community. Crack (2007) argues that these pervasive processes disrupt conventional ideals of space, borders and territory and therefore directly impact on the institutional foundations of public deliberation, signalling the transition to a transnational public sphere. She argues that logistically, the Internet can transcend physical obstacles, allowing for deliberative exchanges that would traditionally be restricted by nation.

The networked public sphere of the Internet is a consequence of what Crack labels 'communicative networks' (2007, p.345). Crack states that conventional public sphere theory is insufficiently theorised to account for the communicative processes typical of contemporary networked society. For example, this public sphere model relies on the wide accessibility and ownership of ICTs. According to a recent ITU<sup>31</sup> (2013) report, 2.7 billion people have access to the Internet, a technology which Crack states has spread "far faster than any other comparable (technology)" (2007, p.346). She also refers to the many-to-many structure of the Internet, which according to Lievrouw (2012) and Bruhn Jensen (2010) is more specific to Web 2.0, in opposition to the one-to-many model of the mass media. Within the context of the Internet, information is exchanged in a fast and flexible manner, with the capability to support various kinds of data whether based on text, image, sound or video. Crack argues that the Internet's unique feature is its radically transnational democratic potential - "for a small outlay and a modicum of technical knowledge, people can set up their own website or blog and potentially access a global audience of millions" (2007, p.346). She stresses that within the networked public sphere, public debate is no longer restricted to a limited range of media outlets, but rather an "infinitely more heterogeneous discursive environment" (ibid.). Interactive debate within the networked public sphere of the Internet sharply contrasts with the conceptual models typical of the mass media. The Internet provides a space for "a highly complex web of overlapping discussion forums on every conceivable topic" (ibid.).

One such form of communication which has excelled within the networked dimensions of the public sphere is comedy. Comic discourse can take many forms on the Internet, from humorous images,

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31 ITU - International Telecommunication Union - United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies

memes, *Vines*, satirical songs, the remixing of televised comedy on new platforms such as *Youtube*, and joke websites. These examples feature on heterogeneous, decentralised, universally applicable sites of communication, not inherently tied to nation-state boundaries, which have marked the end of concrete discursive structures. There are far fewer limitations to what topics can be discussed and by whom, and most importantly they are a small facet of a vast plain of information. One is not forced to debate or consume information online. People can enter into comedic discussion if they wish to, and this will only be shared with others with similar interests. This illustrates, in terms of the cultural public sphere the communicative transition from television to the Internet, the mass model of the media to the networked, both of which have had significant effects on publicly communicated comedy.

Fundamentally the Internet functions according to a liberal, democratic dynamic. Websites provide a place for actors to assert their agency and humorously discuss certain subjects. As previously stated, humorous deliberation can be critical of social, cultural and political institutions and affairs, in both emancipatory or marginalising ways - the humour can socially be aimed up or down. Both feature in the Internet-based examples of humorous communication. The Internet has a huge overarching importance within the context of this research as it provides the fundamental reason for discussing comedy in the public sphere. This is because the egalitarian promise of Internet-based public communication has paradoxically encouraged the most significant re-emergence of comic racism within the popular cultural public domain in forty years. The networked aspects of the cultural public sphere and its notions of decentralisation, universal accessibility and lack of censorship and surveillance has contributed to a discursive space in which marginalising discourses, connoting racialised, among other, ideas of superiority, marginalisation and subordination, can thrive.

## Comic communities as counter-publics

The final process that shapes humorous communication in the public sphere that will be discussed in this chapter is not external like the communicative processes identified, yet it still contributes to the overall argument that the public sphere needs to be addressed as fluid and progressive rather than concrete and stagnant. The following section deals with the flexibility within the cultural public sphere and how it influences and shapes specific publics in alternative ways. As stated, humorous communication in the cultural redefinition of the public sphere creates communities that do not always contribute to an emancipatory debate. Moreover, comic communities are not necessarily mainstream, they can often adopt features which are commonly associated with counter-discursive spaces.

Woo-Young (2005) defines a specific alternative public sphere conceptual model. He identifies it as a discursive space in which counter-discourse is produced and consumed by counter-publics. These counter-publics are made up of groups and individuals who have had their voices removed from the mainstream public sphere. I do not adopt the view that there is a conceptually distinct alternative public sphere, rather I argue that there are spaces within the public sphere, a discursive

process, which allow for counter-publics to be formed, characterised by alternative values, and counter-discourse to be circulated and consumed.

Nancy Fraser (1990), Craig Calhoun (1992) and John Downey and Natalie Fenton have all acknowledged this notion surrounding counter-publics in a public sphere "in flux" (Downey & Fenton, 2003, p.186). Fraser (1990) to some extent is critical of the Habermasian approach to the public sphere. She argues that Habermas was wrong to idealise the liberal values of the European bourgeois public sphere and that the reason for this idealisation was due to his reluctance to examine non-liberal public spheres in competition with it. With reference particularly to the women's suffrage movement, she explains how groups excluded from the official public sphere can still communicate deliberative opinions within a multiplicity of public arenas, such as protest. She stresses that during the historical period Habermas referred to when outlining the genesis of the public sphere, there was already a plurality of counter-publics, sharing the same democratic principles, yet providing disputation from an adversarial approach contrasting with the mainstream. Fraser (1990) claimed these ranged from nationalist, popular peasant, and working-class to elite, women-based counter-publics.

Ultimately Fraser "rethinks" the Habermasian public sphere and calls into question several of its core assumptions, the most relevant being that a "single, comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics " and that "discourse in the public spheres should be restricted to deliberation about the common good" (1990, p.63). Whilst I maintain that it is not in the best interest of democratic theory to proliferate conceptual frameworks of the public sphere due to its inherent consequence of diluting the value of the concept, I do assert that within the conceptual model a diverse assortment of actually existing publics can be located. These publics can contribute to mainstream, liberal democratic practices and values, but not all do, others subsist in counter to the mainstream with their own alternative agendas yet nonetheless must be identified as party to the public sphere.

Fraser asserted that in stratified societies such as Britain - "societies whose basic institutional framework generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination" (ibid., p.66) - a plurality of competing publics better serves the ideal of participatory parity than a singular space. This argument is with reference to a greater overall sense of social, cultural and democratic equality, where counter-publics provide a space for deliberation amongst subordinated groups. Furthermore, in this work Fraser does not provide her own subjective normative reinterpretation of the public sphere, she provides an argument based on historical facts - a revisionist historiography of the public sphere. These facts indicate that women, workers, non-'whites' and homosexuals have all constituted alternative publics in which they can distribute counter discourses, not necessarily critical of the mainstream, just alternative to it.

Martin Nkosi Ndlela (2010) states that "relentlessly critical civil society, opposition parties, and other prodemocracy movements" (p.94) whom are frustrated by a suppressed voice in the public sphere, turn towards alternative communicative spaces, specifically cultural spaces in which the

media operates. Within this space he notably includes the Internet. Downey and Fenton (2003) alongside Naomi Klein (2000) also argue that the Internet can be regarded as the saviour of alternative media and its facilitation of public debate. This notion implies there is a binding relationship between counter-publics, counter-discourses and alternative communicative platforms.

However, it must be stated that the vast extension to the communicative perimeters of the cultural public sphere provided by the Internet, creates both mainstream and alternative publics. This raises the question, what makes a communicative form alternative? Do alternative media provide an attractive prospect or necessary platform for counter-publics, or do media become alternative when adopted by counter-publics? Ndlela (2010) argues alternative media in the public sphere can be defined as any media falling outside the formal corporate mainstream media, but to be 'alternative' it must embody the Gramscian notion of counter-hegemony. By counter-hegemony, Ndlela is referring to the notion of challenging the dominant socio-political order. This implies that it is the discourse that determines whether the media is alternative or not - alternative media become alternative when adopted by counter-publics.

When applying counter-publics to humorous communication and discourses, several issues are raised. The central argument surrounding counter-publics asserts that the public sphere must be defined by multiple publics as opposed to one. This chapter has continuously maintained that comic communities are situated in a fluid discursive space, distinctly separate from Habermas' normative ideal. Comic communities' constituency within the cultural redefinition of the public sphere represents an argument that states that actual existing public spheres cannot be conceptualised normatively. In the discussion of the cultural redefinition, I have already established that Habermas' model is insufficient for evaluating a wide range of publics that must be considered part of the public sphere such as comic communities.

The notion of alternative and counter publics further solidifies the argument that the public sphere is incredibly vast, complex and constantly extending its perimeters. The presence of counter-public spaces does not contradict the cultural public sphere - the two approaches are not in conceptual conflict, rather they fit together cordially. The two can coexist within this flexible conceptualisation of the public sphere. Counter-publics can exist and have the same function even if they are defined as cultural. This understanding of counter-publics and alternative media leads to questioning the lengths to which comic publics are shaped by alternative values. To what extent can comic publics be counter-publics and is *Sickipedia.org* a counter-public?

This question is a component of a larger question asking what makes a 'public' counter. Catherine Squires (2002) questions whether counter-publics are characterised by a shared marginal identity or the expression of counter ideologies. Holt (1995) for example, in reference to what he calls 'the black public sphere' (p.325), shares Ndlela's (2010) view and argues that a counter-public is not a counter-public if it is not working within a space for critiquing the dominant order. To return to humorous communication in the cultural public sphere, one is forced to once again raise the question as to whether a comic community can be counter. The answer is that it can, but not all are.

Comic communities constitute publics formed in the cultural public sphere that can adhere to both mainstream and counter values, and there is evidence for both.

A truly problematic issue concerns whether comic communities based on a shared interest in racist, sexist or homophobic opinions and views for example should be considered mainstream or alternative. Both the historical and contemporary comic racist comic communities discussed in the thesis do not fully constitute counter-publics according to any scholarly definition. The historical narrative of comic racism and its antithesis of anti-comic racism in British popular culture indicate that *both* of their respective comic communities at various points have adopted features of counter-publics. It may seem somewhat paradoxical but Chapter Two highlighted that both comic racist and anti-comic racist publics have been representative of both mainstream and alternative values at different historical points of British popular culture.

The underlying facts concerning comic racist communities in British popular culture create a dilemma that links to both communicative form and content. When are, and when have comic communities been, alternative? The examples of comic racist content in British popular culture referred to are most commonly distributed using mainstream forms of media whether that has been on television from the sixties to the nineties, or on the Internet over the last fifteen years. They are not, in spite of what their members may think in terms of attacking political correctness (see following section), counterhegemonic, as they do not attack the dominant groups in society using alternative media. Furthermore, one can deduce from the identification of groups that are ridiculed in the discourse, and the continuous ideological reproduction of white superiority in the jokes, these communities are not made up of individuals from marginalised or subordinated groups whose voices are otherwise not accounted for in society. These communities have essentially used mainstream media to socially exclude groups already marginalised, making it very difficult to argue that comic racist communities are in any way examples of counter-publics.

This raises a core issue concerning subjective perspectives of the social world and attitudes. Are the current core social values that of equality, emancipation and political correctness? Or, do ideological values which support the dominant while simultaneously subordinating the marginalised, whether that is in accordance to class, gender, sexuality or 'race', represent the mainstream way of thinking, and thus providing an explanation for comic racism's continuous reproduction on public communicative platforms associated with popular culture? One's own answer to these questions determines whether the discourse of a comic racist community within the public sphere can be considered counterhegemonic, or somewhat more worryingly representative of the (reactionary) mainstream. Could it be that comic communities dedicated to critiquing institutional social injustices for the benefit of a perceived liberal, democratic collective good, are more representative of counter-publics than those devoted to prejudice and the reinforcement of subordination?

## The communicative strategy & logic of Sickipedia.org

This chapter has provided a conceptual framework which allows for the appropriate positioning of *Sickipedia.org* within the fluid, discursive space of the cultural public sphere - completing Chapter Two's historical narrative. This final section of the chapter will outline, with reference to the content analysis results, the ways in which *Sickipedia.org* operates as a contemporary, marginalising comic community, comprehensively illuminating the *communicative* transformation of comic racist discourses in British popular culture.

*Sickipedia.org* functions in accordance to several contemporary public communicative features, which assist in the formation of its strategy and logic. It is a product of the broadening developments and processes outlined in this chapter - a result of a diverse, cultural redefinition of the public sphere that highlights that comedy can provide deliberative articulations of social, cultural and political matters that can be shared amongst a public - a comic community. In this case, that community has developed a reciprocal, and blurred dynamic between producer and audience, in which consumers can also create content for consumption - user generated content. This is a result of the expansions to the public sphere provided by new digitalised technologies and the networks installed by the Internet, relocating comic racist facets of popular culture from television, to the web.

In terms of content, *Sickipedia.org* produces humorous discourses specifically aimed to be explicitly antagonistic towards marginal groups (non-whites, women, homosexuals, disabled people, elderly people), incorporating elements of both counter and mainstream publics, distributing discourses which can be established as both mainstream or counter. During its formation between 2006-2007, *Sickipedia.org's* community more closely resembled a counter-public. It used at the time, alternative media to generate and disseminate discourses which were intended, from their perspective, to subvert and antagonise supposed culturally accepted norms of politically correct public communicative conduct. However, over the course of the past ten years, *Sickipedia.org* has grown in influence and now communicates its content in public media that cannot be described as alternative. Its discursive message, no matter how politically incorrect, does not voice the attitudes of groups who have no other voice in society - though the messages themselves have been somewhat muted in recent mainstream popular culture.

*Sickipedia.org* aims to entice prejudice, cause offense, and reproduce culturally taboo attitudes, opinions and values, and often these are based on historically situated, social, cultural and political issues - topics often considered befitting of *serious* discourses. This discursive and semantic agenda, which characterises the comic community, is epitomised in the web browser tagline for the website - "The Web's Hottest Sick, Rude, Offensive & Politically Incorrect Jokes" ([sickipedia.org](http://sickipedia.org)).

**Fig. 1 - Sickipedia.org's Tagline on Mozilla Firefox Web Brower [16/10/14]**



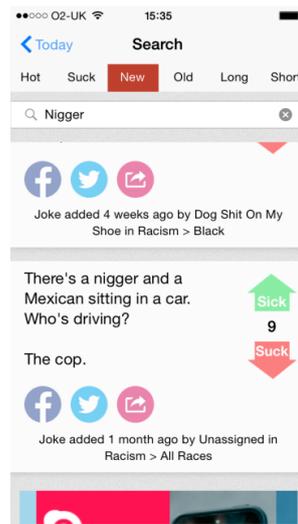
Once on the website, a user is introduced to the site's different features and can navigate their way around the content in various ways. In the bottom right of the homepage there are links that allow the user to 'like' *Sickipedia's* official *Facebook* fan page or 'follow' the official *Sickipedia Twitter* account. This highlights *Sickipedia's* content's presence on other formats of digitalised dissemination - the website is part of a wider communicative sphere. As of October 2014, *Sickipedia.org's* official *Twitter* account has 73, 510 'followers' ([twitter.com/sickipedia](https://twitter.com/sickipedia)) who are delivered material throughout the day. Since the start of this research in October 2011, this number has risen by over 50,000. The official *Facebook* page has 8,035 'likes' ([facebook.com/sickipediaofficial](https://facebook.com/sickipediaofficial)) which allows another means for dissemination. Moreover, when on a joke page on the *Sickipedia* site, a user can further disseminate the material by clicking on the *Twitter* or *Facebook* logo, which will post the joke to a user's personal account on either of those two social networks.

In January 2014, *Sickipedia* released its first eBook for the *Amazon Kindle* device. It is currently rated thirteenth in the top one hundred 'jokes and riddle' books on the official *Kindle* store ([amazon.co.uk/ Best-Sellers](https://amazon.co.uk/Best-Sellers)). Smartphone and tablet applications with the entirety of *Sickipedia's* catalogue of content are available for devices which use *Apple's iOS* and *Android/Google Play*. The *iOS* app has had 26,506 ratings and at the beginning of this research in October 2011 was rated 135th of all free apps on the *Apple iStore* charts. It was recently updated in June 2014 and is currently labelled as "the #1 joke app on the App Store" ([itunes.apple.com](https://itunes.apple.com)) .

**Fig. 2 - iOS Sickipedia app Advertisement from the App Store**



**Fig. 3 - Screenshot from 'Nigger' jokes on iOS Sickipedia app**



Similarly the *Android/Google Play* app was updated in June 2014. It has 2,721 ratings and is identified in the official *Google Play* store as having had between 100,000 and 500,000 installations ([play.google.com](http://play.google.com)). Unofficially, *Sickipedia's* content is disseminated using digitalised media in other ways. *Sickipedia bot*, an account on *Twitter* for example, has 439,000 'followers' and circulates content from *Sickipedia.org* amongst other material of a similar nature. Moreover *Sickipedia bot* is just one of at least forty *Twitter* accounts that disseminate *Sickipedia.org's* content.

The homepage is saturated with advertisements from the outset of entering the site with links to various celebrity/show business-based websites across the top of the page, or links to online games, and a more clear commercial advertisement in the bottom left of the page, normally for bookmakers or pornographically-inclined dating sites which changes according to when a user goes on the website, highlighting its use as a commercial model.

In terms of site traffic, respected website traffic analysts *Similar Web* and *Alexa* (part of the Amazon group) have provided valuable information. One must note that the very fact that a site like *Sickipedia.org* is recognised on *Similar Web* and *Alexa's* radar separates it from the likes of *racist jokes.com* and other sites looked at in similar Internet-based racist joke studies from the likes of Weaver (2010) and Billig (2001, 2005b). *Sickipedia.org* itself in a plea to advertisers claims that it gets over ten million page views per month - "Sickipedia.org has become one of the most popular humour sites in the UK, with a mission to act as a collection for some of the best jokes on the Internet. Sickipedia has an extremely active user base (typically aged 18-26) and sees over 10 million page views per month. The site has an *Alexa* ranking of 1,252 in the UK (20,222 global)" ([sickipedia.org/help](http://sickipedia.org/help)).

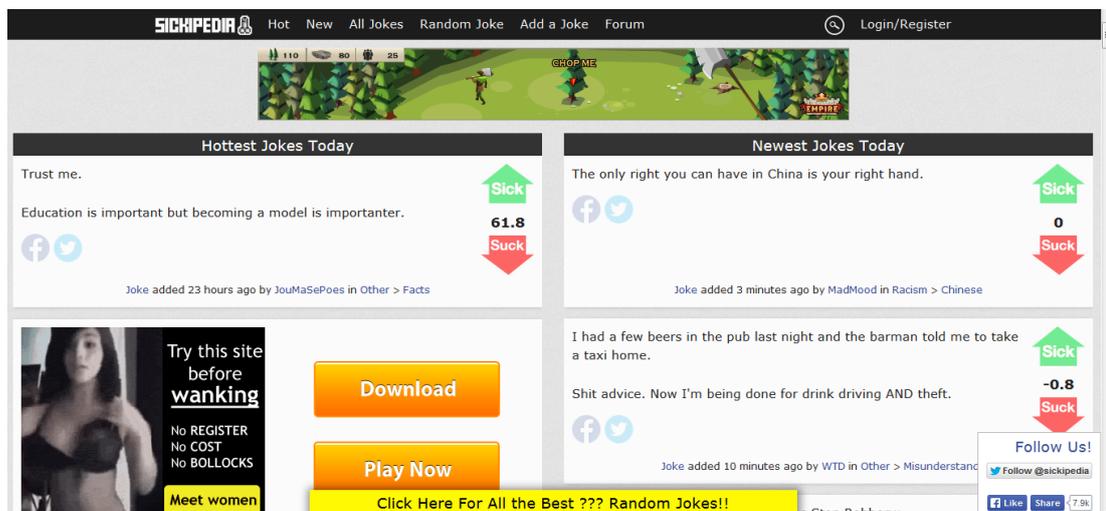
**Fig. 4 - Sickipedia.org site traffic claims**



Both *Similar Web* and *Alexa* in October 2014 corroborate this statement to an extent in claiming *Sickipedia.org* UK ranking is 1,694 and 1,861 respectively. *Similar Web* does however claim that the ten million page views a month is slightly exaggerated in stating that on average *Sickipedia.org* is viewed between 1.6 million and 2 million times a month (similarweb.com, alexa.com)

These points illustrate that while *Sickipedia.org* cannot necessarily be acknowledged as a part of the popular cultural mainstream, it does aim to disseminate its material across other more widely accepted popular platforms of contemporary digitalised communication in the cultural public sphere. This separating this case study from other websites that express comic racism as *Sickipedia.org* is more clearly and coherently motivated by mass notoriety and popularity than a political agenda. It aims for a wide acceptance and its momentum has not slowed down over the course of this research. In fact *Sickipedia.org* has refined itself into a more commercially viable product over the past three years (illustrated by a significant increase of advertisements) and now circulates its content in newer ways, assisting in its growing influence. Therefore *Sickipedia.org* and its content is appropriately positioned in this research as a part of popular culture alongside the historical examples of comic racism.

**Fig. 5 - Sickipedia.org Homepage 2014 [16/10/14]**



On the website, one can either browse the site's content through the 'All Jokes' or 'Random Jokes' options. Selecting the 'All Jokes' option is the method in which a user can navigate the site in accordance to its archival logic - consuming content according to Categories and Subcategories (or Topics, the site's terminology changed from Subcategories to Topics in 2014). When selecting 'All Jokes', a user is introduced to the twelve Categories of jokes on the website in a blue toolbar. These Categories and Topics also define the regulations of how a user can produce new content for the site, implying that the process of categorisation is emphasised more than the idea of consuming 'random' jokes. Despite the option to select jokes randomly, the content is undoubtedly organised, systematically in terms of categorisation.

This archival selection process for the consumer marks both an aesthetic and communicative transformation from the narrative-based humour of comedy disseminated on television for example (even in the case of 'clubland' comedians) to a logic based on categorisation. Comic racism in the past was incorporated into a comedic performance, which indicates there were specific interpersonal reasons behind where a joke would be positioned within a given routine, even if it seemed the jokes were told fairly haphazardly (such as *The Comedians*).

On *Sickipedia.org*, jokes are not encouraged to be consumed in an arbitrary fashion. Users - both producers and consumers - must navigate the site in accordance to the site's logic which works in accordance to categories - audiences are *supposed* to consume the jokes which contain subject matter that personally makes them laugh. This highlights that due to the sheer amount of material on the database and the topics of choice, several interlinked comic communities can be present simultaneously. Furthermore, on the toolbar at the top of every page there is the website's search tool signified by the image of a magnifying glass. Using this, audiences can type whatever they wish in order to search the entire catalogue of the website's content, defining the site's 'pick 'n' mix' logic. Users can select and refine the type of humour they wish to consume down to a single specific word, emphasising the user agency in *Sickipedia's* comic community. This does highlight that *Sickipedia.org* is not solely a racist, comic community. Despite comic racism being present in roughly a third of the site's content, it does allow for other comic communities to form alongside the active comic racist community.

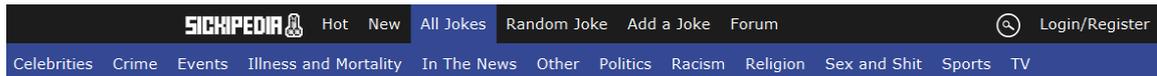
Interestingly in terms of the site's comic racism, despite its overall ethos concerning offensiveness and political incorrectness, the site's general guidelines present *Sickipedia's* only disclaimer, which concerns an attempted vindication of jokes' racism. The site claims that users should not post racist tracts in the jokes:

"some jokes are racist or prejudicial by their nature but just because we laugh at them doesn't mean we subscribe to any racist rhetoric. If that's your thing then fuck off to a racist website where the NSA or whoever can monitor your tiny, petty little minds"  
([sickipedia.org/help](http://sickipedia.org/help)).

It is notable that the only form of discursive social exclusion that the site's moderators feel the need to provide justification to is comic racism. The following chapters will demonstrate how this disclaimer in no way legitimises *Sickipedia.org's* reproduction of racialised stereotypes and racist rhetoric.

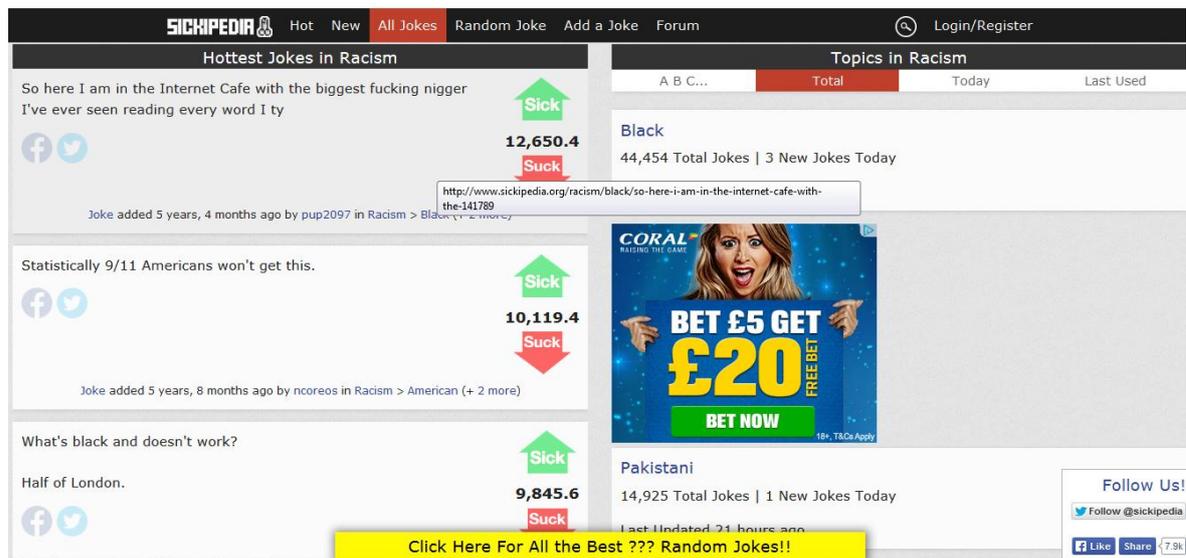
*Sickipedia.org's* categories are as follows: Celebrities, Crime, Events, Illness & Mortality, In The News, Other, Politics, Racism, Religion, Sex & Shit, Sports, TV.

**Fig. 6 - Sickipedia.org Categories toolbar [17/10/2014]**



When clicking on a Category, the user enters a new page divided into the "Hottest Jokes in {Category name}" and a list of "Topics in {Category name}". It must be noted that *Sickipedia.org's* figures in terms of the amounts of Topics and jokes per Topic are somewhat inconsistent due to the site being constantly in flux with members continuously adding and administrators removing content.

**Fig. 7 - Racism Subcategories & Black, Pakistani Subcategories [16/10/14]**



In terms of the how the material is distributed across the website, the content analysis, conducted in July 2013 which addressed roughly half of the site's content, provides some clarity. The analysis was conducted on the Categories 'Crime', 'Politics', 'Racism', 'Religion', 'Sports' and 'Sex & Shit'. This was due to time constraints, and the fact content analysis was only conducted as a preliminary method to gain a more detailed understanding of the site's logic and obtain some indication of the themes present in the comic racist content. It was felt necessary to only include the Categories that seemed most immediately likely to contain comic racist content. However some

of the more general statistical evidence is relevant to the entire site. *Sickipedia.org* in 2013 claimed there was 332,596 jokes on the website. This number will be significantly larger now, but since the remodelling of the site in 2014, it is no longer possible to determine this as the site does not present an exact figure. During the content analysis when this figure was taken, I calculated that the joke count was likely to be closer to 335,000 due to there being 33,486 pages of jokes, each containing ten jokes per page.

**Fig. 8 - Sickipedia.org joke count [07/07/13]**



The frequencies of Categories and amount of jokes per category as of the content analysis in 2013 provide significant findings concerning the site's logic. The joke numbers per Category may seem somewhat inconsistent considering the estimate of 335,000 jokes on the site. This is because a single joke can be uploaded to three Categories at once. In the case of the jokes recorded according to the Category on the site in 2013, the gross sum of jokes was 909,161. However when taking this as three times the amount of the actual total of jokes, this statistic is not too far off the net figure of 335,000 actual jokes. As this figure is larger than one third of 909,161 (303,054), one must acknowledge that some leeway must be provided for jokes only placed into two Categories on the site.

**Fig. 9 - Frequency of Jokes According to Categories**

- 1) Other - 216,722 jokes
- 2). Sex & Shit - 182,236 jokes
- 3). Racism - 108,554 jokes
- 4). In the News - 86,907 jokes
- 5). Celebrities - 73,909 jokes
- 6). Illness & Mortality - 69,625 jokes
- 7). Crime - 50,760 jokes
- 8). Sports - 46,466 jokes

- 9). TV - 27,755 jokes
- 10). Religion - 23,143 jokes
- 11). Other - 12,675 jokes
- 12). Events - 10,409 jokes

Despite what might immediately seem like statistical inconsistencies, this figure does provide a representative account of the recorded distribution of jokes' Categories, positioning comic racism as the Category with the third highest frequency of content. It means that 108,554 of the site's 335,000 jokes (as of 2013) have one of their potential three categories identified under 'Racism' - essentially a third of the website.

To highlight the extent of the site's archival logic, the following figures account for the amount of Topics/Subcategories per category.

**Fig. 10 - Frequency of Topics (Subcategories) per Category**

- 1) Celebrities - 229 Topics
- 2). Sex and Shit - 191 Topics
- 3). Illness and Mortality - 123 Topics
- 4). Other - 107 Topics
- 5). Racism - 100 Topics
- 6). In The News - 75 Topics
- 7). Crime - 45 Topics
- 8). Sports - 38 Topics
- 9). Politics - 37 Topics
- 10). TV - 31 Topics
- 11). Religion - 30 Topics
- 12). Events - 30 Topics

Again, the user of the site has the opportunity to pick between a huge range of individual topics within a Category based on their own personal tastes. In the case of the *Racism* Category these Topics/Subcategories roughly translate as ethnic targets for example Black, Pakistani, Irish, Jew, Chinese, Mexican, Muslim. Of the 100 Topics/Subcategories in the *Racism* Category, I would argue there are approximately seventy-two ethnic targets. Some cannot be categorised as

'racial'/ethnic targets as they simply are not, for example, the topics 'Gingers', 'Emos' or 'Sexism' are all strangely placed in the *Racism* Category.

To reiterate the focus on anti-black comic racism, *Sickipedia.org* provides the most significant evidence thus far in terms of black centrality in comic racist discourse. As of 28/02/2014 the *Black* Topic/Subcategory of *Sickipedia.org* was made up of 43,398 jokes. The anti-black components of the *Racism* category are also made up of several other Topics, such as *African* (5,290 jokes), *Ethiopian* (1,197 jokes), *Nigerian* (415 jokes), *Somalian* (300 jokes) *South African* (254 jokes), *Jamaican* (228 jokes), *Zimbabwean* (144 jokes), *Kenyan* (82 jokes) and *Apartheid* (57 jokes) jokes. Taken together this accounts for 51,365 jokes. Anti-black jokes outnumber the amount of jokes for any other ethnic-target in the *Racism* category of *Sickipedia.org*.

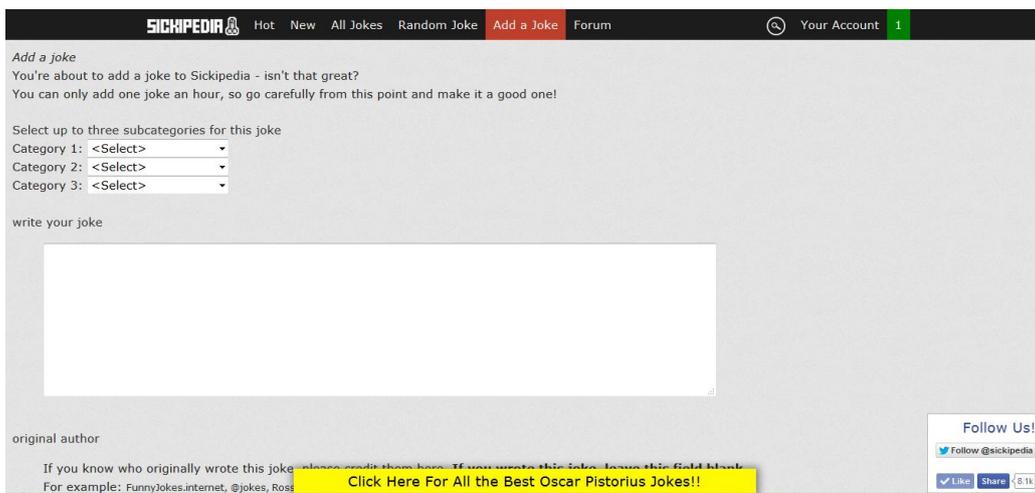
**Fig. 11 - Top Ten Frequency of Jokes per Topic (Subcategory) in Racism Category**

- 1). Black - 42,234 jokes
- 2). Pakistani - 14,505 jokes
- 3). American - 8,824 jokes
- 4). Jew - 6,032 jokes
- 5). Ginger - 5,550 jokes
- 6). Chinese - 5,513 jokes
- 7). African - 5,259 jokes
- 8). Sexism - 4,753 jokes
- 9). Irish - 3,957 jokes
- 10). Muslim - 3,857 jokes

Moreover, it is important to establish that not all jokes of an anti-black focus on *Sickipedia.org* can be found within these Topics. There are other subcategories that specifically deal with North African countries that have both a black and non-black focus. There are also non-racially specific subcategories such as *Immigration* and *All Races* that contain anti-black jokes. In some cases anti-black jokes are subcategorised as an Anti-Pakistani joke for example. In addition, the anti-black joke sample can be collected from Topics/Subcategories in other Categories on the website that have no inherent connections to 'race' related subject matter. This is true of the five other Categories analysed in the content analysis, and the remaining six that weren't (deduced from observations). Therefore the exact figure of anti-black jokes on *Sickipedia.org* is estimated to be larger than fifty-one thousand.

In terms of the audience's engagement with the website and their role within the community, there are several ways in which the site creates an socio-interactive experience. The first is through audiences being able to upload jokes themselves. Signing up to become a member is relatively simple. A user has to create a username and a password - a valid email account is not necessary. Once a member, a user can upload a joke by selecting the 'Add a Joke' option on the toolbar. Once proclaiming that one is not going to repeat a joke already published on the website, a user can write their joke, place it in three Categories and Topics/Subcategories, and it is available for consumption.

**Fig. 12 - Adding a Joke**



The second method of community building on the website is through the rating system of the jokes themselves. A user, and this is not limited to members only, can rate a joke as either 'Sick', meaning good, or 'Suck' meaning bad. The more people who select the 'Sick' option for a joke will result in a higher rating which allows for the joke to be seen by more people, as the best jokes are placed in the hot category which automatically opens when a user enters a particular category.

**Fig. 13 - Joke Page, 'Sick' scoring system**



Finally, the website also has an interactive forum that allows members to discuss both administrative announcements and concerns of the site as well as the site's humorous content.

The final point to be made concerning *Sickipedia.org*'s communicative logic and form, concerns the Internet itself. As stated within a complex model of the public sphere, identified as a fluid, aestheticised discursive space which allows for the creation of a multiplicity of publics shaped by inter-connected external processes, the networked facets of the cultural public sphere, specifically Web 2.0, has addressed the problems of creating an interactive dynamic within comic communities. The Internet limits the constraints of space and time, allowing for diverse forms of public deliberation. The Internet is a heterogeneous discursive environment that pluralises and extends the public sphere as it is decentralized, universally accessible, secure and censor-proof. This is what has characterised *Sickipedia.org* as a part of the cultural public sphere and provides the fundamental reason for its success.

As illustrated in Chapter Two, comic racism was effectively, publicly exiled from British popular culture. *Sickipedia.org* has provided a space in which racist attitudes, rhetoric and assertions of stereotypicality can again resurface, and in the most significant way since the 1970s, be part of a popular manifestation of comedy (if not exactly mainstream). Arguably this could not occur without the new communicative processes and dynamics which characterise the website. Audiences and producers can collaborate and collectively appreciate the material. They are provided with agency, autonomy and choice in regards to the material they wish to consume. There are simultaneous processes of individualisation on the site, in which the content is aligned in accordance with each individual user's own tastes, but also it provides an opportunity to build communities with the site's forum and the joke rating system. Perhaps more importantly though, the site provides users with anonymity and accessibility, and the content is free from critical regulation. A producer can say what they want to a relatively large audience and not be accountable for the messages their content may represent. Responsibility is minimal, further implications are unknown.

The logic of the website, as a part of the cultural public sphere, shaped over fifty years of communicative and discursive developments and processes have created a space in which comic racism and its champions can thrive, voicing it as a declaration of anti-political correctness - a supposed counter-public rejecting alleged threats to freedom of speech. In some cases the comic racist content may be a genuine attempt at expressing politically-motivated rhetoric. In other cases it may be treated as purely a pleasurable topic of jest. In either case, social, cultural and political topics that are of serious consequence are being discussed, in an marginalising, ridicule-based humorous context, contributing to public debate. The importance of evaluating comic discourse in the public sphere conceptual framework throughout this chapter has not been to discuss the positive or emancipatory democratic, thematic and communicative features of the public arena, but instead to provide the appropriate sociological context for evaluating a contemporary public - *Sickipedia.org* - where discriminatory, immoral and unethical attitudes, beliefs and ideologies are continuously communicated. In doing this one can highlight the issues concerned with what the content actually means, the necessity of critical enquiry, and as will be revealed throughout the following chapters, the cruel reality behind these supposedly playful jokes.

# PART TWO:

## Analysis of Contemporary Anti- Black Comic Racism on the Internet

# Chapter 4 :

## Joke Analysis i - Latent Motifs of

### Anti-Black Representation

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What's white on top and black on bottom?  
Society.<sup>32</sup>

#### The reproduction of anti-Black racialised prejudice & stereotypicality in Sickipedia.org jokes

The following three chapters comprise the second part and primary empirical and analytical contributions of the thesis. Throughout these chapters, I will critically discuss the discursive, semantic, linguistic, and comic themes and trends of the comic racist content of *Sickipedia.org* in terms of contextualising it within other historical racist discourses. This will be conducted using a critical discourse analysis of racist jokes. This study has already established that from a communicative perspective, public comic racism has experienced significant changes over time. The second half of the thesis is dedicated to determining the discursive and thematic differences and consistencies within the comic racist content itself, and most importantly establish the meaning attached to the jokes.

Racialised ideologies, values, attitudes, processes and rhetoric will be critiqued using critical discourse analysis, alongside questioning how the examples are articulated within the context of humour/joking to determine the extent to which *Sickipedia.org* acts as a new way to express the old hatred outlined in Chapter Two. Ultimately this serves towards comprehensively addressing the central aim of the thesis - revealing a strong and vigorous body of *serious* racist discourse being circulated today on mass consumer-based media in the cultural public sphere, protected from wider societal critique by the facetious, linguistic facade of joking.

Furthermore, the thesis has asserted that the black 'race' has had a central position in British comic racist discourses within the cultural public sphere and popular culture. To comprehensively establish the reasons behind anti-black prominence in popular comic discourse, one must go beyond the manifest evidence provided by the historical narrative of Chapter Two, and the content analysis data provided by *Sickipedia.org* established in Chapter Three. One must analytically

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32 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* May 2008]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/whats-white-on-top-and-black-on-bottom-society-28268>]

discuss the discursive and thematic continuities between non-comic discourses which reproduce racialised ideals, and contemporary examples of *Sickipedia.org*'s content in a critical fashion.

The analysis is structured in accordance to seven specific racialised motifs based on racist discursive processes or common racialised stereotypes adopted within humorous discourse that have been historically reinforced, and most importantly are significantly present on *Sickipedia.org*. These were determined by the themes identified and used in the content analysis coding scheme (see appendix a), with particular consideration to the frequency of the theme's usage across the Subcategories/Topics.

When addressing the site to illustrate how its comic and communicative logic and strategy operated, I identified several themes that were present in the website's Subcategories/Topics. These were not necessarily specific to anti-black jokes alone. The four-hundred and sixty Subcategories/Topics, across the six jokes Categories analysed in the content analysis, were coded in accordance to them including at least one joke which contained any of nineteen themes. This meant that each of the four-hundred and sixty Topics/Subcategories could be coded as having up to nineteen different themed joke-types present. However, this still meant there could be considerably more than nineteen individual racist jokes per Topic/Subcategory. Due to making the Topics/Subcategories the units of analysis as opposed to the jokes themselves, the content analysis did not aim to quantify the exact number of racist jokes (all themes) present in a Topic/Subcategory. A Topic/Subcategory was coded as having a given joke-theme present, the same, regardless as to whether that theme was represented by one joke or one hundred jokes. The themes were as follows:

- Non-White 'Races' Presented As Unintelligent
- Racism Of A Sexual Nature
- Sexuality-Based Racism
- Racism Intertwined With Class-Based Social Exclusion
- Racism Intertwined With Gender-Based Social Exclusion
- Non-White 'Races' Presented As Criminals
- Non-White 'Races' Presented As Perpetrators Of Violence
- Fantastical Violence Aimed Towards Non-White 'Races'
- Racism In The Context Of Politics
- Racism In The Context Of War
- Racism In The Context Of Sport
- Racism In The Context Of Religion
- Physicality-Based Racism
- Presence Of Culturally-Based Racist Stereotypes
- Presence Of Racist Terminology
- Non-White 'Races' Presented As Non-Human
- Racism In The Context Of Immigrant Bigotry/Fear Of Immigrants

- Explicit Presentation Of White Supremacist Attitudes
- Other<sup>33</sup>

The following figures document the top ten joke themes across all six Categories (460 Topics/Subcategories) and in the Racism Category alone (101 Topics/Subcategories).

**Fig. 14 - Top Ten Joke Themes Present in Topics (Subcategories) Across 6 Categories Analysed in Content Analysis (460 Topics)**

- 1). Other - Present In 229 of 460 Topics (49.8%)
- 2). Presence Of Culturally-Based Racist Stereotypes - Present In 202 of 460 Topics (43.9%)
- 3). Presence Of Racist Terminology - Present In 161 of 460 Topics (35%)
- 4). Fantastical Violence Aimed Towards Non-White 'Races' - Present In 141 of 460 Topics (30.7%)
- 5). Racism In The Context Of Religion - Present In 137 of 460 Topics (29.8%)
- 5). Racism Of A Sexual Nature - Present In 137 of 460 Topics (29.8%)
- 7). Non-White 'Races' Presented As Perpetrators Of Violence - Present In 121 of 460 Topics (26.3%)
- 8). Racism Intertwined With Gender-Based Social Exclusion - Present In 118 of 460 Topics (24.7%)
- 8). Physicality-Based Racism - Present In 118 of 460 Topics (25.7%)
- 10). Non-White 'Races' Presented As Criminals - Present In 105 of 460 Topics (22.8%)

**Fig. 15 - Top Ten Themes Present in Topics (Subcategories) in Racism Category (101 Topics)**

- 1). Presence Of Culturally-Based Racist Stereotypes - Present In 72 of 101 Topics (71.3%)
- 2). Other - Present In 63 of 101 Topics (62.4%)
- 3). Presence Of Racist Terminology - Present In 51 of 101 Topics (50.5%)
- 4). Non-White 'Races' Presented As Perpetrators Of Violence - Present In 49 of 101 Topics (48.5%)
- 5). Fantastical Violence Aimed Towards Non-White 'Races' - Present In 46 of 101 Topics (45.5%)

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<sup>33</sup> 'Other' included jokes that did not fit into the other theme categories. These were jokes that were based on racist insults and abuse, for example:

"So here I am in the Internet Cafe with the biggest fucking nigger I've ever seen reading every word I ty"

[Retrieved 17/03/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black June 2009]

[<http://www.sickpedia.org/racism/black/so-here-i-am-in-the-internet-cafe-with-the-141789#ixzz3aD3KhOQR>]

- 6). Non-White 'Races' Presented As Criminals - Present In 41 of 101 Topics (40.6%)
- 6). Racism Intertwined With Gender-Based Social Exclusion - Present In 41 of 101 Topics (40.6%)
- 8). Racism Of A Sexual Nature - Present In 39 of 101 Topics (38.6%)
- 9). Racism In The Context Of Immigrant Bigotry/Fear Of Immigrants - Present In 38 of 101 Topics (37.6%)
- 10). Racism In The Context Of Politics - Present In 36 of 101 Topics (35.6%)

The data obtained from the content analysis coding and analysis led to the formation of the seven motifs which have been separated across three analytical chapters in terms of thematic consistencies. They are as follows:

- Motif No.1 - Primitivisation, dehumanisation & simianisation
- Motif No. 2 - Inferior intelligence & idleness
- Motif No. 3 - Violence & criminality
- Motif No. 4 - Sexual deviance & sexual violence
- Motif No. 5 - Gross physicality
- Motif No. 7 - Violence against the Black 'race'
- Motif No. 6 - Immigrant bigotry

At the beginning of each chapter, the discursive motifs are discussed in isolation in terms of their wider social significance and meanings embedded in non-comic Western racialised discourses. The motifs expressed through humour are deeply rooted in a wider social context based on 'serious' ideological discourses that have formed and reproduced racialised representations of the black 'race'. The relationship between the two (comic and non-comic racism) must be established in order to comprehensively critique the racist content.

However, due to the nature of racist ideology and rhetoric, in humorous and serious discourses, many of these racialised motifs are used by joke producers in conjunction with others in order to socially exclude the black 'race' and simultaneously assert the dominance of whiteness. Therefore despite identifying these seven thematic clusters present in jokes, contextualising them individually, and positioning them across three separate chapters, they cannot be analysed completely separately in terms of the jokes that feature them.

The motifs will be evaluated according to their presence in relevant examples, but they incorporate racist notions that are discursively intertwined - combined together in a complex web of anti-black Othering. It is simply not possible to take a single joke and analyse it in terms of one racialised motif, conceptually isolated from the other six. Nor is it possible to discuss the motifs themselves as thematically separate. The jokes, in spite of their aesthetic simplicity, are highly complex. They have a density of discursive meanings that interlink several racialised motifs interchangeably, and for that reason the analysis will consist of deconstructing several jokes that sufficiently account for

all motifs in conjunction. For this reason some jokes analysed in a chapter will inhabit motifs which have not been discussed in terms of non-comic discourses in that chapter.

## Motif No. 1 -Primitivisation, dehumanisation & simianisation

The first and only motif that will be discussed in this chapter constitutes the most complex. It concerns a cluster of interlinked, common discursive processes in both comic and non-comic racist discourse, namely articulations of primitivisation, dehumanisation and simianisation. A notable point to make surrounding the first motif is that the content analysis findings of both the whole data set (6 Categories, 460 Topics/Subcategories), and of the Racism Category alone, did not indicate that the joke theme of 'Non-White 'Races' Presented As Non-Human' was in either top ten of most prominent themes. However, as the following chapters will illustrate, the motif of primitivisation, dehumanisation and simianisation is the most present of all the motifs in *Sickipedia.org's* racist jokes, it is just these themes are often overlooked by an analytical procedure that emphasises manifest content. This highlights the importance of using critical discourse analysis to contextualise the findings of the content analysis and provide a more in-depth, qualitative critique of comic racist texts.

Analytically, it is a difficult task thematically to separate these three racialised discursive processes as they are all dependent on each other, and when found in discourse, humorous or otherwise, they are rarely presented independently. They will be addressed in this section individually, in order to comprehensively critique their unique specificities, but they will be discussed with clear reference to how they inform each other. Moreover, this first motif is exceptionally important as it arguably provides the foundation on which the other stereotypical motifs could develop.

These three interlinked, ideological perspectives have been referred to in this chapter as 'latent motifs' due to the extensive level of interpretation required on the part of the analyst to identify them within a text. Unlike other stereotypical ideas and racialised representations presented in comic racist discourses, ideas of primitivisation, dehumanisation and simianisation often require a slightly more comprehensive analysis in order to legitimately classify their expression within the content.

To summarise their interwoven relationship, across a wide range of racialised discourses, including contemporary and historical comedy, the black 'race' is often represented as fundamentally primitive, and one of the most effective ways of rhetorically asserting this notion is through the discursive dehumanisation of black individuals and groups. The motif of black dehumanisation is communicated in several ways, however the most common, defined and coherent form of the motif, is the animalistic dehumanising process of simianisation. Due to the sheer volume of jokes on *Sickipedia.org* that articulate simianisation, it must be analysed as its own individual concept - separate, yet discursively interconnected to both primitivisation and dehumanisation.

Humorous discourses that embody ideas of primitivisation are fairly common. The primitive Other is present in many anti-Black jokes both on *Sickipedia.org* and in historical examples.

Primitivisation's commonality in comic discourse appears to be due to conscious intentions to reproduce this stereotype from the perspective of the producer, but can also be identified through more interpretive analyses of a joke's meanings. Moreover its prominence can be attributed to primitivisation being one of the most common racialised motifs outside of the comic racism - an idea which has roots in the origins of black racialisation from the periods of European Enlightenment, colonial expansion and imperialism.

According to Stuart Hall (1997), since 'race's' conception in Enlightenment discourses, Africans are identified in relation to nature, and symbolise primitiveness as opposed to civilisation. Anne McClintock cites Edward Long, a British colonial historian who in the context of Enlightenment thought (categorising 'races' according to their alleged civilising abilities) degraded Africa as "the parent of everything that is monstrous in Nature" (Long, 1774, cited in McClintock, 1995, p.22).

McClintock claims that during the height of nineteenth century European colonisation of Africa, it was regarded by commentators of the time as "marooned and historically abandoned...a fetish land, inhabited by cannibals, dervishes and witch doctors" (1995, p.41). Similarly George M. Fredrickson (1987) claimed throughout this period and approaching the present, that Africa was "and always had been" seen as "the scene of unmitigated savagery, cannibalism, devil worship and licentiousness" (p.49).

From this citation, it is important to identify that the references to Africa concern its people and their alleged behavioural practices. In conjunction with the development of 'race' (as described in Chapter 2), which includes the racialising practice of naturalisation, these assumed cultural features of Africa's people came to embody the racial characteristics of not just Africans specifically, but more generally the newly *categorised* black 'race'. Naturalisation is a process of representation Hall (1997) describes as naturalising differences between 'races'. He claims that in colonial discourses, black and white difference was attributed to cultural factors alone. These could not be considered fixed and would therefore be subject to progression or change (which would consequentially have negative effects on justifying slavery). Therefore in claiming that the social and behavioural characteristics of black people are naturally fixed - amalgamating the cultural and biological - these ideas would become permanent over a substantial time period. As Pickering states, the construct of primitiveness represented man in an earlier time, but was 'fossilised in the fixed otherness' (2001, p.55) of the past. Consequently Hall claims that "for Blacks, 'primitivism' (Culture) and 'blackness' (Nature) became interchangeable. This was claimed to be their 'true nature' and they could not escape it" (1997, p.245).

Hall explains that these descriptions of Africa, its peoples and the interlinked biological and civilising abilities (or lack thereof) attributed to them, led to a plethora of popular primitive representations of the black 'race' disseminated across a range of discourses including maps, drawings, etchings, photography, newspapers (both through image and published word), diaries, travel writings, treatises, novels and official reports. Through popular media such as imperialist-

based advertising of unrelated products (Hall shows examples of *Huntley and Palmers Biscuits*<sup>34</sup> and *Bovril*<sup>35</sup>), the accounts of Africa and the representations of the black 'race' were directed towards the Western general public, gaining a more populist acceptance amongst the masses, based fundamentally on a socially constructed binary opposition of White European civilisation in contrast to black primitiveness and savagery.

Michael Pickering (2001) provides an example of the perceived "two extremes of humanity" (p.60) in the illustration *The Pigmy Earthmen at the Royal Aquarium*<sup>36</sup>. It depicts several black people in loin cloths, low to the ground, inanely dancing around a slain animal. All the while they are being watched by the 'silken baron of civilisation', a tall white, moustachioed, gentleman in formal clothing. The example demonstrates the representational contrast between the stereotypical savage way of life in Africa embodied by black Others and white cultural and civil superiority - associated here quite commonly with white masculinity.

Pickering has argued that the construct of the primitive became prominent in the nineteenth century but had been seen earlier in "Columbus' 'cannibals' and figures such as Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*" (2001, p.51). He claims that primitive discourses generalised ideas of barbarism and savagery in debates concerning non-European peoples in primitive societies that included Africans. He highlights that throughout European thought in the nineteenth century the primitive came to represent the conceptual opposite of civility. The primitive represented groups of people who were "nomadic rather than settled into a territorial state; sexually promiscuous by cultural sanction rather than monogamous and grouped in nuclear family units; communal in property relations rather than committed to private property; illogical in mentality and given to magic and superstition rather than being rational and scientific in intellectual orientation" (ibid., p.52-3). With reference to Herbert Spencer, George W. Stocking (1987) claimed that the primitive people were perceived as dark skinned, unattractive, unclothed, unclean, promiscuous, brutal, worships animals and stones and had small brains (Spencer, 1874 cited in Stocking, 1987).

What can be extracted from these statements from Pickering and Stocking is the identification of the foundation of many different stereotypical features attributed to the black 'race' and blackness (a concept which will be addressed in Chapter Five). Primitivisation provides the origins of many other negative racialised characteristics related to black people - unintelligence, politically unsophisticated, sexually promiscuous, uncomfortable in a family environment, and violently unpredictable. These stereotypical ideas, though hundreds of years old in their origin, are clearly and explicitly still reproduced today, about the black 'race' through discourses such as the content of contemporary comic communities like *Sickipedia.org*.

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34 Bovril advertisement, 1900. Taken from Hall (1997) p.241.

35 Huntley and Palmer's Biscuit advertisement. Taken from Hall (1997) p.241

36 *The Pigmy Earthmen at the Royal Aquarium*. John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library. Taken from Pickering (2001) p.60

Both a key discursive method of accentuating the perceived primitive nature of the black 'race' and simultaneously a consequence of perceiving the black 'race' as primitive, is dehumanising black people - situating blacks as lesser humans than whites. John Hagen and Wenona Rymond-Richmond (2008) defined dehumanisation as a "mechanism that imposes degrading attributes on both individuals and entire groups" (p.877). They see it as a process which essentially removes both individuality and membership within a given society or within a group. They refer to Dower (1986) and claim that dehumanisation is a process that attributes degrading characteristics to individuals and groups which can in turn have several rhetorical functions. In the context of contemporary comic racism, processes of dehumanisation are rhetorically used to assert the black 'race' as inferior whilst simultaneously reinforcing white superiority.

As nearly every joke in the *Racism* category of *Sickipedia.org* is formed on the basis of asserting the superiority of the respective joke's producer, the motif of dehumanisation is present in a high frequency. This is often presented in several different ways, namely from a humanistic approach, animalistic approach and materialistic approach. These approaches refer to the degradation of blacks presented as humans, but lesser humans than whites; blacks presented not as humans at all, but rather other creatures from the animal kingdom most notably apes; or blacks presented more abstractly as inanimate objects. Within this tradition of reinforcing the notion of degrading and dehumanising black people as secondary citizens not befitting of human rights, and as sub-humans, I have included allusions to slavery and the slave trade as a clear thematic extension of processes of humanistic dehumanisation.

Audrey and Brian D. Smedley (2012) claim that slavery, in its literal sense, can be defined as an "institution in which some persons are legally owned by other persons just as piece of property is owned" (p.127). They define the concept of the slave as someone who has no will of their own and submits to the will of a master. Slaves can be bought, sold, inherited or given away, and are considered to be legally defined as a thing. However, they also state that despite being reduced to a thing, a slave is *still* presented and represented as a human being, and the ways in which this dichotomy is negotiated vary. Smedley and Smedley argue that in the context of African slavery and also in the development of Judeo-Christian discourses on 'race', Africans were defined as subhuman, "a form of human being different from and inferior to whites" (ibid., p.127). According to this scholarly definition it is clear that there is a relationship between slavery and processes of racialised dehumanisation and Othering in both a literal and discursive understanding of the concept.

Patrick Brantlinger (2003) claims that during the nineteenth century it was commonly understood that Africans thrived in slavery, and through their subordination they were prevented from expressing their own supposed, free savage customs which would have eventually resulted in their extinction. He refers to thinkers such as Josiah Nott, George Glidden and Samuel G. Morton, nineteenth century theorists who were interested in preserving slavery and justified its existence by claiming it was good for Africans, and that any form of emancipation would lead to the African 'race's' extinction.

Another anti-black stereotypical representation that must be addressed, as it provides a clear example of humanistic dehumanisation and a contributing factor to the overall racialised logic that has discursively positioned black people as primitive sub-humans, is the notion of infantilisation. Processes of infantilisation account for representations of the black 'race' as child-like in comparison to whites. Moreover, this stereotype's contemporary prevalence and its discursively constructed meanings are illustrated in an abundance of examples from *Sickipedia.org*. Pickering has stated that "the 'primitive' black Other...was relegated to infantility on an evolutionary scale, with the white European at the opposite pole, in a position of rational, enlightened maturity" (2001, p.122).

He argues, with reference to several historical illustrations from the twentieth century, publicly depicting black infantility in discourse, that members of the black 'race', already long positioned as 'savage', were considered to exist in a perpetual infantile-state, and thus needed to be guided by their 'civilised' white counterparts. He refers to several examples to illustrate this point. First, nineteenth century English writer and explorer Sir Richard Burton who described natives of East Africa as "one of those childish races" (1860, p.280). Second, Scottish explorer of Africa, David Livingstone who described his African missionary subjects as "merely children, as easily pleased as babies" (Schapera, 1960, p.156). Thirdly, twentieth century German philosopher Albert Schweitzer who claimed the "negro is a child, and with children nothing can be done without authority" (1922, p.130).

Referring to animalistic dehumanisation, James Walvin (1982) again cited extracts taken from Edward Long's *History of Jamaica*, which claimed that Africans were more animal than human. Africans "are represented by all authors as the vilest of the human kind, to which they have little more pretensions of resemblance than what arises from their exterior form" (1774, p.315).

James Anthony Froude (1886), a nineteenth century, English historian claimed in his text *Oceana* that all wild races of animals and human beings, specifically black people, must submit under the rule of Anglo-Saxon (white) civilisation in order to participate in the benefits of modern social life and better themselves:

"those only will survive who can domesticate themselves into servants of the modern forms of social development. The lion and the leopard, the eagle and the hawk, every creature of earth or air, which is wildly free, dies off or disappears; the sheep, the ox, the horse, the ass accepts his bondage and thrives and multiplies. So it is with man. The negro submits to the conditions, becomes useful and rises to a higher level" (ibid., p.300).

In this extract, Froude is implying that the white 'race' has discovered the secret of 'social development' and can offer its fruits to more primitive beings in exchange for passive servility. This additionally acts as a way of discursively justifying the transatlantic slave trade, or slavery in general, in providing a process for black people, thought of as primitive animals, to improve culturally (Brantlinger, 2003).

Furthermore Froude (1886) is firmly asserting the animalistic dehumanisation of black people in contextualising his ideas on human 'races' within his thoughts on the animal kingdom. He specifically refers to *wild* animals (lion, leopard, eagle, hawk) and *domesticated* animals in the Anglo-Saxon civilisation (sheep, ox, horse, ass) with the likelihood of survival in favour of domestication. 'So it is with man' claims that the exact same premise is valid for human beings. 'Negroes' are thought of as a *wild* 'race' of men who have more in common with animals than white humans. Whilst they remain wild, in a primitive state of nature, they are doomed to vanish, die out and cannot be included in the socially developed civilisation of the Anglo-Saxons. Such claims echo wider eugenics racist discourses in the late 19th century. They were based on a polygenist dogma of fixed racial types, and promoted the view that primitive 'races' were meant to die out, and were essentially not fit for survival in the modern civilised world. Brantlinger (2003) has shown how racialised stereotypes of black primitivity were incorporated into an increasingly popular 'doomed race' theory and led to 'dark vanishings' in Western Academic discourse.

The racialised discursive process of simianisation can be considered a more specific form of animalistic dehumanisation. Whereas dehumanisation can be articulated in several ways, simianisation is a distinctive, coherent and more importantly, very common rhetorical strategy implemented in a wide range of racialised discourses, that differs from other processes of dehumanisation in several ways. Audrey Smedley (2011) argued that from the eighteenth century onwards, negative characterisations of black people were present in various popular platforms of media and communication aimed at public consumption as a way of rationalising slavery. One such characterisation was the production of 'Negro' caricatures of blacks with "ape-like features with distorted skulls, elongated arms and ape-shaped bodies" (p.157).

The comparison between the black 'race' and apes dates back to Blumenbach, earlier highlighted in Chapter One as a hugely influential figure in Enlightenment discourses that aimed to systematically categorise the different races of mankind and in the process racialised different groups. Blumenbach in *On the Natural History of Mankind* (1775) said of the black 'race' "the assertion that is made about the Ethiopians, that they come nearer the apes than other men, I willingly allow so far as this, that it is in the same way that solid-hoofed...variety of the domestic sow may be said to come near to the horse than other sows" (p.271).

Brantlinger (2003) refers to Charles Darwin and his work *The Descent of Man* (1874), in which he argues Darwin accepted notions that perceived 'primitive' races such as the 'Negro' and the Aboriginals would eventually become extinct when introduced to any civilising processes. Brantlinger specifically refers to the following extract which highlights again historical evidence documenting the black 'race's' supposed close relationship with apes, "the break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilized state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla (Darwin, 1874 [1998], p.176-168).

George Mosse (1999) has argued that in the eighteenth century, following the formation of a modern category of 'race' in the Enlightenment, cultural ambiguity surrounding blacks had begun to alleviate. No longer were there black representations of the noble savage (see Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #3), instead the most common idea accepted in regards to blacks was "they were considered close to the animal world" (p.43). He states that at the time it was thought to be no coincidence that the home of both the 'Negro' and the gorilla was Africa. He refers to travellers at the time writing of this relationship between the 'black man' and the 'ape', in addition to anthropologists such as Peter Camper who in 1792 compared African men's and ape's skulls, highlighting a potential missing link between civilised man and the animal kingdom.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse (1992) refers to 18th century physician James Houston (1725) as an example of an early writer who simianised the black 'race' in accordance to their cultural practices as opposed to their physical appearance. Houston wrote in his notebook of Africans "their natural Temper is barbarously cruel, selfish and deceitful, and their Government equally barbarous and uncivil...As for their Customs they exactly resemble their Fellow Creatures and Natives, the Monkeys" (Houston, 1725 cited in Pieterse, 1992, p.40).

## Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #1

I have just been to see that Avatar.

The natives are a primitive bunch; hunting, killing and generally being hostile in large groups.

Combine this with their unusual accents and faces: you may find proof that blue is the new black.<sup>37</sup>

*Example (1)* is an explicit example of the black 'race' being represented as primitive through humorous discourse. It is quite simplistic in its expression of this racialised motif and is coherent in terms of both its linguistic structure as a joke, and as a method of articulating racist attitudes, by presenting several different motifs in conjunction.

This example is a slight variation on the typical linguistic archetype of the majority of joke aesthetics in *Sickipedia.org's Racism* Category. Most are divided into two lines, a leading line and a punch-line. In some cases this two-line formula can be described as a one-liner, even if a one-liner still technically has a leading line and a punch-line. The distinction between a two-liner and a one-liner is often not determined by the structural setup and the payoff of a joke (the leading line and the punch-line), but rather its length - how long it takes to read or tell.

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37 [Retrieved 14/03/14 Uploaded to TV > Film/Movie February 2012]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/tv/film-movie/i-have-just-been-to-see-that-avatar-the-natives-332282>]

Therefore structurally most of the jokes on the site, and the jokes that will be evaluated in this chapter follow the same basic structural premise of a leading line and a punch-line, but they are distinguished into one and two liners, due to the length of the joke. Some jokes do not follow this formula at all and they will be discussed accordingly when relevant. This first example is more representative of a two-liner due to its length, but to reiterate it follows very much the same simplistic, formulaic joke structure of a one-liner.

A very important finding that must be acknowledged from the outset and will form a pattern throughout the joke analyses, is that *Example (1)*, like many of the other jokes, though not all, does not particularly work as humorous assemblage of language - it fails as a joke from a linguistic perspective. This joke, like many others on *Sickipedia.org*, does not fit into what one would commonly interpret as a linguistic structure which *definitively* aims to provoke a humorous response from an audience, on the basis of how the joke is *linguistically* constructed. Instead many of the jokes addressed in the empirical chapters function more clearly as pieces of racist discourse, with rhetorical components, which rely on an audience finding racism funny (possibly in relation to a sense of superiority or relief) rather than the assemblage of language itself. This success or failure of joke as a linguistic structure is determined in terms of a joke linguistically constructing an appropriate incongruity between the different components of the joke, the use of wit, or a play on words.

Though not completely unsuccessful, *Example (1)*'s punch-line is not linguistically sophisticated, witty, or uses any incongruous linguistic elements. It *more* clearly attempts to make the racism work rather than create a humorous assemblage of language that can be (somewhat) appreciated by its own merits.

*Example (1)* is exemplary of the website's content which is uniquely aimed at the *Sickipedia.org* audience (consumers who enjoy sick humour), or a comic community that understands the nuances of comic racism. This example can only be seen to work as a *joke* - something produced for audiences to find funny - if one subscribes to the theories of humour based on the aggressive nature of human beings, or the superiority one feels from either producing or consuming the content. *Example (1)* cannot be seen as to work as a joke in terms of the language used.

This is extremely problematic. It will be argued throughout the analysis chapters, that the very idea of a sick joke, unless very sophisticatedly constructed linguistically, completely contradicts the notion (that will be outlined in more detail throughout the remaining chapters) that ridicule-based, prejudiced jokes can often be seen as ambivalent in terms of how they publicly operate as serious racist rhetoric. This notion of comic racist ambivalence is highlighted by the numerous debates concerning racist humour, both inside and outside of academia, and the peaks and troughs (yet continuous presence of) comic racism has experienced in British popular culture over the past fifty years, as illustrated in Chapter Two.

If a joke, doesn't really work as a joke from a linguistic perspective, this ambivalence is dramatically challenged, as the only consistent 'justification' for the expression of racist ideology that remains is the assertion that it was uttered ironically - to protest that what was said was not *meant*. This again is extremely problematic when dealing with public discourses in which both the producers and consumers remain anonymous - the only materials for analysis is the content itself. If a critic cannot identify that the humour derives from the ways racism can be used in a successful and sophisticated, linguistic joke structure (which in any case does not vindicate it of promoting racialised representations), it *must* either derive from finding *racism funny* - which in itself must be morally condemned - or it fails to produce humour at all. This implies that the essence of comic racism communicated in the cultural public sphere is based on reproducing stereotypes, racist ideology and racist rhetoric rather than attempting to create a humorous piece of language. Therefore, based on the representations present, comic racism is not that far removed from traditional *serious* racist discourses. From this, a major argument is formed in favour of attention and critique aimed directly at this content and its public dissemination in popular culture.

*Example (1)* requires the audience to understand several aspects of popular cultural products in order to fully appreciate the joke. Those being, having seen or being familiar with the 2009 James Cameron directed blockbuster *Avatar*, and having heard the expression 'blue is the new black' - a phrase that refers to the continuous changes of trends in the fashion industry.

The knowledge of *Avatar* that the audience would require concerns familiarity with the computer generated, fictional, intelligent, eight-foot tall, blue-skinned, tribal-based, humanoid alien race, the *Na'vi* - the natives of the fictional planet *Pandora* depicted in the film. For further understanding of the joke, one could be familiar with some of the controversy surrounding *Avatar* that argued the *Na'vi* represented a negative stereotypical portrayal of the ethnic Other (particularly black ethnicity due to several black actors providing voice work for *Na'vi* characters). However, this is not essential due to the joke reproducing this idea from a position of agreement, as opposed to an anti-racist critique.

The clarity of the primitive stereotype attributed to black people could not be stronger due to the clear usage of the term "primitive" to describe the "natives" portrayed in *Avatar* - ie. the fictional *Na'vi* - in the second line. In this line the producer provides a brief description of the fictional race depicted in the film, claiming them to be "a primitive bunch; hunting, killing and generally being hostile in large groups". These characteristics of the blue skinned *Na'vi* are then implied to apply to all black people in the punch-line by claiming that combined with unusual accents and faces, "blue is the new black". This is stating that what the blue skin of the humanoid beings represents in the film is symbolic of what the black skin of humans - blackness - represents in the real world.

What is of such importance in this joke is that it clearly links the physical with the cultural. The audience is presented with physical notions of black skin/blackness (symbolised by blue skin but representing the same meanings) and unusual faces. Black people are presented in terms of the way they look, physically. Black people have dark coloured skin (commonly accepted as 'black'),

and in comparison to a position of white normativity, of which is the perspective the joke is produced in accordance to, black people are addressed as having unusual faces.

In *Avatar*, the *Na'vi*'s faces are designed very uniquely. They have large heads, with large facial features. They have wide noses, large eyes with an epicanthic fold, relatively thin lips and wear their long black hair in dreadlocks. Whilst there are some clear comparisons between the design of the *Na'vi* and how black people have been stereotypically represented physically in racialised discourses, for example, dreadlocked hair, large heads, enlarged wide noses, the joke does not appear to draw direct parallels between specific alleged facial features of black people, and the *Na'vi*. Instead the joke is drawing comparisons to how these facial features are considered distinctively "unusual" when compared to the dominant group. In the film's case that group is human colonisers, and in reality, it is whites.

Overlooking the popular cultural context of *Avatar*, the joke is rhetorically asserting that in comparison to white people, black people look different and unusual, and through the usage of the term "unusual" and its semantic meanings, one can firmly assert that the joke claims black physicality is not just different to white, it is inferior.

At this point the biological and cultural become intertwined. The physical appearance of the black 'race' - blackness is thus used as a marker for unyielding black cultural characteristics and social behaviour. It is stated that if a person/s is/are black, they are essentially 'primitive', and by extension they inhabit further cultural attributes that adhere to primitiveness. In this joke's case specifically, those additional characteristics reproduced are notions of black people being violent, hostile and having a murderous nature - common racialised stereotypes applied to black people in comic and non-comic discourses in both the historical and contemporary context.

A particularly striking point that needs to be addressed, the meanings of which will only be accessible to those who have viewed the source film being referred to, is that the second line's description of the *Na'vi* (up until that point there has been no mention of black people) is a fairly contradictory account of how they are actually portrayed in the movie. They are depicted in the film as somewhat culturally primitive. They live in tribes, worship trees, co-exist under a fairly underdeveloped political system. They do not appear to have any economic infrastructure, and while they do hunt wildlife for food, the *Na'vi* actually are presented as fairly peaceful, nature-loving beings. For example, they are depicted as praying for the souls of animals killed in hunting.

Despite the film's controversy for accusations of symbolically reproducing ideas of white advanced society in contrast to black (the *Na'vi*) primitiveness, the *Na'vi* were still presented as the film's *protagonists* - they were peaceful people with a deeper understanding of life and nature than the predominantly white colonial invaders. Beings that had little interest in war or hostility. In this sense, the *Na'vi*, as presented in the film, are actually closer to a fictionalised representation of the 'noble savage' stereotype.

According to Brantlinger, the 'noble savage' is a romantic, stereotypical representation of non-Western 'primitive' 'races', most notably, native American Indians which developed in discourses which documented Western colonial expansion (2003). The stereotype stands contrary to the more common negative racialised stereotypes that developed during this period as it was based on the idea that in some ways, primitive 'races' and their cultures are superior to more developed civilisations. This was characterised through a closer relationship to nature, a calmer and more relaxed lifestyle which was not burdened by the cultural, religious, economic and political pressures of the developed world.

At this point in the joke, the descriptions of the *Na'vi* have not been applied to the black 'race', but they have presented a far more accurate regurgitation of the negative, stereotypical representations of black people commonly used in comic racist and non-comic racist discourses, rather than the noble savage representation that the *Na'vi* are presented as in *Avatar*.

The producer is describing the perceived racialised characteristics of the black 'race' and attributing them to the fictional characters in the film, rather than the other way around as it initially presents itself to the joke's audience - accentuating the negative racialised *savage*, rather than the *noble*. In this joke, anti-black stereotypicality and Othering precedes the descriptions of the fictional race. What is provided is a written word reproduction of the John Johnston exhibition illustration earlier addressed depicting black savages dancing happily around a hunted animal, rather than an accurate description of the film's fictional beings. This way the joke fits more coherently into a continued racist rhetoric from traditional racialised discourses that have found a home in the anti-Black jokes of *Sickipedia.org* - it makes more sense as a racist joke.

In terms of how the, as stated somewhat unsuccessful joke, operates as a linguistic structure aimed to insight a humorous response, it works on the idea of misleading its audience into thinking it will have one meaning before subverting that meaning in the punch-line. The joke operates on the distinction and relationship between the terms and colours of blue and black. This is the deception or misdirection. The joke leads its audience to believe that the producers is describing the *Na'vi* - blue - when in reality the producer is describing the black 'race' - black.

There is an element of incongruity and metaphor that the audience can interpret because the fictional *Na'vi* and black people have no common relationship. It is the description of the alleged racial traits of the black 'race' in the context of comic racism that creates an appropriate relationship between the two. The audience member must have some sense of familiarity with racialised values attributed to the black 'race' in order to make sense of the humour. This is what makes the joke somewhat unsuccessful because although there appears to be an appropriate connection between the opening line and punch-line, it is a loose one at best with little wit or intellect. In this example's case the punch-line is essential for the audience's understanding of the racism, rather than creating laughter - the racism is prioritised over the humour.

*Example (1)* comes from an approach of white normativity and white superiority. The cultural characteristics of the black race identified are not positive attributes and in comparison to wider notions of supposed white, developed, sophisticated civilisation, these ideas of black primitiveness are clearly presented as inferior.

## Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #2

I love my job at the Zoo. It's stressful though. Watching all those smelly apes fighting over their dinner. Sorry did I say Zoo? I meant KFC.<sup>38</sup>

*Example (2)* is a particularly short joke, not published in sentence-long paragraphs but rather four very short, conjoined sentences. In this sense, if told orally, the first three sentences would comprise the leading line and the latter two the punch-line. In terms of the shortened length and simplicity of the humour, this example represents a typical comic racist one-liner of *Sickipedia.org*. The joke's producer attempts to create humour through misdirecting the audience in the opening line, and revealing its true intentions in the punch-line, those being the reproduction of four racialised stereotypes concerning the black 'race': black people as apes (simianisation), black people as unhygienic (gross physicality), black people as violent, and the somewhat specific stereotype of black people having a love for eating (fried) chicken.

The misdirection is not comprehensive in its complexity, it merely acts as a device to shroud the racism of the content until the audience has read the joke in its entirety - it serves no other purpose. Therefore the true 'humorous' dimension of the joke derives from the presentation of the racialised imagery, rather than the linguistic structure - one can only find humour in this joke through the appreciation of the racism, as opposed to the craft. From a philosophical or theoretical perspective, humorous responses to this joke can only originate from superiority experienced from reading at the expense of ridiculing an Other, or a deep-seated sense of pleasure obtained from engaging in the tabooed subject matter. Therefore this example is very similar to *Example (1)* in that it just about adopts enough of a linguistic, humorous trope to be considered loosely what could be labelled a *joke*, though not a particularly successful one.

At the same time *Example (2)* is somewhat unique in its misdirection. This is because it is not explicit in its Othering of the black 'race'. At no point *in the joke* are black people (men, women, specific individuals) specifically referred to. No terminology that can unquestionably be attributed to black people is used in this example, instead the joke relies on semiotics, metaphor and context.

*Example (2)*, more so than many of the other examples in this chapter requires a deeper contextual knowledge of either traditional racist rhetoric and the racialised stereotyping of the black 'race' or anti-black comic racism in order to understand the humour. The audience is forced to

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<sup>38</sup> [Retrieved 14/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black May* 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/i-love-my-job-at-the-zoo-its-stressful-though-438397>]

interpret the meaning of the joke and who is being ridiculed in accordance to previously acquired knowledge concerning black stereotypicality - namely the stereotype that black people love to eat chicken, fried chicken and food from the fast-food restaurant chain *Kentucky Fried Chicken*. This feature of black stereotypicality (with the obvious exclusion of Kentucky Fried Chicken) is historically situated, as it was very common in minstrelsy, particularly blackface sketches and songs (Dennison, 1982; Oliver, 1984; Pickering, 2008).

This stereotype is also presented across various other anti-black jokes on the site such as:

Just seen the Facebook group 'I LOVE CHICKEN.' More black faces than the Crimewatch christmas special. <sup>39</sup>

Give a man a fish, and he'll eat for a day. Give a black man a fish, and he'll call you a racist, because he wanted chicken. <sup>40</sup>

I invited my black colleague over for dinner last night. In preparation, I told my wife to cut and fry a lot of chickens. He's black, I figured that's what the fuckers eat. During dinner, he sat down, stared at his food and said, "You're really a racist cunt, you know that, right?" I said, "Why, what's wrong with the chicken?" "You lot were given plates. Why's mine in a dog's bowl?" <sup>41</sup>

Whilst this joke is not exactly anecdotal or centred on an experiential narrative, the joke's style imitates a direct account relating to the producer's experience from a white perspective. The producer makes his/herself the narrator of the joke, describing their feelings about their occupation to the reader. The narrator, obviously fictitiously, draws upon their own supposed experiences to conclude and rhetorically assert to the reader that the members of the black 'race' he/she has encountered, embody several common racialised stereotypes, whilst simultaneously attempting to be funny. This is not a problem in terms of the joke's success. A joke's funniness on *Sickipedia.org* or in any communicative medium is not dependent on the truthfulness of the events depicted, rather the humour that can be derived from thinking about them, regardless of how fantastical. Moreover these fantasy dimensions of jokes can work in favour of making an example more amusing to its audience - as will be illustrated with the jokes which incorporate the anti-black fantasy violence motif discussed in Chapter Six, but this does not necessarily mean it works better as a *joke*.

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39 [Retrieved 17/03/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black January 2009]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/just-seen-the-facebook-group-i-love-chicken-more-black-298017>]

40 [Retrieved 17/03/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black May 2014]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/give-a-man-a-fish-and-hell-eat-for-a-1567071>]

41 [Retrieved 17/03/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black July 2013]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/i-invited-my-black-colleague-over-for-dinner-last-night-1494875>]

The leading line, "I love my job at the Zoo. It's stressful though. Watching all those smelly apes fighting over their dinner", provides three of the four racialised stereotypes, however in the leading line, it is not definitively clear to the audience that the notion of "smelly apes...fighting" necessarily has any inherently racist undertones.

It must be stated, that when consumed in reality, these jokes are not removed or decontextualised from the platform of which they are initially communicated. They are not being consumed for analytical or evaluative purposes, they are being consumed for the purpose of potentially inciting pleasure from laughter. *Sickipedia.org* is a participatory comic community in the flexible discursive space of the cultural public sphere, therefore the audience of *Example (2)* is highly likely to be aware of any potential racist representations or connotations prior to its consumption, or at the immediate moment of consumption. The audience has come to the *Black* subcategory of the *Racism* section of the site and therefore is actively participating in *Sickipedia.org's* comic community. Upon reading the term "smelly ape", the reader is aware of the context these words are used and their discursive meanings, even if it is only within the superficial or populist understandings limited to the confines of *Sickipedia.org's* comic racist community.

The likelihood of an audience believing that the opening line of this joke is referring, literally, to a "smelly ape" rather than a 'smelly black individual' is slim to none. However, purely for the analytical purposes of this specific deconstruction, one must hypothetically maintain that the opening line's presentations of racialised stereotypes are not fulfilled until the misdirection is revealed in the punch-line.

The way in which the misdirection works, and the initial ambiguity created in the leading line is due to the narrator claiming they work in a zoo. Therefore it would not be out of the ordinary for a zookeeper to become stressed from 'smelly apes' fighting over dinner. However early in the leading line there is an element of linguistic incongruity which assists in creating the humour in the punch-line. This incongruity creates a sense of humorous unease for the audience - they know they are being misled, waiting for the punch-line to reveal itself. This is due to the narrator portraying the 'apes' (before it is revealed they are in fact black people) in a negative light. They are referred to as 'smelly' and their behaviour is described as violent. The narrator has spoken of the 'apes' derogatively, ridiculed them, and identified their own position towards them as somewhat hateful.

The incongruity derives from the narrator claiming they love their job. It raises the question, why would anyone love a job in a zoo, if they have a strong distain for the animals they work with? The leading line alludes to a sense of enjoyment in the hatred of the apes, as it allows for ridicule which in turn leads to more enjoyment and pleasure. At this point the audience becomes aware that the joke is misleading them, as it is uncustomary to have a joke which is about the enjoyment of hating and ridiculing 'apes'.

It is not however uncommon, on either *Sickipedia.org* or in historical comic racist examples, to have jokes concerning the hatred and ridicule of the black 'race'. In the leading line the notions of a lesser being (the ape) is presented in conjunction with several negative characteristics that they behold. They are represented as smelly and violent. This is not necessarily untrue, hence the legitimacy of the misdirection - many species of ape are aggressive and dangerous at various developmental stages of their lives, and they may well smell unpleasant to the norms of human's sense of smell. All of these notions are shifted to apply to black people upon completing reading the punch-line, and in turn their discursive meanings are expanded substantially.

Upon the revelation in the punch-line that the narrator made an (intentional) mistake in regards to their occupation in the leading line, the misdirection is revealed - "Sorry did I say Zoo? I meant KFC". The audience is forced to somewhat sophisticatedly deduce that the "smelly apes" that were depicted are actually a reference to black people - without it ever being explicitly stated. The correct (racist) interpretation of this joke can only be obtained through the prior knowledge of the stereotypical assumption that black people adore *Kentucky Fried Chicken*, and in part that black people are often represented as apes or monkeys, violent and smelly. In having this prior knowledge, the different components discursively align to form a coherent piece of comic racist content - it has misdirection and promotes several racist stereotypes and could be offensive to anyone who belongs to the group who is ridiculed, namely the entire black 'race'.

The producer is asserting that it is easy to mistake working in a zoo for working in *Kentucky Fried Chicken* because in both working environments, staff would have to encounter "smelly apes fighting over their dinner". According to the joke's logic, in a zoo, staff literally deal with dangerous apes, and in *Kentucky Fried Chicken* staff have to cope with primitive, lesser-human black people, being violent with one another and the staff, whilst smelling bad before they eat and during the consumption of fried chicken.

In this example, the joke may be somewhat short, but the social exclusion can be considered much larger. It draws upon several historical processes of racialised representation and Othering to create a general sense of white superiority and inferiority that can be reductively applied to the entire black 'race'. Somewhat contradictorily, the ambivalence created by not specifically addressing black people with linguistic terminology pulls the entire black 'race' into the joke and 'it' collectively becomes the target of ridicule. All black people are targeted, and each negative stereotype presented is generalised to apply to every black individual without distinguishing different ethnicities, nationalities or as some jokes have indicated, hierarchical differences within the black 'race' determined by a range of perceived behavioural traits. In this joke, the producer rhetorically asserts that all black people are sub-human due to their similarities to apes and their ape-like behaviour. They are conceived as *all* being smelly, violent, chicken lovers and therefore *all* inferior to the white 'race'.

In terms of simianisation, it is clearly a racialised value which does not represent any form of cultural awareness or representational heterogeneity. The very doctrine of anti-black simianisation

as a form of animalistic dehumanisation, rhetorically positions all black people as closer to ape-kind than mankind and this joke does not attempt to challenge this approach in any way. The joke clearly asserts from a white perspective that black people are so similar in both their biological appearance and anthropological and behavioural traits to apes that it is not possible to distinguish between the two. Several other examples on the website assert this racialised idea and imagery similarly:

I was talking to a scientist who complained how hard it is to find test monkeys these days. "What are you talking about", I said, "prisons are full of them."<sup>42</sup>

Why do chimpanzees always frown? Because they know they are going to evolve into niggers!<sup>43</sup>

Just seen the new JLS video on tv, I can't believe they managed to coax the chimpanzees out of the PG Tips advert out of retirement for it.<sup>44</sup>

At no point in the joke does the narrator explain that black people are similar to ape-kind, as black people are never specifically referred to. Instead it interpretatively asserts that black people *are* apes. The term 'ape' is simultaneously a literal representation of and a linguistic signifier of the black 'race'. This representation thus has wider associated meanings concerning dehumanisation, primitivisation, black racial inferiority and white racial superiority.

The ape is used in this kind of discourse as a way of succinctly conveying several racialised, stereotypical assumptions and processes of Othering in conjunction - such as the black 'race' being closer to nature, primitive, violent, unintelligent, unable to develop civilisation, sexually promiscuous and grossly disproportionate in size and unattractive in comparison to white counterparts.

It discursively acts as a way of further separating white and black human beings - creating social inclusion and exclusion - through identifying that it is somewhat insufficient to merely argue that black people are allegedly inferior due to a wide range of biological and cultural factors. Instead a more accurate understanding would reveal that white and black people are no closer to being the same species than humans and apes, indicating whites' superiority. According to the joke's discursive agenda, a white individual could become confused about what their occupation is -

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42 [Retrieved 02/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* December 2013]

[<http://www.sickpedia.org/racism/black/i-was-talking-to-a-scientist-who-complained-how-hard-1531852>]

43 [Retrieved 14/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* June 2010]

[<http://www.sickpedia.org/racism/black/why-do-chimpanzees-always-frown-because-they-know-they-are-471091>]

44 [Retrieved 02/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* July 2010]

[<http://www.sickpedia.org/racism/black/just-seen-the-new-jls-video-on-tv-i-cant-508413>]

whether they are working in a zoo, or *Kentucky Fried Chicken*, as all one would encounter is apes, forming a lucid contemporary example of simianising the black 'race' in comic discourse.

The other stereotypical representations can be considered a little more aware of cultural differences, or perhaps inadvertently through the choice of stereotypes, they cannot be applied to all black people. Firstly the notion of black people supposedly smelling bad, is a secondary stereotype which contributes to the overall racialised representation of the gross black physique.

Typical racialised imagery of the black 'race', both in comic and non-comic discourses, portrays a large physique, muscular, large cranium, wide nose, distinct cheekbones, full lips, large penises for men, large breasts and buttocks for women, scruffy, 'nappy', curly hair, and overall similar features to a Chimpanzee or Gorilla (see Chapter Five, Motif No.5). This is demonstrated in other jokes from the website:

I was stunned when my wife gave birth to a black baby today. I said, "You dirty, cheating bitch ..how could you? Look at him, he's fucking brown, I'm fucking white ... you've been cheating on me with a fucking nigger?" She said, "But ..." I said, "Don't try and deny it .. look at his massive nose, his huge blubbery lips .." She said, "I'm black, you fucking idiot" <sup>45</sup>

What do you call a nigger with three legs? Horny. <sup>46</sup>

My daughter came up to me today and asked me 'Dad what's the difference between a crow and a black bird?'

I said "Well my dear, a crow has somewhat heavier beaks and fan shaped tails. Where as a black bird has huge lips, big fuzzy hair and a huge arse" <sup>47</sup>

An additional stereotype, commonly presented that both genders share, is the notion that black people smell unpleasant in comparison to white people - that white and black people have radically different body odours, again favouring white through denigrating black.

What is interesting about the racialised stereotype of black people smelling unpleasant, is that it clearly embodies the intertwined relationship between the social and biological. It is very difficult to distinguish whether nasty body odour can be attributed to biological or cultural factors. In the case of this particular stereotype across comic racist content, it is somewhat reduced to both.

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45 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* May 2009]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/i-was-stunned-when-my-wife-gave-birth-to-a-939016>]

46 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Sex and Shit > Black Cock* February 2012]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/sex-and-shit/black-cock/what-do-you-call-a-nigger-with-three-legs-horny-1228059>]

47 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* July 2011]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/my-daughter-came-up-to-me-today-and-asked-me-1030254>]

In some examples, it is simply articulated that black people allegedly smell bad *because they are black*, as illustrated in *Example (2)*, indicating that body odour is directly derivative of the black body. In other examples, it is stressed that black people smell because within black culture, personal hygiene is not prioritised as highly as it is in white culture, therefore they smell *because of black culture*. This meaning could be taken from the following examples:

I just brought some African Lynx. He fucking needed it.<sup>48</sup>

Why do black people drive with their windows up? They think the smell is coming from outside.<sup>49</sup>

Within the general context of comic racism, the stereotype of unpleasant black body odour is always presented as fundamentally determined by biological, phenotypical or natural causes. It does not matter if within a joke black people are presented as being fetid due to poor personal hygiene, within the context of the comic racism, the poor personal hygiene must be seen deriving from a cultural ritual that has originated from black racial heritage - it is a by-product of black-ness. This particular stereotype, like so many others, further supports the notion that the cultural and the biological can rarely be separated in racialised discourses, whether based on humour or not.

On the surface it may not seem that that this stereotype has any deep rooted social, cultural, political or economical implications. In the grand scheme of Othering processes, socially excluding, and generally creating offense through ridicule, claiming that a group smells unpleasant may not immediately seem like something to be overly angry, concerned or critical about. Who is really offended or hurt by being told that a 'race' or ethnic group they belong to apparently smells? This insult would surely be more successful if it was aimed at the individual as opposed to the collective.

In isolation this may be correct. However, the notion of black body odour is not a stereotypical representation that has been created in isolation. It is a by-product of a plethora of far more severe and socially damaging stereotypical assumptions and representations which have historically been used to justify abhorrent behaviour and attitudes towards the black 'race'. Alleged black body odour initially ties into depictions of gross black physicality, but in turn this racialised imagery reinforces wider ideas concerning dehumanising black people according to black primitiveness, poor intelligence, black intimidation, violence and aggressiveness and sexual violence. The notion of the bad odour of black people contributes to an overall argument that the *black body*, *black culture*, and most importantly *black nature* in comparison to white counterparts is essentially inferior.

Any ambivalence concerning what the ape and smelly representations provide in terms of portraying black people as violent is made explicit in the joke when it proclaims that black people

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48 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to Racism > African March 2012]

[<http://www.sickpedia.org/racism/african/i-just-brought-some-african-lynx-he-fucking-needed-it-1258962>]

49 [Retrieved 06/04/14 Uploaded to Racism > Pakistani June 2008]

[<http://www.sickpedia.org/racism/pakistani/why-do-black-people-drive-with-their-windows-up-they-33725>]

"fight over their dinner". It overtly labels the black 'race' as violent in a way that allows for no error in interpretation but further more contributes to the overall representation of the black 'race' as a subhuman, primitive Other in this joke.

### Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #3

You can always count on black people....If you've got some chalk.<sup>50</sup>

*Example (3)* has been deliberately chosen not only due to its discursive reproduction of the notion of mechanistic dehumanisation of black people, but also due to it drawing a direct parallel to the joke told by Frank Carson referred to in Chapter Two in terms of its linguistic, joke structure, providing a clear sense of anti-black continuity within comic racist expressions throughout the history of British popular culture.

*I must say I love bringing him home with me [Charlie Williams], my kids always love something to chalk on.*

Both are very simplistic - a leading line followed by a punch-line and due to shortness they are both clearly one-liners. In terms of aesthetics, *Example (3)* shares little structural features with the previous jokes analysed. The short, snappiness of the joke and the clear coherent trope of misdirection and wordplay constitutes its legitimate classification as a *joke* from a linguistic perspective. However I would argue that despite their similarities, again in terms of its linguistic structure, the Frank Carson joke does not. The Carson joke does not resemble a joke, rather it is more of a racialised insult told in the good faith that the target will not take offense (as they are friends). But offensiveness is not the most important outcome that requires attention in comic racism. Both examples must be critiqued in equal measure in terms of the racialised representations they reproduce.

This demonstrates that despite the same discursive meanings, it is how a joke is *presented* in terms of its aesthetics, and the communicative sphere in which it is available for consumption, which determine if it works, linguistically as a joke. Ultimately the potential ambivalence a joke can create in terms of audience interpretation is irrelevant to what the discourse represents socially, culturally and historically. What is of greatest importance for critical responses are the meanings reproduced.

In both jokes the punch-lines are almost identical in their reference to black people being used as chalk/black boards. It is in the leading line that these jokes slightly differ ('I must say I love bringing him home with me', and, 'you can always count on black people'). *Example (3)* works as a joke because it relies on a slightly more complex semantic understanding as it places two incongruous

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50 [Retrieved 28/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* September 2009]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/you-can-always-count-on-black-people-if-youve-got-179178>]

elements together - it leads the reader in one direction before going in another. The joke's leading line works according to the intransitive verb 'counting', *to count* on an individual. When claiming 'to count' on an individual, one is asserting that, that individual is suitably trustworthy with something of importance.

When interpreted with this meaning, the punch-line makes no sense. The intransitive definition of 'counting' does not correspond to the alluded noun of a chalk/blackboard. The intransitive definition of counting and chalkboards are totally incongruous, they do not sit harmoniously with one another. The joke works in the punch-line through subverting the semantic meaning of 'counting' to a transitive verb, meaning to recite numerals in a pedagogical context.

The leading line now has a different meaning - the idea of physical numerical recital on a human being's skin with chalk. The subversion of 'counting' has now become appropriately incongruous with the notion of 'people' more specifically 'black people' - socially, this is not considered *normal* or acceptable conduct, moreover, to numerically recite physically with chalk on someone's skin is not physically possible. This wordplay involving the misrepresentation between the two usages of the verb 'counting' on a linguistic level creates appropriate incongruities (Oring, 1992, 2003), as discussed in Chapter One, between the leading line and the punch-line, which purely in terms of joke structure, insights a humorous response from the reader.

Frank Carson's joke fails linguistically as it does not have this initial incongruity provided by the language of the joke. There are no subversions of word's meanings. The leading line leads the audience into a false sense of friendliness (which in a private context maybe genuine) between the two comedians in "loving taking him (Charlie Williams) home..." before saying something clearly offensive in the punch-line. However there is no explicit wordplay. Incongruity, if there is any at all, is provided by initially leading the audience to interpret that something positive is being asserted before revealing something both negative and offensive - the idea of literally writing on a human being, something that is behaviourally abhorrent on the part of the perpetrator and physically intrusive for the victim.

I argue that, purely on a linguistic level, Carson's material more closely resembles insult than joking. In reality, there may have been a degree of warmth and friendship between the two actors that allowed insults to be thrown at each other in jest, with neither taking offense, or taking notice of any deep-seated racialised ideas or processes of Othering being reasserted. But this was a joke told within the public realm. It is not possible to fully incorporate the private context of the comedians' relationship into the public space that the joke was told. This is why adopting the public sphere model in *critical humour studies* is beneficial, it allows for a more refined approach towards critiquing jokes, taking into consideration the communicative context in which they are told, and how that in turn affects its discursive meanings and representations.

In private, the joke takes on different meanings as it can adopt the inter-personal context between the perpetrator and the target, and for that reason it could at least be considered funny, if still not

technically a joke. Take for example a 'false lie'. Deliberately not telling the truth is widely considered sinful, but it can also be an act of playfulness and banter. Lying to a loved one, privately, in jest can incite a humorous response for both the liar and the lied to. Moreover, this would not linguistically have to resemble a formal joke structure to produce laughter. But if a similar lie was proclaimed in public to a wider audience with no immediate inter-personal relationship, any humorous interpretation would more than likely be lost in translation. Humour takes different forms when created and used in different communicative paradigms and contexts.

Comic racism's ambivalence in the cultural public sphere stems from its articulation in *joke* structures. If it was expressed in any other way, for example in the humorous structure of the private sphere's 'false lie', it would immediately be met with a far more severe critical intervention because audiences would be encouraged to query the authenticity of the lie. When placed in a more formal joke structure, based on tropes, incongruities, metaphors, exaggerations and misdirection, enough doubt is created over the severity of racist connotations. An audience member can hypothesise that perhaps the producer wanted you to laugh more than they wanted you to believe negative stereotypes about the black 'race' or hate their very existence. When expressed outside of this joke structure, one is forced to confront the prejudice articulated, as not enough ambivalence is raised concerning the producer's legitimate intentions to make audiences laugh.

Therefore from the approach of an analysis of the *public* expression of comic racism, Frank Carson's joke must be addressed firstly in terms of the racialised representations reproduced, and the discursive production of social exclusion and Othering, because when disseminated *publicly*, these are the meanings that are of primary importance. In this context any meanings derivative of the private relations between the two parties must be considered peripheral.

In both jokes it is this fantastical assertion of chalking on a human being which incorporates notions of dehumanisation. Both jokes play on the idea that the colour of a black person's skin makes them an easier target for ridicule, in this case according to processes of mechanistic dehumanisation. The perceived blackness of a black person's skin colour is equated to the blackness of an inanimate object's colour. Therefore by extension, as the fundamental identifying feature of the black 'race' in these jokes is skin colour, they equate black *people* with non-human inanimate objects. The notion of chalking on a black person, symbolically reduces a black individual to nothing more than an object, an object that can be used at the will of a white individual, an object that has no entitlement to human rights, an object that is essentially disposable.

These jokes rhetorically assert that humans belonging to the black 'race' should not be addressed with the same respect and uniqueness as if they were white. In this example, the complex cultural and social practices of black ethnicity are reduced to represent synonymously an entire 'race' as intrinsically inferior, so much so that their value as human beings is considered superfluous.

Frank Carson's joke specifically indicates that no matter how skilled an individual may be at her/his occupation, no matter how nice she/he may be, or how much one might value her/his friendship on a human level, her/his existence as a black person, fundamentally positions them as inferior, both culturally and phenotypically, and therefore can or should be *used*. They should be used by perceived superior white individuals, like one *uses* a tool, at one's discretion at for example the behest of your children's entertainment. These notions are similarly reproduced by *Example (3)*.

Furthermore this joke operates according to racialised understandings of the colour black and blackness discussed earlier. Clearly there is a fundamental chromatic difference between the colour of a black individual's skin and the black on the colour spectrum - the colour of a chalk/blackboard. In *Example (3)*'s case, the producer clearly attempts to draw the audience's attention to the connection between notions of 'black' as a colour, and 'black' as a racial marker, which simultaneously within these types of discourse, is a racialised marker. When blackness is positioned in such a manner with a racist discourse, audiences are being rhetorically persuaded to interpret racialised notions of blackness and its discursive meanings.

Blackness is presented in the joke as a way of highlighting the black 'race's' alleged inferiority in accordance to many different associated negative traits. Additionally in a slightly less interpretative manner, blackness is presented as being literally gross and unappealing from a white perspective. Both jokes grossly exaggerate the physical characteristics of the black 'race', which contribute to the ideas concerning mechanistic dehumanisation but also the reproduction of the physically repulsive, gross caricature of the black man/woman.

Despite the similarities between the jokes, in *Example (3)* there is an additional discursive component external to processes of dehumanisation that is not present in the historical example that is of significant importance. This concerns the idea of 'counting on black people' in the intransitive usage of the verb 'counting' - to depend on or trust black people with something of importance. Within the context of the joke, this assertion works according to a complex discursive strategy that relies on a wider understanding of racialised humour and indeed wider racist attitudes from its audience.

It is not presumptuous to maintain that the general comedic and rhetorical strategy of the jokes across the anti-Black sample of *Sickipedia.org* is essentially negative. Through the linguistic tropes of the anti-Black *Racism* jokes, the audience is persuaded to believe in the alleged negative intertwined physical, cultural and behavioural attributes of the black 'race', whether that is in regards to criminality, primitiveness, aggressiveness, sexuality, physique, intelligence etc. The relationship between the producer and the audience relies on a reciprocal understanding of both the semantic and discursive meaning of the language used - that in comparison to white people, who produce the content - black people are supposedly grossly inferior in multiple ways and they must be socially excluded. Therefore within the context of anti-Black racist humour, the notion that a black person can be 'counted on' in the intransitive usage of the verb, is in itself, laughable - it is *a joke*.

Coming from a normative centre of whiteness, positive characteristics such as trustworthiness, loyalty, reliability, integrity and honour - adjectives and nouns which are semantically attached to the notion of 'counting' on someone - stand in binary opposition to characteristics which are traditionally used to describe the black 'race' within both comic and non-comic racialised discourses. What 'counting on someone' in the intransitive usage represents semantically, external to social, cultural and political contexts, is incompatible with the tropes of anti-Black racist joking (and wider anti-Black discourses), and as a result within the leading line, humour is created.

In this subversive usage of the intransitive definition of 'counting', the joke further solidifies negative discursive stereotypes about the black 'race', that black people are supposedly too indolent to have any honour, too deceitful to be trusted with something of importance to a white individual, too at ease with criminality, violence, both sexual and non-sexual and unintelligent to have any integrity, and are too perfidious to be considered loyal.

In creating a racist joke that in its leading line asserts that black people can be 'counted on' in the intransitive sense - before it is subverted to its transitive usage in the punch-line - one is ridiculing that notion, and in turn reproducing the idea that black people most definitely *cannot* be counted on.

It is within this combination of the transitive usage of counting on a human being, in conjunction with the racist values articulated, that ridicule those in subordinated positions according to processes of dehumanisation, gross physicality and other more subtle processes of Othering, that form the comic racist basis of *Example (3)*. Though it is highly similar in terms of the discursive message reproduced, in contrast to Frank Carson's joke, *Example (3)* is far more successful as a joke and thus raises ambiguity over how one should interpret the content.

## Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #4

Why does Beyonce keep singing: To the left, to the left?

Because, everybody knows that blacks don't have any rights.<sup>51</sup>

*Example (4)* more explicitly reproduces the notion of black people having no entitlement to human rights that was more subtly asserted in *Example (3)*. This joke is highly similar to *Example (3)* in terms of its very short and simplistic aesthetic structure, with a leading line and a punch-line at just twenty words, and a clearly defined, simple comic trope which houses the discursive processes of Othering in such a way that it works as a joke linguistically.

Like *Example (1)*, the first line requires a prerequisite of popular cultural knowledge, in this case concerning African-American pop singer Beyoncé Knowles, specifically her 2006 song *Irreplaceable* which featured the repeated lyrical hook "to the left, to the left, everything you own in

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51 [Retrieved 28/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* September 2007]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/why-does-beyonce-keep-singing-to-the-left-to-the-4295>]

the box to the left". The understanding of the racist connotations of this joke does not rely on knowing the song, however in order to fully engage with both the linguistic and racialised humorous elements, knowing the cultural context is advisable.

This joke works, like *Example (3)*, as it relies on an appropriately incongruous play on language. The leading line refers to Beyoncé's singing of the line 'to the left, to the left' in the song *Irreplaceable* with the focus being on the word 'left' used as a noun. In the song, Beyoncé is referring to 'the box to the left', therefore the joke is using the term 'left' in the sense of direction.

The punch-line focuses on what should be the antonym of the direction 'left', the direction 'right', however the noun 'right' is used with a different definition concerning someone's claims to prescriptive moral and legal guarantees. Therefore the humour is provided by the appropriate incongruity between the usages of 'left' and 'rights'. The term 'left', even in using one of its other various definitions can never be used as the antonym for the plural noun 'rights' in its usage in the punch-line. The two words do not make sense when used in conjunction. They cannot be used in a mutually exclusive context - they are incongruous yet appropriately connected due to other semantic meanings attributed to them. From a linguistic perspective, this example just about holds together sufficiently to be labelled legitimately as a joke, and it is through this word play that it creates humour.

The racism embedded in the joke operates twofold. The first racist/racialised element concerns the cultural context associated with the actor identified in the leading line, Beyoncé Knowles. Using a named actor, in this case Beyoncé, is a fairly common comic strategy adopted by the jokes on *Sickipedia.org*. *Sickipedia.org* states that one of its primary discursive agendas is to provide a space in which 'current-ness' is actively encouraged - "every time there is a big story - say a murder or a disaster, following the news comes the jokes. Psychologists probably have something to say about this, but not us, we just want to be the number one place for finding, recording and disseminating this material" ([sickipedia.org/help](http://sickipedia.org/help)). Referring to a well-known social actor who is relevant at that particular period of time is both common and encouraged on *Sickipedia.org*.

In this case, Beyoncé's relevance is due to the popularity and success of the song *Irreplaceable* in late 2006, early 2007 (when this joke was published), reaching number one in many countries around the world. However within the context of this joke, Beyoncé as an individual has no personal connection to the discursive connotations of the joke - the joke isn't *about* Beyoncé *personally*. She is a symbol of blackness and the black 'race'. The joke's primary aim is to reproduce anti-Black rhetoric, therefore Beyoncé's specific usage within the joke from a personal perspective can be interpreted as circumstantial due to her 'race' being the primary theme of the joke.

Nevertheless Beyoncé's existence as an influential black woman cannot be ignored. It is Beyoncé's specific artistic attachment to the song that led this joke to be centred on anti-black discrimination. Contextually, this joke could not be aimed towards any other marginal group whether that be in

accordance to 'race', gender, age, class, sexuality, or disability. On both a linguistic and a discursive level, the joke only works if the target is black - because Beyoncé Knowles is black. The target of this joke has been specifically selected because Beyoncé Knowles' existence as a black woman is considered by the producer to be a hugely significant marker of her cultural identity, and because that identity is black, it is considered to be inferior and thus deserves to be ridiculed. It is Beyoncé's blackness which leads to the anti-Black focus and within the context of the joke Beyoncé becomes a symbolic figurehead for the black 'race'.

Why does - **an iconic symbol of the black 'race'** - keep singing: To the left, to the left?

Because, everybody knows that - **the black 'race' doesn't** - have any rights

The second racist element concerns the discursive meaning provided by reproducing notions of dehumanising the black 'race'. Unlike *Example (3)* this joke does not attempt to dehumanise black people mechanistically. Black people here are presented as humans, but lesser humans than whites.

Despite the word play in the leading line, the punch-line is very specific, explicit and to the point. You could read the punch-line in isolation and it would clearly and coherently articulate anti-Black racist rhetoric - 'everybody knows that blacks don't have any rights'. Like most of the examples, only when consumed in conjunction with its leading line can this joke be loosely considered humorous. Therefore this example needs very little interpretation. It explicitly claims that all black people have no rights.

By 'rights' the joke is alluding to deliberately omitting black people from the congenital moral, political and legal principles each human is entitled to no matter what gender, class, race, nationality or sexuality one might belong to or actions one may commit during their life. The joke claims that black people, in their entirety, as a 'race', with no distinction to specific black ethnicities, have no entitlement to these basic principles. Black people are positioned in opposition to white people, who clearly within the context of this discourse *are* entitled to these rights. The black 'race' is therefore dehumanised, they are positioned as sub-human and clearly an inferior 'race' - an Other who cannot be included in white, civilised society. The joke maintains that if everyone is entitled to human rights from birth except 'blacks', 'blacks' cannot be human, at least not in the same way white people are human.

Furthermore, this joke has another component of high importance. It is set up in the leading line with the assertion that Beyoncé *keeps* singing to the left, to the left' - the emphasis on 'keeps' - and questioning why she is doing this. It has already been established that in this joke, Beyoncé is positioned as a symbolic metaphor for all black people - she is singing on behalf of her 'race'. In the punch-line it claims that '*everybody knows* that blacks don't have rights'. Through these two notions that Beyoncé *keeps* singing and *everybody knows* that black don't have rights is producing an idea of self-dehumanisation on the part of black people. The joke maintains that it is not just the white 'race' and other non-black 'races' that *know* the black 'race' is inferior and subhuman, the

black 'race' *knows it* as well and its members actively participate in reproducing this notion's collective, societal acceptance.

This is an important rhetorical strategy implemented in the joke because it attempts to imply, obviously falsely, that not all racialised discourse explicitly derives from white normativity and white supremacist values. Not all racialised discourse must function in accordance to an 'us claiming they are something' dynamic. In this case, the discourse persuasively implies that the Other *knows* that it is inferior, and furthermore goes out of its way to reassert its inferiority through public forms of artistic discourse, such as a pop song. Obviously this is a discursive illusion created on the part of the producer as it is clearly written from a white perspective, reproducing ideological, white supremacist values, but, this level of complexity is intentionally implemented to provide a stronger rhetorical position.

Finally, Beyoncé's naming as an actor in this joke does have further significance on a slightly more personal level. Although this joke is broad in its generalisation to all black people, in specifically naming a young, attractive, rich and successful black individual it is attempting to further solidify a notion of collective inferiority of the black 'race'. Furthermore there is significance of this individual being a woman. The joke intertwines social exclusion of racism with sexism, due to black women being positioned the most inferior of the black 'race' in the general comic rhetorical strategy of *Sickipedia.org's* content.

*Example (4)* asserts that the discursive reproduction of dehumanisation and its associations with Othering and white supremacy is applicable to all black people. No matter how rich and successful the Other is, no matter how much worldwide adoration the Other may behold, in the racist logic of this joke and others on *Sickipedia.org*, the Other is *still* the Other and will remain an inferior subhuman, indefinitely. The joke maintains that social mobility is an illusion for black people. Moreover, what is of such significance in this particular joke is that the Other itself (Beyoncé on behalf of black people) is represented as fully aware and accepting of this notion and is prepared to publicly reproduce its assertion.

## Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #5

"When you domesticate a pet and own it for ages," I said, "letting them back into the wild is dangerous.

They won't be able to fend for themselves and they'll probably starve to death."

"That's true enough," replied my black history tutor, "but what's that got to do with decolonization of Africa?"<sup>52</sup>

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52 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > African* April 2011]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/african/when-you-domesticate-a-pet-and-own-it-for-ages-911282>]

Where *Example (3) and (4)* demonstrated the humorous rhetorical strategies implemented in jokes that reproduce values of *mechanistic* and *humanistic* dehumanisation respectively, *Example (5)* provides evidence of reinforcing notions of general *animalistic* dehumanisation of the black 'race'. As opposed to the more specialised animal-based, dehumanised representation of simianisation, this joke acts as a broad example of de-associating black people with their status as human beings and presenting them as not just closer to, but actually as primitive animals.

*Example (5)* has a slightly more elaborate joke structure than the two previous examples that also centred on dehumanising the black 'race'. This is due to its slightly longer length and separation into three lines, but when deconstructing it, it is clear to see that it is effectively still a basic leading line/punch-line structure. However unlike the previous two, *Example (5)* does adopt a more complex humorous strategy which ultimately causes it to fail as a joke.

It is not as direct in terms of its distinctly separated producer/audience dynamic as the previous examples. *Example (5)* does not comprise a producer directly communicating with the listener/reader, it is stylised as a repetition of a previous conversation in the producer's private sphere recited for public consumption. This was and remains a very common joking style for stand-up comedians. This anecdotal style gives the joke a more naturalistic feel, as if what is written in the joke is an accurate recount of something said in reality, and therefore gives the joke more *gravitas*. The joke can be considered more genuine in terms of its racism if it was something that was actually said outside of the 'safe haven' and sense of artificiality provided by *Sickipedia.org's* discursive space (whether it is a true anecdote or not). Ultimately this causes the content's downfall in terms of it being characterised as a legitimate joke linguistically. It has too much of a naturalistic feel. It's comic agenda is in no way as transparent as its racism.

When deconstructed, *Example (5)* does operate according to an inconsistent linguistic relationship between the leading line and the punch-line. The audience is naturalistically led to believe the joke is about something seemingly innocent, yet it is uncharacteristically forced to apply to something out of place that is far more controversial or seemingly offensive. However, with the lack of a clear comic set up, *Example (5)* prioritises these racist elements over the humorous. Audience members may fail to acknowledge that what they are consuming is a joke until after the punch-line is revealed and at that point, the racism of the joke is so visceral, and the stereotypes produced so well defined through its authentic presentation, that any aims at creating humour from the producer stem solely *from* the racism, the taboo nature of the joke, or the sense of superiority gained, *not* the joke's aesthetics.

In this joke's case the misdirection is provided by an uncommon and not very well accepted notion (outside of racialised discourses) of black people's comparisons to animals. This is considered a taboo and controversial subject but dehumanisation, particularly animalistic dehumanisation is a common feature in both traditional racist discourses and racialised humour:

Someone told me I immediately judge black people by the colour of their skin. This couldn't be further from the truth. It's about judging them because they act like fucking animals.<sup>53</sup>

I'm such a fucking idiot. Just failed philosophy big time. Wrote an awesome essay on "animal rights" before realising they meant the question literally about animals and not black people. Fuck's sake.<sup>54</sup>

The following joke interestingly provides something of a discursive link between *Example (4)* and *Example (5)* - humanistic and animalistic dehumanisation:

I used to call black people animals, but then I remembered animals have rights<sup>55</sup>

Generally animalistic dehumanisation is universally accepted by civilised thought to be an abhorrent attitude to uphold or reproduce publicly or privately. Therefore if someone is reciting an anecdote about a conversation discussing animals, or pets, or in this example's case, releasing domesticated pets into the wild, it is not universally acceptable for the term 'pet' or 'animal' to symbolically signify black people.

The idea of an animal, or a domesticated household pet, are both semantically and discursively inappropriate to be compared to the 'racial' identity of a human being. It is the contextual aspects of racialised discourses, both humorous and non-humorous, that create an appropriate connection between these two seemingly unrelated subjects. However in this example, the misdirection is not defined clearly enough at the start of the joke, for the joke to be considered racist rhetoric and humorous in equal measure - the racism overwhelms the humour, causing the joke to fail.

The joke has a slight historical context based on Western colonialism and subsequent decolonisation of African countries, as highlighted by the supposed inciting incident which drives the joke's subject matter - a black history teacher discussing the decolonisation of Africa. This overall contributes to the racialised rhetorical agenda of the piece, as colonial practices influenced by imperialistic ideas were intrinsically related to Enlightenment discourses on 'race' and the manifestation of racialised hierarchies which particularly excluded blacks.

In terms of its dehumanisation of the black 'race', *Example (5)* somewhat sophisticatedly negotiates the process. It is not so crude as to simplistically assert that black people remind the producer of domesticated animals. The leading line sets up several behavioural notions that are inherently associated with domesticated animals, particularly household pets. These explicitly

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53 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* January 2013]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/someone-told-me-i-immediately-judge-black-people-by-the-1410456>]

54 [Retrieved 06/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* April 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/im-such-a-fucking-idiot-just-failed-philosophy-big-time-413270>]

55 [Retrieved 06/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* June 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/i-used-to-call-black-people-animals-but-then-i-456319>]

include an inability to defend oneself and an inability to find enough food to supply nourishment for survival if left in the wild.

However there are several other behavioural attributes of domesticated animals that are implied to apply to black people with a little more interpretation. Therefore these behavioural notions typical of animals identified in the leading line, that the audience acknowledges to the best of their knowledge to be true, are subsequently attributed to black people in the punch-line. In this sense, the producer has affectively intertwined behavioural or biological characteristics of a living being with the cultural or the social. What is importantly being articulated is twofold: one is that primitive animals, distinguished from humans, are uncivilised and unable to develop culturally, and two is that pets are ultimately human being's subordinates, they are not equal. Animals cannot develop culturally in the same way humans can, therefore it is implied that black people also cannot do so in the same way white people can. The idea that black behavioural characteristics are not a result of cultural nuances, but instead attributable to their biological make-up in a state of nature, is re-articulated.

Domesticating an animal acts as an attempt to civilise a primitive or wild being. It can be compared to the idea of taking a savage being out of its natural state and making it compatible with civil social life. Humans ultimately have pets for pleasure, for the enjoyment they give its master. If a pet is too difficult to live with, or if they are unable to integrate with normal, civilised ways of living, their owners have them put to sleep or sent away. Pets must go through a basic process of *civilising* in order to co-exist as a master's subordinate. Taking a wild animal and domesticating it, causes that animal to forget, or simply never develop a number of its natural, biologically determined attributes which make it fit for survival in the wild. If after a significant period of its life, it has never used and developed these skills, it never will, and if it were returned to their natural habitat, it would die quickly.

*Example (5)* sophisticatedly asserts that the black 'race' - more specifically Africans - is/are similarly primitive - that black people are not human, or at least not in the way white people are. Often in both comic and non-comic discourses, the creation of the Other is presented in binary opposition to the creation of the self - in this case the white self. Therefore in the joke, white humans, with whiteness acting as the normative centre, are presented as socially civilised and superior. Conversely black people are presented as naturalised, inferior *sub-humans*, or animal-like, having more in common with the primitive beings civilised humans domesticate and have as pets.

In the joke, black people are positioned as savage, uncivilised and caught in a state of nature. Any cultural advances black people have developed over time are represented as coming from Western (white) intervention. Due to the perceived, relentlessly primitive nature of the black 'race', white, civilised humans are positioned as having had to selflessly *domesticate* black people so that they are conveniently fit for integration and assimilation with civilised society.

However it is stressed that blacks can never be whites' contemporaries. Black people, in the logic of this joke, and echoing traditional Western racialised stereotypes of black inferiority, must always be subordinates to their white masters. The joke heavily implies that left to the black 'race's' own devices, segregated from the Western world, black culture would not and could not develop, it would remain in a state of nature. Therefore the joke reduces black culture and behaviour to something that is intrinsic to alleged inferior black biological features, or a supposedly savage nature of the black 'race'.

## Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #6

Just watched 12 Years a Slave. Can't believe how badly they treated that poor man.

He paid good money for that nigger.<sup>56</sup>

*Example (6)* requires the audience to have knowledge of the social context of the subject matter in order to fully appreciate how it works as racist rhetoric and a piece of humour. The example refers specifically to slavery, which as a concept embodies several aspects of dehumanisation, both literally and discursively. When slavery is referred to in the context of the black 'race' on *Sickipedia.org*, joke producers are most commonly historically referencing the transatlantic slave trade instigated by North American and European colonialism of African people. This is illustrated in various other examples:

How many black people does it take to change a light bulb?" I asked my friend. "Whoa! Are you about to make a racist joke? "No - It's a proper question, just need to know how many slaves I should buy."<sup>57</sup>

Isn't it funny that black people are usually stronger, faster and they can stay in the sun longer? It's like God wanted them to be slaves.<sup>58</sup>

*Example (6)* aims to reproduce the *idea* of slavery through language and its discursive meanings, reproducing the values it upholds and how they allegedly, specifically apply to the black 'race'. Moreover, though the transatlantic slave trade - centred on *African* slavery - is being used as the reference point in *Example (6)* and the other examples shown, the slavery-based racist jokes on *Sickipedia.org* are crude in their generalisations, applying slavery-based dehumanisation to *all* black people. The anti-black stereotypes in *Example (6)* and other slavery-based jokes incorporate

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56 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* March 2014]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/just-watched-12-years-a-slave-cant-believe-how-badly-1558668>]

57 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > African* January 2014]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/african/how-many-black-people-does-it-take-to-change-a-1546782>]

58 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > African* October 2009]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/isnt-it-funny-that-black-people-are-usually-stronger-faster-244762>]

both elements of animalistic and mechanistic dehumanisation, negotiating between the two, presenting the black woman or man as sub-human and inferior.

Representing another simple, leading line/punch-line structure, *Example (6)* revolves around a basic idea of deception and misdirection. The leading line leads the audience to believe the joke is based on common, well accepted, civilised notions of tolerance and equality, before the punch-line subverts our expectations in asserting a very cruel and intolerant message. It does not comprise a successful joke structure. It toys with the assertion of creating a fully-fledged joke centred around misdirection, but ultimately the example acts more as an expression of the producer's opinion - an opinion which epitomises the racist undertones of the piece. Similar to *Example (5)*, this example dedicates far more effort into making the language construct a form of racist rhetoric as opposed to an effective joke structure.

Similar to *Example (4)* this joke addresses a popular cultural current affair, this time from March 2014. Therefore for the audience it is beneficial to have a brief contextual understanding of the joke's subject matter, the Best Picture Academy Award winning film *12 Years A Slave* directed by black, British director Steve McQueen.

The audience does not have to have necessarily seen the film to understand the joke, but it is perhaps favourable to have some indication of the film's plot to fully comprehend the humour and its racist connotations. All previous knowledge an audience member would require is the official promotional blurb to understand the joke - "in the antebellum United States, Solomon Northup, a free black man from upstate New York, is abducted and sold into slavery" (imdb.com) - and who the director is. If an audience member has no previous knowledge whatsoever of the film or its plot, it is still more than possible to understand the joke and its connotations for either humorous appreciation or critique, due to the highly discussed and well-known subject of the transatlantic slave trade and the general aesthetic and discursive structure of comic racism (writing as an individual who has not seen *12 Years A Slave*).

An important point to address in regard to *Example (6)*'s understanding for audiences who have not seen *12 Years A Slave*, is that the film is based on true events depicted in the memoirs of a 19<sup>th</sup> century free-born man, turned slave, Solomon Northup. Therefore the context of the joke is set in real events and real people. However, Northup's life has only recently achieved wide-scale notoriety due to its retelling through the medium of film. In becoming the central character in a highly profitable and critically acclaimed movie, of which some aspects of the memoirs were altered for dramatic purposes, Solomon Northup arguably has become fictionalised when referred to in discourse such as racist jokes posted on a website. It is important to highlight that whenever real people or real events are referred to in the comic discourse of *Sickipedia.org* they are often simplified, glorified, romanticised, exaggerated or fictionalised.

In *Example (6)*'s case, like many others, the central actor in the joke becomes somewhat symbolic, a symbol for much cruder and simplistic generalisations aimed at the entire black 'race'. Anti-Black

jokes rarely ridicule or are at the expense of an individual person in discursive isolation, they are always applicable to broader targets and processes. To be more selective and attentive to the specificities and nuances of a given topic or in this case, actor, reduces the accessibility and wide scale enjoyment of a joke for the audience. A great deal of *Sickipedia.org's* jokes revolve around simplistic and crude dynamics, moreover this is encouraged in the site's guidelines. Under a heading entitled 'good', instructing members of the correct etiquette for uploading jokes, a bullet point reads 'short jokes' ([sickipedia.org/help](http://sickipedia.org/help)). This assists in both the coherent articulation of racist rhetoric, for all ethnic targets, but also in the broad appreciation of the humour.

*Example (6)*'s dynamic is very simple, but its racist rhetoric is still quite dense in terms of an analytical discursive interpretation. The leading line refers to the producer his/herself (the gender is unknown) - representing white normativity and its associated notions of superiority, supremacy and dominance, explaining that they have 'just watched *12 Years A Slave*'. They then claim they 'can't believe how badly they treated that poor man', insinuating that they feel sympathy for the central male character of the film.

The 'they' in the joke represents two groups in the leading line. It intentionally represents both the characters within the film's narrative that have treated another character (supposedly Northup) badly, but also the creators who have presented these characters on screen. The most significant figure of these creators is Steve McQueen, a black individual. If the audience knows the film they would naturally assume that the producer is referring to Solomon Northup, the film's main character and the "free black man from upstate New York abducted and sold into slavery".

The idea being maintained in the leading line of the joke for the audience to interpret is that the black creators of the film have intentionally put a black character through horrific events at the hands of white perpetrators in order to expose the horrors of the slave trade (regardless of the fact that the events of the film are based on factual memoirs). The audience is supposed to pick up on the notion that the 'they' can either be the white antagonists within the film or the black creators of the film. In either case the audience is supposed to interpret that the 'they' have created audience sympathy for black people and perhaps from the perspective of the joke's creators, positioned white people as antagonists.

Northup is a character both intended on the part of the film's creators to receive, and more objectively, to be morally *deserving* of sympathy from audiences. The joke is leading its audience to believe that an audience who watched the film should be sympathetic to the struggles of the black 'race', and an audience who watched the film should simultaneously be ashamed of the white colonial slave trade. The joke is set up in this way because that *is* the appropriate moral response to the film's content. If the audience does not know the film or the memoirs they will likely still assume that the joke is referring to a character who has been sold into slavery, as this is something deserving of sympathy, but if not they can still interpret the joke correctly after reading the punch-line.

The punch-line reveals that the leading line was attempting to mislead the audience into believing the producer/author had sympathy for the black character sold into slavery - this is not who the 'poor man' was in the opening line. However, the audience learns that actually the producer was feeling sympathy for presumably a white slave owner or buyer - 'he paid good money for that nigger'. Upon reading the punch-line the audience clearly learns they were *intended* to believe 'the poor man' being referred to in the leading line was a black man sold into slavery.

One learns this from the usage of the word 'nigger'. Instead we are presented with a new actor in the punch-line, the 'nigger' - a black man who belonged to the white 'poor man' from the opening line. The comic racism operates on the notion that black individuals (Northup) are never people deserving of sympathy - that idea is *laughable*. The joke asserts that the 'nigger' from the punch-line was indeed a slave, but this is not something out of place. According to the logic of comic racism black people are *supposed* to be slaves. They are presented as dehumanised, lesser beings, or sub-humans - individuals inherently inferior to white people. This is certainly not seen as something befitting of sympathy. The 'nigger' in the joke is not the 'poor man'. Any sympathy would be considered ridiculous, because black individuals, conceptualised as white subordinates in the joke, are *deserving* of any 'bad treatment' they might receive from the characters in the film.

In terms of reproducing notions of dehumanisation, *Example (6)* is fairly simplistic, the general point being that black people are supposedly sub-human and inferior, therefore their existence as slaves is represented as legitimate. Any bad treatment aimed in their direction is claimed to be justified. However there is a far more interesting element surrounding processes of Othering and social exclusion present in the joke.

In the punch-line, the ambiguity surrounding who the 'they' is in the joke becomes clearer. As the joke clears up its intentions of whom the 'poor man' is, it also clears up who the 'they' are. The 'poor man' is not Solomon Northup, therefore the 'they' cannot be the characters who treated him badly. The 'poor man' is the white slave buyer, and the 'they' are the movie's creators - Steve McQueen on behalf of the black 'race'. From the perspective of the joke's producer, the perceived intentions of the black creators of the film - to gain audience sympathy for the black man's plight - has been in vain. Instead the 'they' - the black Other - have angered the joke's producer, an actor commentating on behalf of the white 'race'.

In the joke Steve McQueen is positioned as an oppositional commentator to white supremacy and superiority. The joke implies that with the creation of this film and its dissemination of Solomon Northup's story to wider audiences, McQueen has challenged notions of black dehumanisation. He has challenged the notions that black people are sub-human, inferior beings that should be referred to as 'niggers', and deserving of ill treatment. From the perspective of the producer of this joke, this is unacceptable conduct. Furthermore the producer sees McQueen as having the unacceptable audacity to present white 'individuals' as antagonists. The joke implies that the real tragic elements of the story are the 'bad treatment' of the white slave owner. It stresses that he has presumably had his 'nigger' taken from him, which is the true crime of this cynical narrative, far

worse than any physical, institutional or discursive processes of dehumanisation aimed at the black victims of the slave trade.

# Chapter 5:

## Joke Analysis ii - Explicit

### Stereotypicality

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The four motifs discussed in this chapter are labelled as motifs of 'explicit stereotypicality' as they do not require as deep a level of analysis and interpretation in order to clarify how they are thematically reproduced in comic racist discourses, unlike the motif of primitivisation, dehumanisation and simianisation discussed in Chapter Four. In this chapter, the motifs are more formally based on quite specific and coherently structured racialised anti-black cultural or behavioural stereotypes that are attributed to the black 'race's' perceived natural or biological inferiority. These stereotypes are presented transparently in the jokes as they have been in the historical non-comic, racialised discourses.

#### Motif No. 2 - Inferior intelligence & idleness

The second prevalent motif of the anti-black comic racism of *Sickipedia.org* focuses on inferior intelligence and idleness. These are clear negative stereotypes which address a perceived unfavourable behavioural or cultural trait and reduce their manifestations in ethnic groups to a hereditary, racially-determined origin - a process of naturalisation.

The notions of inferior intelligence and idleness are fairly self-explanatory. Throughout history, racialised discourses have firmly expressed representations of the black race as not just intellectually inferior to the white 'race', but as objectively unintelligent in a general sense. Furthermore, alongside this stereotypical representation black people have also been represented as lazy as an accompanying behavioural feature. Neither of these stereotypes are directly dependent on the other, nor a result of the other's reproduction. Both are complementary stereotypes that developed concurrently throughout racialised discourses and reproduced to socially exclude black Others.

In racist discourse, the black 'race' is characterised (racialised) as indolent by its very nature - biologically unable to work hard towards building a more developed, progressive future, and it is assumed that even if they were able to, they would not want to, as they allegedly lack a drive to improve themselves, and advance culturally. It can be argued that this anti-black motif is related to the discursive strands of primitivisation, dehumanisation and simianisation. Primitive beings are often associated with lack of civility, lack of culture and lack of intelligence. A 'lesser human being'

is often positioned as such due to a lower intelligence being attributed to them. The same way human beings prioritise the well-being of human beings over all other animal life on Earth because they are the most intelligent, is mirrored in the attitude from these discourses that black people are lesser humans than whites due to a perceived inferior intellectual capacity - they are de-graded by being represented as closer to animals (particularly less intelligent primates) than humans. As will be demonstrated in the analysis, due to their discursive interconnectedness, these motifs are often presented in combination.

Audrey Smedley (2011) among others has shown how in the eighteenth century popular cultural products and caricatures of 'Negroes' presented the black 'race' as "stupid, irrational, emotional, immoral, lazy, superstitious and gullible" (p.157). These collectively formed a general view that the black 'race' was naturally unintelligent and as a result slavery was a justified process. She argues that these became recognisable stereotypical traits which assisted in eliciting hatred and contempt for black people from the perspective of whites and would form the substance of racist ideologies that followed in the coming centuries.

Audrey and Brian Smedley (2012) state that following on from the development of 'race' in the eighteenth century and the polygenist theories of the nineteenth, Europeans and Americans began to form the idea of a racial essence. This racial essence was seen to be present in each 'race', and helped to distinguish the "fundamental and ineradicable differences" (p.262) between racial populations, to the degree of separating different 'races' as different species. The idea of racial essence claims that temperament and intellectual capabilities of a 'race' are bound together permanently and inherited regardless of visible physical characteristics. This argument asserts that the cultural is not merely reduced to being a product of the physical, for the cultural is an essential element which makes a 'race' what it is - the cultural and biological are intrinsically intertwined at a fundamental level.

They stress that this notion of racial essence was necessary in Europe because populations were not distinguishable from one another by physical characteristics alone. Therefore Smedley and Smedley argue that the distances between 'races' in terms of civilising abilities were measured (by scientists) just as much in terms of intellectual and psychological differences as physical - "the real...differences which denoted a race's ranking and capacity for civilisation rested in... mental, psychological and intellectual traits" (annotated quote *ibid.*, p.262).

Audrey Smedley (2011) states that during the nineteenth century, if it could be demonstrated that 'Negroes' were less intelligent than whites, their lower status, and the subsequent cruelty aimed at them, could be seen as justified. The key site of interest in distinguishing intellectual abilities was the human brain - "the brain was seen as the site of moral, intellectual and temperamental qualities" (*ibid.*, p.263). Measuring the contents of the skull, and the size and weight of the brain, in addition to new psychometric tests which had developed from the field of psychology post-Enlightenment (from Franz Joseph Gall and Sir Francis Galton for example), paved the way for making judgements concerning intellectual racial differences.

Galton is particularly well remembered due to his notions of the hereditary superiority of certain 'races' and the selective mating of Eugenics theory. Later tests pioneered by Galton such as sensory perception tests, were administered by others, including RM Bache for example. The important point concerning these tests was that the interpretations of their results were subject to racialised assumptions that had already developed in eighteenth century thought and discourse. In this particular test Bache experimented on twelve white people, eleven Indians, and eleven black people. Despite whites having the slowest reactions, Bache interpreted them as the most superior as they were deliberately reflective of the situation. Similarly in an experiment which tested memory, black people again performed better than white, but were again interpreted as only being able to outperform whites in situations which required limited mental activity (Smedley & Smedley, 2012) - these tests simply reinforced predispositions of white intellectual superiority.

Gunnar Myrdal (2000) argued that several nineteenth and twentieth century scientists researched the skull and brain, attempting to outline racial differences in intellectual capacity. For example, he refers to Robert B. Bean who conducted an in-depth study of 'Negro skulls', determining that they were smaller than white men's skulls. He thus concluded that the black brain was deficient and less convoluted than its white counterparts. Myrdal explained that Bean was later exposed for having grossly distorted his measurements and conclusions. Additionally, Steve Garner (2010) referred again to nineteenth century American craniologist Samuel Morton, who after conducting an experiment on skulls of various 'racial' types (filling them with lead pellets to measure their capacity) concluded that Black Americans were the least intelligent.

Following the increase of Black civilians living in both Europe and America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, institutional inequalities (particularly economic and vocational) were inflicted on individuals of this ethnicity. There was a lack of decent housing and jobs, and the work that was available was low-skilled and low-waged. Smedley and Smedley argue that it is not difficult to understand why scholars at the time aimed to justify institutional inequality through supposed hereditary differences between the different 'races'. They state that racial and social class differences were deemed the product of differential intelligence, a unitary characteristic inherited from parents.

For example, American psychologists experimented on drafted military men during World War I to determine the racial differences of IQ. Of all the ethnic groups tested, 'Negroes' were placed at the bottom of the table with a supposed average mental age of 10.41 (in comparison to the highest group, whites of English descent with an average mental age of 13.08). Again the results were interpreted from a perspective which aimed to conclude that any correlations between intelligence were due to hereditary differences, ignoring large statistical aberrations which saw differences between the northern and southern states of America, implying geographically (culturally)-caused differences rather than biological (Smedley & Smedley, 2012).

In Britain, according to Charles Husband (1982), in the first half of the twentieth century 'race' was also still considered a "scientific study of racial variation...in psychology and anthropology" (p.15).

'Race' theory acted as a specific expression of a general acceptance that there was a physical determination of an individual's abilities, and that this was based on scientific, social facts. Husband provided the example that in the 1930s and 40s, during the period that the national education system was being formed by the state, intellectual ability was seen as being a hereditary aptitude and therefore not subject to change (ibid.). These ideas surrounding intelligence and intellectual capacity attributed to natural, racial foundations are a subject, which continued to fascinate scientists and social scientists alike, through to the present day.

In terms of the lazy stereotype which accompanies ideas based on a lack of intelligence, Pieterse (1992) referred to Victorian English novelist Anthony Trollope, who after a tour of the West Indies in 1858 claimed that 'Negroes' were naturally idle and unambitious, content with little, and lie under mango-trees all day in the sun (Trollope 1859, cited in Pieterse, 1992, p.199).

This notion that "each race was thought to have distinct physical and behavioural traits that were inherited in the blood and passed on to their children" (Smedley, 2011, p.160) has allowed racialised stereotypes of blackness to be continually reproduced. Smedley argues that in America, the black 'race' is still portrayed as lazy, loud, irrational, emotional, superstitious and lacking in intelligence. As joke examples will demonstrate, this slothful stereotype remains a key racialised motif present in comic racism, both in historical and contemporary comic communities and texts.

### Motif No.3 - Violence & criminality

Continuing in the same fashion, the third motif that will be discussed in relation to the comic racism of *Sickipedia.org* concerns the stereotypical assertion that representatives of the black 'race' are naturally determined to be violent and at ease with criminality. One may notice that at this point, each motif is in some way dependant on the previous, or that they are in many ways thematically intertwined. As stated, it is not possible thematically to separate the jokes of *Sickipedia.org* in terms of specific motifs that are communicated because most jokes present several in combination, complementing each other to create a coherent piece of rhetoric.

This finding is logical because all of these motifs, separated from their presentation in comic discourses, are both historically and thematically intertwined. The ideological representation that black people are violent or criminals was, and is not, an arbitrarily conceived stereotype. Its roots lie in the historically enforced notions of supposed black primitiveness, sub-human status and inferior intelligence that I have already established are deeply rooted in pre-colonial, colonial, Enlightenment and post-colonial discourses. Particularly in this case, the stereotype of the violent black individual is derivative of bestial, savage and wicked representations. To reiterate, it makes perfect sense that the jokes of *Sickipedia.org* reproduce these motifs in combination, because their very development in traditional, non-comic discourses is based on an intertwined dependency on other previously formed ideas.

Similar to the previous motif concerning intelligence and idleness, representations of black criminality and violence do not require in-depth interpretation, they are fully formed coherent stereotypes disseminated on a wide scale.

In terms of twentieth century public expressions of the violent and criminal black stereotype, John Solomos and Les Back (1996) stated that throughout the 1950s the geography of Birmingham, for example, which housed a significant black population, was represented in news coverage according to certain racialised characteristics, such as alleged cultural pathologies that included crime and drug abuse. Keith (1993) claimed that similar discursive processes occurred across all major British cities where there were significant minority settlements. Gideon Ben-Tovim and Jon Gabriel (1982) reflected upon the British National Front's development in the early 1970s, and how they manipulated themes of crime in particular, alongside unemployment and anti-communism. They specialised in the rhetoric of scapegoating which included blacks, in order to build a political base amongst working-class unions, schools, churches and community groups.

One of the most famous studies that documented the clear, publicly situated, negative representation of black people as criminals in Britain, was Stuart Hall et al's *Policing the Crisis* (1978). This study aimed to critique and deconstruct national narratives on the phenomenon of mugging, arguing that the idea of identifying it as a racial crime was far too simplistic. They showed that the common discourses of the time had mistakenly ignored the importance of class and the black labour struggle in Britain, fixating the problem of mugging on a "false enemy" (p.395). This enemy was 'the young black mugger', defined by 'race' rather than class as the behaviour fitted with related racialised discourses focused on black criminality.

John Benyon and Solomos (1987) referred to a 1985 statement from Sir Peter Emery - former MP for Devon-based town Honiton - following several violent clashes between black youth and police in major British cities. This statement epitomised banal, publicly accepted notions of negative/inferior racialised customs of migrant ethnicities associated with crime - "the vast majority of people expect the precepts of Anglo-Saxon behaviour and law and order to be maintained. These standards must be maintained, despite what other ethnic minorities want" (ibid. p.25). Solomos and Back (1996) claim that following these events, black youth particularly in Britain were racialised in new ways throughout various discourses, claiming that it was not just crime against individuals that was associated with black people, but crimes against society as a whole.

Similar representations have been shaped on the other side of the Atlantic ocean. At this point it is important to note that despite *Sickipedia.org* being a British-based website, most commonly documenting British news stories and events in a humorous context, the stereotypical representations communicated do not necessarily derive from British-centred historical processes of Othering. In many cases, the stereotypes present in the jokes are derivative of historical phenomena both discursive and physical from other nations that in reality may have little relevance in Britain. This ultimately is a consequence of the erosion of national boundaries accelerated by new information communication technologies, particularly the communicative platforms provided by

the internet, and has resulted in global, homogenous stereotypes formed from various nationally-specific representations. Therefore referring to North American examples that have assisted in the formation of various stereotypical motifs is not invalid.

In the case of violence and criminality, incorporating the North American context is necessary, due to the relatively well documented and acknowledged public representations of black criminality in a far more explicit and coherent fashion than in Britain. Arguably this image of the American black criminal is often justified by some through national-based statistics (which are highly contested in terms of their representativeness and validity). Smedley and Smedley (2012) state that African Americans are disproportionately penalised and imprisoned by the American criminal justice system. They claim that on a national level, for every white person incarcerated, 5.6 black people are, and one out of every fourteen black children has a parent in prison.

These statistics have often (falsely) enforced negative images of the black criminal in American media. Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki (2000) support this argument in a study conducted examining the representation of the violent, black stereotype on American news output. They claim that American "crime reporting fashions a hierarchical racial divide that stereotypes Blacks and associates them with the wrong, dangerous side of the cultural continuum" (p.78). They argued that in their sample of Chicago local news output, black people are closely linked with violent crime in contrast to whites and are more commonly represented as victims regardless of the contextual issues concerning national crime statistics (eg. disproportionate amounts of black people arrested as a result of racial stereotypes).

### Motif No.4 - Sexual deviance & sexual violence

To continue, Motif No.4 is closely related to motif two and three in that it relates to the very explicit stereotypical representation of the black 'race' being in this case sexually deviant and violent. Again like the previous motifs, sexual deviance and violence are rooted in the early racialised notions of the black 'race' both before and after the Enlightenment. In this particular case, sexual deviance and violence are most closely related to ideas of primitiveness and dehumanisation - specifically the idea that black men were *bestial* or *bestly* (Jordan, 1982) and unable to control their alleged natural primitive and savage urges (Wigger, 2010). Furthermore this motif, alongside gross physicality, more so than any of the others, has greater diversity and specific nuances according to the gender that is being represented. Both are arguably socially excluded in equal measure in terms of the severity of the Othering, but according to distinct gender-specific racialised traits.

Winthrop D. Jordan (1982) refers to sixteenth century French political philosopher Jean Bodin and Spanish Moroccan Moor Leo Africanus to address how black men and women were historically racialised as libidinous long before the Enlightenment and English encounters with Africans. Africanus described 'Negroes' as bestly beings surrounding by "swarms of Harlots" (cited in Jordan, 1982, p.53). In 1566, Bodin claimed that the Ethiopian race of men were very keen and

lustful. English philosopher Francis Bacon in his works *New Atlantis* described the "spirit of Fornication" as a "foul ugly Ethiop" (1624, p.54). Furthermore Jordan describes that perceived promiscuous traits attributed to Africans were written in the personal accounts of British explorers. They proclaimed that 'Negroes' engaged in aggressive sexual activities and had "large propagators" (ibid.). Jordan also states that by the eighteenth century, after the beginning of the slave trade, the alleged sexual aggressiveness of African women was well reported and acknowledged, labelling them as "lascivious, making no scruple to prostitute themselves to the Europeans for a very slender profit" (ibid.).

Robert Miles claims that a major continuity in British representations of the African Other in colonial discourses was an "attribution of excessive and unrestrained sexuality" (1989, p.27). The representation of Africans exhibiting a potent sexuality was one of the first racialised characteristics reproduced in colonial discourses. Miles refers to Jordan (1968) and Fryer (1984) who both argued that African women were seen as being especially desirous of sexual intercourse and African men were thought to be virile, lusty and possessed of abnormally large penises. Miles claims that these ideas are highly intertwined with notions of alleged black bestial behaviour and savagery, alongside ideas based on the black 'race's' similarities to apes (in some cases it was argued that Africans had sexual intercourse with apes).

Both black men and women are arguably presented equally in terms of sexual deviance, but sexual violence is a trait that is more commonly stereotypically assigned to black men specifically. According to Fredrickson (1971) a large amount of literature written during the early twentieth century consciously depicted exaggerated negative racialised behaviours of the black 'race', such as bestiality, crime, and sexuality, and specifically lust towards white women. Harris (1988) reflected on a survey conducted in 1935 by the British Social Hygiene Council which documented the organisation's preoccupations with black sailor's alleged sexual demands, promiscuity, venereal disease and supposed coercion of white women into prostitution. Harris also states that black men's sexual relationships with white women and the children born as a consequence were also the attention of much state discourse, arguing that 'half-caste' children were "marked by a racial trait" that caused them to "mature sexually at an early age" (p.24)

Iris Wigger's (2009, 2010) work on the 'black shame' of the Rhineland in 1920s Germany is a particularly relevant study which demonstrates the public stereotypical representation of the sexually deviant black 'race'. Similar to the early twentieth century concerns over black sexuality in Britain, Wigger discusses the ways in which the German state and media created a coherent campaign which aimed to rhetorically alter and tarnish public opinions of black, French colonial soldiers in the Rhineland post first world war. It did this sophisticatedly through fixating on several representations of negative racialised characteristics of black males, particularly their alleged bestial sexualities and their corruption and subsequent de-purifying of white, German women - "they were represented in the German media as being governed by dangerous, uncontrollable sexual instincts and desires" (2010, p.35).

Wigger identifies that 'black shame' campaigners specifically referred to the concern over black troops' supervision of a white nation. They stressed, from an alleged civilised perspective, that due to the troops perceived primitiveness and savage nature, it would be particularly dangerous and wrong to let them take part in the Allied Occupation of the German Rhineland. It was thought that the troops, due to their primitive nature, and dangerous, untamed sexual instincts, would tyrannise 'civilised' white people. The behavioural fixation of this supposed tyranny was the alleged mass rape of white German women - symbolising nation and racial purity - though Wigger stresses this accusation was a fabrication.

## Motif No.5 - Gross physicality

The fifth motif concerns perhaps the most complex anti-black representation in both comic and non-comic discourses. It concerns the reductive portrayal or depiction of black men and women as grossly exaggerated in terms of their physique in contrast to the individual appearances of black men and women in reality. This is a physical-based stereotype - a culturally situated and reinforced assumption that reduces the physical heterogeneity of black individuals to a more coherent, homogenous archetype.

While thus far I have attempted to present the motifs in some form of logical order in terms of their historical development throughout racialised discourses, it would be a fallacy to suggest these motifs have been presented historically in any form of linear or chronological manner. They clearly all overlap one another in terms of how they have been reproduced throughout history. In the case of the portrayal of the black 'race' having their physical appearance grossly exaggerated, its representation can be traced back to those early discourses based on racial classification, which subsequently raised notions of black primitiveness, savagery, dehumanisation and simianisation. Furthermore this is, as many of those discussed previously, a stereotype that is fundamentally centred on the perceived inferiority of the black 'race' in comparison to the white.

This perceived inferiority is not just limited to the imagery of the *black body* in isolation. What is imperative to the overarching notions of inferiority, social exclusion and Othering created through this specific stereotype, are the discursive meanings that are associated with the depiction of the black body, and its comparison to presentations of the white.

Therefore any assumptions that this physically-centred stereotype only facilitates what one might consider 'biological racism' would be incorrect. Though the focal point of an image of the grossly exaggerated physique of a black man or woman, is undoubtedly the body, this representation cannot be separated from the intertwined biological and cultural meanings which both contributed to its formation and can be derived from its articulation in discourse - meanings both rooted in and assisting ideas of primitiveness, dehumanisation, simianisation and sexual deviance.

The most appropriate way of addressing the interconnections between physical and cultural Othering in reference to this gross physical stereotype, would be to first outline the concept of blackness. Robert Miles (1989) stated that Western Christianity prior to the Enlightenment

associated colours with additional meanings. He highlighted that white and black were often positioned in contrast to one another - good/evil, pure/diabolical, spiritual/carnal and Christ/Satan. David Brion Davis (2008) also claimed that long prior to Enlightenment racial classification discourses, "colour symbolism, derived from astrology, alchemy, Gnosticism, or various forms of Manichaeism" (p.65), was a probable cause in negative attitudes towards the black people, both from the Christian and Muslim worlds of the middle ages. He claimed that early Christian writers equated 'Ethiopians' (a term at the time which represented much of the black 'race') with sinful and dark forces. Furthermore he stressed that blackness was associated with "death, danger, evil, and grief" (ibid.) in many early cultures which overall contributed to a conviction that black Africans were befitting of slavery.

Upon European colonial expansion, and European experiences of contact with Africans, Miles (1989) claimed certain mythical notions of 'wild man', with his untamed aggression (violence and criminality) and sexuality (sexual deviance and violence) were assigned a precise geographical location in the world - Africa. Moreover, Miles argues that this notion of 'wild man' and its associated behavioural traits would become distinguished by skin colour, permitting the conception of the black Other, a binary opposite to the representation of the white European. Jordan (1982) states that upon the first meetings between white British colonial traveller's and black people in the sixteenth century, a huge emphasis was placed on the colour of the discovered natives of Africa. Africans were literally described as 'black', which Jordan argues demonstrated the powerful impact Africans' complexion had on the travellers' perceptions. Prior to British discovery of the black 'race', the concept of blackness was already established and loaded with meaning - "no other colour except white conveyed so much emotional impact" (ibid. p.43).

The word 'black' during this period was already saturated with negative connotations - "as described by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the meaning of *black* before the sixteenth century included 'deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul...Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly; baneful, disastrous, sinister...iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked...Indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment," (Jordan, 1982, p.44). Where whiteness had come to connote purity, virginity, virtue, beauty and beneficence, blackness represented filthiness, sin, baseness, ugliness and evil (ibid.). Moreover, where whiteness symbolically represented these virtues in the context of colour, the 'whiteness' of the Elizabethan Englishmen in terms of skin complexion also came to incorporate the same qualities. In contrast, when black Africans were 'discovered' by the English, the perverse connotations associated with blackness were attributed to the newly founded 'race' (ibid.).

In this sense the physical and cultural definitions of blackness and whiteness cannot be separated in terms of their meanings. Steve Garner (2007) claimed that the two concepts are relational; one must acknowledge the ways in which whiteness and blackness have come to represent the fundamental dichotomies in racialised discourses such as civilisation and savagery, and freedom and slavery. The idea of blackness and its associated traits have laid the foundation for the racialised depiction of the black body. As stated, the gross physique of the black 'race' is rarely

presented in racialised discourses, both comic and non-comic, in isolation. Though the majority of gross black physical representations are historically presented visually, through cartoonists, illustrators and caricaturists for example, often upon a text's deconstruction, one can deduce other aspects of negative black stereotypicality within one image.

For example, Stuart Hall claimed that across racialised discourses "with a few, simple, essentialized strokes of the pen...black people were reduced to the signifiers of their physical difference - thick lips, fuzzy hair, broad face and nose" (1997, p.246). However, Nederveen Pieterse (1992) highlights that the perceived negative *cultural* traits of the black 'race' have long been placed in conjunction with discursive presentations/descriptions of the gross black physique. He refers to eighteenth century botanist Carl Linnaeus, who classified the *homo sapien* type *Homo africanus*, the 'African', as "black, phlegmatic, lax, black, curly hair, silky skin, apelike nose, swollen lips, the bosom of the women are distended, their breasts given milk copiously, crafty, slothful, careless, he smears himself with fat" (Pieterse, 1992, p.40).

Moreover, as already referred to in the discussion of the previous motif, racialised discourses' often fixated on the supposed large penis of the black man. This was addressed by Frantz Fanon (1967), who in reference to white perceptions of the *imago* of the 'Negro' in Western discourses, stressed that European representations of black men were at times obsessed over their alleged large penises. He referred to twentieth century French screenwriter, film director and journalist Michel Cournot who compared black and white penises in writing "the black man's sword is a sword. When he has thrust it into your wife, she has really felt something. In the chasm that it has left, your little toy is lost...Four Negroes with their penises exposed would fill a cathedral" (Cournot, 1948, p.13-14). Fanon went on to suggest that in such discourses, the black man is symbolically transformed into a penis. Furthermore he argued that in spite of certain studies' revelations concerning the actual average lengths of African men's penises, the representation of the large black penis has become fixed, as it rests synonymously with the stereotypical representation of black sexual deviance or potency - the sexually aggressive black man with the large penis.

To again refer to Iris Wigger's work, (2009, 2010) she has illustrated German and international examples from the 1920s 'Black Shame' propaganda campaign which socially defamed, and excluded French colonial troops stationed in the Rhineland. In such images the black man specifically is depicted in illustrations as exaggeratedly large, broad faced and grossly miscoloured as the black of the chromatic scale. In addition to these physical misrepresentations, within the images, black men were simultaneously represented as in most cases sexually deviant, but also in others violent as well<sup>59</sup>. Similarly Hall (1997) has presented several images of stereotypical gross physicality of blacks where their skin colour is again depicted as charcoal black, and they are

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59 'Die Schwarz Schmach!' Reproduced from Franzosen im Ruhregiet. 10 Zeichnungen von A.M. Cay. Berlin 1923. Retrieved from Wigger (2010, p.36)

represented as large nosed, wide lipped, wide eyed and fuzzy haired in addition to fulfilling stereotypical notions of a child like nature<sup>60</sup> and servility<sup>61</sup>.

Similarly under the Nazi regime, blacks were also represented negatively in visual propaganda. Maintaining some historical continuity with the 'black shame' campaign that preceded it, Solomos and Back (1996) claimed that propagandists invoked the Rhineland episode and reproduced cartoons of 'primitive' black Allied soldiers. The representations of black men depicted, accentuated their alleged gross physical characteristics, displaying them in a human-apelike hybrid, with skin presented as completely black, bizarrely thin necks, and raised button-like noses<sup>62</sup>.

## Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #7

A young policeman, on his first day on the beat, turns around a corner and spots a big black guy dancing, jumping up and down on the roof of a car.

The copper gets straight on his radio, "Come in control, back up, I need back up!" he shouts.

The control operator's voice comes over the radio, "What's the situation?"

"A big fucking nigger is jumping up and down, dancing all over a car roof," replies our boy in blue.

"You can't say things like that over the radio," says the control operator. "Use politically correct police language."

"Okay," replies the young cop. "Control, come in I need back up!"

"What's the situation?" replies the smug operator.

"ZULU TANGO SIERRA!"<sup>63</sup>

*Example (7)* is one of the longer and more complex jokes that will be critically analysed in the thesis. It does not constitute a one or a two-liner. It takes up eight lines and works as the recital of a story. What makes it complex as both a joke and a form of racist discourse is its content being told by different voices/actors, which ultimately are all manifestations of the producer's attitudes, but are all used in order to make multiple points, of which multiple meanings can be formed by the audience.

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60 A girl and her goliwog: an illustration by Lawson Wood, 1927 Taken from Hall (1997, p.248)

61 Slavery; drawing of a Creole lady and black slave in the West Indies. Taken from Hall (1997, p.248)

62 Nazi cartoon. Taken from Solomos & Back (1996, p.173)

63 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black January 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/a-young-policeman-on-his-first-day-on-the-beat-295801>]

The story is not specifically labelled as fictional or non-fictional, but the exaggerated events of the story and the outrageous behaviour of the actors in the story undoubtedly gives the impression to the reader that it is not a true recital of an event. As stated in Chapter Four, the factual legitimacy of the account is somewhat insignificant in humorous discourse of this kind.

*Example (7)* does work linguistically as a joke to an extent, more so than some of the examples analysed in the previous chapter. The joke is carefully constructed over several lines and the punch-line cleverly serves what has preceded it, which includes various reproductions of anti-black stereotypicality and black social exclusion. Within the context of racialised discourses, it draws together an appropriate connection between different elements which can be appreciated in terms of its wit, even if it is abhorrent in terms of its subject matter. The punch-line acts as a further articulation of anti-black racist attitudes while it simultaneously brings the piece together as a coherent joke structure with a degree of wittiness. This is the kind of example which does create a certain degree of social ambivalence towards how audiences interpret comic racism, as it is well constructed in terms of a fine balance between ridicule and humour.

I am not arguing that when an example works linguistically as a joke, its hateful, ideological themes are insignificant or absolved. Quite the contrary, I maintain that jokes like this quite successfully merge humour and social exclusion. It is examples like this that possibly create an overarching sense of ambivalence towards publicly communicated racist humour, from the audience's perspective. This ambivalence, as will be argued throughout the remainder of the thesis, can further manifest in a lack of critical outrage from audiences towards jokes which are far less successfully constructed. This will be discussed in detail in the thesis' conclusion.

*Example (7)* effectively has four lines to create the set-up, of which four different forms of anti-black stereotypicality are reproduced and then later reasserted in the final four lines with an intended humorous twist. Of these derogatory black stereotypes, the primary focus of the joke is to depict black people as primitive, with the other three based on more explicit stereotypes, contributing to this overarching discursive theme of the joke.

In the first line, the audience is informed that a young police officer identifies a 'big, black guy dancing, jumping up and down on the roof of a car'. From this the audience is rhetorically encouraged to interpret black people as primitive and savage, but more intricately as grossly and exaggeratedly large in physique, unintelligent and comfortable in criminality. The central idea of primitivisation is implied through the stereotype of black people being naturally rhythmic and having a strong desire to dance at perhaps inappropriate times and places. This is considered a relatively savage, primitive action, something associated with tribes and tribal rituals, and not a sophisticated practice of Western civilisation. *Sickipedia.org* has dedicated several jokes which aim to ridicule and solidify the notion of the black 'race' being primitive through the expression of dance:

I dedicate my time to fighting stereotypes. Like yesterday, I punched a dancing nigger in the face.<sup>64</sup>

I don't know much about African culture. Except that there isn't any situation where dancing is inappropriate.<sup>65</sup>

How many Africans does it take to screw in a lightbulb? Six: one to screw it in and five to dance for no fucking reason.<sup>66</sup>

As stated this idea of primitivisation is simultaneously presented and amplified through the contributing usage of other stereotypes that each individually can be seen as their own independent method of Othering the black 'race', but in this context all serve to further accentuate the idea of black people as primitive human beings.

The gross, large physique of the black man depicted in the joke, subtly represents him as a beast-like, subhuman and closer to a large animal than a human. This may seem like something of an interpretative leap, but this is a justified reading of the line when one considers the context of historical non-comic racialised discourses which frequently depicts black men in this fashion.

This notion of the savage beast is further accentuated in the second line where the police officer, clearly concerned, feels the need to urgently call for back up. The implication being that this 'big black guy' is so physically domineering in comparison to the white man, that one officer alone would be unable to subdue and restrain him. Comic racist discourses rarely specify the physique of ethnic targets unless that target is of the black 'race'. As will be illustrated throughout this chapter, black people are almost nonchalantly or flippantly referred to as 'big', regardless of the joke's immediate subject matter, in order to further accentuate black people's perceived inherent ties to savage, aggressive, uncivilised beings - the same way a large, aggressive animal might be described as 'big'. Black male characters are commonly degraded and ridiculed according to this racialised conception in various other examples:

This big bloke approached me in the pub last night, stared at me and said: "I'm a bad motherfucker." "That's no surprise" I said, looking him up and down, "no good mother would fuck a massive sweaty nigger like you."<sup>67</sup>

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64 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* November 2013]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/i-dedicate-my-time-to-fighting-stereotypes-like-yesterday-i-1522540>]

65 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > African* July 2013]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/african/i-dont-know-much-about-african-culture-except-that-there-1486676>]

66 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > African* July 2011]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/other/lightbulb/how-many-africans-does-it-take-to-screw-in-a-1009787>]

67 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Other > Misunderstanding* September 2012]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/other/misunderstanding/this-big-bloke-approached-me-in-the-pub-last-night-1356975>]

Last night, I got called a racist cunt and had the shit kicked out of me by this 7 foot tall nigger with a massive afro hairstyle. What the fuck??? All I said was, "Golly, you're tall!"<sup>68</sup>

There i was, minding my own business at the local swimming pool, doing my usual morning swim when suddenly a massive brown smelly thing floated past me...since when did black people learn how to swim?<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore the black man is stated to be 'jumping up and down, dancing on the roof of a car' and this therefore depicts a criminal act of vandalism. In the joke there is a dichotomous positioning of the police and the black man on opposing perspectives, symbolising law and order on one side and disorder on the other. To go one step further, one could assert that the joke signifies civility and cultural sophistication in binary conflict with the anarchic and primordial.

This idea of the police being in opposition to the black individual further amplifies the representation of this particular man as a criminal, even though vandalism towards an automobile may be considered a fairly insignificant crime in comparison to the crimes black people are stereotypically associated with in racialised discourses. In the confines of the joke, this is just one black man being presented as, in part, a petty criminal, but when placed into the historical, discursive context of comic racism and racialised discourses more generally this is yet another example of not a black man, but *the* black man being racially predestined to break the law.

Finally taking this description in its full account, this particular nameless 'black guy' (and therefore a representative of the entire black 'race') is intended to be interpreted as equally imbecilic by the joke's audience as he is criminally dangerous. In this case the criminal behaviour is attributed to a lack of intelligence, used in symbiosis with gross physicality and together these characteristics amalgamate to formulate a general representation of the primitive black Other. As stated the criminal act perpetrated by the black actor is not presented as being particularly violent or threatening, unlike other forms of crime that black people are typically associated with in comic and non-comic racialised discourses (eg. armed robbery, theft, assault, rape).

In the joke the policeman - representing whiteness in contrast to black deviance - notices a man jumping up and down on the roof of a car. At this point within the logic of the joke, the police officer, and by extension the audience, is then presented with two possibilities. The first being that the 'black guy' is jumping on his own car, in which case blackness represents idiocy. The second is that the 'black guy' is jumping on another person's car, where blackness represents idiocy and criminality. Due to the themes of the joke presenting black criminality in opposition to white law and

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68 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Discrimination* August 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/discrimination/last-night-i-got-called-a-racist-cunt-and-had-597247>]

69 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* February 2012]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/there-i-was-minding-my-own-business-at-the-local-1205593>]

order, the latter option is the most likely interpretation the audience is intended to make. Jumping up and down on another individual's car *is* a criminal act and in reality, a police officer would be expected to take action. However the general tone of the joke is not presenting black people's perceived natural criminality as significantly threatening to normative white society, culture or its citizens. Certainly not in the same way the primitive black Other is often represented as entering Western civilisation and genuinely threatening it with menacing criminality and sexual violence (see *Example 13*; see Wigger, 2009, 2010).

Contrarily, even in spite of the 'black guy's' physically intimidating demeanour, his criminal behaviour is depicted as rather dim-witted or brainless as opposed to frightening. The audience is provided with no context for the vandalism. The motivations for this man's decision to jump up and down, and dance on the roof of the car are not disclosed in the joke. The audience knows that this criminal act is of little consequence, therefore to risk prosecution for it is regarded as completely pointless - it is stupid, and the individual who would behave in such a manner is equally foolish.

The audience is encouraged to *laugh* at this man's actions. Together the producer and audience are collectively ridiculing the moronic behaviour of an individual who is presented as being both biologically and culturally determined to be a moron. Simultaneously this actor in the joke represents a stereotype, or a racialised symbol, one that embodies ideas of alleged black childishness, infantility and foolishness. The discursive meaning to take from this in terms of racialised rhetoric is that intelligent, civilised white people do not behave in this way, and therefore black people cannot be considered intelligent or civilised.

The fourth line is particularly important for further creating the anti-Black rhetoric of this joke. First it reiterates the opening line's description of the events by the unnamed narrator, but instead it does so from the perspective of the young policeman in quotation marks. The most obvious difference in the two descriptions is the use of extreme racist terminology by the policeman and the frustration caused by the event.

The black actor in the joke, continuing his 'jumping up and down, dancing all over a car roof' is not now referred to as a 'big black guy' but instead 'a big fucking nigger'. The word 'fucking' is used to put further emphasis on both the large physique of the black man, but also the policeman's frustration towards the black man behaving in a, what the joke considers typical negative (criminal, threatening, imbecilic) manner. Therefore the producer decided that he ceases to be a black man and becomes a 'nigger', with the term 'nigger' embodying all the negative aspects of black stereotypicality and alleged racial inferiority.

An important component of this joke is the distinction between and later merging of two of the three speaking actors - the narrator and the young policeman, noting that both are ultimately different voices of the joke's producer. The narrator initially specifically attempts to provide an accurate (although a clearly made-up), non-judgemental portrayal of (fictional) events. Though the joke in its entirety, from the outset, is clearly reproducing racist ideology, the voice of the narrator within the

joke is not necessarily describing anything racist. The point being that from an objective narrator's perspective, a black man with a large physique *could* have been jumping up and down and dancing on top of a car - this could be an accurate description of events. Up until the fourth line, it is through the producer's voice of the young policeman, and the general context of the joke's communicative platform, that provides the racist approach, and from the audience's interpretation, this actor relevantly represents the British police force, which in turn represents whiteness.

Through this particular voice (yet still the producer's), the joke reinforces what I consider to be the second major theme of the joke - the (accepted) notion that the British police service is institutionally racist, a commonly discussed topic, particularly in Britain since the death of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 (see Macpherson, 1999). This notion is not handled from a critical perspective, but rather through the glorification and celebration of their conceived corrupt prejudice. Any critique in the joke is aimed towards any politically-correct threats to racism and its institutional manifestations. The joke revels in the idea that a police officer, on their first day, would inevitably encounter a primitive, somewhat idiotic, physically imposing black man committing a crime.

This proposed inevitability acts as a humorous, speculative foundation for why the UK's police service can be institutionally discriminatory towards black people from the outset. The joke highlights that the (white) police are allowed to discriminate against black people - that is what they are supposed to do and should continue to do. Black people are represented as deserving of any abuse they receive at the hands of white police officers, either verbal or physical, because the stereotypes are true. Black people - according to the logic of the joke - *are* criminals, and criminals deserve no tolerance. The police in the joke represent the great white peace keepers, the knights of the realm protecting the land from the evil black Other, even if that Other is committing an act which is more foolish and indicative of the unintelligent aspects of his alleged primitive nature, than the violent or threatening aspects.

This idea is amplified in the joke when the producer merges together the perspectives of the narrator and the policeman. In the fourth line the narrator abandons his/her role as the objective describer of events and aligns him/herself with the police's perspective. The narrator refers to the policeman as '*our* boy in blue'. This is a clear articulation of an 'us' versus 'them' dynamic, a hint of nationally situated immigrant bigotry - social inclusion and social exclusion. By '*our*' the narrator is referring to the collective of both the white producer and audience. Through the use of '*our*' the reader is invited into the discursive realm of the joke.

The narrator, acting as the voice of the producer, invites the audience to be included in enjoying the ridicule of the 'big fucking nigger'. As the ridicule is aimed towards the black excluded, the *us* in the joke - the included - is clearly referring to white British citizens, whose taxes fund institutional practices of law and order. Simultaneously, in addition to the narrator of the joke creating a sense of inclusion for whites in a purely communicative context, they side with the institutionally racist police, creating further consensus amongst the joke producer, the joke reader and the represented British police. The black man is positioned as the Other, and from now on, as the black actor

remains voiceless, and the narrator and police actors become unified, the producer has enforced the idea that the 'big black guy' is transformed permanently into the 'big fucking nigger'.

The following lines bring the joke to its conclusion in terms of its formal structure with three more leading lines preceding a punch-line. In these lines they refer to one additional theme of the joke before reasserting the ideas surrounding black primitiveness. This being that political correctness, and any of its champions are the allies of the Other - they are turning their back on white supremacy, effectively sleeping with the enemy.

The fifth line addresses the third speaking actor of the joke - a more senior, police control operator, assisting in dealing with the 'big fucking nigger' via the police inter-com. This actor is supposed to provide the objective, more politically aware voice of the post-Macpherson report UK police service - a police service, which is assumed purely within the construct of the joke, to have attempted to make positive, conscious efforts to remove any internal and external accusations of institutional racism. This voice is positioned in conjunction with the notion of political correctness - both of which are criticised by the producer.

In the fifth line the control operator is quoted as saying "you can't say things like that over the radio, use politically correct police language". This is in response to hearing the phrase 'big fucking nigger' by the young police man. The narrator and producer whose perspectives are now shared as clearly anti-black address this idea of "politically correct police language" as absurd, and it acts as the foundation for the cathartic punch-line.

Political correctness in the context of *Sickipedia.org* is represented as the antithesis of freedom of speech, of freedom to offend and ridicule, of freedom to express one's own political agenda - political correctness acts as the antithesis to freedom, and liberal democratic values. In this line, the producer is asserting that the police, who are socially included in white normative superiority, has been forced to adapt for the worse in order to consciously not offend people who are by all rights, in the context of the joke, deserving of being offended - as black people are represented as criminals in the joke. The responding line from the control officer is not a clear rejection of the young policeman's beliefs, or a criticism of his bigotry, it is the suggestion to adapt his language to fit more comfortably within contemporary police regulations.

This third actor's specific attitudes towards 'race' and institutional racism are left ambivalent, most likely to not provide a complex or contradictory perspective of language whose speaker has the ultimate intention to incite laughter. However, the control officer's mere expression of a preference of the politically correct is enough for him/her to be labelled derogatorily. After the young policeman has agreed to use politically correct language and once again calls for back up, the narrator once again abandons his/her objective stance, aligns his/herself (and the audience who is also included due to the usage of 'our') with the racist, white policeman and describes the control operator as 'smug'. This insulting adjective, used to describe the control operator, may seem subtle to audiences. However, coupled with the provocative punch-line, it is clear that through the uses of

language, this actor is socially excluded alongside the black man. The joke asserts that if you are white and support the Other, you have betrayed whiteness, and you can join the Other in its marginalised space in society.

The punch-line finally arrives and acts as a quote from the young Police man without any descriptions from the narrator, frustratingly, yet playfully reacting to the control operator's previous request for politically correct language. The joke has carefully up to that point created a complex sense of social inclusion and exclusion, aligning the producer, the narrator, the reader and implied institutionally racist aspects of the police service together on one side in opposition to the black stereotypical Other and anything which serves to benefit their interests or rights. In this joke's case that is politically correct police language, or anyone who believes that the police service should attempt to uphold politically correct, or liberal values. The punch-line acts as a sarcastic rejection of political correctness and is a celebratory statement for the included to enjoy.

'ZULU TANGO SIERRA' are the NATO phonetic alphabet letter's for 'z', 't' and 's' respectively. Their corresponding letters are irrelevant, it is the fact that the police use the phonetic alphabet for relevant purposes and in the context of this joke, it is seen as a slightly more proper usage of language, despite that this system would not be relevant for police to use in this instance. On the basis of the humour alone, the joke works because the usage of the phonetic alphabet describes the events depicted if one understands the specific language of racialised stereotyping. The 'ZULU' represents the black man, 'TANGO' represents his dancing and 'SIERRA' is the model of Ford manufactured car - "a big black guy dancing, jumping up and down on the roof of a car".

It is in this final line that black people are again represented as primitive beings. The word 'Zulu' is used in this context as a synonymic term for the phrase 'big fucking nigger'. The joke is that despite being requested to use politically correct language, the young policeman uses another contextually specific offensive term to describe the black man. 'Zulu' is used to position the black man as symbolically part of the predominantly black Bantu ethnic group of Southern Africa - an ethnicity with specific cultural and populist, racialised stereotypes associated with tribalism, aggressiveness, savagery and primitivism in the UK. This may seem a somewhat interpretative leap on this researchers part, but evidence from other material on *Sickipedia.org* supports the notion of the term 'Zulu' being used in this racialised context for the purposes of humour:

I've just watched the film "Zulu dawn" And I must say how impressed I was with it.  
Although it must have been terrifying to have been there when the black tribes attacked.  
I'm just glad I wasn't around at the time. Croyden, August 2011.<sup>70</sup>

These reductive images have been most commonly indoctrinated into popular western discourse through basic historical knowledge of the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879 and the imagery provided by the

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70 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism >Black* January 2012]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/ive-just-watched-the-film-zulu-dawn-and-i-must-1172914>]

iconic 1964 film *Zulu* (not that there is anything inherently racist about that film). The black man depicted in the joke has been symbolically associated with the Zulu because he is a black man in England. He is clearly not a member of the Zulu - therefore the term 'ZULU' acts as a derogatory term or metaphor used to identify and denounce the 'black man'. This is not to assert that there is anything inherently impertinent about being part of the Zulu. However, in the context of the joke, the racialised imagery of the Zulu, with its alleged ties to primitivity that has historically developed in the UK, is used as way of claiming that all people that share similar physical traits as the Zulu, share the same reductively conceived cultural attributes - such as savagery, primitiveness, and lack of civilisation. In this instance, that includes all members of the black 'race'

### Sickpedia Critical Discourse Analysis #8

Some black bloke has just tried to sell me an electric wall mirror in the pub....

I said "Thats not a mirror you thick cunt....It's a 42" Plasma TV and you've got Crimewatch on!"<sup>71</sup>

*Example (8)* is a creative example of reproducing the racialised representation of the low intelligence of the black 'race'. It simultaneously presents black people, particularly black men, as criminals. This further accentuates a thematic trend appearing amongst the material that has seen criminality and low intelligence as racialised characteristics of the black 'race' presented in symbiosis.

It is again a very short joke in terms of its stylistic approach, arguably an example of a one-liner, although it is split into a short leading and punch-line. It is written in an anecdotal style similarly to *Example (6)* but it differs in several ways. The first being that it is presented as being a very recent incident that requires immediate recital. This can be understood by the narrator claiming that the inciting incident of the opening line had 'just' occurred. Secondly *Example (8)* presents far more fantastical imagery to the audience which identifies itself more clearly as a joke.

With all anecdotal jokes, whether communicated through contemporary, digitalised means, physically published or spoken word, it is in the end not possible to know if the joke is representative of actual experience. Frankly in most cases, events reported are unlikely, and altogether it is not essentially relevant. It is the message of the joke, its discursive character that is of importance to its audience, not necessarily its factual accuracy.

*Example (8)* works slightly better as a joke than several of the other previous examples, most notably the anecdotal *Example (6)* because it provides a clear and coherent comic set up in the leading line based on absurd imagery. It may be anecdotal but it is not naturalistic. Instead, it presents the audience with an eccentric situation. The joke makes known to the audience that what

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<sup>71</sup> [Retrieved 27/03/14 Uploaded to TV > Crime August 2011]

[<http://www.sickpedia.org/tv/crime/some-black-bloke-has-just-tried-to-sell-me-an-1048406>]

they are consuming is a piece of comic language, and despite it functioning in accordance with racialised stereotypes and racist rhetoric, it does have a degree of sophistication which demonstrates that the joke aims to embody both wit and intellect in conjunction with ridicule, Othering and social exclusion.

It requires a small degree of cultural, political or popular cultural knowledge to understand or appreciate the joke, such as an acknowledgment of the television programme *Crimewatch*<sup>72</sup> and its format. The programme aims to gain information in regard to unsolved crimes through showing CCTV footage, re-enactments, and photographs of the crimes and suspected criminal, in the hope of audience members telephoning the studio to assist in investigations. However, even without any detailed familiarity with the programme, an audience member can easily make sense of the joke.

The opening line of the joke provides the exposition of a "black bloke" attempting to sell "an electric wall mirror" to the producer, who simultaneously acts as the narrating actor in the joke, "in the pub". From the outset the audience is provided with the distinction between white normativity and the black Other. The joke is again, like *Example (7)*, created from a position of white normativity, and this is presented through not making any clear declaration of the narrator's ethnicity. The only actor that has their ethnicity or racial identity revealed is the 'black bloke' - the butt of the joke. From this one can deduce that the joke is created to reinforce on a profound level, notions of white superiority through Othering the black 'race'.

In the opening line, some contextual knowledge can aid in the full appreciation of the joke. This involves the semi-mythical notion of men selling commodities 'in the pub' to other men. This phenomenon hints at an essence of criminality - unsanctioned trading of items which are more than likely stolen. This is not necessarily essentially related to black people or stereotypical black criminality. In contrast, it has more clear associations with gender and class-based stereotyping. For example, within comic discourse in popular culture, the popular British situation comedy *Only Fools and Horses* commonly presented the notion of white, working-class men often trading goods in a local public house, as did *The Fast Show* with sketches such as 'Chris The Crafty Cockney'.

It is a phenomenon that has associations with male-based, working-class, petty criminality, stolen goods, stolen by working-class men, being sold to working-class men at a reduced price. The notion depends on the idea of some working-class men neither having the economic capital to afford top of the range products, nor the skills or jobs available to them to earn high wages through legitimate means. The notion of a man selling an item down the pub, inherently has connotations of illegitimate, unlawful or *dodgy* behaviour.

These meanings begin to form in the opening line of the joke before attempting to form any concrete racialised representations of black people, and as stated, if anything, presenting a black man as an embodiment of 'the dodgy dealer down the pub' is a somewhat distinct caricature of black criminality compared to more common racial archetypes in this motif. Its distinction comes

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<sup>72</sup> *Crimewatch* - the common abbreviation of the full title *Crimewatch UK*, a British television show that has been aired on the BBC since 1984. It is shown at irregular times throughout the year.

from the notion being fairly mild in its severity. This is not a black criminal being presented as an intimidating figure, who violently poses a threat to law abiding white figures, instead he is the dodgy, dim-witted 'bloke', down the pub selling *swag*.

Furthermore its mild derogatory undertones stem from a representation that is not necessarily solely attributable to 'race'. It is rare that in a form of comic rhetoric, a representation that is subjected onto the black 'race' is also used in other forms of comedy to depict white people. This provides a clear connection between 'race' and class based social exclusion. In this form of ridicule-based comic discourse, black people *can* share in the cultural practices of whites, however only the lowest of whites - whites that reside in the underclass. To reiterate, in the opening line the 'black bloke' is not explicitly labelled as a criminal; it is subtly implied. This restrained suggestion is maintained in the punch-line, whilst additionally being unequivocally confirmed in a more generalisable manner, to the entire 'black' race. Therefore, the 'black bloke' is still not necessarily a criminal, but black men in general are.

During the punch-line, in response to the offer to buy the "electric wall mirror", the narrator claims "thats not a mirror you thick cunt....It's a 42" Plasma TV and you've got *Crimewatch* on!". In the punch-line, the producer completes the articulation of two racialised stereotypes concerning the black 'race' - that black people are criminals and they are unintelligent. The humour derives from the 'black bloke' mistaking a forty-two inch Plasma television for a non-existent "electric wall mirror". The audience reading the joke in the first line may stop and debate what an 'electric wall mirror' is, but disregard the issue as being potentially problematic until the punch-line arrives. It is a loose attempt at misdirection that is resolved later. However the main source of the humour that can be derived from the joke concerns the ridicule of the 'black bloke'.

The first implication of this error of judgement made by the black actor reinforces notions of inherent black, male criminality. Not necessarily that all black men commit crime, but that crime in the UK is *only* committed by black men. The racist rhetoric here is quite sophisticatedly expressed. It is key to remember that this joke is written from a white perspective. The producer is asserting views which support white perceptions of black inferiority through both the actors of the narrator and the 'black bloke' in the joke. Therefore every action that the actor of the 'black bloke' commits in the joke is written from white, racialised perceptions of black behaviour.

In the punch-line, it is now made fairly clear that the television is in fact stolen, and it was stolen by the 'black bloke' in order to be sold in the pub. It is asserted that when the 'black bloke' has taken the television off a wall in the house he is stealing it from, he thinks he has seen his own reflection, as he has seen a black man on the television show *Crimewatch UK*.

The implication of black criminality being, that during the re-enactments, CCTV footage and photographs displayed on *Crimewatch*, the only suspected criminals displayed would be black men, leading to the mistake by the 'black bloke'. Other jokes on *Sickipedia.org* have also aimed to stress this idea further:

After complaints that there aren't enough black people on British television, the BBC have vowed to solve the problem. They are now going to show *Crimewatch* seven nights a week.<sup>73</sup>

The joke is cleverly maintaining white-centred ridicule of fixed black criminality in two ways: firstly that *Crimewatch* only features black perpetrators of crime and the 'black bloke' being a thief, and secondly, a perceived black acceptance of their criminal nature due to the 'black bloke' not realising that he was watching a television programme. The joke presentation alleges that while committing a criminal act, he sees a reflection of his own behaviour being depicted on a television programme (supposedly) solely comprised of black men committing criminal acts - he sees an accurate representation of his behaviour and therefore *accepts* it as reality - an alleged representational truth.

The representation of inferior intelligence in the joke occurs through the 'black bloke's' initial error of judgement. It is asserted that this man is so unintelligent that not only did he not realise that he was not seeing his reflection when watching the television, but also that he goes on to attempt to sell what he thinks is a mirror on the basis of this assumption. Furthermore the actor's foolishness is amplified due to him having to conjure up an imaginary item/product in order to support the conclusion that he was looking at his reflection.

He doesn't realise that mirrors cannot be electric, therefore he was confused that the 'mirror' he stole appeared to only work through the use of electricity. After all the explicit clues that what he was stealing was a television, the 'black bloke' in the joke was so stupid that he didn't even realise. Moreover the representation of the ignorant black 'race' is directly expressed rhetorically through the narrator directly quoting himself as calling the 'black bloke' a "thick cunt" when responding to the offer of the electric wall mirror. This is not the only joke which has opted to express frustration towards perceived black stupidity from a white perspective in this harsh manner:

I was playing a nigger at pool last night. He stepped up to the table and asked "What colour am I?" I replied " You're black you thick cunt".<sup>74</sup>

The use of the harsh expletive 'cunt' in conjunction with thick, implies both the severity of the 'black bloke's' unintelligence but also the hatred the narrator - representing white superiority - has for the black Other, completing the black 'race's' discursive exclusion and degrading in *Example (8)*.

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<sup>73</sup> [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* July 2007]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/after-complaints-that-there-arent-enough-black-people-on-british-2089>]

<sup>74</sup> [Retrieved 27/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* January 2011]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/i-was-playing-a-nigger-at-pool-last-night-he-767423>]

## Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #9

Dispatches are doing a program on Science's last Taboo - the theory on race having something to do with intelligence...

White Man =  $E=MC^2$

Black Man = 1 Banana , 2 Banana

No need for the show really.<sup>75</sup>

*Example (9)* amalgamates the racialised motifs of simianisation and the perceived inferior intelligence of the black 'race'. As an arrangement of language that attempts to instigate a humorous response, there is no obvious way of interpreting this joke in any other way than it being amusing to people who find the ridicule of non-white races funny. From an analytical perspective, I suggest the only way an audience could find the joke funny is through an acceptance of superiority theory rather than anything situated in the language. The idea that the joke inherently triggers the innermost, prohibited nature of our being, and asserting a deep-seated need for reinforcing superiority through denigrating others. Though this cannot be seen as a universal condition of all humour, there is very little else in this *specific* piece that suggests humour can be created alternatively. Therefore *Example (9)* again represents a linguistic joke failure.

If one was to suggest a slight effort on the producer's part to create a joke, it would be the slight misdirection between the second and third lines "White Man =  $E=MC^2$  Black Man = 1 Banana , 2 Banana", though it is not clear enough to determine this joke as a success.

A neutral reader, unfamiliar with the common riffs and tropes of comic racist discourse, may believe that the producer of the joke will draw a mutually exclusive comparison with the first equation - an equation taken from reality. Instead the second equation is not based on reality and is devised by the producer in order to express racialised stereotypes. The reader is faintly misled as the two equations are not fair comparisons, so there is a slight incongruity between the two, but both are appropriately positioned together within the context of comic racism. In general, an audience's humorous gratification of the joke comes solely from the ridicule of the black 'race' rather than, ironically, an *intelligent* use of language.

It has been published in four lines, but unlike several others that may initially appear more complex than they actually are, this joke cannot be stylistically categorised as a one-liner. The punch-line occurs before the end of the joke, which is somewhat unique from an aesthetic perspective of the comic racism on *Sickipedia.org*. What makes this joke a particularly suitable joke to analyse is because of the explicit binary distinction the joke provides between white people and black people - "White Man =  $E=MC^2$  Black Man = 1 Banana, 2 Banana".

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75 [Retrieved 27/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* November 2009]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/dispatches-are-doing-a-program-on-sciences-last-taboo-the-235084>]

On a first glance it appears to prioritise the distinction between black and white males. However I do believe that the term 'man' used in this joke is being used in the sense of 'man' as person, rather than 'man' as male. 'Man' is referring to mankind - human beings of either gender. It is separating mankind into dichotomous categories - 'white man' (white people, men and women) and 'black man' (black people, men and women). However, in order to make the same point, the producer could have used the terms 'whites/blacks', 'white people/black people' or a universal racial expletive for all black people. Instead, the producer does choose to use the word 'man' which could be interpreted as implicitly prioritising men over women - even though in this case, it would effectively absolve women of racial abuse. This subtle inclusion of the word 'man' interestingly leans in favour of the predominant social exclusion of women from the anti-Black comic racism of *Sickipedia.org*. However, in general I believe the ridicule is primarily intended to be aimed at all black people. Therefore the joke can be interpreted by the audience as either reductively ridiculing the black 'race', or more specifically, all black men.

Through this latent oppositional conflict between 'white man' and 'black man' presented in the joke, the joke does not require a deep interpretation based on white normativity to identify notions of white superiority and white social inclusion at the expense of ridiculing perceived black inferiority and exclusion.

The joke opens by providing the following exposition, "Dispatches are doing a program on Science's last Taboo - the theory on race having something to do with intelligence..." It is not essential for the appreciation of this joke to be familiar with the *Channel 4* commissioned, current affairs documentary series *Dispatches*, especially considering that the programme referred to in the joke was not a part of the *Dispatches* series. The programme referred to was entitled *Race and Intelligence: Science's Last Taboo* and was part of a season of programmes dedicated to investigating racial issues on *Channel 4* in 2009. The popular cultural context is not essential as the joke's opening line provides the entire expository context needed for a full understanding of the joke. The television programme is ultimately unimportant, but its subject matter - the relationship between 'race' and intelligence, is taken as the subject matter for the joke, of which two clear racialised representations of the black 'race' are expressed - limited intelligence and similarities to apes. The producer therefore uses the format of a joke and the platform of *Sickipedia.org* as a form of contributing commentary to the dialogue created by the television show, in a supposedly humorous context which ultimately supports racist, ideological attitudes.

The joke's second line highlights how the producer wishes to represent each 'race's' intelligence. It is articulated using a diagram, perhaps attempting to draw an aesthetic parallel between the notion of intelligence and scientific or mathematical figures. The white 'race's' relationship with intelligence is presented as "White Man =  $E=MC^2$ ". This is a reference to the mass-energy equivalence equation developed by one of the universally regarded, finest scientific minds in recorded European history - the white German, Albert Einstein. In order to maintain some linguistic coherency, the producer chooses to similarly represent the black 'race's' relationship with intelligence through the form of an equation. However, this equation does not represent a well-

known scientific or mathematical concept from a celebrated intellectual, rather it is fictitiously concocted by the producer to articulate the notions of black people's inferior intelligence and their inherent ties to apes - "Black Man = 1 Banana , 2 Banana".

The implication of such an 'equation' is that in comparison to complex mathematical conundrums that concern alleged superior white minds, black people have the intellectual capacity to just about count in numerical order. Furthermore it is suggested that black people cannot count numerically very high, and they can only manage it through adopting the child-like technique of applying the concept of counting to physical objects. In this case that object represents the second racialised stereotype attributed to the black 'race' - that black people are closer to apes than humans.

The 'banana' is commonly used as symbol for this racialised motif as the banana has come to culturally signify a monkey's favourite food. The banana has therefore been adopted in various forms of both racist language and action as a way of expressing that a banana should also be the black 'race's' favourite food. Pieterse (1992) discussed the significance of fruit and specifically bananas in non-comic racialised imagery throughout history, and its range of symbolism, not necessarily related to simianisation. He claims that fruit was the "classic symbol of plenty, commonly used to denote the natural fertility of the tropics, and hence the 'natural laziness' of blacks" (p.199). These fruits across different cultures have included pumpkins, watermelons, coconuts and bananas. He states that bananas similarly connote these associations with the tropics. He refers to *Chiquita* (a Central American fruit brand part of the United Brands multinational group) who used bananas in advertisement campaigns throughout the 1950s and Josephine Baker, a black dancing sensation in Paris in the 1920s. Women would often wear bananas on their head and skirts which represented amusing exotic cultures, full of zest and charm, unburdened by politics or troubling issues. Furthermore due to the phallic symbolism of the banana, Pieterse argues that when worn in this way by black women it also came to embody ideas of sexual liberation.

The joke is explicitly drawing the comparison between the black 'race' as a whole due to the use of the term 'man'. It seamlessly interchanges the imagery of black human beings with signifiers associated with monkeys and apes (bananas). It correctly asserts that monkeys would find difficulty in understanding simple human intellectual concepts such as counting numerically and attributes that behaviour to the black 'race'. The black 'race' is degraded as ape-like, and like apes, they are considered highly unintelligent in comparison to the white 'race'.

It is the line 'Black Man = 1 Banana , 2 Banana' that constitutes the punch-line of the joke, which is the third of four lines. As stated this is somewhat strange. The final line continues the narrative of this joke, that being a commentary. *Example (9)* is more of a published opinion that contains a slight humorous trope, than a more formal joke structure. In the fourth line, the producer states 'no need for the show really'. This sentence asserts several points. The first being that the diagram he/she has devised concerning the comparison of white and black intelligence is the truth. With this additional comment, the producer has reduced any potential caveats that state anything said in a

humorous context cannot be taken seriously. If this was the case in this joke, then the joke should have ended with the punch-line. Not that this writer adopts the perspective that a joke's content is absolved of wrongdoing if social exclusion is directly tied, linguistically, to a joke's crescendo. However, if one was to subscribe to that approach, in the case of this joke, it falls under close scrutiny. This joke's construction goes beyond the attempted creation of a humorous response for the audience and states that the humorous dimension of the joke is representative of the truth. The final line has no humorous element, instead with its addition, the joke as a linguistic structure becomes rhetorical, attempting to persuade the audience into consensus concerning black people's inferiority.

The second point of the joke is that not only is this assertion of black unintelligence, primitiveness and inherent ties to apes or monkeys true, it is also a well-known and obvious truth. The joke asserts that the simple diagram provided tells an audience all it needs to know about the supposed relationship between intelligence and 'race'. It argued that there is 'no need for the show' because one, the joke explains the relationship quickly and efficiently, and two, because allegedly everyone knows this anyway. The joke attempts simply and explicitly to reproduce the notion that black people are inferiorly different from white people. It claims that monkeys are different from humans, and that black people are like monkeys. Moreover, it stresses that if we subscribe to the understanding that monkeys are stupid in comparison to humans, black people *also* must be similarly understood as stupid in comparison to white people, and furthermore that this is common knowledge to all.

## Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #10

I went to a fancy dress party as a nigger the other night.

Apparently "getting into the character" is not a good enough excuse to stab, rob and rape the other guests.

Next time I'll go as a chink, that way they will never find me. <sup>76</sup>

*Example (10)* is one of the most multi-faceted jokes that will be analysed in this chapter, not necessarily in terms of the complexity of the joke but certainly in terms of the different racialised stereotypes concerning the black 'race' that it reproduces, the extremity of the negative portrayal of black people, and the conjoined ridiculing of two non-white 'races'. This joke contains the motifs of dehumanisation, criminality and violence and sexual violence.

As stated, the joke isn't particularly complex. It is overtly clear about the values it wishes to express, and it is not sophisticated in terms of how it aims to create laughter. Like many of the examples discussed at this point, *Example (10)* does not rely on elaborate linguistic techniques in order to

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76 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to *Sex and Shit > Fancy Dress* May 2009]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/sex-and-shit/fancy-dress/i-went-to-a-fancy-dress-party-as-a-nigger-123249>]

incite humour, rather it operates solely according to ridicule and the normative assertion of white superiority over perceived subordinate non-white 'races'.

*Example (10)* does not follow a traditional joke structure. This does not however make the joke complex in terms of humour, rather on the contrary, its humour is very one-dimensional, so much so it is difficult to highlight *Example (10)* as derivative of a joke at all. Nevertheless this example's subversive aesthetic does make the joke a little more complex in terms of deconstructing it as a piece of discourse.

Divided into three lines, initially it would appear to a reader that the joke can be characterised as a simple one-liner, a leading line, followed by a punch-line. However the producer of *Example (10)* actually provides an additional punch-line that follows the first (the second line). Somewhat ironically, this structural decision on the part of the producer, presumably in an effort to make the content funnier to the audience, results in the joke ceasing to be what one would establish as a joke at all from a linguistic perspective.

The presence of the second punch-line "next time I'll go as a chink, that way they will never find me" acts as an explicit insult to Chinese people. It is not an assemblage of language that either intends to, or creates humour. This is made clear from the usage of the epithet 'chink' and the exclamation of a negative cultural stereotype (this will be expanded upon later in this analysis). This added insult at the end of the example, only loosely related to the lines that preceded it, prevents the joke, structurally from its aesthetic presentation, as being regarded a joke. The piece no longer fits together coherently, so that an audience member can find laughter from the language.

If the producer demonstrated the restraint to keep the linguistic structure restricted to two lines (a one-liner), it could be more formally characterised as a joke. This is because the two lines would work together as a humorous assemblage of language which appropriately make sense within the context of racist discourses. Moreover, this would allow its producer or audience to lay claim to discursive ambivalence and would be less open to an unambiguous critique concerning its racist foundations. As the joke provides two punch-lines, neither of which contain intricate usages of language to make the assemblage humorous from a linguistic perspective, *Example (10)* cannot legitimately be linguistically categorised as a joke and instead must be identified as solely a piece of rhetorical discourse. The fact that some individuals within the comic community's audience might find the rhetoric entertaining is irrelevant - the latent connotations may create humour for some, but its aesthetics in their complete form does not appropriate a joke.

Its opening line creates a general comic set up like many other jokes. It is written from a first person perspective therefore the producer and the narrator of the joke are intertwined as the same voice. It is written in the past tense, anecdotally referring to a recent event experienced. Again the joke does not necessarily have to account for a real event. The aesthetic presentation of the language, which leans towards rhetoric rather than humour, means that the example, if truthful (which it is clearly not), further reinforces that it can in fact not be regarded as a joke, rather a

celebration of racist attitudes and white superiority. If it is fictional, it acts merely as a fantasy of celebrating racist attitudes and white superiority, while still remaining unamusing.

Only the clear likelihood that this anecdote is imagined provides any form of justification that this linguistic structure in any way can be identified as humour - the narrator's behaviour depicted is so outrageous and fantastical that it is clearly a false lie - it is told in jest. However, merely presenting a situation through language that is evidently fabricated does not constitute a joke, and therefore certainly does not absolve the content of its ideological, rhetorical functions.

In this particular example, the anecdote does not include any other specific actors. This creates a general sense of simplicity for the audience who are not forced to interpret various different actors/voices which are all ultimately divided aspects of the producer's omnipotent perspective. There is not a complex presentation of perceptions of different characters that the reader has to negotiate in order to fully comprehend the joke and the producer's discursive intentions. The audience is simply presented with the narrator/producer's voice alone and his/her inner monologue, recounting and reflecting on a past event and their behaviour. Those thoughts are fixated on reproducing a multitude of negative racialised stereotypes concerning black people.

From the opening line the audience learns that the inciting incident that has led the narrator to reflect with hindsight, was attending a fancy dress party, dressed "as a nigger the other night". From this opening line one can substantially assert that this joke is being written from the perspective of white normativity and white supremacy.

Granted it is not possible definitively to ascertain that *Example (10)* was produced by a white individual. It is highly unlikely however, that the joke is written by someone who identifies with either Black or Chinese ethnicity, as these are the two groups whom are ridiculed. It is possible though that the joke could have been written by an individual from another ethnic group except for white. The point being maintained, is that unless a joke clearly identifies that the group being presented as superior, through ridiculing inferior non-white 'races', *isn't* a white group, then the discourse fits into the continued narrative of reinforcing ideas of white supremacy.

Through hundreds of years of reproducing the social exclusion of non-white 'races' and the maintenance of white supremacy and hegemony, 'whiteness' is the normative notion in Western racialised discourses, including comic racism. Therefore, hypothetically even if a joke that ridicules black people was produced by a British individual with a South-Asian heritage and identity for example, they would have to clearly identify in the language that it is written from a South-Asian perspective and assert the perceived superiority of South-Asians over black people. If it doesn't then the discourse's racism continues to support the white normative approach and notions of white supremacy - it fits into the continued narrative of racialised discourses that positions the white 'race' as the most powerful group, who hold dominance over all other racial groups.

With this joke fitting into the continued white normative comic, the producer from the outset creates a dichotomous conflict between the white and black 'races' through explicitly referring to black

people as 'niggers'. In this example's case, 'nigger' is used as an all-encompassing, inclusive term to define all black people, not distinguishing for gender, class or any other type of formal or informal social categorisation.

The term 'nigger' is not simply used as a literal synonym for 'black people'. When the producer of *Example (10)* refers to 'niggers', he/she is claiming that all black people are incredibly personally frustrating from a white perspective - they are wholeheartedly abhorrent, and behave radically abnormal from white cultural and behavioural norms. Adopting the joke's logic, *all* black people should be appropriately referred to by the most severe and offensive expletive, because that is what they *all* deserve - *all* black people are conceived as 'niggers'. Thus, a perception of superior whiteness is positioned on one side of this joke, creating inclusion for all whites, in opposition to the perceived lowest of the low, disgusting 'niggers', representing the entire black 'race', excluded on the other. This sense of disgust is explained and expanded on in the second line (the first punch-line).

Furthermore, in the leading line, the racialised motif of dehumanisation is expressed. This is the most subtle form of racial prejudice articulated in *Example (10)*, however its importance must be stressed. Firstly, in any joke where the entire black 'race' is collectively targeted and referred to as 'niggers', a discursive form of humanistic dehumanisation is being reproduced.

One of the semantic connotations of using the term 'nigger' in this context, where whiteness is positioned in opposition, is the idea of being inferior - a lesser human. Using 'nigger' as an epithet to describe all black people strips black ethnic groups of their diverse cultural nuances, practices and values. It efficiently takes any negative cultural aspects of black individuals in a group and attributes that to many different black ethnic groups' genetic make-up. It uses these characteristics to stereotypically define these groups as one inferior 'race'. As a result anyone who is a 'nigger', and in this example's case, all black people, are eternally defined by these fixed, naturalised negative characteristics and therefore can only be identified as sub-human.

Furthermore these negative characteristics that are subtly implied by using the term 'nigger' to describe black people, with all of its cultural and historical baggage, is presented harmoniously with specific negative stereotypical cultural practices, in order to further amplify the point. 'Niggers' are not presented as the human equivalent to whites. Black people, labelled as 'niggers' are dehumanised of all their positive characteristics, cultural vibrancy, heterogeneity, and individuality.

Secondly, the producer further accentuates this notion of the dehumanised 'nigger' by linguistically caricaturing black people as 'niggers'. The premise of the joke is that attending a fancy dress party dressed as a black person would be generally fun and enjoyable for everyone involved (the narrator dressing up and the other guests at the party). In this sense black people or 'niggers' as they are referred to in the joke become a caricature - a character, something mythical and fantastical that transcends the boundaries of reality.

The producer does not say that he/she will dress up as a specific black person - perhaps a black celebrity or fictional character - but rather as an archetypical 'nigger'. This mythologises the idea of the 'nigger' and further dehumanises black people as it symbolically aligns the whole notion of black ethnicity with that of typical characters people dress up as at a party. Archetypes such as Father Christmas, Batman, the Easter Rabbit, Harry Potter, a generic fireman, policeman or nurse are positioned as equivalent to the 'nigger'.

Through expressing this idea that a 'nigger' is a legitimate character to dress up as at a party, black people are dehumanised - they are not as seen as tantamount to whites. In this joke black people are no longer a set of individuals with an ethnic background, a cultural heritage, a class status, a gender, a sexuality, a personality, both positive and negative physical and behavioural characteristics. Black people are instead a symbol of all the negative racialised ideas attributed to their 'race' reinforced over hundreds of years, immortalised in a character that can be brought out at parties for others' amusement.

The second line acts as a direct punch-line to the leading line. If one was to leave just the leading line and second line, *Example (10)* would be a slightly more successful anti-black racist joke from a linguistic perspective. It is explicit in its language, clear in its target of ridicule. It attempts to reproduce as many negative stereotypes as possible. It attempts to be as offensive as possible, and it tries to create enough misdirection for it to be categorised as humorous. However, I would argue that even left at two lines, *Example (10)* would still not constitute a successful joke linguistically due to the primacy of racism over humour and the lack of a clear comic set up in the leading line.

In the second line, the narrator/producer claims that "apparently getting into the character is not a good enough excuse to stab, rob and rape the other guests". In this claim the narrator is attributing the behavioural traits of criminality, violence and sexual violence on to all black people. It is this generalising proclamation, from the perspective of the producer, of extremely negative cultural traits that all black people manifest that makes black people 'niggers'.

As identified earlier in the chapter, the common racialised motifs outside of comic racist discourses of criminality, violence and sexual violence are not character traits assigned to black people in an isolated fashion. These are stereotypical ideas, reproduced across various different discourses for centuries, further reinforced in a contemporary context with this example.

The narrator asserts that in order accurately to portray a 'nigger' at a fancy dress party, they, a white individual, must "get into character". The most precise way of 'getting into character', according to the producer, is not only to physically look like black people, characterised as 'niggers', but behave as 'niggers' behave. Traditionally, if one is attending a fancy dress party, one's character has to be simplified - reduced of any nuances or contradictions. Anything too complex would limit the effectiveness of the costume - this measured on how recognisable a given character is. Therefore in the narrator claiming that they are "getting into character", he/she is

implying that they have to adopt the most fundamental, well-known and essential behavioural traits of that character, as they would in any other case of getting into character for a fancy dress party.

In this example, the producer presents themselves as attending the party dressed as a generic, archetypal member of a 'race', characterised by simplified, essential traits that apply to all members of that 'race'. Through the identification of this 'race' as 'niggers', the entire black 'race' becomes the 'nigger race', and as 'niggers', the essential traits represented are racialised characteristics, indicative of the worst stereotypical behaviours associated with blackness. To be a 'nigger', is symbolically related to someone who stabs, robs and rapes innocent people. The narrator of the joke is arguing that all black people are murderously violent, sexually violent, and show no hesitation in thievery: this is a well-known fact understood by all. According to the joke, by stabbing, robbing and raping the guests, the narrator has 'got into character' sufficiently, and successfully emulated the behaviour of black people.

At this point of the joke, the narrator has concluded his/her ridicule of the black 'race', their reproduction of stereotypical characteristics that characterise black people, and fulfilled their expression of anti-black prejudice and rhetoric. However, *Example (10)* does not end after this line. In the final line, the narrator attempts to reproduce another racialised motif, but this time not about the black 'race'. The narrator states that at the next fancy dress party they will "go as a chink, that way they will never find me".

As with the negative attitude towards black people earlier in the joke, the narrator chooses to adopt a racial slur to identify the group being ridiculed. In this case the slur is 'chink' in reference to the Chinese. This again creates the overall tone of this line, positioning all Chinese people in to one homogenous category, and it is one that is negative and implies their inferiority. This line appears to sacrifice the overall quality of the comedic structure of the joke in order to fit in another perceived racist slight. As stated this line is added so that the joke overall has a heightened sense of offensiveness for non-white groups. This reinforces that *Example (10)* does not comprise a legitimate assemblage of language that creates humour - it is instead a piece of rhetoric. Not only does the joke attack black people, it attacks Chinese people too.

The third line (second punch-line) doesn't appear to fit too well with the comic narrative set up in the opening two lines, or the rest of the joke's content. In this sense, this line feels somewhat tonally tacked-on. The audience doesn't really know who the 'they' are who are being referred to in the final line. Presumably the producer is referring to the other guests who were 'stabbed, robbed and raped' in the previous line, but it is not clear and does not make a great deal of narrative sense. Furthermore, this punch-line quite simply does not make sense - it doesn't work as a joke on any level.

The idea works on the common Western perception, particularly articulated in comic racist discourse, that all individuals of most predominantly a North Asian descent, or particularly Asians whose eyes have an epicanthic fold, are very difficult to tell apart from one another - the notion that

they all look the same. This notion has a plethora of jokes solely dedicated to its articulation throughout *Sickipedia.org's* vast content:

I just had my joke about Chinese people deleted as a duplicate. Oh the irony... <sup>77</sup>

I was in London the other day when I got mugged by two Chinese guys. The police have narrowed it down to 45,000 suspects. <sup>78</sup>

As a photographer, imagine my delight when I got a job to photograph pupils at a predominantly Chinese school. I made a fortune, and only had to take one photo. <sup>79</sup>

Therefore the joke being attempted to be told is that if one was to attend a fancy dress party dressed as a Chinese individual, the rest of the guests would not be able to find them as all Chinese people supposedly look the same. Evidently the joke makes little sense as the producer has not revealed the ethnicity of the rest of the guests. Adopting the joke's logic, if a fancy dress party was attended by predominantly white people - already suggested due to the discursive dichotomy created between white inclusiveness and black Otherness - why would it be difficult to identify a Chinese person? This illogical attempt at a punch-line further accentuates that the producer has attempted to offend an additional group at the expense of creating a successful joke from a linguistic perspective.

Overall the attempt of the joke is to be offensive, and due to the usage of the term 'Chink', the Chinese are symbolically positioned in the inferior, socially excluded position of the 'niggers' and therefore the Chinese Othering does come from a racist perspective, however this is not expressed with the same level of sophistication and prominence as the anti-black message of this joke.

### Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #11

"My missus said that she's too scared to go out at night because she doesn't want to become a victim of any of the vicious gangs of black youths wandering the streets. I told her she shouldn't worry so much... "Even gangs of crack addicted nigger rapists still have some standards." I said."<sup>80</sup>

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77 [Retrieved 31/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Chinese* April 2009]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/chinese/i-just-had-my-joke-about-chinese-people-deleted-as-112916>]

78 [Retrieved 31/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Chinese* July 2008]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/chinese/i-was-in-london-the-other-day-when-i-got-39744>]

79 [Retrieved 31/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Chinese* August 2009]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/chinese/as-a-photographer-imagine-my-delight-when-i-got-a-182046>]

80 [Retrieved 07/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* September 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/my-missus-said-that-shes-too-scared-to-go-out-666618>]

*Example (11)* combines the racialised motifs of black sexual violence, black violence and criminality, dehumanisation and also intersects with the social exclusion of women in general. It is not just a racist joke, it a sexist and misogynistic joke as well. The joke is told from the first person perspective of a male narrator, anecdotally retelling a conversation he previously shared with his wife. It technically is four lines long, but it is in fact two sentences not divided into short paragraphs like so many of the jokes on the website. In deconstructing the joke it can be divided into a valid two-liner, structured as a basic leading line and a punch-line with the division occurring between the two sentences.

This joke does have a comedic riff that it follows to attempt to create humour for the audience. It is one based on misdirection. However, *again* the joke fails linguistically for the same reason most of the other examples have. The comic set up in the language is not clearly structured. The audience has already consumed several negative racialised stereotypes, presented explicitly with extreme racist language before they can fathom that the language is attempting to mislead them. The joke again is far more centred on discursively marginalising Others than effective joke aesthetics that can be appreciated in isolation from the content.

The narrator introduces the idea that his wife is "too scared to go out at night because she doesn't want to become a victim of any of the vicious gangs of black youths wandering the streets". The joke attempts to set up the notion that the narrator's wife's concerns about 'black youths' is unnecessary. At the end of the first sentence, between the leading line and the punch-line, the producer hopes that the audience has assumed that this is because stereotypical assumptions concerning black youth are untrue. If one is intimidated by black youth, this is because of false preconceived racialised attitudes that white people embrace regarding them and black people in general, caused by years of discursive reproduction. This could provide the foundation of an anti-racist joke.

Instead, the joke fails in terms of how it is linguistically constructed, because this notion requires far too much interpretation on behalf of the audience to reach that conclusion. Through merely mentioning "vicious gangs of black youths", in the context of *Sickipedia.org's* comic racism, the producer has created a distinction between blacks and whites which is later fulfilled more explicitly in terms of the black 'race's' social exclusion due to its perceived inferiority in comparison to superior whites.

In the punch-line this brief assumption encouraged to be made by the audience turns out to be incorrect - the narrator has attempted to mislead the readers to draw this conclusion and as a result a humorous response can be obtained. However humour cannot be achieved this way easily - derivative of the aesthetics and the structure. Instead humour can only occur from finding the racism (and sexism) of the piece funny.

The narrator goes on to reinforce that his wife is in fact correct to hold some concerns regarding the negative racialised characteristics of young black people. These include specifically a tendency

to abuse illegal narcotics and develop dependency on them, and also being sexually threatening and violent. A deeper interpretation of the more latent traits attributed to black people are being lesser humans, at one with criminality, deviance and delinquency in general, being anti-social and intimidating, and being directly associated with an urbanised way of life, the working class and being economically underprivileged. These commonly intertwined notions are subject to many other anti-black examples on the site:

From the Makers of gangs of New York, we bring you, Gangs of Brixton. This epic film set in 2008 brixton has an all black cast, rated 18 for gun violence, drug use and rape.

Dizzee rascal gives it 5 out of 5 bananas <sup>81</sup>

"I wish we had never moved to Brixton; my son, Alfie, keeps coming home with the strangest homework assignments: 1. Black music is better than white music. Diss. (30) 2. John has a knife, Peter has a gun but no knife, Andy has a knife, a gun and an axe. Which gangs are they in? (15) 3. If Axsel, who is 5 ft 11 in. tall, bumps into Jermaine - who is 5 ft 7 in.- in the street, calculate the angle Jermaine would need to raise a 6 in. carving knife to shank Axsel in the face. (5) <sup>82</sup>

The joke rhetorically argues that these stereotypical ideas his wife, on behalf of white people in general, believes about black people are in fact true, and the reason that the wife character should not be concerned is because even as allegedly inferior black people are to white people, they are superior to her and by extension less deserving of marginalisation than women. However, *Example (11)*'s discursive social exclusion of women works twofold. The first is the above interpretation which is a racist and sexist amalgamation, implying that black people are inferior to white people, and white women and inferior to white men. The second interpretation is more fixated on the 'wife' character herself and the supposed threat she is concerned about. The implication is that her concerns are attributed to the threat of rape from black male perpetrators. However, the narrator does not believe that she is sexually attractive enough for the group of youths to desire her, not even in the context of sexual violence. This suggestion of sexual violence in the example is not alleviated due to the black youths not being represented as sexually violent - they are - but due to the wife's inability to arouse them. In this way, *Example (11)* makes misogynistic suggestions that the sexual abuse, and rape of women is not actually immoral, regardless of what 'race' the perpetrator is, and is only an inappropriate action if a woman is not perceived to be attractive by men. This clearly makes this 'joke' highly sexist, as well as racist.

*Example (11)* is another extract from *Sickipedia.org* which uses the term 'nigger' to refer to black people. As stated in the analysis of *Example (10)*, whenever 'nigger' is used to refer to black

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81 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* July 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/from-the-makers-of-gangs-of-new-york-we-bring-545596>]

82 [Retrieved 07/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* January 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/i-wish-we-had-never-moved-to-brixton-my-son-311304>]

people in comic racism, the process of discursive dehumanisation is occurring and its ideological components are being reproduced. Throughout the critical discourse analysis of the anti-black jokes a revealing dichotomy has been discovered concerning the material and the term 'nigger' - who is being referred to and ridiculed with its usage.

In some cases 'niggers' have been hierarchically distinguished from other black people, embodying the worst possible traits a black individual can possess. In other cases, 'niggers' has undoubtedly been used as a derogatory term to identify all black people and discursively attribute all negative racialised characteristics to them. In cases such as *Example (11)*, there is a little more ambivalence as to who is being called a 'nigger'.

'Nigger' on *Sickipedia.org* has come linguistically to embody the negative stereotypical aspects of the black 'race'. Therefore in some cases, with the logic of the comic racism adopted by the site, it is appropriate to refer to black people as 'niggers' when black people are presented in a particularly negative light, explicitly highlighting perceived, racialised negative aspects of their character. The ambivalence occurs when a *specific* black group, ethnicity, or subculture is presented in a joke, and its members are referred to as 'niggers'. It is difficult to establish within the context of this joke whether only "vicious gangs of black youths" have been defined as 'niggers' by the producer, or all black people. The answer in this joke's case is they both have.

I argue that in *Example (11)*, the general message stressed by the producer is one of racialised generalisations and racist rhetoric, positioning black people as inferior. However, this joke does not explicitly apply all of its ideas to the entire black 'race'. In this joke's case, the smaller group being referred to is black youth. Firstly, it refers to black youth as grouping in "vicious gangs". On the surface, one might interpret this introduction to the target of ridicule, as an aim to distinguish black youth in general, and vicious gangs of black youth. Black youth in general as a subject of comedy, can be a fully socially functional group that is not culturally problematic and therefore undeserving of ridicule. However, vicious, deviant black youth that wander the streets in gangs, in this context, are.

Deconstructing this joke as whole in accordance to its punch-line and within the wider context of comic racism on *Sickipedia.org*, there is a stronger case to suggest this reference to vicious gangs of black youth is rhetorically implying that all black youth is vicious. It suggests that black people are inherently susceptible to the attraction of a gangland/gangster lifestyle as it appeals to their alleged naturally violent and deviant instincts. This is the first generalisation and it reproduces common racialised motifs concerning the supposed inherent threatening and violent nature of all black people reinforced throughout historical racialised discourses. It is just that in this joke it does not aim to explicitly make that over arching claim about the whole black 'race' - it is just subtly implied through interpretation.

Another point which justifies this argument is that the joke would not work if these claims were made about vicious gangs of white youth for example (groups which are just as prevalent in reality

as black). The humour is derivative of the well-established, cultural notions of black violent, criminal and sexually violent behaviour, allegedly caused by their biological make-up.

When in the punch-line this same group initially described as "vicious gangs of black youth" becomes "gangs of crack addicted nigger rapists", the negative characteristics have become more distinct and the derogatory manner in which they are presented is amplified. The broad notion of viciousness implies that black people are in some ways naturally depraved or immoral. The punch-line substitutes this wide-ranging idea with specific manifestations of depravity. In this case crack addiction and rape are presented as archetypal behavioural features of black youth caused through perceived biological inferiority.

Particularly ideas of black sexual deviance are used within *Sickipedia.org's* anti-black rhetoric to a huge degree as also identified in the historical examples. The following jokes illustrate these statements:

What's black and behind you?...a rapist.<sup>83</sup>

I went on a date with a blind woman last night. She said, "Tell me a little bit about yourself". I said, "My name is Jamal, I'm Black, 6ft 4, I have no tattoo's and I wish you the best of luck in finding your rapist".<sup>84</sup>

Was at London zoo today. I saw a huge male monkey forcing a female monkey to have sex with him. So I called the police and got that fucking nigger arrested!<sup>85</sup>

The stereotypical proclamation that there is a strong correlation between belonging to the black 'race' and Crack Cocaine addiction is a more recent racialised representation widely disseminated in racist discourses, both comic and non-comic. Upon initial reflection, one would perhaps assume that this stereotype is purely culturally-based, however with a more thorough deconstruction, alleged high frequencies of black Crack addiction is a significantly racialised perception that stems from more coherent notions of anti-black stereotypicality such as perceived black primitivity and civil inferiority. It also acts as a good example that illustrates the discursive intersectionality of social exclusion, as this idea of a relationship between Crack addiction and black people is grounded purely in racialised ideology, but also processes of Othering based on gender, class and nation.

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83 [Retrieved 14/03/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black January 2009]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/whats-black-and-behind-you-a-rapist-70449>]

84 [Retrieved 14/03/14 Uploaded to Sex and Shit > Rape September 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/sex-and-shit/rape/i-went-on-a-date-with-a-blind-woman-last-647888>]

85 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to Sex and Shit > Rape February 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/sex-and-shit/rape/was-at-london-zoo-today-i-saw-a-huge-male-355944>]

Nation is very important to discuss in this context. This is because despite *Sickipedia.org* being primarily focused on Britain and British issues, many of the stereotypical ideas are not limited to Othering British members of the black 'race'. In some cases, the rhetoric of the jokes adopts processes of Othering that are not particularly relevant to British black people to create a more reductive form of social exclusion. The stereotypical association between blacks and Crack Cocaine is one such example. Crack Cocaine's associations with blackness stem from discourse and dialogues in North America. Racialised perceptions of drugs and drug related issues are not so well defined in Britain, particularly in this case, blacks and Crack.

This is likely to be a result of Crack Cocaine use being relatively low in Britain. According to national statistics from the Home Office, Cannabis, powder Cocaine and Ecstasy are the most frequently used drugs in Britain ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)). They estimate there to be around 181,000 Crack Cocaine users in Britain, which is comparatively low to the estimated 1.1 million powder Cocaine users ([www.drugscope.org.uk](http://www.drugscope.org.uk)).

In comparison to the American context, Nielsen, Bonn and Wilson (2010) have claimed that ideas around 'race' and ethnicity, particularly racial prejudice, are key factors in how drug-related issues are presented publicly in media and political rhetoric. They argue that images of black people in media throughout the 1980s has firmly established crack cocaine addiction as a problem primarily associated with black people (and to an extent Latino).

Kelly Welch (2007) claims that this dialogue was a consequence of the well documented 'war on drugs' implemented by the Ronald Regan administration. During this period in the early 80s, crack cocaine was seen as an inexpensive drug predominantly used by racial minorities highlighting the connection between 'race', class and crack. Katherine Beckett et al (2005) stressed that the illegal drug, both in terms of its trade and its consumption, most associated with blackness, is crack, leading American drug related law enforcement policies to assume crack is a black problem. With reference to Beckett et al (2005), Reeves and Campbell (1994), and Reinerman and Levine (1989), Nielsen, Bonn and Wilson (2010) argue that in the public imagination, drug abuse has become racialised.

This racialised perception of the lower-class, black crack addict has materialised into several images in discourses, again, predominantly North American. Most notably, images which denigrate women in accordance to both their perceived stereotypical racialised behaviour traits and their gender. These include the 'crack whore' - a woman who prostitutes for money to fund crack addiction, and the 'crack mother' - a woman who takes crack throughout a pregnancy. Both can overlap with one another. Drew Humphreys (1998) claims that the idea of a 'crack mother' is a socially constructed representation of a mother who is both black and urban, and made up of several other interlinked racialised stereotypes of black women such as the sexually promiscuous she-devil (Reeves & Campbell, 1994). Humphreys claimed that black 'crack mothers' were often demonised in media as symbolising "everything that was wrong with America" (1998, p.45).

*Example (11)* is not an isolated case of referring to both black women and men as crack cocaine addicts:

Give a nigger a fish.....And he will try and swap it for crack. <sup>86</sup>

I bought myself a rare 'nigger parrot'. All he ever says is, "Polly wants a crack-whore." <sup>87</sup>

What these examples demonstrate is an interesting insight into the ways in which *Sickipedia.org* interlinks issues of gender and class, but most significantly transcends issues of nation. This decentralised, networked discursive space within the cultural public sphere has provided producers an opportunity to combine various, nationally-specific stereotypes into a larger, more complex intertwined process of Othering. This agglomeration creates multiple meanings which allows for the content to transcend national boundaries and communicate its rhetoric in a global context.

Moreover, it too demonstrates a development in the sophistication of the rhetoric itself. Due to the enhancements of digitalised, communicative technologies, racist rhetoric and ideological values are no longer bound by the national contexts in which they were originally forged. In effect the discourse becomes *de-contextualised* from the perspective of the consumer. The meanings of the representation are somewhat removed from the context they derive from. In this case British consumers are persuaded to believe in the representation of black people as crack addicts, yet there is no immediate, nationally-situated context which allows the reader to understand where that idea originated. The 'black crack addict' becomes a mythologised caricature, with little grounding in reality or actual experience, but nonetheless a real representation of the black 'race' consistently reproduced.

The use of the word 'nigger' in the joke applies to a specific socially negative or problematic group within black ethnicity which justifies its usage (in this case young black gangs) but also everyone in the black 'race'. This in turn is perceived as providing a threat to society and particularly aggravates the producer personally.

In this context black youth are threatening and vicious. From the producer's perspective they loiter the streets looking intimidating, they might be engaged in a range of criminal activities, they might be high on highly addictive amphetamines and therefore be behaviourally unpredictable or unstable, and regardless of personal attraction to a woman, they will be forced to fight their natural urges to rape her, perhaps unsuccessfully. These supposed fixed characteristics that are integral to black inferiority, cause intense hatred from the producer and therefore this black group have transcended the boundaries from simply being members of a supposed subordinate 'race' to 'niggers'.

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<sup>86</sup> [Retrieved 14/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* November 2012]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/give-a-nigger-a-fish-and-he-will-try-and-1386790>]

<sup>87</sup> [Retrieved 14/03/14 Uploaded to *Other > Animals/Insects* February 2013]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/other/animals-insects/i-bought-myself-a-rare-nigger-parrot-all-he-ever-1434171>]

However, in the joke the term 'nigger' can also be justifiably argued as an offensive synonym for 'black people'. This is due to the ordering of the words which are used to describe the gang. It specifically states that the wife has nothing to fear from "crack addicted nigger rapists". It does not state that they are crack addicted, rapist, 'niggers'. If the joke adopted the second sentence, it would more strongly imply that due to their supposed vicious, crack-addicted, rapist nature, black people can be identified as 'niggers' - leaning towards an interpretation of the joke that does not suggest all black people are 'niggers'.

As it is presented, the joke highlights that being a 'nigger' contributes to the overall negative representation of the group. Being 'one', is a conceptually separate and distinct contributing factor to the perceived viciousness of black youth. The concept precedes the representation of the group, therefore it strongly suggests that through their very existence, black people are congenitally 'niggers' - being a nigger is not something that black people become through later actions in life. 'Nigger-ness' solidifies notions of cultural inferiority and a negative stereotypical character traits as a permanent construct, biologically determined in every living, dead and unborn black individual.

Therefore this joke does not explicitly establish that the particular stereotypes of inferiority and subsequent social exclusion that are specific to black youth need apply to the entire black 'race', but through the amalgamation of common racialised stereotypes used to describe this group and the particular usage of the word 'nigger', ideas of white superiority over the black 'race' as a whole are expressed.

# Chapter 6:

## Joke Analysis iii - Racial Hatred

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The final empirical chapter addresses the final two common motifs that are expressed in *Sickipedia.org*'s comic material. These can be considered somewhat thematically separate from the previous five discussed across preceding the chapters. This is because they are not based on the reproduction of stereotypicality at all. These last two motifs are more viscerally centred on expressing racial hatred. This is not to assert that they operate completely independently from the rest of the motifs. All of the motifs are thematically and discursively intertwined and they are presented in conjunction in *Sickipedia.org*'s content if the joke deems it appropriate.

However, these final two operate in accordance with the general acknowledgement and understanding of the other racialised representations, communicated in both comic and non-comic racist texts, rather than specifically try to reproduce them. Discursively inciting racial hatred, through immigrant bigotry or fantasy violence towards the black 'race', does not necessarily mean that ideas of primitiveness, violence, lower intelligence, sexual deviance and gross physicality have to be transparently presented, but the content does rely on both the producer and audience having a wider understanding of these ideas.

The jokes which inhabit these motifs are the examples which can be most visibly labelled as racist rhetoric - as they specifically attempt to persuade the audience to participate in the hatred. This is because the jokes are not often based specifically on ridicule - they do not seem to take a specific aspect of black life and generalise, reduce, caricature, or generally make fun of it from a position of superiority. Instead the jokes serve to house more politically-centred opinions and values.

White superiority and non-white (black) inferiority are so obviously accepted by general ethical and communicative context of the jokes that they do not have to be explicitly or implicitly proclaimed - just being non-white is enough to not just be ridiculed, but a valid reason for having your citizenship or even very existence questioned. These jokes are what I identify as racist for the sake of being racist. They do not necessarily serve to reproduce specific racialised ideologies, they instead act as a form of catharsis for the producer to relieve their frustrations. Consequentially, many of the examples that feature these motifs, fail as jokes as a result from a linguistic perspective.

### Motif No. 6 - Immigrant bigotry

Immigrant bigotry has inherent ties to an anti-immigration political standpoint, xenophobia and racism. But it is also grounded in ideas surrounding nation, citizenship and imperialism discussed

in Chapter's One and Two. Furthermore, unlike the previous motifs, the historical discursive foundations for contemporary reproductions of immigrant bigotry are far more recent. Though as stated, there is a general overarching acknowledgement of older racialised ideology, anti-black immigrant bigotry discourses are grounded in more recent global events in the wake of de-colonisation, and specifically in the British context, the disbandment of the British Empire, and mass immigration from former Commonwealth countries integrating into British society *in Britain* itself.

George M. Fredrickson (2002) stated that "racism is always nationally specific. It invariably becomes enmeshed with searches for national identity and cohesion that vary with the historical experience of each country" (p.75). As Steve Garner (2010) argued, though membership to a nation state is not determined racially, historically, nations have been dominated by groups who have defined themselves and others in accordance with 'race'.

In the historical British context, Lord Cyril Radcliffe (1969) identified several key factors concerning post-war immigrant discrimination, bigotry or distrust. He claimed in 1969, following several years of research, that the essence of negative relations and attitudes between the British and immigrant settlers from the likes of India, Pakistan and the Caribbean were not due to a fundamental racial hatred or contempt. He stressed that "the barrier that inhibits free association is strangeness: the immigrant is a stranger, the man of different ways, different assumptions and different implications in his speech and his silence. Very few communities in the world do not favour the familiar, the neighbour, and the English, who rarely explicitly place much reliance on tacit understandings, are not accustomed to receive or adopt strangers as one of themselves" (p.47).

The historical context of racial discrimination of immigrants in Britain is comparatively recent considering the historical genesis of many of the motifs, dating back to twentieth century post-war Britain. Prior to 1948, anyone born in a country colonised by the British Empire would be considered British. However after the 1948 act, British, Irish, Commonwealth and Other nationals were separated (a policy-based process of Othering) and mass migration into the country became possible due to the need for an increase in labour following the second world war.

As stated in Chapter Two, John Solomos (1993) claimed there was a particular increase in concern regarding immigration into Britain following the end of the war. Garner (2010) stated that discussions began at a parliamentary level, where some politicians protested against continued immigration from the former colonies, notably India, the West Indies and parts of Africa. This became focused on black migrants who had fought in the war for Britain and fears that returning back to the home nations, there would be a significant loss of jobs for British people.

In addition, further acknowledging the historical public reproduction of the black criminal and sexually deviant stereotypes, Solomos (1993) claimed that there were also fears that with a black influx, crime levels would increase and there would be a growth in undesirable activities such as prostitution. To illustrate the effects this mentality has on immigrants, Charles Husband (1982)

collected several accounts from black British citizens that documented their experiences of immigrant bigotry throughout their lives.

A "West Indian/British male" (p.175) referred to being called "a darkie and monkey..by other kids", and "wanting to be white...because being black was something bad and awful" (ibid.). He reflected upon friends at school telling "nigger jokes, but I was okay because I was supposed not to mind. 'It's alright he doesn't take offence', I was part of their group so I had to accept it. I did mind" (ibid.). He also referred to being followed by the police for innocently walking home, and drivers making U-turns to shout "you wog, you nigger" (p.177). He finally reflects claiming that "black people in Britain are still slaves, but the chains are not on their bodies but on their minds" (p.179). A "professional black West Indian/British male" (p.180) similarly referred to how "generally speaking, racist humour is used to make simple conversation and reactions to these generally leaves us, the black individuals, feeling guilty that we have challenged them" (p.181).

### Motif No. 7 - Violence against the Black 'race'

The motif concerning violence against the black 'race' continues on the issues raised by immigrant bigotry in jokes. However this motif takes the ideas from the previous to its somewhat tragic, but logical conclusion. This being that not only should the black 'race' be socially excluded in Britain due to the perceived injustice and illegality of their migrant status in the country, but actually their alleged inferiority as sub-humans provides a legitimate reason for violence to be committed towards them, often expressed in the most brutal of fashions.

In this sense, violence against the black 'race' articulated in comic racism provides thematic closure to the motif which claims the black 'race' is violent. On the surface these two motifs may appear to represent a contrasting approach to an overarching racist ideology - black people are violent on one side, black people are victims of violence on the other. However these two motifs cannot be considered as antithetical - they are thematically entwined with the latter dependant on the former. As stated these final two motifs are built on the precedents provided by the others. The fundamental basis for expressing the fantasy of committing violence towards the black 'race' is the negative racialised traits stereotypically assigned to blacks in discourse. Therefore one can stress that amongst other alleged attributes, the stereotypical assumption of the naturally violent black man or woman justifies the fantasy of enacting violence towards black men and women.

In terms of discursively presenting ideas of violence towards the black 'race' historically, one must refer to the historical discourses centred on eugenics and racial purity discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore in this motif's case, alongside immigrant bigotry, more so than any of the others, the comic content is grounded in actual cases of historical violence towards the black 'race', often drawing on the anti-black components of Nazism and black-centred racial segregation in America.

Ben-Tovim and Gabriel (1982) stated that within the British context, in the 1960s proceeding the arrival of many migrants into the country after the second world war, there were catastrophic effects on black communities in Britain. A dominant consensus in political discourse at the time

positioned black people as undesirable, second-class citizens and consequentially blacks found themselves victims of many forms of state harassment and public violence, often initiated by National Front propaganda. They go on to stress that throughout this period, following the Enoch Powell inspired National Front's rhetoric and the reinforcement of negative images of blacks in media as scroungers and criminals, black people became victims of fear, hatred and violence.

When discussing notions of violence in racist humour specifically, Michael Billig (2001, 2005b) has studied the topic in the most significant detail. Furthermore his work is particularly relevant to this study as his primary empirical contribution to the area consists of content collected from Ku Klux Klan affiliated websites.

Billig argued that violent racist humour can be generally defined as expressing some form of violence against an ethnic group. He claimed that violent racist jokes adopted four main characteristics. Firstly, the joke is told within a racist context, where a racial victim is identified and against whom the prejudice is expressed. The second he claimed is a lack of stereotyping, which is something this research contests quite forthright. Billig suggested that "the victims of the joke are not said to possess a particular characteristic which has led them to be victimised" (ibid., p.37). I argue that this is not the case, and will provide many examples from *Sickipedia.org* where stereotypes are presented in conjunction with expressions of racist violence.

The presentation of different motifs together stresses that all forms of comic racism are related, and furthermore this critical discourse analysis highlights their grounding in wider non-comic Western ideologies. Granted, it is difficult for several examples to definitively claim that the stereotypical characteristics attributed to the black 'race' provide the genesis for the victimisation presented within the boundaries of a joke's structure, but I would certainly argue that if they aren't, they are a contributing factor.

As stated, motifs concerning immigrant bigotry and violence against the black 'race' provide the darkest and most severe aspects of the comic racist spectrum: expressions which are based more on hatred than stereotypicality. Yet this spectrum of comic racist motifs still constitutes interconnected processes of discursive Othering. Just because a joke may not explicitly claim that a stereotypical attribute leads directly to a fantastical articulation of violence against a black group or individual, does not mean that the general context of anti-black stereotyping acknowledged, accepted and celebrated in the content and amongst the comic community, does not contribute to this presentation of racist violence. These violent racist jokes cannot be de-contextualised from the discursive sphere in which they are situated. The anti-black stereotypicality clearly presented in so many of the jokes provides justification and legitimisation for the severely racist rhetoric expressed in the violent motif.

Thirdly, Billig argued that there is passive racial/ethnic victim. This means the butt of the joke is not an assertive actor in the joke - they are passively victimised purely on the basis of their racial

membership. Fourthly, he suggests that the racist violence is not a latent subtext of the joke - the violence is the point of the joke.

Billig also elaborated on these general characteristics to distinguish three separate types of violent joke: fantasy racist violence, historical/ political violence, and banal racist violence. Billig explains that fantasy racist violence concerns the non-literal expression of an event that would be unlikely to occur in reality. For example, a joke that plays on the idea of people wishing to kill black people as an ethnic example - it fulfils a fantasy of committing violence. However he claims that despite the action being unlikely ever to be committed, the jokes rely on audiences "universally" (2005b, p.40) sharing the same fantasy. He claims that a fantasy racist violence joke "rhetorically enrols the recipient into the racist community, which is presented as if it is the universal community" (ibid.). The jokes work on the basis that the violence may be fantastical, but they also support the assumption that there are racists in reality that will appreciate and celebrate the fantasy as if it were real.

Historical/political racist violence slightly differs in that its jokes provide analogies with historical events from reality. The producer creates jokes about real situations such as the Holocaust, lynchings, assassinations of prominent non-white figures. The third type, banal racist violence, does not have such malicious intent based on historical facts or fantastical wishes, but rather instead refers to an accidental violence that would still have very negative consequences for non-whites, as for example a road accident (ibid.).

Billig stresses that comic racist violence is a manifestation of the humour of hatred - highly unethical jokes with the potential for destructive social implications. Billig states these kinds of jokes cannot be considered 'just jokes' that mock restraints against racist violence. He argues that these forms of jokes celebrate violence, and are intended to be enjoyed without pity for the dehumanised victims. He refers to the ambivalence of humour, where assertions of highly abhorrent views are equally met with the denial of their intentions, and that no resolution is required. To quote Billig (2001) "on these pages, the extreme racist can be brave without acting. They can be murderers in their imagination. These are jokes and the targets deserve their fate. Racists are invited to join the fun of the lynch mob without moving from their computer. They can have blood on their hands, but the blood will not drip messily onto the keyboards" (p.287).

## Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #12

I'm surprised Lenny Henry has managed to live as long as he has to be honest.

If I was a starving African and that fat patronising nigger took the piss by coming into my village wearing a wacky comic relief nose, I'd drive a spear into his skull and eat the fucker.<sup>88</sup>

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88 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Celebrities > Lenny Henry* April 2010]

Arguably, *Example (12)*'s primary aim is to reproduce the notion of the black 'race' as inherently primitive. This illustrates the view that ideas of racial hatred cannot be thematically separated from the other racialised motifs discussed in the analytical chapters, outlining the general comic racism of the website. *Example (12)*'s second motif presented is the fantasy of enacting violence against members of the black 'race' from a position of white normativity.

It also creates an interesting dynamic in terms of reproducing racialised stereotypicality and anti-Black rhetoric. This is because, while taking the joke in its entirety, it is clear that its purpose is to be generally offensive to black people and perpetuate several different stereotypes. It positions black people into two dichotomous categories. It does not aim to reductively attribute negative stereotypes to all black people, only to those who fit into the created groupings. The two dichotomous categories can be loosely defined in this particular analysis as *the starving African*, and *the western 'nigger'*.

Both categorisations are addressed with equal measures of racist attitudes in terms of white normative superiority in conflict with black Otherness. However there is a sense of the producer of the joke internally creating further social inclusion and exclusion that slightly favours one of the categories over the other - a social hierarchy within the black 'race', whilst still ultimately ridiculing 'it' in its entirety. Adopting this logic, the joke aims to ridicule different aspects of black life.

Within a basic semantic analysis of the joke, social inclusion does not explicitly appear to favour whiteness through the process of excluding blackness, like it so commonly does in this form of comic racism. This more frequently articulated power relationship of inclusion and exclusion in racialised discourses is still present but requires a more comprehensive discursive interpretation of the joke as a whole.

*Example (12)* is representative of a two-liner due to its length and I argue that it specifically fails linguistically because the punch-line does not really act as a traditional punch-line, instead it cathartically relieves the aggravated tension on behalf of the producer insinuated in the leading line, through the fantasy of inflicting violence towards a black individual. Simultaneously it reproduces notions of black stereotypicality. In this sense it must be addressed as a form of racist rhetoric primarily, rather than racist humour.

This example is of particular significance to this research as it leads me to once again focus on the British comedian Lenny Henry, discussed in Chapter Two. *Example (1)* brings Lenny Henry's relationship with British comic racism full circle to the point where he is once again the subject matter of a joke's punch-line - and this example is not an anomaly. *Example (1)* was not extracted from the *Black* subcategory of the *Racism* category. It was taken from the specific subcategory dedicated solely to Lenny Henry in the *Celebrity* category. It is one example of 452 jokes concerning the comedian, many of which target his 'race' as a key identifier/marker for ridicule. In this particular example Lenny Henry is presented as the victim of racially-motivated fantastical

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[<http://www.sickipedia.org/celebrities/lenny-henry/im-surprised-lenny-henry-has-managed-to-live-as-long-392680>]

violence and simultaneously used as a thematic device to reproduce the stereotypical perception of black people as primitive.

The leading line initially provides no articulation of a racist ethos. It does however set up the fantastical violence that will be fulfilled in the punch-line in claiming "I'm surprised Lenny Henry has managed to live as long as he has to be honest". By this, the joke is making suggestions concerning Lenny Henry's mortality. Therefore the thirty-six word punch-line serves to provide to the two main forms of racist rhetoric and stereotypicality. Firstly I will address the category I've identified as *the starving African* and deconstruct the ways in which the joke represents the primitivisation of the black 'race'.

The *starving African*, actually quoted in the joke, is an amalgamation of several stereotypical ideas concerning the black 'race'. Firstly, this specific representation aims to demean African people as opposed to a general degradation of all members of the black 'race'. This is still however a reductive representation based on several negative *black* stereotypes. In this categorisation, African people are still represented on behalf of the entire black 'race' in that they are fundamentally argued as culturally inferior to their Western counterparts. The 'starving' aspect of the categorisation is a reference to famine and poverty that troubles certain parts of Africa.

Within comic racist discourse this is commonly articulated in one of two ways, as either reductively asserting that all of Africa is poor and suffers from famine, or specifically the citizens of Ethiopia. The *starving African* can be substituted with the *starving Ethiopian*, representing the same discursive meanings with a slightly more nationally-based focus but still ultimately ridiculing black people in general in the same manner. This is highlighted in the following jokes:

I know this Ethiopian family who are so poor they had to eat clay to survive. Afterwards they were all shitting bricks.<sup>89</sup>

Ethiopia were pissed off with the world cup draw. They were hoping to draw Turkey but got Hungary instead.<sup>90</sup>

At a glance, the notion of the *starving African* does not seem to necessarily fit within the same context of the other racialised motifs discussed in this chapter. Fundamentally, this categorisation does not attribute a behavioural or cultural characteristic of black individuals to their biological nature. It instead seems more a concise reductive cultural stereotype. However, within the context of this joke and how I will discuss the collective categorisation of the *starving African* archetype, it *is* used as a racialised totem. From this perspective, the *starving African* representation can be

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89 [Retrieved 14/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Ethiopia* May 2008]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/ethiopian/i-know-this-ethiopian-family-who-are-so-poor-they-26648>]

90 [Retrieved 14/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Ethiopia* August 2009]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/ethiopian/ethiopia-were-pissed-off-with-the-world-cup-draw-they-179675>]

seen as an amalgamation that incorporates several inter-related aspects of negative anti-Black stereotypicality, which are too reproduced in jokes, such as:

The diseased African, most notably carriers of AIDS or HIV:

There is two types of aids in the world , the good aids and the bad aids . The good aids kills black people , the bad aids puts concerts on asks for money and saves black people <sup>91</sup>

Africans or black people as charity-cases:

I went to a Charity Auction for African children last night... ...Came away with two of the little black cunts.<sup>92</sup>

The child-like nature of black people :

Madonna's adopted African baby will be 2 years old next month. Which is 23 in human years.<sup>93</sup>

Together these different stereotypes combine to illustrate the overall alleged primitive nature of black people. In this joke the *starving African* is represented far more within the context of his/her primitiveness than anything associated with purely social, cultural or nationally-specific issue of famine or poverty. The *starving African's* behaviour is referred to and this behaviour is typical of racialised representation of the savage, primitive black 'race' - a 'race' that descends from Africa. The joke refers to the behaviour of 'driving a spear into a man's skull and eating him', again a common image portrayed in Sickness.org's jokes:

Why aren't there any decent black darts players? Niggers are good at chucking spears. <sup>94</sup>

Within the context of wider racialised discourses, this is a representation of the black 'race' as a whole, as opposed to specifically African ethnicities or cultures. The producer is depicting a representation of a black individual: living in a village, as opposed to a developed town or city of a more economically advanced country, being physically violent and aggressive, expressed through using primitive weaponry, and exhibiting cannibalism.

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91 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to *Illness and Mortality* > *AIDS/HIV* February 2013]

[<http://www.sickness.org/illness-and-mortality/aids-hiv/there-is-two-types-of-aids-in-the-world-the-1442958>]

92 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism* > *African* October 2010]

[<http://www.sickness.org/racism/african/i-went-to-a-charity-auction-for-african-children-last-675741>]

93 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism* > *African* February 2010]

[<http://www.sickness.org/racism/african/madonna-s-adopted-african-baby-will-be-2-years-old-304137>]

94 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism* > *African* January 2010]

[<http://www.sickness.org/racism/african/why-arent-there-any-decent-black-darts-players-niggers-are-298258>]

There is a degree of sophistication as to how the producer has reproduced this representation - a way in which provides the overarching conflict between the social inclusion of whites, and the exclusion of blacks. The *starving African* is not described in a linear fashion, he/she is not *depicted* as such. The producer attributes the perceived primitive behavioural characteristics of the black 'race' to white people within the context of a fantasy - "if *I* was a starving African". The 'I' refers to the white 'race'. It creates the dichotomy - civilisation in opposition to nature. The joke simultaneously aims to sympathise with black people's supposed inherent savage nature, while also creating a violent fantasy of murdering a black person that they hate.

With the narrator imagining that he/she is a member of the racialised categorisation of the *starving African*, they are claiming that if a white individual had Lenny Henry as a source of charity, they would act just as barbaric as black people do. It is a complex idea being articulated. The narrator sympathises with the alleged inferior racial characteristics of black people, namely their perceived violent nature, because the narrator, as a representation of the white 'race', has a hatred of black people - represented by the 'nigger' Lenny Henry. The joke argues on the level of representation, if you are white, it is okay to be as savage as black people, if your barbarism is aimed towards a black individual.

The fact that there has never been any violence towards Lenny Henry in reality from groups he has interacted with during charity work, contributes to the generalisation of the negative stereotype to the whole black 'race'. The assertion is based on the idea that several components of violent, aggressive, primitive and cannibalistic behaviour has inherent ties to blackness.

The second aspect of racist rhetoric in the joke focuses on the *Western 'nigger'* and the fantasy violence committed against them. Notably the image of the poor, malnourished, primitive, savage, barbaric *starving African* is not referred to as a 'nigger'. This is because despite the *starving African* categorisation presented in the joke reproducing racialised values concerning primitivisation, the producer thinks of these people in higher stead than *Western 'niggers'* such as Lenny Henry (within the context of the joke) but altogether, both are considered inferior to the white 'race'.

While the joke is definitely racist, the producer does not appear to articulate a true hatred of all black people - they are not *all* 'niggers'. This distinguishes ways of using the term 'nigger' from say *Examples (10)* and *(11)*. Within *Example (12)*, some black people are denigrated to little more than a child-like, uncivilised group of barbarians, but they are not befitting of revulsion, that must be saved for Lenny Henry, the *Western 'nigger'*.

In the joke there are very few characteristics used to describe the features of the *Western 'nigger'*. In this sense, the joke is not attempting to reproduce any form of racialised stereotype for the purpose of social inclusion and exclusion. Instead what the audience is provided with is an expression of intense racial hatred (granted in this case towards an individual as opposed to a group) that excludes black people.

Lenny Henry is described in a linear manner as a "fat patronising nigger" who takes "the piss by coming into "villages wearing a wacky comic relief nose". In racialised discourses, comic and non-comic, black men specifically are rarely discriminated against or negatively stereotyped in terms of obesity. It is more commonly associated with black women, however with men, weight is rarely a factor (height and muscle are instead epitomised). Nor are black people in general stereotyped in terms of patronisation, or their sense of humour.

As none of the characteristics used to describe Lenny Henry can be contextualised appropriately in terms of other forms of anti-black stereotypicality, one can deduce that the fantasy violence proposed against him derives from a personal distain for the comedian. It doesn't appear to derive from his 'racial' heritage like it is in various other joke examples which insight fantasy violence towards the black 'race' :

How can you kill a million niggers with just one bullet? Shoot Bob Geldof. <sup>95</sup>

What do you call a black man in the middle of a road? A speed bump. <sup>96</sup>

All this slating of Joseph Kony for using child soldiers is all well and good, but I think we should let the children themselves decide. I mean, if at the age of 9 someone gave me an AK47 and told me to shoot a load of niggers, I would have loved it. <sup>97</sup>

However the usage of the word 'nigger' does heavily imply that Lenny Henry's membership in the black 'race' does have some implication on why he is hated, or the usage of the term, affirms the hatred more deeply.

## Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #13

Q: What do you call a white man that enters a black man's territory?

A: Conqueror.

Q: What do you call a black man that enters a white man's territory?

A: It depends: Immigrant, thief, slave, rapist, trespasser, but most of the time, nigger. <sup>98</sup>

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95 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* June 2007]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/how-can-you-kill-a-million-niggers-with-just-one-686>]

96 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* April 2014]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/what-do-you-call-a-black-man-in-the-middle-1560534>]

97 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to *In The News > Joseph Kony 2012* March 2012]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/in-the-news/joseph-kony-2012/all-this-slatting-of-joseph-kony-for-using-child-soldiers-1243351>]

98 [Retrieved 28/03/14 Uploaded to *Racism > Black* February 2011]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/q-what-do-you-call-a-white-man-that-enters-846357>]

*Example (13)* introduces the motif of immigrant bigotry in contemporary comic racist discourse. This is one of the more complex racialised motifs identified from the content analysis that is addressed in the critical discourse analyses. This is because, alongside the motif depicting fantastical violence towards the black 'race', immigrant bigotry is concerned more with the ideas of racial hatred from a white perspective, than in itself highlighting clear notions of intertwined biological and cultural inferiority based on inferior, stereotypical behavioural traits.

As will be stressed though, the immigrant bigotry motif of *Sickipedia.org*'s anti-Black comic racism does incorporate these other more clear stereotypical motifs in order to assist in the overall rhetorical and discursive social exclusion of the black 'race' in the jokes. In *Example (13)*'s case those notions include black criminality, sexual violence and wider ideas of black dehumanisation. Furthermore there is an underpinning historical context of the joke which reinforces the sense of white superiority in the joke, associated with values of imperialism, colonialism and empire.

The joke is similar stylistically to *Example (9)*. The producer does not act as a narrator, instead he/she simply provides two questions and two answers to their respective questions. These two questions can be roughly translated linguistically as an opening line and a punch-line, therefore *Example (13)* could be labelled as a two-liner.

As a piece of humour, it does not have anything particularly sophisticated about it. It could be argued that it slightly attempts to use misdirection in the opening line to be realised by the audience in the punch-line, however this does not really work and it isn't clear if it is even intended by the author. The intentions that are clear from the production of this joke is to represent the inferiority of the black 'race' in many ways and how that it's members don't belong in Britain. Therefore this joke *again* fails as a joke and more formally resembles a piece of rhetoric. The fact that people may find it funny can only be established through subjective analysis of a given individual consumer and even then most likely can only be explained using philosophical ideals such as superiority and relief theories rather than something clearly created in the language.

In a similar vein to *Example (9)*, *Example (13)* provides an unambiguous comparison between the white and black 'races'. This makes for a relatively simple analytical evaluation of how the joke discursively creates a sense of social inclusion for superior whites, and excludes the perceived inferior black 'race' through the humorous expression of ridicule. Once again also mirroring *Example (10)*, the distinction between the white and black 'races' has been presented to the audience as distinctions between white and black 'man'.

On one side of the joke we have the white 'race', represented by the term "a white man", and on the other we have the black, represented by "a black man". As the white 'race' is so explicitly identified ("a white man") and represented as superior to the black, this joke once again is undoubtedly written from an approach of white normativity and superiority.

Unlike *Example (9)* where there was a somewhat ambivalent interpretation of whether the term 'man' was used to either represent the male gender of the human species, or indeed the entire species of *mankind*, this joke is more clear in its exclusion of women.

The joke refers to not the distinction between white and black 'man', it explores the differences between 'a white man' and 'a black man' in the singular usage. From this use of language that refers to a given individual black or white male rather than in the collective sense, women have been deliberately omitted from the groups represented in the joke.

This raises an interesting question in regard to the impact of what appears to be an overall trend of social exclusion of women in the anti-black comic racism of *Sickipedia.org*. How can *not* ridiculing a social group that are often marginalised in various ways throughout society be seen as social exclusion? Surely this is a positive finding - a commonly socially excluded group omitted from further marginalisation through the exclusory discursive processes identified on *Sickipedia.org*. To adopt such a perspective though would be short-sighted and taking the content of *Sickipedia.org* out of its multifaceted ridiculing context.

I have already provided examples where the comic racism of the website has intersected with comic sexism, discursively subordinating women in as odious a manner, if not worse than non-white 'races'. Furthermore across the other various categories and subcategories independent from the comic racism, highly sexist jokes exist in just as high frequency as racist. This leads to the conclusion that when women are overtly omitted from the overarching trends of the comic racist rhetoric of *Sickipedia.org*, such as how they are in *Example (13)*, they are not being consciously emancipated by the material's producers - women's best interests and progressive feminist thinking is not at the heart of this choice.

Women are excluded from a great deal of the comic racist material, particularly the content which aims to deal with broad racialised generalisations of entire 'races' of people, because the producers simply do not deem it necessary to include them. They are not directly Othered, they are forgotten, disregarded, overlooked. Unless there is a specific reason to ridicule women, the idea that within 'races' there are further cultural and social categories such as gender that need to be taken into account, is completely disregarded. This fact would disrupt the homogeneity of much of the comic logic - it would ruin the purity and the simplicity of the joke's ideological core.

There are many examples on the website where there clearly is discursive processes of intersectionality, intertwining various forms of social exclusion such as gender, class and sexuality. The point being asserted is that particularly with gender, there are examples where women are being excluded without formally being ridiculed in the humour. Their missing presence in jokes that could account for gender differences, highlights further forms of gender-based social exclusion. Women are not included in a large amount of the broad comic racism of the website, because they are simply not regarded significant enough to dedicate the effort to ridicule them. This creates a

debate as to whether this is either a unintentional blessing, or further examples of the wider discursive subordination and marginalisation of women in a communicative context.

Much like *Example (9)*, a supposed mutually exclusive comparison between the white and black 'races' is presented by the producer. This is in the form of two identical questions except for exchanging the 'race' being discussed in each - "What do you call a white man that enters a black man's territory?" and "What do you call a black man that enters a white man's territory?" The answer provided for the first question by the producer is "Conqueror". This is a particularly intriguing answer as the idea of a conqueror, or the process of conquering is not something that all people, regardless of ethnicity, gender or class, will necessarily consider a positive attribute of a superior 'race'.

Additionally this is an interesting answer because, as the concluding word of the opening line to the joke, this answer tells the audience something that the producer is wishing to assert directly about white people as opposed to denigrating black. There are meanings and representations of white superiority, and perhaps more importantly white supremacy, that are intended to be interpreted without having to read the punch-line - the discursive ascension of the white 'race' is expressed without the explicit ridicule of non-white 'races', although it can be suggested that inferiorising Others is subtly implied through more in depth interpretation.

The idea of "a white man" - an actor whose characteristics are discursively intended to be applied to the entire white 'race' - as a conqueror has ties to ideas of empire, imperialism and colonial expansion. As *Sickipedia.org* is a British website, one can assume (as this researcher will in this analysis) that this notion of a white conqueror can be discussed in the British context. The meanings the audience is intended to understand concerning this linguistic imagery, is a White, British conqueror with discursive ties to the notions of the British empire and its colonial and territorial expansions throughout history.

The idea of a conqueror or conquering, implies defeating an enemy by force and as a result taking control of the land they occupied. It positions the conquering group as dominant and powerful. It identifies them as superior to the group that was conquered, physically, intellectually, politically and perhaps socially and culturally. In this joke's case, it specifically refers to a white man in "a black man's territory", therefore without explicitly reproducing any racialised, stereotypical traits about black people, the black 'race' is subtly represented as inferior. They are the conquered and thus physically, intellectually, politically, culturally and biologically subordinate.

These ideas surrounding white supremacy across global territories, influenced ideas surrounding imperialism and colonialism, and are therefore being reproduced here in a contemporary humorous context. The joke does not explicitly label the "white man" as British so one could instead relate the ideas of conquering to Western imperialism and colonialism in general, and any given dominant empire associated with these processes. This perhaps makes this joke more applicable to a wider audience across various national boundaries, as despite *Sickipedia.org* being a British website in

its origins, it exists as a communicative platform which is not restricted by such margins. Overall the discursive meanings remain very similar regardless of the nation-dependant audience. What is important though is that the aimed socially included groups of this audience are of a Western, white heritage.

The second half of the joke, or the punch-line, is more representative of the general racist rhetoric I have presented in this analysis. It conversely asks "What do you call a black man that enters a white man's territory?" and answers the question with "It depends: Immigrant, thief, slave, rapist, trespasser, but most of the time, nigger". This is where the joke abandons any subtle implications of black inferiority and overtly reproduces several racialised ideas about the black 'race'.

What is of particular interest in this punch-line is how self-aware the producer appears to be. By self aware I am referring to the ways in which the producer understands the complexities of Western racialised values of black people. The joke has already created the distinction between blacks and whites in the opening line, highlighting white colonial expansion loosely based on historical facts, and implied positive effects it had on national pride and identity. However, when the producer describes black people's presence in "a white man's territory" ie. Western parts of the world (Europe/North America), the joke's author chooses not to base the answer on any one characteristic, according to a historical truth. The joke essentially lists various ways black people have been racially represented in the Western world - the producer is aware of the diverse range of stereotypes Western discourses have attributed to the black 'race' over time. The producer is saying that there is no one answer to what a black man outside of Africa, the Caribbean or South America for example can be labelled - there are so many negative intertwined biological and cultural traits that the audience are spoiled for choice.

The first answer the producer provides is the image of the immigrant. This can be considered somewhat mutually exclusive to the answer provided to the first question. On one side, if a white individual leaves his/her country, they are presented as strong conquerors looking to civilise primitive cultures, expand their nation's values, strengthen their empire and gain economic benefits for the *metropole*. In contrast, if a black man leaves their country, he becomes an immigrant.

Taken out of this particular context there is no reason to assert that being an immigrant need be an inherently negative description. Millions of people migrate every year across the world for a variety of different reasons. This presentation of 'the immigrant' completely reduces the complexities of the politics and processes of global migration. It ignores the common knowledge that millions of white people migrate to traditionally non-white territories every year for a plethora of subjective reasons, none of which are to conquer. When placed alongside the other racialised representations of black inferiority, the notion of the immigrant becomes synonymously negative. It implies that if any black individual or group, and I would argue any non-white group for that matter, immigrates to a 'white' territory they are doing so because their own racialised culture is inferior - black people immigrate because the white world is superior and they wish to better themselves. This is a simplistic, generalised idea which maintains the purity of the comic racism.

Furthermore the idea of immigration is positioned in conceptual alignment with the notion of trespassing. Trespassing from a more semantic approach *does* inherently connote negative meanings. Trespassing implies committing an offence against another, or setting foot on another's property. It also constitutes a formal breach of the law in the United Kingdom as it does in most countries in the contemporary world. Interlinking ideas of immigration and trespassing linguistically leads the audience to only one logical conclusion - that the immigrant is illegally stepping foot on land which they are unentitled to and more importantly not wanted on by its 'owners'.

In positioning the 'immigrant' alongside the other racialised character traits it solidifies the idea that an immigrant is an inherently negative label of identification. In this context, the notion of the immigrant, discursively draws all of the historical animosity and turmoil that has arisen out of black (and various other migrant groups) immigration to Britain - notions of taking resources out of the system without contributing, cultural inferiority, and threats to racial purity. Together these are enough reasons to frustrate the producer, and therefore justify the idea that immigrants can be legitimately hated and ridiculed - hence the comic bigotry present in the joke. This notion is difficult to firmly establish by addressing one joke in isolation, but when placed into the context of other jokes that reproduce the process of Othering, the argument is made more convincing:

'More than 600,000 migrants in UK are not working' I'm guessing black people were omitted from this calculation <sup>99</sup>

The BBC website is reporting that 30 Chimpanzees escaped from their enclosure today at Chester Zoo. My immediate thoughts were - They won't catch them now - they'll have their asylum applications in and a flat from the council sorted already. <sup>100</sup>

JLS new song lyrics: "London to Jamaica, L.A. to Africa". Yeah, back to where you came from niggers! <sup>101</sup>

Met a black girl at a club the other night and asked her for a dance. At closing time she asked me if I wanted to take her home. I told her to fuck off i'm not driving to Africa at this time of night. <sup>102</sup>

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99 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black November 2013]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/more-than-600-000-migrants-in-uk-are-not-working-1519445>]

100 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to In The News > Headlines July 2009]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/in-the-news/headlines/the-bbc-website-is-reporting-that-30-chimpanzees-escaped-from-154708>]

101 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black July 2011]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/jls-new-song-lyrics-london-to-jamaica-l-a-to-1027319>]

102 [Retrieved 04/04/14 Uploaded Racism > African April 2008]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/african/met-a-black-girl-at-a-club-the-other-night-22058>]

"A Nursery Rhyme for black children; Nig-Nog Golliwog Please dont steal my phone. Why dont you all fuck off home?"<sup>103</sup>

I was on holiday in France when a black man came up to me and asked, "Excuse me please, do you know where the nearest immigrant settlement is?" "Yes mate. That would be England." I replied.<sup>104</sup>

The other ways the producer stresses the audience should identify black people in white people's territory is in terms of their perceived negative racialised characteristics. These are either as a criminal, as sexually violent or deviant and as a slave. By this point I have analysed these ideas in enough detail. This joke does not use these ideas in any other way than simply further reproducing discursive processes of Othering, specifically creating the social exclusion of the black 'race' according to stereotypical intertwined biological and cultural traits that are perceived as causing their inferiority.

The final word of the joke and the actual punch-line, is asserting that the most correct way of identifying black people in white territories is as 'niggers'. I argue this acts as the true punch-line because as I have stated, this joke is more representative of rhetoric than humour. Therefore this powerful rhetorical statement based at the end of the 'joke' must be seen as its comic climax, even though it is difficult to establish, linguistically, how it creates a humorous response.

Again this usage of the term 'nigger' highlights the self awareness of anti-black Othering in the comic racism of *Sickipedia.org* from the perspective of white normativity. The word 'nigger' is a term which originated from white people, that efficiently signified black people's racial inferiority and existence as a primitive, dehumanised being. This proclamation in the joke highlights that *in a white man's territory* black people are 'niggers'. The implication being that where black people belong (literally within the national boundaries of a nation whose citizen's are of black ethnicity), black people cease to be 'niggers'. A 'race' can be as biologically and culturally inferior as it wishes to be, as long as it remains in its own environment - its own territory, unburdening to the Western world. When black people enter a territory ruled by a dominant group such as the white 'race' - perceived to be against the white 'race's' will - and tarnish its cultural superiority with their menial behaviour, a comparison is justified and the discriminatory, or prejudiced processes that follow are legitimised. The joke discursively asserts that when black people are integrated with white, black people become 'niggers'.

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103 [Retrieved 07/03/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black August 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/a-nursery-rhyme-for-black-children-nig-nog-golliwog-please-578408>]

104 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to Racism > Immigrant April 2013]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/immigrant/i-was-on-holiday-in-france-when-a-black-man-1458745>]

Furthermore this once again stresses that despite all of the other specific negative cultural traits of black people inherent to their biological nature that are perceived by the white joke producers, the notion of the 'nigger' is the most pure form of both racial inferiority from the perspective of blacks, and racial hatred from the perspective of white - perhaps in equal measure. In this joke, the assertion of "but most of the time, nigger" claims that regardless of black people's supposed cultural inadequacy, their existence as 'niggers' fixes the black 'race' as permanently racially inferior. A black person does not have to be a thief, a rapist or an immigrant. He or she is a 'nigger' and therefore every negative cultural trait stereotypically assigned to them is part of their biological framework, eternally preventing the black 'race' from civility.

## Sickipedia Critical Discourse Analysis #14

*Why are Christmas lights and Black People similar? They both look better in chains, half of them don't work, and they look better hanging from a tree.*<sup>105</sup>

*Example (14)* is the final example that will be analysed in this chapter. In this researcher's opinion it acts as the most successful of all the examples as working as both a joke from an aesthetic and linguistic perspective, and as an explicit form of racist rhetoric in equal measure. The racist rhetoric is based on the racial hatred of and the fantastical imagining of perpetrating violence on the black 'race'. Simultaneously it attempts to reproduce racialised representations of black people as naturally idle ("half of them don't work") and better suited to the life as slaves ("they look better in chains").

Like many of the previous examples white superiority is not explicitly referred to, but the manner in which anti-black stereotypicality is reproduced, and how the black 'race' is generally treated and referred to, clearly fits within the doctrine of white supremacy and that of jokes which are written from a white approach. The ideas surrounding the transatlantic slave trade and lynchings alluded to, are historical phenomena which subordinated, marginalised and physically victimised members of the black 'race' by predominantly white perpetrators. Moreover, these acts were justified by a discursive reproduction of notions of black racial inferiority. This joke acts as rhetorical reassertion of white hatred and physical harm towards black victims while simultaneously maintaining their perceived combined cultural and biological inferiority through racialised representations.

As stated, this is one of the most clearly defined and explicit pieces of racist rhetoric that has been examined in Part Two of the thesis - it coherently identifies the black 'race' as an inferior Other. From the perspective of racist rhetoric, the joke producer's clear racial hatred insinuates that the black 'race's' extermination is both appropriate and necessary, but also from a linguistic perspective, this example operates in accordance to quite a successful humorous joke structure.

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105 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black December 2013]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/why-are-christmas-lights-and-black-people-similar-they-both-1534536>]

Within a one-liner structure, the audience is presented with a riddle-based metaphor - an appropriate comparison between two different components which otherwise would seem incongruous. The humour derives from the cleverness of the comparison, and despite its highly offensive, racist undertones, the abhorrent messages it represents and racialised stereotypes it reproduces, one cannot deny that the joke does contain a degree of intellect and wit, albeit within the context of comic racism.

The joke relies on various aspects of the highly controversial anti-black comic racist discursive lexicon to draw an appropriate connection between black people and Christmas lights. To be clear, by stating *Example (14)* works as a joke linguistically, or creates an appropriate connection, does not mean that it is funny to this researcher or the vast majority of people who would read or hear it. The joke's logic is in no way based on 'truthful' accounts of black racial heritage or culture, however, within the context of anti-black racialised discourses, the joke does work linguistically, as there is an appropriate discursive relationship between Christmas lights and black people. In reality, Christmas lights are most commonly connected together in chains, most commonly hung from a Christmas tree, and are notoriously temperamental in terms of their workability. Throughout the thesis, it has been firmly established that in creating comic racist discourses, reproducing racialised stereotypes is not just prohibited but *essential*. Furthermore, it is additionally deemed acceptable by the producers to discuss lynching's and the horrendous treatment of slaves with little sense of remorse. Thus the example has an appropriate relationship between two seemingly unrelated subject matters, Christmas lights and the black 'race', and in this way the language legitimately constitutes a joke.

Racist discourses claim that black people's enslavement is their most appropriate social role as they are inferior, child-like sub-humans which require constant direction from a superior (white) master. They too stress that black people are lazy and do not have the motivation or ability to work hard throughout their lives. Finally, in some of the most severe racialised discourses, predominantly from more politically-motivated extremist groups, but still informed from traditional ideas of black primitive inferiority, it is argued that the genocide of the entire black 'race' would be the best course of action for a harmonious, fully functioning society.

*Example (14)* provides a contemporary manifestation of the kind of examples Michael Billig referred to in his work on comic racist violence (2001, 2005b), discussed in Chapter Two. The following examples act as further illustrations of fantastical racist violence:

*what does a nigger and a tyre have in common? they both are fun to hang from a tree*<sup>106</sup>

*Whats the difference between niggers and matches? niggers are already black before i burn them!*<sup>107</sup>

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106 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black July 2010]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/what-does-a-nigger-and-a-tyre-have-in-common-544831>]

In this sense, this is very much an example of comic racism, but more than that it is relatively smart comic racism. The wit of the joke that aims to create a humorous response in no way vindicates it of the discursive processes of Othering and social exclusion that are created with its dissemination. On the contrary it makes those aspects far more ambivalent for the audience and ultimately effective as a piece of racist rhetoric. It is this type of joke that creates enough doubt within the discursive space regarding comic racism's intentions and implications. This notion of doubt and ambivalence will be discussed with reference to the entirety of the critical discourse analyses in the following conclusion.

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107 [Retrieved 03/04/14 Uploaded to Racism > Black May 2011]

[<http://www.sickipedia.org/racism/black/whats-the-difference-between-niggers-and-matches-niggers-are-already-969102>]

# Chapter 7:

## Conclusion

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### The ambivalence towards comic racism & its subsistence in public discourse

Throughout the analysis chapters, many of the joke examples formed a trend that contradicts the overarching counter-arguments to *critical humour studies* from outside, and sometimes within, academia, as established in Chapter One. These being that jokes are 'just jokes' and anything said in jest, regardless of its discursive meanings, cannot be treated seriously. There are no tangible social implications of such language's communication and dissemination, because humour is trivial. Regardless of the critical arguments made throughout this thesis and the collective work from other researchers who have contributed to *critical humour studies*, ridicule-based humour aimed at pre-existing socially excluded Others, communicated in the cultural public sphere, is unquestionably met by audiences with an element of ambivalence. The very fact that there is debate confirms this.

Comic racist discourses are incredibly complex and duplicitous. As illustrated, *without* in depth critical discourse analysis, it is very difficult to establish exactly the ways in which the formation of linguistic structures, and their various semantic and discursive values, combine together in a complex agglomeration to reproduce meanings that if disseminated publicly in non-comic racist discourse, would undoubtedly be universally condemned.

There are numerous recent examples of public outrage concerning public expressions of racism which support this. Counter-protests and numerous public accusations of racism aimed at the English Defence League constitute just one example. Similar accusations have been made about the UK Independence Party. Recently, white, BBC Berkshire Radio DJ Mike Read was filmed singing at the 2014 UKIP Conference, and subsequently released his song *UKIP Calypso*, in which he sang provocative lyrics concerning migration and illegal immigrants in a caricatured Caribbean accent - "the leader's committed a cardinal sin, open the borders let them all come in". This was immediately met with public outrage with accusations of racism which subsequently led to Read requesting the song be removed from general sale despite initially claiming it was "satirical" and "a bit of fun" ([www.theguardian.com/media/2014](http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014)). Other recent examples of outrage in the context of publicly expressed racist attitudes include Cardiff City FC manager Malkay Mckay, after accusations of sending racist text messages during the half time interval of a match ([www.theguardian.com/football/2014/](http://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/)). In the popular cultural context, the infamous controversy in the 2007 British Celebrity Big Brother where celebrity Jade Goody was accused of racism by Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty which resulted in widespread coverage of public indignation.

Typically in Britain, public expressions of racism are universally maligned, so much so that several counter-arguments from both white and non-white spokespeople often refer to a cultural state of over-sensitivity regarding 'race'. Arguably this sensitivity led by the 'PC Brigade' has created a cultural environment which has facilitated *Sickipedia.org's* genesis as a form of a backlash, not dissimilar to the comedic revolutions in British popular culture outlined in Chapter Two. The questions are therefore raised concerning why *Sickipedia.org* continues to function and expand on such a public scale, and what is it about humour which creates a sense of critical ambivalence?

The critical discourse analyses of the second part of the thesis, ultimately outline that within the context of anti-black comic racism (just one racial target of many in both contemporary and historical comic racism), *Sickipedia.org's* content is discursively positioned as a contemporary reproduction of historically-situated stereotypes and representations that inferiorise blacks, in addition to the assertion of white superiority and dominance. Racialised ideas of the primitive black Other, who is an ugly, unintelligent, violent, sexually deviant, criminal are not new. The discursive dehumanisation and degradation of the black 'race' through simianisation, immigrant bigotry, and fantasies of re-living, or exerting, racially-motivated violence is not new either. These are explicit racist motifs, that are criticised widely due to their moral and ethical abhorrence when expressed either physically or discursively throughout history. This is however, not quite the case with jokes.

If a racist joke is well constructed, it can ultimately become too difficult for social actors, commentators, regulators within the realm of the audience to firmly identify (especially given the communicative features specific to the networked public sphere) several important aspects of the communicative process. Who is telling the jokes? Who are reading the jokes? Is anyone intended to be offended? Is anyone directly taking offense? Most importantly does anyone believe in the ideas raised in the joke?

Throughout the thesis I have argued that these questions are not necessarily the most important raised by discussing these texts as *public discourses*. But, it is these factors that create a general sense of ambiguity amongst audiences in terms of how they are supposed to *feel* when consuming such material. I argue that this is why this kind of content continues to be circulated unchallenged. When the racism is explicit, *and* the joke fails to create any form of humorous reaction, audience outrage is far more visceral - an audience *knows* that the material has crossed a social boundary and requires a critical response.

Importantly, this research has established that a sense of ambivalence as to a joke's exact meanings should be somewhat alleviated, due to the majority of *Sickipedia.org's* jokes' linguistic structures *not* combining in such a way that one can firmly conclude audiences *are* consuming *jokes*. Consumers may find the content to be funny, and this is attributed to the subjectivity of humorous perception, but a humorous response from a perceiver does not inherently ascertain that the initial stimuli was a *joke*. The nature of joking is essential for (wrongly) justifying comic racism, for stretching public discursive boundaries. If not, one is admitting that it is the racism itself that is funny, and any legitimisation is void.

If we recognize that racism, sexism, homophobia and various other socially-situated prejudices are publicly accepted with a degree of ambivalence when communicated in jokes, it is understandable that the content of *Sickipedia.org* has met little critical response. However, the points I have raised provide a damning revelation that *Sickipedia.org*, for the most part does not disseminate *jokes* as linguistic structures. Within the context of anti-black racism, it disseminates sophisticated, socially, politically and historically aware, linguistic hatred, publicly. Even the examples that can be loosely defined as semi-successful joke structures, still function through upholding the wider context and values of racialised discourses. They prioritise racism over humour - it is not 'race' humour, it is *racist* humour.

From an aesthetic approach the majority of the jokes reviewed in the analysis chapters were examples of anti-black racist rhetoric, based on the reproduction of a number of historically reinforced racialised stereotypes and representations, disguised ever so loosely as jokes, or presented alongside examples constructed more effectively in terms of a joke structure.

What is interesting about *Example (14)* in Chapter Six for example, is that it provides an illustration of how all of the jokes of *Sickipedia.org* *should* operate in order to continue the status quo of audience ambivalence (not that any jokes *should* be circulated at all). *Example (14)* is an aesthetic archetype of why comic racism is met with lenience in some contexts, and exemplary of how effective well-formed humour can be in reproducing racialised ideas whilst avoiding wider critique. Not effective in terms of reproducing processes of Othering in comparison to the other examples - all of the examples did this emphatically - but effective in terms of raising enough social doubt, so that other examples can thrive.

I have argued that the comic racism of *Sickipedia.org* subsists for two main reasons. The first of these is that, from the perspective of communicative platforms in the British cultural public sphere, *Sickipedia.org's* discursive space is likely distanced just far enough from the popular cultural mainstream that it does not infringe the regulations of the 'PC Brigade'. The second accounts for the users within the comic community. The existence of examples like *(14)*, creates enough ambivalence for the rest of the far more poorly constructed, cruder material to be disseminated uncontested, but ultimately beneath the presentation, like the others, it is still embodies an attempt to reproduce the same hateful ideologies. This ambivalence is a product of *audience* interpretation. The examples, no matter how successful linguistically they are as jokes, are equally as effective in reproducing the discursive aspects of racialised stereotyping, racial hatred and racist rhetoric.

If an example like *(14)* works effectively as a joke, the rhetoric can operate in a twofold manner. Firstly, it can aim to persuade the reader to believe in the 'truths' of racist ideology. Secondly, it encourages the reader to consider leniency towards that prejudice because it was presented facetiously. As a result of a *successful* combination of rhetoric and humour, audiences, fixating their critique on ambiguous, subjective notions of offensiveness and personal wounds, are far more likely to come to the conclusion that the joke's messages are minimally harmful in terms of wider negative social implications. If comedy and offense are inherently subjective, and negative social

implications are not overt, faint suggestions can be raised that there may be a time and place for comic racism.

When met with a cruder joke, the critical outcry becomes more severe as the second form of rhetoric fails to persuade the audience that it *shouldn't* be taken seriously. This can be illustrated by the *UKIP Calypso* song. Mike Read, a white man, at a controversial political party's conference - a 'serious' political context, as opposed to humorous - publicly singing bigoted lyrics in a Caribbean accent, failed to deliver on the humour. Furthermore, being closer to the mainstream of popular entertainment in Britain, this event was more visible to critics.

While still disseminating its material to millions, *Sickipedia.org* does so relatively quietly from its Internet haven. Moreover, within the comic community, an accepted humorous space by its members, linguistic joke failures can be overlooked due to the success of others. As it requires such an in-depth level of attention to reveal the whether a racist joke can be seen as a successful linguistic, humorous structure or not, it seems practical on behalf of audiences to interpret the *entire* body of material with a degree of ambivalence.

*Sickipedia.org* undoubtedly demonstrates that there are producers and consumers that do not consider this kind of content to be damaging or problematic, even if they have no wider political or racist agenda. *Sickipedia.org*'s discursive ethos prioritises the rights of the offender, over the rights of the offended. This research however, is not solely concerned with people taking offense from jokes or not. Whether non-white individuals are *offended* by this material is not the main issue of discussion here. Additionally, if a non-white individual takes no offense from a joke, the phenomenon of publicly communicated comic racism is not relieved of its problematic social implications. Both of these issues are components of a wider, more complex phenomenon, that requires further research if we are to comprehensively fathom it, particularly with audiences and producers of comic racist content. The point is, that regardless of who is being offended, for what reason an individual either produces or consumes this type of discourse, or whether a comic racist joke can be considered ambiguous or not, the hard facts are that within this material, the age-old messages, ideologies and values of traditionally racist, non-comic discourses *are* being reproduced, aimed unanimously at the likely social targets. This is an indisputable finding from the research.

As illustrated by the anti-black content of the website, and its reproduction of racialised motifs, *Sickipedia.org* can be understood as providing a space in which the marginalised groups of society can be discursively Othered and degraded through the ridicule-based humour of an interactive comic community. Within the discursive space, the ideological politics of racial hierarchy can be reproduced by producers, or appreciated by audiences who believe in them.

Obvious counter-arguments would centre on the supposed inherent nature of 'sick' humour. 'Sick' humour by definition is *supposed* to be based on ridicule. The site is *supposed* to provide a free space in which the shackles of political correctness can be abandoned. *All* individuals and groups

of society can be targeted, no target is off-limits, no subject is too taboo, and all processes of social exclusion are limited to the boundaries of the virtual space - they hold no resonance in reality. This argument dramatically falls under scrutiny when one considers the targets this comic community has selected to ridicule predominantly - non-white 'races', non-white ethnicities, women, the working class, homosexuals, the disabled and Islam.

There are 500 jokes dedicated to 'Whites' (many of whose targets are still non-white 'races'), in comparison to the 50,000 anti-black, which as stated is estimated to be much higher due to the diffusion of anti-black jokes across 'non-racist' subcategories. There are 33,000 anti-Asian jokes with 22,000 more specifically aimed at South-Asian ethnicities and nationalities (the largest Asian ethnicities in Britain). There are 4,000 anti-Muslim jokes in the *Racism* Category alongside another 8,500 in the *Religion*. There are 12,000 'Gay' and 2,000 'Lesbian' jokes. There is no subcategory for heterosexuals. The entirety of the *Sex and Shit* category is saturated with discursive social exclusion of women in addition to 4,750 sexist jokes in the *Racism* category (sickipedia.org).

Individual offense taken, or offense intended to be given, is circumstantial and subjective. The ambivalence towards ridicule-based joking, most specifically in comic racism, is misjudged. Even if a joke is successful and it creates ambivalence, that ambivalence exists in the realm of the *audience* - the realm of human interpretation and judgement. The ambivalence does not exist *in the discourse* itself. The sense of ambiguity as to a joke's intentions is a result of the perception and interpretation of humour. A joke's effectiveness as a linguistic structure does not make the racism any less defined or explicit. The ideological meanings are the same whether one argues that the joke works or not linguistically.

In the case of *Example (14)*, a successful linguistic joke structure, the racist rhetoric is arguably far more severe and explicit than in *Example (13)*, which indubitably fails. This is what audiences need to be aware of, that racialised stereotypes are being reproduced, and racial hatred and racist rhetoric are being reasserted and circulated, publicly, on a wide scale within the communicative sphere of the discourse. It is presented slightly differently aesthetically, but the representational meanings are identical to non-comic discourses that, if disseminated in the same manner publicly, one would imagine it would not be endorsed by *Apple, Android, Google, Facebook* and *Twitter*. The fact that a racist joke may be well constructed linguistically as a piece of humour does not revoke the fact that the messages being reproduced are representative of wider racist ideologies, and the groups who are being targeted are representative of wider institutional inequalities and structural subordination in contemporary society, and historically.

## The cultural public sphere & critical humour studies

To conclude the thesis, I must again reiterate the advantages a public sphere model provides *critical humour studies* in its analysis of ridicule-based humour and comedy. As stated, private and public expressions of humour are very different, and operate in accordance with a different set of practices and processes, both in terms of producers and audiences, and the ethics and aesthetics

of humour. It is fundamentally very difficult to approach any form of critical discussion of humour conducted in the private realm, as the discursive elements of a text become meshed with interpersonal and subjective notions of taste, offense and intention.

An anti-black racist joke told in private does not necessarily embody the ideological, discursive messages and representations outlined in this thesis, or fit into a doctrine based on white normative superiority. Each time a joke is told in private, it is dependent on the very particular and subjective, small scale context in which it was told. This makes it very difficult for a scholar to approach an ethical set of guidelines for all forms of humour.

When articulated in the cultural public sphere, as illustrated by this thesis' examples of comic racism in British popular culture, one must fixate on the discourse itself and the *potential* messages it can convey. We do not know exactly who the producer or the audience is, or why they produced the content. Therefore, we must aim our critique at the historically-situated, social, cultural and political ideas being expressed on a textual level, allowing for a more rigid ethical perspective.

In combining aspects of *critical humour studies* with a fluid model of the public sphere that accounts for discourses communicated through cultural and popular cultural platforms, scholars can identify more clearly, what aspects of public humour are worthy of study and critique, while simultaneously positioning humour and joking within a conceptual framework which accounts for how it is shaped by communicative processes. I claim that humour is used as a communicative device used to articulate thoughts, concepts, and ideologies that are often discussed in non-comic, 'serious' public discourses. As a consequence of their jest, they are often ignored or trivialised. This model as adopted in the thesis overtly proclaims that forms of both emancipatory and marginalising ridicule-based humour are, most definitely, a legitimate form of discourse for sociological study. The approach takes Lockyer and Pickering's (2008) perspective concerning who is being targeted or ridiculed in humour, and adds the notion of what communicative context that group is ridiculed in, concluding that when conceptualising humour as a legitimate form of language for discussing serious subjects in the public sphere, its triviality must be overwhelmingly placed into question.

Moreover, this approach opens up possibilities for future research in regard to many areas. The issues concerning producer intentions and audience ambivalence needs to be addressed with future qualitative research to outline more comprehensively why comic racism has subsisted over the past fifty years in British popular culture and more importantly, how it can be regulated. More focus must be given to other forms, and the intersectionality of social exclusion articulated in humour that I was only able to touch upon in the critical discourse analysis. Racism is but one form of Othering based on negative representations and stereotyping present in the vast discursive space of the cultural public sphere. Gender, class and sexuality-based marginalisation are rife on platforms such as *Sickipedia.org* and other similar new media. Further research must be welcomed concerning the issues of these platforms as sites of counter or mainstream discourse.

*Sickipedia.org* may well sit firmly on the peripherals of the British popular cultural mainstream from

a communicative perspective, but I would argue that its messages reinforce the ideologies of the dominant, attempting discursively to subordinate the marginalised groups of society.

This forces us to question dominant ideologies and who *Sickipedia.org*, on behalf of wider comic racism, speaks for. The very premise of the racist joke, and a public-based comic community solely dedicated to its mass dissemination, is hugely detrimental to processes of cultural diversity, racial harmony in Britain and the efforts to regulate hate speech from the British government (eg. Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006). *Sickipedia.org* falsely envisions and champions a discursive manifesto based on anti-political correctness and freedom of expression. However, it promotes a distorted version of the central values of democratic communication, creating a binary distinction between freedom of speech on one side and political correctness on the other. These concepts need not be in conflict with one another - there should not be a dichotomous relationship between the two. Freedom of speech should provide voices to both the dominant *and* the marginalised, and political correctness is not the enemy of conservatism. Political correctness aims to solidify social inclusion to all, on a discursive level, while inclusion comes to fruition in society on a self-sustaining, structural level. The freedom of expression present on *Sickipedia.org* can only be regarded as promoting exclusion against the subordinated, and favouring dominant groups.

This thesis is not an explicit call for sanctions and restrictions to freedom of speech, but it is an attempt to draw attention to the notion that racism expressed through humour, with its inherent ambivalence surrounding intentionality and audience interpretation, creates a complex situation in which racial hatred, articulated through language cannot be effectively regulated. This has been illustrated by the numerous public controversies outlined at the start of this chapter, in which individuals have been accused of promoting racist views, yet not faced any legal action due to suggested jest in which they were expressed. Therefore further discussion is needed from scholars and practitioners alike, to establish a more clear framework for an ethics of humour in the cultural public sphere, and outline what is and what is not acceptable to say publicly.

*Sickipedia.org* is not a site that requires critical attention from scholars because it can potentially cause offense to individuals. Offense and social exclusion are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The site, and wider comic racism in the cultural public sphere require critical attention because they provide a reflection of, and a worrying insight into, the marginalisation of certain groups in contemporary Britain. It illustrates that through the means of new digitalised communicative technologies situated in the cultural public sphere, producers and audiences have collectively identified a contemporary discursive site in British popular culture to form communities, and initiate processes of Othering and social exclusion that can be traced back hundreds of years - a new way to express *old* hatred. There, they can celebrate in its expression, find pleasure in its hatred, and all the while be completely free from critical intervention of moral censure.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A - SPSS Coding Scheme For Content Analysis

Sickpedia Content Analysis.sav [DataSet1] - IBM SPSS Statistics Data Editor

File Edit View Data Transform Analyze Direct Marketing Graphs Utilities Add-ons Window Help

	Name	Type	Width	Decimals	Label	Values	Missing	Columns	Align	Measure	Role
1	cat	Numeric	8	2	Category	{1.00, Celeb...	None	8	Right	Scale	Input
2	subcat	Numeric	8	2	Subcategory	{1.00, 50 Ce...	None	8	Right	Scale	Input
3	theint	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Intelligence	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
4	thesex	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Sex	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
5	thesexu	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Sexuality	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
6	thecla	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Class	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
7	thecrim	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Criminality	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
8	theviop	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Violence Perpert...	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
9	theviop	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Violence victims	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
10	thepol	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Politics	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
11	thespo	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Sport	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
12	thewar	Numeric	8	2	Theme - War	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
13	therel	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Religion	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
14	thephy	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Physicality	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
15	thegen	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Gender	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
16	theculs	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Cultural Stereoty...	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
17	thelang	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Language	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
18	thedehum	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Dehumanisation	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
19	theoth	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Other	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
20	theimf	Numeric	8	2	Theme - Immigration Fears	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
21	thews	Numeric	8	2	Theme - White Supremacy	{1.00, Yes}...	None	8	Right	Nominal	Input
22	adamo	Numeric	8	2	Advertised Amount of Jokes	None	None	8	Right	Scale	Input
23	acamo	Numeric	8	2	Actual Amount of Jokes	None	None	8	Right	Scale	Input
24											
25											

Data View Variable View

IBM SPSS Statistics Processor is ready

14:56  
15/05/2015