

Laughing at the Truth: Investigating Racial Comedy in  
Anti-Racist Teacher Education

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## **Background**

Historically, racial comedy (RC) was used as a form of White entertainment perpetuating racial stereotypes and validating oppressive behavior towards Black individuals (Bloomquist, 2015). Going back to the early days of North America's colonization, RC was used to exaggerate language and mannerisms of Black people in order to depict them unfit for White society. In contrast, some Black comedians reclaimed RC to stress racial inequalities and cope with brutalization. For example, Dick Gregory (1962) and Richard Pryor (1976) used their personal experiences to expose racial injustices in American society. This racial truth-telling (Rossing, 2014) is crucial in breaking down the discrepancies in race culture. Rossing (2014) describes a concept called *critical race humor* in which we use comedic outlets to uncover racism and racial tendencies in a way that challenge our current ideologies. Critical race humor can provoke change in the way we talk about race. It encourages people to reflect on biases and actions so that they can evolve in their racial understandings.

Humor has long been established as a useful teaching tool, especially in college education. It allows resonance encouraging students to retain material (Garner, 2006). While research on humor in college education remains consistent, there is limited research on use of RC, specifically. Our research centers on using RC as a tool in antiracist education. RC is already being used by students in and out of classrooms so it's imperative that educators develop a pedagogy around it. Our research examines the ways in which RC has embedded teaching moments, and interpretive tensions that emerged. RC has the potential to perpetuate racial stereotypes and has inherent tensions due to its historical roots. We want to find a way to overcome those tensions and get students to start critical conversations about race.

## **Methodology**

Assessing how students view race and RC is crucial to forming a pedagogy surround it. This strand of student-led research used purposeful snowball-sampled focus groups in order to examine qualitatively how college students respond to RC (e.g. Dave Chappelle, Amer Rahman). The focus groups included 20 undergraduate students from a medium-sized undergraduate institution in the rural northeast. The subjects self-identified as White (45%), Native American (11%), Black (25%), Chinese-American (5%), or Multiracial (10%), with three participants who did not disclose their race or ethnicity. Researchers guided discussions about the clips shown, looking at tendencies, and asked questions about multicultural education. We are most interested in reviewing how these students respond to RC media clips both verbally and non-verbally. We are interested in the dynamics between participants during the discussions that follow the clips. Ultimately we are interested in using student responses to inform development of a RC Pedagogy.

## **Results**

We began to study RC because students were sending their professors clips that they believed related to the discussions we were having in the classroom. Using comedy allows students to approach racial concepts in a medium that they have experience with, but also challenges their learned perspectives. By engaging in material students are viewing outside of the

classroom, teachers encourage constant awareness of these issues and how to talk about them. Rossing's (2014) concept of 'critical race humor' allows us to recognize the benefits of humor as a way to reflect on our own biases and promote analysis of the racial issues surrounding our experience.

### **Discussion**

Scholars in the fields of media, rhetoric, and communications have shown – and, as our research team has experienced firsthand – comedic media has the potential to spotlight the persistence of racism, and may urge public discourse toward understanding racial realities (Gilbert & Rossing, 2013; Rossing, 2014; Schulman, 1992). The bottom line is that RC media clips *are currently, regularly being used* in classrooms. Moreover, our students and our peers watch, share, and recommend RC to one another regularly; thus it is being watched outside of the classroom, and deemed relevant to scholarly and personal discussions of race, regardless of our efforts to study it. With this knowledge, we implore educators to construct methods for critically examining this practice with some urgency. There is very little research that attempts to break down the use of RC, discuss its strengths and tensions, and attempts to build a framework for its use in anti-racist education.

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