

## **Did you hear the one about...:Exclusionary Humour and Micropolitics**

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### **Abstract**

Humour plays a central role in our daily lives, yet is rarely the object of research within political science. There has been a recent upsurge in humour that deals with controversial issues, such as race, gender, and sexual preference, mostly using irony in its approach. Comics such as Sarah Silverman, Dave Chappelle and Russell Peters participate in this resurgence. Much of the literature on the political ramifications of the use of ‘exclusionary humour’ – humour which has a racial, gendered, or other group as its target – claims that its use is by definition negative and against the political goals of equality for the groups targeted. According to these arguments, the use of such humour constitutes a micropolitical threat to state policies that work towards incorporation of minorities into the fabric of society, such as multiculturalism. However, I contend that certain forms of exclusionary humour have a far more ambivalent role in politics, and may work to subtly undermine inequality through making light of racism, sexism, and homophobia. This paper is an analysis of a series of interviews exploring how the dominant group of White, Anglophone males in Canada view and mobilize exclusionary humour in their daily lives. Focusing exclusively on members of the Charter Generation, i.e. those who have grown up with multiculturalism as official policy, the paper will evaluate the use of exclusionary humour for political goals of equality, and attempt to determine the effect that multicultural socialization has had on the way exclusionary humour manifests itself.

### **Introduction: Main questions, larger project**

The following paper is a preliminary attempt to come to grips with the persistence of what I term exclusionary humour in Canadian culture and society. It is the basis for one section of my doctoral thesis, which explores discursive, rhetorical and affective techniques through which colonialism reproduces itself in contemporary Canada. I am particularly interested in micropolitical processes of dominant subject formation, i.e. how white, male Anglophones reproduce their hegemonic status within Canada, and how this dominance shifts and changes over time. This paper thus looks at one technique – humour – through which I

argue dominant subject positions continue to be produced in a Canada ostensibly marked by multiculturalism and a politics of recognition, expressed in both official politics and popular culture. Questions that this research looks to answer, or at least approach, include the following: Is exclusionary humour being used by people of the multicultural generation in their daily lives? If so, how? Does this use necessarily point to a reproduction of colonialism (or perhaps in the narrower context of this paper, an 'exclusionary society' marked by white, heterosexual, able-bodied male dominance)? It seems clear that this dominance persists – but what role does humour play in its persistence? Does humour have the potential to mitigate exclusion? This seems evident, but what about humour used by the dominant in reference to the subordinate? Does edgy or boundary pushing, ironic use of subordinated subject positions in humour reproduce their subordination, or does it point to a change in their position vis-à-vis the dominant?

In looking to address this problem, I interviewed 10 people whose self-identification as white, male and Anglophone places them in a position of structural dominance in Canada. These interviews focused both on their perception of exclusionary humour in the media, and their personal approaches to exclusionary humour in their daily lives. The following is a discussion of how they view exclusionary humour and how they use it. Although I will present some conclusions regarding this research in this paper, here I am primarily attempting to draw out some patterns from the interviews.

## **Exclusionary Humour – Discussion of the literature**

The prolific humour researcher Michael Billig (2005) has put forth a structural theory of humour, in which it plays a disciplinary role, specifically in relation to embarrassment. He claims that laughter amongst the onlookers of an individual who contravenes social codes is a means of reaffirming those codes, effectively chastising the individual being laughed at through the inducement of embarrassment. We therefore follow social codes in order to avoid embarrassment. Although I find this theory too reductive, Billig has a point about the often-disciplinary role of humour. The performative repetition of exclusionary humour both constructs the categories that are its currency (*the* 'Indian', *the* woman, *the* homosexual, etc.) and works to ensure that those who are engaging in the humour do not challenge the use or existence of these categories. Thus although I agree with Howlitt and Owusu-Bempah when they note that "racist humour is an aspect of racist society and not just an idiosyncratic feature of a particular individual or group" (2005: 45-6), I also want to say that the relationship between a 'racist society' and the 'racist humour' in which its members partake is not unidirectional; engaging in exclusionary humour is a means through which the racist, or for the purposes of my research, colonial society both shows and reproduces itself. Exclusionary humour both expresses and produces the whitestream (Denis, 1997) normative complex.

However, even while exclusionary humour persists, working to reproduce whitestream normativity through its disciplinary subjectivation, reproduction through repetition necessitates a change in the nature of the humour. First, and

most obviously, it has for the most part stopped manifesting itself in public in Canada; Mickey Rooney's 'yellowface' performance in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* would be viewed today not as humorous but as distasteful.<sup>1</sup> The taboo against racist and other forms of exclusionary humour is, however, frequently only upheld in public. And although the humour persists, it takes a different form, being often far subtler than Rooney's portrayal of a blatant stereotype. Again, Howlitt and Owusu-Bempah claim that "The function of racist jokes is to reinforce the presumed superiority of one racial or ethnic group over another" (2005: 50), mirroring the 'superiority theory' common to Plato, Aristotle and Hobbes (Morreal, 1987). Although I am sympathetic to this statement, I cannot go as far as its authors and claim that all humour which has as an element some representative of an excluded group functions solely to 'reinforce superiority.' Rather, it is *possible* that this humour may be leveled against exclusion itself – the same ideal that likely motivated the creators of *All in the Family*, with the infamously racist patriarch Archie Bunker offered up as an example of how ludicrous such positions really are.

This other, potentially subversive aspect present in exclusionary humour corresponds to what Billig (2005) terms the 'rebellious' aspect of humour. Even while Billig rightly argues that this rebelliousness often in fact functions to reinforce social codes, the reinforcement can also become an undermining.

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<sup>1</sup> The overtly exclusionary humour of such American comics as 'Larry the Cable Guy' (Daniel Lawrence Whitney) bucks this trend. Whether the resurgence of so-called 'edgy humour' by comics such as David Cross, Sarah Silverman, and Dave Chappelle in the US, and Russell Peters, Sugar Sammy, and Shawn Majumder in Canada can be classified as overly exclusionary or not is a question I will not attempt to answer here.

Additionally, the target of the language used in exclusionary humour is not always self-evident. For instance, in her study of a California high school, C.J. Pascoe (2005) determines that the use of the term 'fag' is meant to target non-masculine subjects or actions, and is not necessarily an attempt to target homosexuality:

A boy could get called a fag for exhibiting any sort of behaviour defined as non-masculine (although not necessarily behaviours aligned with femininity) in the world of River High: being stupid, incompetent, dancing, caring too much about clothing, being too emotional or expressing interest (sexual or platonic) in other guys (337).

Thus I want to claim that there are contradictory elements in the contemporary use of exclusionary humour by the multicultural generation, just as Pascoe argues that the term 'fag' does not have homosexuality as its immediate referent. While exclusionary humour may work to reinforce ideas of superiority, in many ways it may also undermine the superiority of the subject position that is most likely to engage in it.

## **Methodology**

My analysis of the use of exclusionary humour by the multicultural generation was carried out through interviews with representatives of the dominant subject position (White, male, Anglophone) in Canada. The goal of the interviews is to explore the nature of exclusionary humour as used by representatives of the dominant subject position who have gone through a multicultural education; thus I targeted participants of roughly my own generation, i.e. those currently aged between 18 and 34. Although Canada has had a multicultural *policy* since the

early 1970s, it was not until 1988 that the federal *Multiculturalism Act*, which made government departments and institutions responsible for developing and enacting multicultural policies, came into force (Mock, 1997). Thus although multicultural education policies have been in force in most provinces since the 1970s, I take the date of 1988 as significant in making multiculturalism law in Canada, and thus have as an upward limit of 34 years (those who, in 2009, would have graduated high school in 1993 and thus have been educated for at least 5 years under multicultural education practices). My lower limit is aimed at those who have graduated high school, and could still be considered to be members of the same generation as myself.

Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the interview topic, I used a snowball sampling procedure, starting with acquaintances, and working outward from their own social networks. Using this sampling procedure means that I take the *presence* of exclusionary humour as axiomatic; the fact that I have no white male acquaintances who do *not* engage in exclusionary humour may not be a scientific basis for this axiom, but I hold it as meaningful nonetheless.

The interviews were centred on a series of four or five short video recordings of comedic broadcasts that utilize exclusionary humour to a greater or lesser extent. The first was always considered to be a rather mild use of exclusionary humour (a lampooning of Danny Williams on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*), with the remainder gradually using terms and situations that utilized exclusion in more brazen ways. The questions themselves were broken into two parts. In the first, after playing each recording, I asked about respondents'

reactions: whether they found them funny, if so could they point to aspects of the bit that they found the most humorous, if they could articulate what about the bit made it humorous, if there were other feelings or memories that they associated with the bit, and if they found the bit to be offensive, and if so why.

The second part focused on the use of humour, and particularly exclusionary humour, in the respondents' daily lives. Here I asked how they would characterize the humour in which they personally participated (with friends and family, at work, etc.), telling them that they could reference the recordings if they wished. From here I went on with further questions specifically about their use of racist, sexist, homophobic or other exclusionary humour, what their opinions were on the use of this humour, and how they determined what was acceptable to laugh at and what was not. Although most interviews touched on more than one 'exclusionary category,' it should be noted that the interviews focused mainly on the mobilization of race in humour. I also asked them questions about the use of exclusionary humour in their families, and if they believed that their use of such humour differed from their parents' or grandparents' generations. Finally I asked whether they could remember any exclusionary humour from their childhood.

Analysis of the interviews entailed transcribing and coding them. My coding method focused on both specific words and general themes that recurred over the 10 interviews. Analysis is discussed in more detail in the next section. In the future I plan on inputting my coding into a program such as NVivo in order to tease out the relevance of how prevalent codes overlap with others.

## Findings

A great number of common themes emerged from the interviews, even while responses to the videos, and attitudes about the use of exclusionary humour, varied. I should begin by emphasizing that all respondents had obviously given thought to issues related to race, multiculturalism, and equality in Canada, both in terms of humour and in broader social and political contexts. This awareness of political and social norms provided a backdrop for the interviews, with responses generally reinforcing a view that social hierarchies based on race, sex, class, gender, sexual preference, etc. are unacceptable, and that the respondents themselves did not believe that any of these categories were superior to any other. Furthermore, all those interviewed acknowledged that, to a greater or lesser extent, they use humour in their daily lives that relies in some way on ethnic, racial, cultural, sexual, and other differences; however, all participants were highly aware of their usage of such humour. Ron, a student from British Columbia, made this clear in discussing his use of terms targeting gay people:

“No no, just by doing that and they turned out to be gay, I would feel really bad, where, and that’s why, if I’m in an argument with somebody and they’re a visible minority, I’m not going to pick on that, [...] cause I don’t want them to feel bad about themselves, or I don’t want them to think that I actually believe that, because I don’t.”

The following section will discuss a few themes that were prevalent in the interviews: boundaries between acceptable humour and inappropriate remarks; the importance of the identity and the intent of the speaker in determining this



boundary; and the reactions of interviewees to transgressions of these boundaries.

Important to performed humour (i.e. the videos played during the interviews, and other examples mentioned by respondents) that crossed social boundaries relating to race, gender and sexual preference was the identity of the comic. The comic's identity was often the most important factor in determining whether his or her 'boundary crossing' was acceptable as humour or deemed to be 'real' racism, sexism, etc. For instance, three of the videos used during the interviews were of Canadian comics of Indian descent (Russell Peters, Sugar Sammy and Shawn Majumder). All respondents agreed that Sugar Sammy's use of Indian accents and stereotypes was unproblematic, and most agreed that Russell Peters use of non-Indian stereotypes and accents (Nigerian and Chinese) was, if problematic or offensive at all, far less offensive than if a white comic had used the same stereotypes and accents. This is highlighted in comments by Mike, a PhD student from Ontario. After watching a clip of Russell Peters, Mike justified Peters' use of accents in the bit:

Mike: "[Y]eah, it's funny, and he's good at the accents"

Interviewer: "What's with the accents? Why is that funny?"

Mike: "Like half his humour's about the accents, right?"

Interviewer: "So why is that funny?"

Mike: "He's skilled at it, right, he provides a recognizable caricature, and it's not, in his case, they're not mean. Like the uh, the what is it, Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, a mean absolutely ignorant caricature, is not funny, whereas something that is recognizable and clearly like enjoying being this cosmopolitan and and going and eating chicken in china and having that experience its its ah its, you know, it's funnier [...] And the fact that he's not white authorizes it, so."

Mike goes on to elaborate the difference between Mickey Rooney's performance in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and Peters' use of stereotypes and accents:

"The context does matter. That's not a cheap copout, that's not to say, cause you know, he's not white and he's from Toronto he gets to say that and Mickey Rooney doesn't, the context really matters. Cause he has a whole different set of cultural knowledge than Mickey Rooney, and he's trying to achieve a different comic effect, the mere presence of the buck teeth and the bad accent is supposed to be funny in that movie whereas this has the funny premise, which is pretty funny, or should be funny for anyone, it doesn't rely on, it relies on some knowledge of race, but not participating in you know the actually invoking those feelings you know [...] "Well ok, this guy lives in a city where he has to deal with 'many and varied types of humans'. And you know, if his experience is like mine, you know he's probably not actually a racist, he's not joining gangs, he's not, uh, in any acute way discriminating against people, he's not participating, he's a standup comic, he's not, you know, making hiring decisions, he's not [I laugh], you know structural racism, so that makes it ok. Mickey Rooney in, you know, 19, Hollywood from the 30s till now, you know, deeply deeply racist culture and and and designed to exclude in an angry mean way"

Mike qualifies racist behaviour as "joining gangs" and participating in discriminatory hiring, and differentiates between the malicious intent of Rooney's yellowface performance and the humorous anecdote related to us by Peters, whose credentials both as a member of a minority and a denizen of the multicultural city of Toronto mean that his humour, though relying on stereotypes of race and culture for its comic value, cannot be deemed bigoted.

This excerpt also brings in another important aspect of how the respondents determined whether the use of stereotypes in humour could be accepted as humour: the intent of the speaker. The perception of a statement could easily change from a joke to a non-humorous statement of superiority based on the intent of the speaker. The intent of a speaker also went much deeper than the immediate joke or statement: most respondents claimed to be

able to discern someone's underlying beliefs, with those who made exclusionary statements with malicious intent as believing in the superiority of their own subject position vis-à-vis the object of the statement. All respondents thus discriminated between a statement that they would find acceptable as humour, and statements which would label their speaker a bigot.

Boundaries between the mobilizing of exclusionary categories that remained ironic or sarcastic, and such mobilization that was perceived as sincere, were important to all respondents. These boundaries were determined through a combination of factors. As mentioned above, in performed humour, the identity of the comic was of primary importance. In daily interactions, however, the most important means of determining this boundary was the context of the situation in which the humour was being used: as long as people in a group were known and trusted, and deemed to not be 'real racists,' most respondents found it acceptable to engage in exclusionary humour. If there were people present who were unknown to the group, or were non-white, hetero males, respondents' deemed the use of exclusionary humour generally unacceptable. However, once a certain level of comfort with the newcomer or non-white, hetero male was gained, respondents were more likely to engage in humour using stereotypes. Importantly, this humour was never viewed by the respondents as reflecting anything about their true beliefs: they often juxtaposed their own use of stereotypes and excluded categories with such usage by 'real racists' or 'rednecks.' Additionally, when mentioning friends belonging to

different identities or backgrounds to their own, respondents noted that the fact of this difference was often highlighted humourously.

The views on where exactly the boundaries lay, however, differed considerably among the interviewees. For some respondents, any statement that involved derogatory terms, particularly those most taboo, would be deemed inappropriate to humour; others, however, would use racial and other jokes with their minority friends. Henry, a student and a bar tender from British Columbia, expressed his discomfort with the use of 'nigger' by Shawn Majumder in one of the videos during the interview:

"like I said, I'm uncomfortable with the word, so when I hear it I'm not really, I think I naturally just get my back up to it as opposed to, you know, actually listening to you know the potential of the humour [...] If it's a black person who's saying it I'm far more comfortable with it, which, you know, doesn't *really* make a whole lot of sense to me, cause I feel like, I don't know, maybe they're not even appreciating the full extent of the slight, the slur."

Nick, a PhD student from British Columbia who displayed an exceptional understanding of the workings of humour and jokes, discusses his use of humour that ostensibly targets his minority friends:

"there's an important difference there in terms of privacy and publicity I think, insofar as there are definitely jokes I would tell to friends of mine, like close friends of mine, and both Jewish and black friends of mine, that I wouldn't say in public. Um, because, there's an element of, this is an obvious standard thing to say, but there are things that I will say to my Jewish friend like as a joke about them being Jewish because they know I'm not anti-Semitic, they know it's a joke and they know I'm saying it because it's shocking in the same way that I would tell a sex joke or tell a joke like that and I wouldn't tell it in public because people don't know that I'm not anti-Semitic and there's no way for them to know, I don't know, when I make a joke about Josh liking money because he's Jewish [...] and I can get away with that because A, they know I'm not anti-Semitic, B we all know Josh doesn't exactly like money, C we know that Josh doesn't exactly have much of an attachment to his Jewishness, there's all these

things that we all know and therefore I can get the humour of the shockingness without having the content be an issue, or being able to trust that people will know that I'm just doing it for the form and there's no investment in the content for me. Whereas if I were to do those things in public, there's no way of divorcing the form from the content, like the form is the content, and that would be a different sort of like, and then it becomes much more complicated."

Nick claims that his use of these jokes is an example of 'shock humour', and that their form corresponds to humour utilizing taboo subject matter, such as sex, bodily functions, or race.

Zach, a designer from Manitoba, demonstrates both an understanding of boundaries, as well as a willingness to cross them for the shock value. In this example, Zach makes racist jokes in order to provoke laughter from someone he deems to be a 'real' racist, thus shocking his wife:

"I can't remember exactly what I said, but [my wife] and I have a mutual friend who really is, I think she, well, I don't know it's tough to say, but I think she's definitely got some feelings against aboriginal people, which is pretty common for a lot of people I think in Manitoba, for sure in Winnipeg, but anyway, so and I know [my wife] is very defensive when people use slurs against aboriginals and things like that, and so if we get around these people, this couple, and especially this girl, I try to throw out a comment or two that will get a laugh out of her, but aggravates [my wife], just for my own amusement."

The following quote from Ron, a student from British Columbia, demonstrates the importance of social context, boundaries to humour, and perceived intent in the use of exclusionary humour. It is in reference to his interaction with a mixed-race friend, Dan (whose nickname was actually a racial slur, albeit a somewhat obscure one). Note the importance of the intent for Ron in his use of exclusionary humour in his dealings with Dan:

"But here's the interesting thing, Dan shaves his head because Dan's bald, you don't make fun of Dan for being bald, Dan doesn't like that, that

bugs Dan, and you don't want to bug him, you don't want to like hurt his feelings"

Interviewer: "What about someone else calling him [his nickname], or using other racial slurs?"

"We were playing hockey and somebody called Dan something derogatory, nigger, whatever, something, and one of the guys who I consider to be racist levelled the guy, like blindsided him, like you don't call, you know, afterwards in the parking lot the joke was 'you don't call my boy that, that's my boy!' [in southern accent]"

Here Ron makes mention of another of his friends who he considers to be racist. Respondents often made mention of people they knew who they considered to be 'real' racists, homophobes, misogynists, etc. Many used examples of these people as foils for examples of their own use of exclusionary humour. Ron gives an example of this:

"Exclusionary humour, exactly, that's not racist humour, this is white supremacists who stand around, you know how we told dead baby jokes, they'd tell dead nigger jokes, they think it's hilarious, and I mean it was borderline bad taste with babies, but it wasn't like 'hey I hate this group of people,' it was just, like, it was just absurd, it borders on absurdity, and whereas I mean if I was standing around people who were legitimate white supremacists, and they were telling you know, like talking about, like, a natural disaster, new Orleans, the Katrina, I mean I guarantee there were people who thought that was hilarious, you know 'good, just less niggers', I mean I would be offended at somebody who would say it seriously. I mean if you say it in jest mocking white supremacists I mean maybe a little bit too soon, but, I mean you get a pass."

Tom, a bartender from British Columbia, says something similar. Here he also explicitly links the issue of boundaries to the intention of the speaker:

And you know, and I kind of, same with the racist thing, there's being funny when you know you're not serious and then really saying it so it's almost so it looks like that's what you believe, and so that's why you think it's funny. And I think your own perception of your joke tells what you really, you know is this just a joke or uh do you think this is funny because you think all Latinos are lazy and that's why you think this is funny [...] like I've come across uh you know racists and that kind of stuff where their jokes are more along the lines of to make fun of uh of of the actual race and you know the actual, you know how, again, how it's, again ridiculous

word comes up, It's ridiculous what's funny but they're actually making fun of because they think it's stupid or whatnot."

Even though respondents were highly aware of the social norm against discrimination, with only one respondent admitting to having some racist feelings, it became clear that the majority of interviewees stopped short of actually expressing disapproval of discriminatory statements (made by those gauged to be 'really' racist, sexist, etc.) in their daily lives. In fact, many admitted that even when they deemed the intent of the speaker to be malicious, and them to be a 'real' racist, they found themselves laughing nonetheless. Barry, a teacher from British Columbia, was the most consistent in admitting that the willingness of the crowd to laugh at something that he deemed inappropriate was a factor in whether he himself laughed or not:

I don't really find racist humour that funny in general, so, I don't know, if people are making racist jokes I might laugh just to, you know, whatever, alright I'll throw a chuckle here and there, but I don't know, I don't really find it offensive but I don't really find it funny either, so I don't know.

And again, later in the interview:

a lot of racial humour is simple and basic and just not like, ok maybe its worth chuckling at, but it's just more like ok I'm chuckling because I'm supposed to be laughing.

Eric, a lawyer from British Columbia, recounted being in a situation at work where a client made an exceedingly racist comment about Chinese people over a speakerphone while a co-worker of Chinese descent was in the room. Both he and his co-worker found themselves laughing; Eric characterized this laughter as "almost a defence mechanism."

There were some exceptions to this propensity to laugh even in situations deemed inappropriate, such as the following claim made by Nick:

“it’s like what am I endorsing by laughing maybe. Like when one of my friends who is not racist tells a racist joke for the shock value, I’m happy to laugh because I know I’m not endorsing racism, whereas [...] when I have the weird racist cab driver who tells a racist joke, I don’t want to laugh because I don’t want to endorse that.”

However, the majority of respondents were less concerned with whether their actions ‘endorsed’ discriminatory behaviour. Zach claimed “Even if someone really is racist, it’s not like I personally feel like ‘oh fuck, I’d better do something about this’ or I better write a letter to you know my MP.” Stan gave an example of a friend who would make racist comments in situations that Stan deemed inappropriate, i.e. with people that they didn’t know for instance (“I [said to myself], dude, you don’t even know who this person is, they could have a black or native girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, mom, dad, like you don’t know and there’s just things you don’t say to people you don’t know”). However, despite the content of his friend’s statements (“he used to say the most racist things I’ve ever heard in my life”) Stan “didn’t want him to get judged by other people, cause he, in the context he was using it in, I found no offence, or there was no hatred behind it, you know what I mean, like underlying hatred.” Ron admitted to having friends that he deemed to be ‘really racist’; however, this didn’t affect his friendship with them (“because they’re good guys”). Nor did he feel the need to admonish them when they did make discriminatory comments or jokes.

Only two respondents claimed that they had attempted to dissuade people from the use of taboo language in their humour; interestingly they were also the



only interviewees to relate stories about being the brunt of jokes, one for his Jewish heritage and the other for a wandering eye. However, the reactions of these respondents to humour or comments that crossed boundaries were generally mild; for instance, Lenny, a real estate agent from British Columbia, used the phrase 'whoa, easy guys' a number of times in characterizing his response to his friends' use of the term 'nigger' in the context of a joke and when they went too far in teasing him about his Jewish heritage. Tom related having stood up for *himself* in instances where people making fun of his disability had gone too far. And although he expressed disapproval of 'real' exclusionary humour, terming it 'offsides', it was unclear whether he had actually confronted anyone on their use of any 'offsides' statements.

### **Preliminary Conclusions**

Is there a difference between Mickey Rooney's yellowface (or Rob Schneider's, for that matter),<sup>2</sup> and Russell Peters using ethnic stereotypes in his humour? I think so. But is it possible that the use of so-called 'edgy' humour (humour trucking in taboo) may subvert white, male dominance *and at the same time* reinforce it? Zach brought up the potential for this in his discussion of the possible change in the use of exclusionary humour between generations:

"Yeah, I mean Archie bunker was basically [...] well he was a bigot too, but they didn't exactly portray him as a person of wisdom and integrity. So in that way yes, but on the other hand I think there's a lot of American

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<sup>2</sup> In *I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry* (2007), a Hollywood comedy about two straight men who decide to get married for insurance purposes, Rob Schneider plays a Chinese reverend; for his character he put on a ridiculous accent, thick glasses, buck teeth and a bowl cut, repeating an offensive use of stereotype prevalent in the Hollywood of 50 years ago.

people who watched that show and might identify with his character, and say yeah, he's like a good ol' boy, kind of. And in that case they were trying to, I don't know, if that's the way you're looking at it then basically they were saying 'he's that good ol' boy with a heart of gold' like, he was kind of racist, but you were like 'aw shucks' you can kind of forgive him because he wasn't all that bad."

Interviewer: So would you put it on a timeline of changing [humour]?

"I don't know, not really, cause I see Larry the cable guy as the same kind of character as Archie bunker."

This quote brings out the problematic nature of using exclusionary humour; as Zach claims, even though Archie Bunker was not portrayed as "a person of wisdom and integrity," it is likely that many people enjoyed the character for his positions, i.e. laughed with the character, rather than taking enjoyment from the character qua buffoon, i.e. laughing at him. Of course in the same interview, Zach makes an important distinction between the humour on the Redneck Comedy Tour<sup>3</sup> and the humour used by comics such as Russell Peters, David Cross and Sarah Silverman. He claims that the use of exclusionary categories by comedians on the Redneck Comedy Tour works to overtly reinforce racism, sexism, etc. while the latter mentioned 'edgy' comics' usage of the same categories works, through irony and other techniques, to break down discriminatory practices.

This point leads to another, related question: Is there a difference between a white male using an ethnic slur in a joke where the punch line depends on a stereotype, and a white male using exclusionary humour that he intends as sarcastic or ironic? Although the respondents to the interviews were emphatic

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<sup>3</sup> A tour of comedians, including Larry the Cable Guy, who self-identify as rednecks. Both Zach and Mick brought Larry the cable guy up as examples of comics who use 'real' racism to get their laughs.

that there is a marked difference between these two circumstances, the importance of the speaker's intentions in this difference may mean little for the subversive capacity of the humour. More than anything, they may underscore the importance of the individual in Canadian society, linking their discourse on intentions with a number of narratives important to Canada's colonial mythology (the 'pioneer ethic' (Furniss, 1999), for instance).

The relationship between exclusionary humour and the persistence of colonialism requires more exploration. And although it may be that the continued use of racial, gendered, and other such humour by dominant subjects in Canada must point to a reproduction of colonialism, the way that it is used does not merely repeat past usage. Interview subjects displayed a remarkable self-awareness about racism in particular, and discriminatory practices in general. None wanted to be viewed as 'actually' discriminatory, even if they did participate in exclusionary humour in their daily lives. Thus the claims of theorists such as Howlitt and Owusu-Bempah – that racial humour always works to reproduce racism and enforce the superiority of the dominant race – must be tempered with an understanding of exactly *how* exclusionary humour reproduces discriminatory practices, and a recognition that in some cases it has at least the *potential* to bring these practices into a critical light. This was reflected in the comments of many respondents. When asked about the problems of shifting boundaries and whether potentially subversive humour could in fact be simply reproducing 'real' racism, they responded that comedy was an important forum for discussion of discrimination and exclusion. This at least points to both an awareness of

exclusionary humour's ramifications (that it may never be 'just a joke'), and the potential for comedy and humour to do positive political work.

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