

# Ethnic jokes in america



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The summer before I came to Hamline, I would watch videos of comedians on Youtube to pass the time and entertain myself. However, there were only a few comedians I would watch. Admittedly, most of them were white, like me. I would sometimes look up Wanda Sykes or Margaret Cho, but mostly because I was attracted to the jokes they made about womanhood or other topics with which I were familiar. I found myself shying away from black male comedians like Chris Rock, because I wasn't entirely comfortable with the race-based humor. In retrospect, it is actually quite a shame, because many of the most influential and creative humorists throughout the 20th century are black males. I blame my previous aversion on my lack of understanding about ethnic humor and how it is used. I had the feeling as though race was a topic best left alone in humor, and sometimes felt like I was being unfairly attacked as a white person. Whatever my thought process, the channel would usually get changed or the Youtube tab would be closed before the punchline even came.

When I found out that we were going to be reading David Gillota's Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America I felt unprepared. Little did I know it would become one of my favorite books for the class and my most frequently referenced sources when analysing or writing papers. This book, in tandem with discussions, primary source analysis, and independent research, helped me to understand the importance of ethnic humor, the concept of whiteness, and the utilization of a white race in ethnic humor.

Several authors have spoke of humor's abillity to make people feel powerful. Sollors speaks of the boundary construction that occurs when jokes about others are made. Berger lists a couple theories about the " stupid group" and

the feeling of superiority that comes with jokes about a specific group or for a specific group. In America, one of the most racially diverse countries in the world, there is a lot of material for all races to draw on to create ethnic humor. Jokes that belittle women or ethnic minorities are considered “ racist” or “ sexist” jokes, but the tables are able to turn on the majority that once held a monopoly on the humor and used it as a socially accepted tool for repression. It is quite common for comedians who are black, Native American, Hispanic, or otherwise an ethnic minority to make jokes about white people, which, interestingly, usually generates laughter from white people as well as those who identify with the comedian’s race, even though it may come off as tasteless, aggressive, and unnecessary, as I had seen it before. The first thing I learned in class about ethnic humor is the idea of the aesthetic, or that comedians embody a certain character for their act that is different than themselves, a sort of stage persona for the audience to enjoy. For example, part of Chris Rock’s aesthetic is being loud and direct about issues within the black and white binary. When he talks about how it doesn’t matter what kind of white person you are and shouts “ You damn Romanian cracker,” he doesn’t actually want to cuss out anybody simply because they’re white. In fact, Chris Rock’s aesthetic seems to satirize the fear-enticing image of a black man, with relatively new-found rights, being angry and hateful towards white people who see themselves as innocent bystanders in a world where racial tension is like a wound that won’t heal. White audience members are able to laugh at this image instead of being disturbed by it because a play frame has been set up, as Berger had explained, and the image seems absurd and ridiculous to both white and minority spectators.

However, minorities get a little bit more out of Chris Rock's performances and other pieces of ethnic humor than whites do. On page 196 of the "Laughing It Up" article, Clyde Hall, a Native American, gives a great insight into the use of white people in Native American humor: "Anytime you laugh at something, it shatters it. Then it doesn't have any power over you." It is irrefutable that, in the American culture, white people are seen as generally dominant. Ethnic humor allows minorities, constantly disprivileged by the color of their skin, to feel some sort of power over the white race, with whom they more than likely have a painful history (black slavery, Native American exploitation, etc). Ethnic humor that utilizes white people as the humorous subject allows for minorities to feel a sense of empowerment.

Other than empowerment, ethnic humor also helps to promote visibility. This visibility occurs when ethnic minorities use their own culture within their humor. Not only is the humor an 'inside joke' for the group, but a communication tool for those outside of the group. The comedians in the American Indian Comedy Jam are a fine example, using their history of oppression and exploitation and current social issues, like alcoholism and poverty, as fuel for their jokes. The combination of the comedians' racial statuses and the dark nature of these subjects could possibly make it harder for these stories and messages to be listened to or absorbed by outside groups, namely the white group, if it were in a more serious context. The humorous approach, though, is entertaining and more appealing to white spectators, who may not even be aware that they are learning about someone else's life and culture while chuckling in their seats.

So far, this essay has discussed ethnic humor's importance for its ability to create a sense of empowerment and visibility for those who are using it. Even though the term 'ethnic' or 'racial' most likely makes one think of people of color, ethnic and racial humor can be accessed and enjoyed by white people as well. This is because the idea of ethnic humor acknowledges whiteness as a race instead of an absence of race. Instead of being some sort of intangible presence that can only be defended against, the white race is simply another group on the same level as all the other ethnic groups, and is just as much as a target as it is an assailant when it comes to making someone the butt of a joke (although the white majority's jokes about ethnic minorities is usually seen to be in poor taste). When I found out that South Park is a satire on white culture, I was blown away. I found a new appreciation for shows like the Simpsons and Family Guy after realizing this kind of comedy existed. I just didn't realize that there was something behind what I considered to be raunchy nonsense until I discovered that 'white' is a race with its own special culture and subcultures, not simply a lack thereof. Poking fun of the white culture has become more and more prevalent among white people as opposed to just ethnic minorities. There is a blog called Stuff White People Like with 100, 791, 157 hits and 2 published books and a satirical piece called "Our White Heritage" published in Andy Borowitz's book of compilations. Comedians such as Larry the Cable guy and Jeff Foxworthy have created a redneck aesthetic in order to entertain. Sarah Silverman, Tim Allen, and others have used their whiteness as much as their Jewish ethnicity as fuel for their comedic acts.

Personally, I felt as though coming to understand ethnic humor and the concept of whiteness as a race has helped me learn to be comfortable with ethnic humor and able to laugh at jokes even if they are about my own race. Contrary to what we may have feared, ethnic minorities do not generally hate white people. In fact, these comedians have seemed to make an effort to include us in their humor. David Gillota pointed out that Chris Rock was among the first to have a racially mixed audience, and it didn't become that way because he disliked white people. Rock and other black comedians simply want white people to be reminded that they are not above them, but on the same level, the same playing field. Because of this, though, we, too, are allowed to enjoy the game.