



Raúl Pérez. *The Souls of White Jokes: How Racist Humor Fuels White Supremacy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022.

Raúl Pérez's recent book, *The Souls of White Jokes: How Racist Humor Fuels White Supremacy* uncovers a sinister yet underexplored harm of racist humor: positive affect in the form of amused racial contempt. As Pérez notes, humor ethicists have taken a few different approaches to racist humor. Some (e.g., Christie Davies) have deemed its harms minimal by lumping it in with "ethnic" humor so that the grave harms of racist humor are characterized as a subtype of a more purportedly benign "ethnic" humor, while maintaining that it does not reflect the genuine commitments of its participants—it's "just a joke." Still other humor ethicists minimize the damage of racist humor, acknowledging its ability to harm but minimizing such harms by focusing on the "positive" aspects it offers its purveyors—kinship and union, solidarity, even if by racially oppressive means.

Pérez takes a unique tack. Rather than denying the positive attributes racist jokes offer to their primarily white or white-supremacist-sympathizing audiences, he notes that it is not hate or fear but the positive, racialized emotions of amusement, resulting in exclusionary communion, which act as the most pervasive form of harm: amused racial contempt. Precisely because of the powerfully positive outcomes these racist jokes offer their sympathetic audiences, they provide the most insidious form of harm. So, positive outcomes are not a sign that these racist jokes should stick around but greater evidence for why we need to do away with such humor. As Pérez notes, "racism is more than hatred. It is also a practice deeply rooted in a pleasurable solidarity grounded in an amused contempt for racialized others" (18). Unlike other theories of "ethnic humor" which render its role and use in society as benign with "no social consequences" (32), Pérez's work exposes the causal relation between racist humor and white supremacy in the U.S. Likewise, *The Souls of White Jokes* differs from accounts of the positive aspect of emotions and affect as ways of challenging "hegemonic racial meaning," as such studies downplay the negative effects of these jokes to produce racial and social harms (19). The perspective held by ethnic humorists also breeds a white epistemic ignorance that takes these jokes to be "just" jokes (40), as if the "censoring" of "ethnic jokes" is a crueller crime than the racial oppression and attitudes they foster by remaining in circulation.

We are given an account of the affective role of racist humor: racialized *emotions* and their relation to systemic racism. Humor, for the sake of this book, is capable of constructing and shaping racial boundaries, senses of belonging, and other social or affective implications (41). Building from Sara Ahmed's work on the "cultural politics of emotions" (24), Pérez's work centers the ability for racist humor to function as a social force in its production of feelings of alignment and alienation (24). Humor, Pérez shows, can function as both a pro-social *and* anti-social mechanism: we can laugh *with* some and *at* others (26), and in the case of racist humor in service to a racist ideology which promotes white supremacy, we laugh with some *by* laughing at others. "White humor," informed by a "white social frame" (30), effectively maintains structural and systemic racism. It does this by perpetuating a worldview where whites and whiteness are given positive attributes of superiority, virtuousness, and moral goodness, bolstered by a comparatively negative conception of non-whites as, by contrast, immoral and inferior (Ibid.).

Although racist jokes have negative *effects* on those they oppress, it is the positive *affect* they nurture in their sympathetic audiences, as amused racial contempt, that fuels this harm. Pérez's work "links the intersection of racial fun and amusement alongside the emotional, structural, and interactional dimensions of race and racism" (47). By applying this model to racist humor first in the entertainment industry and after to settings beyond it, Pérez discovers that racist humor works as a racialization mechanism (47–48), not merely by its effect on one's conception of others but on the emotions themselves, such that we arrive at amused racial contempt through *positive emotions* (i.e., amusement and solidarity built through unification against those excluded by racial ridicule). As Pérez keenly points out, though racist jokes, such as the infamously racist Tom Metzger cartoons in *White Aryan Resistance*, prey on racist anxieties, they do not do so by exploiting negative emotions of fear and anxiety, but by relieving this racial anxiety by a positive emotion, comic relief, and amusement in their white male audiences, through a particular kind of racial ridicule. So this racist humor acts as a means of soothing the anxieties, effectively operating on its white (especially, cishet male) audiences by triggering positive racialized emotional reactions. It is also action-guiding, pushing its audience to see how "this current racial state of affairs could be radically different if they were willing to take some sort of action" (65).

Racial humor's harms operate in crucially distinct ways depending on whose ideology is targeting whom. White racist humor is fueled by "power and contempt," and its effects have larger social consequences, operating within major social organizations of law enforcement and political organizations

alike. Out of this amused racial contempt comes the oppressive consequences of unjust racial hierarchy, which creates an imbalanced set of relations both at the social and cultural level, benefitting whites at the expense of all others it has tagged as “non-white” (43).

Not all laughter is the same, and it matters who laughs at whom. As Pérez expounds in chapter three, the notion of an “equal opportunity offender” (59), where, in a post-Civil Rights society, racist humor is taken as socially acceptable as long as everyone is made fun of, rests on the mistaken assumption that there is not a racial hierarchy embedded in our laughter. Non-whites can perpetuate this unjust racial hierarchy, too, by self-deprecating themselves or by racially ridiculing other racialized groups. But there is a marked difference in result, depending on who sits in what power relation. Non-whites racially ridiculing whites in an effort to resist dominant oppressive power relations is different than whites who racially ridicule non-whites in an effort to maintain such dominant power structures (42). The joke-teller need not intend that their joking practices reinforce racist ideas to effectively do so. Intentions aside, the telling of racist jokes normalizes the existence of racism. Such an act is made within a racist context that intentions play no part in discontinuing and that continues to harbor a particular (amused) attitude toward it. Here, Pérez shows that amused racial contempt and the white racial frame are not descriptive of the racialized identity of those who purvey it but of those it socially benefits. Even and especially those victimized by such systems can also take up these racist mechanisms for the small degree of power it affords them by complicity with the system such ideologies feed from.

Given the thorough treatment of amused racial contempt as it plays out in politics, police departments, and broader social contexts, we are left with an open question about how this racist humor also harms by misinforming the joke-tellers and purveyors in ways that perpetuate damage not only toward those the joke targets but conceptually toward those who launch, listen, and sympathize with such jokes—those the joke apparently benefits. This is not to say that the perpetrators and white culture more broadly do not benefit from these racist jokes, but that these benefits, as Pérez’s work so powerfully shows, come at the expense of their own demise via severe damage to the conceptual framework they have of themselves and those around them. Against Christie Davies, what allows audiences to find racist humor amusing is genuine sympathy with the ideologies pushed by the joke. While white supremacist sites like *Stormfront* and *White Aryan Resistance* create and spread racist jokes, the fact that such jokes were found funny by outsiders rather than falling flat or being ridiculed suggests that these jokes tug on existing white supremacist ideas already

inherent in dominant conceptions of race and racism in the United States, as audiences needed to sympathize with racism to find these joke amusing in the first place.

Pérez shows that it is not merely the contents of the joke that matter but in *whom* the positive affective emotions of amusement are triggered. Racist jokes, resulting in amused racial contempt, prioritize certain joke audiences. When thinking of how and whom a joke harms, Pérez shows, we need to think less about merely *what* a joke says and more about *whom* the joke affectively serves. By his focus on the dehumanizing role of positive emotions in oppressive audiences resulting in negative outcomes toward the joke's target, Pérez shows that racist humor is not “just a joke” (30) launched by “a few bad apples” (89) in law enforcement or alt-right groups—its grave role as a social affective mechanism of dehumanization demands to be treated with great caution.

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