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Numbing the Heart: Racist Jokes and the Aesthetic Affect

Tanya Rodriguez

Abstract

People sometimes resist the idea that racist humor fails on aesthetic grounds because they find it funny. They make the case that we can enjoy its comic aspects by controlling our attention, by focusing on a joke's rhythm or delivery rather than on its racist content. Ironic intent may reside with the joke teller and/or the audience. I discuss how arguments for the immorality of racist jokes fall short. Ironic racist jokes may be acceptable to an audience that already rejects racism but is comfortable with such ironic racist joking precisely because as individuals they feel confident in their own rejection of genuine racism. Distinguishing between straightforward racist humor and ironically framed racist humor reveals a price that must be paid. The controlled attention demanded, or even extorted, by ironic racist humor is possible only by forsaking empathy as the listener divorces himself from the feelings of those affected and thereby becomes a complicit if impartial spectator. Thus, if I say that a joke is not good because it is racist, it does not necessarily follow that the joke is not funny. What does result, however, is that appreciating such humor entails a lack of empathy for it insists upon numbing the heart.

Key Words

aesthetic affect, empathy, humor, ironic joking, jokes, race, racial aesthetics, racism

It is enough for us to stop our ears to the sound of music in a room where dancing is going on, for the dancers at once to appear ridiculous. How many human actions would stand a similar test? Should we not see many of them suddenly pass from grave to gay on isolating them from the accompanying music of sentiment? To produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart.

—Henri Bergson[1]

1. Introduction

Empathy has been widely discussed in aesthetics, especially as one of the essential values of literature and of the arts in general. When we empathize with a character, we take on that character's feelings: we are shocked with her and we hurt when she hurts. This often occurs when reading fiction or poetry or when watching a film, play, ballet, or opera. Usually we empathize because we identify with and admire a character, but sometimes a character with whom we identify in a work of art we would despise in real life. Both kinds of experience inspire compassion and, perhaps, develop our moral capacities.

I think empathy is an important topic for at least two reasons. Understanding it, including its theoretical perspectives, may enrich our experiences of art works. More important, the mechanisms of aesthetic empathy are vitally relevant to social life. I believe that the way in which we relate to fictional characters affects our relationships with real people, the ethical implications are obvious. I do not pretend to prove such a hypothesis. Instead, I examine the role that empathy or the lack of it, plays in aesthetic uptake. I argue that successful uptake sometimes requires a distance that diminishes not only the aesthetic experience in the moment but our empathic capacity as well. My hypothesis is that racist jokes, ironic or not, put their audience in a position at odds with the compassion that characterizes empathy.

Although my focus here is on race, it is possible that other deeply offensive types of humor would fit my argument just as well. I focus on race because racist jokes are what I have personally encountered most often. In a straightforward racist joke, the fictional characters are immoral and the audience must adopt the position of the racist character to get the joke. Through identification with this imaginary character we distance ourselves from the fictional subject of the joke. In so doing, I believe we also distance ourselves from real, nonfictional persons included in the joke's racism. Racist jokes told ironically suffer from the same problem. The ironic racist joke is supposed to be a joke on or at the expense of a racist character, and by implication, on real-life racists too, yet its effect is often the same: its racist implications survive the irony, and to enjoy the humor the audience members must harden their hearts. Aesthetic appreciation thus places the audience in an immoral position. Since a joke is *merely* a joke its appreciation seems to suggest that ethical considerations are irrelevant. Instead of enlightening us, racist jokes do the opposite. Cold-hearted laughter is not only ugly; it is deadening. Such laughter results from an ugliness that has both aesthetic and ethical implications.

A philosopher at a recent conference of the American Society for Aesthetics conference commented, "I wouldn't want to live in a world with no offensive jokes." Ted Cohen makes a comparable observation in his book, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*: "I have come to realize that if there is a problem with such [offensive] jokes, the problem is compounded exactly by the fact that they are funny. Face that fact."^[2] These statements reveal mistrust in moral condemnation of the arts. They suggest that as long as a joke is funny, its morality may be suspended. They also seem to suggest that being offended may be good for us, a point with which I agree. I think these comments allude to humor as one of our most guarded and prized values. We might give up a lot of laughter if we eliminated offensive jokes.

2. Beauty v. goodness

Theoretically speaking, empathy lies at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics. In ethics, empathy serves to integrate emotion with an ethics of care; in the aesthetic realm, empathy strengthens the emotional connection between art work and audience. A strong philosophical tradition links aesthetics and ethics through the emotions. Plato made a

moral attack on poetry for indulging the emotions and encouraging irrationality. He wanted it banned from his republic [607a]. In the *Ion*, Plato describes the orator of poetry as out of his mind and scolds audiences for their approval of fictional characters they would despise in life [534e]. On the other hand, Aristotle's analysis of tragedy praises catharsis as a means of aesthetic and moral development through emotion. If we do not feel along with the characters, we are not affected by the work, and its value for teaching virtue is diminished. For David Hume, sympathy explains the transmission of emotion among persons as well as our shared reactions to works of art. Tolstoy saw art as a channel of human communication and emotional union.[3]

Berys Gaut, Marcia Eaton, and Noël Carroll, among others, argue for a conceptual connection between aesthetics and ethics. Gaut argues for *ethicism*, contending that some ethical concerns have aesthetic relevance when ethical attitudes or values are prescribed by a work.[4] *Aes-ethical* judgments, Marcia Eaton's idiosyncratic coinage, are those judgments of merit that are at once ethical and aesthetic. She cites the example of purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*). When one learns about the widespread damage done to native ecosystems by this flowering weed, she argues, a judgment of beauty becomes inappropriate.[5] Noël Carroll's *moderate moralism* holds that a moral flaw can, at times, also be an aesthetic flaw and that for certain genres, moral comment is as appropriate as formal comment. Carroll argues that

many of the emotions that the audience brings to bear, as a condition of narrative intelligibility, are moral both in the sense that many emotions, like [justified] anger . . . possess ineliminable moral components, and in the sense that many of the emotions that are pertinent to narratives are frequently moral emotions, such as the indignation that pervades a reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. [6]

Narrative art works specifically require audiences to rely upon antecedent moral judgments and moral emotions to engage and make sense of the story. My goal here is to show that jokes belong to this kind of narrative since, to "get" a joke, audiences must fill in the narrative by drawing upon morally suspect inferences.

Moral emotion is not universally accepted as relevant to judgments of art. Autonomists separate aesthetic and moral judgment, insisting on maintaining a distinction between goodness and beauty. Whether or not a work of art inspires, exemplifies, or adheres to tenets of goodness are all questions of morality, not of artistic value. In this view, beautiful and profound art works may be the result of cruelty, depict abhorrent acts, and even inspire evil behavior. However, as Gaut writes, "The live debate is between those who maintain that ethical properties are never aesthetically relevant and those who maintain that they sometimes are." [7] I do not argue that the immoral consequences of an art work constitute an aesthetic defect, or claim that racist jokes are flawed simply because they may propagate stereotypes. Eaton incorporates context and consequence, which makes sense for

judgments of natural beauty in which aesthetic intention is not at stake.

My critique of racist joking lies closer to Aristotle's observation that, if comedy is too ugly, it loses its humor. In comedy, he writes, the artist creates distance between life and art by representing men as *worse* than they really are. Yet comedy "consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive."^[8] If a joke is too mean-spirited or if the pain suffered by the subject of the joke is too great, then the intended comedic effect is not achieved. This shortcoming is the fault of the comic whose mimesis fails to create the aesthetic distance between life and art necessary for aesthetic appreciation (which Aristotle also views as especially critical to the paradoxical pleasure of tragedy). Perhaps racist humor is too painful because the mimesis is in some sense as bad as, or worse than, the reality the joke represents.

While we certainly can separate overlapping strands of ethical judgment about art, I am not convinced that we must. Doing so is useful, however, to the extent that it clarifies certain scenarios. In particular, what I call the paradox of offensive humor benefits from such analysis. It is useful to distinguish three variants of racist joking: the straightforward, the self-protectively ironic, and the ironic. In racist joking intended to mean what it seems to mean, the aesthetic flaw is typically a lack of originality. Self-protective irony dissimulates genuine feeling rather than communicating it through a subtext. It is aesthetically flawed because it hides the aesthetic intention: the joker merely pretends to be ironic and uses irony as a cover. In contrast, the truly ironic racist joke capitalizes on the lack of originality in racist jokes and exploits it. Racist joking that is clearly ironic does not necessarily exhibit either flaw; it may be original and communicate clearly. What then, if anything, is *aesthetically* wrong with ironic racist jokes?

When individuals utilize the comment "It's just a joke" as a defense, they are implying that responses to jokes are and should be free from real-world concerns, just as autonomists do when they restrict evaluation of art to narrow categories of aesthetic relevance. For them, in a racist joke, real-world oppression is not a relevant or even appropriate factor in appreciation. Ted Cohen writes: "Wish that there were no mean jokes. Try remaking the world so that such jokes will have no place, will not arise. But do not deny that they are funny. That denial is a pretense that will help nothing."^[9] Cohen thus sets humor apart from the moral: to describe a joke as "mean" is an inappropriate aesthetic response. He insists that we recognize the humor in certain mean or racist jokes and therefore engage in an autonomist approach. He wants credit for the humor without the blame based on moral objections or meanness. While he recognizes that some jokes are objectionable, he sees a problem in identifying their moral defect: "First is the problem of finding a basis for any moral judgment passed upon fiction, and then there is the problem of establishing the impropriety of laughing at something especially when the something is fictional."^[10]

Most of us will agree that certain jokes should not be told in front of or by certain people or on certain occasions. Nevertheless, some resist the notion that it is wrong to tell a

given joke in the absence of such limiting situations. What is the harm in two close friends, both opponents of real oppression, exchanging a joke that theoretically might hurt certain people when there is no chance that they will hear it? The humor of such a case is based on the uptake required of the hearer, on the intimacy established by the joke between teller and hearer, and perhaps on the pleasure of relief in laughing at something unpleasant. None of these responses seems wrong. Our ability to detach from the joke and the joke's larger context allows our enjoyment of a potentially offensive joke and is characteristic of the autonomist's position. Particularly in the case of fiction, an aesthetic response is coupled with the knowledge that we have some control in our real lives. Some argue that it is the knowledge that tragedy is not real life that enables us to appreciate it. If, like Cohen, we think of jokes as short stories, there is no point in practical ethical objections to racist jokes, since we can have no influence over a fictional joke world.

Berys Gaut criticizes such arguments against ethical assessment in a way relevant to racist jokes: "The step from the claim that the will is disengaged and therefore that ethical assessment has no role to play does not follow: there is similarly no possibility of altering historical events, and we are in this sense forced to have a detached or contemplative attitude toward them, but we still ethically assess historical characters and actions."^[11] We engage ethically with history and we can engage with fiction in the same way. The difference, to borrow from Aristotle, is that "one relates what has happened, the other what may happen."^[12]

The comparison between appropriate ethical responses to history and to fiction is telling. Surely it would be reasonable, for example, to admonish a writer for misrepresenting slavery as an acceptable practice even if we could not show that the misrepresentation had any practical consequences. We could appeal to the moral superiority of truthfulness: slavery existed and exists in the real world and lying about it harms those being misinformed, through lies, especially because we hope that understanding historical events and their moral importance will enlighten our current practices and even our feelings about those practices. Consider Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, a popular novel that dramatizes the antebellum South. We might criticize the novel for its sentimentality and its tendentious misrepresentation of the story's historical background. Such an accusation of moral failure relies upon a distinction between truth and falseness even in fiction, even if it is difficult to establish actual detrimental effects of a novel on society. Of course it would not make sense to condemn any fiction outright for a simple lack of truth value; by that criterion, almost all novels would appear *de facto* immoral. Yet we may demand responsibility to historical truthfulness beyond the details of fictional character and story. Similarly, even without proof that a morally objectionable joke has negative real-world consequences, our engagement with it subjects us to ethical scrutiny.

In an argument that departs from the passages quoted above from his book on jokes, Cohen clearly explains the unacceptability of some jokes to *some* people:

Suppose that prejudice against P's is a bad thing, and that to be amused by an x-joke requires a disposition which is related to anti-P prejudice, although that disposition is not itself a prejudice. The joke will be accessible only to those who either have the disposition or can, in imagination, respond as if they had it. The joke is obviously conditional—it is affective; but it will also be fundamentally parochial (essentially conditional, one might say) if there are people who cannot find it accessible. What people will be in this position? P's I think. Even the imagined possession of the disposition is in conflict with what makes these people P's. To appreciate the joke a P must disfigure himself. He must forsake himself. He should not do that. In fact, he cannot do that while remaining a P. The rest of us, who are not P's, *should not* appreciate the joke although we *can* in a sense in which a P cannot. The joke is exclusionary and should be resisted.[\[13\]](#)

For Cohen, laughing at a racist or sexist joke does not require that I actually hold racist/sexist views, only that I imagine holding them. Who cannot imagine holding such views? P's. Cohen recognizes that I cannot find a joke funny if in so doing I must forsake an essential part of who I am—my gender, race, or sexuality. "Her reply could be that she cannot bring her sense of humor to that joke without imaginatively taking on a disposition at odds with her conception of herself as a woman or a certain kind of woman. And if she is essentially a woman or a certain kind of woman, then she cannot reach that joke without a hideous cost."[\[14\]](#)

I argue that there are others who *could not* appreciate the joke even if they need not forsake some essential part of themselves to do so. If an audience *can* find the humor but *should not*, then the joke fails on moral grounds. An imagined possession of anti-P prejudice is *also* in conflict with empathy for P's. When the audience *cannot* find the humor because the joke is so parochial as to be sectarian, the joke fails on aesthetic grounds.

Even though Cohen offers grounds for resisting exclusionary jokes, he retreats from this position in a more recent book: "I insist that you not let your conviction that a joke is in bad taste, or downright immoral, blind you to whether you find it funny."[\[15\]](#) Contradicting his earlier condemnation of offensive jokes, he writes: "[M]y complaint that such jokes are in bad taste or unwholesome comes to nothing more than my wish to be made free of them."[\[16\]](#) He asserts that if it were true that such jokes are symptoms of or cause pernicious beliefs, they would warrant a moral objection, yet he concludes that no one can know or show they are or do. Contemporary moral theories would require proof that a joke produces genuine harm or that it reduces the moral character of those trafficking in them. Since no moral theory can be invoked, he argues, we cannot condemn the joke. What Cohen once described as a "hideous cost" he now considers a matter of personal taste, a failure on the part of the audience. Although Cohen maintains that the only person in this role is

the person about whom the joke is made, I contend that this position is equally tenable by empathetic listeners whose racial, gender, cultural or other personal identity is not under attack, but who empathize with the person whose self-conception is at odds with the joke to such a degree that they find no humor in the joke.

3. Empathy and identification

Distinctions among aesthetic identification, sympathy, and empathy are useful in understanding what I see as the problem in ironic racist jokes. To the extent that it is possible, I want to avoid a detailed consideration of identification in the nonaesthetic sense. Racial, gender, and sexual identity are complex topics I could not adequately treat within the scope of this essay. By the term *nonaesthetic identification*, I intend here to refer straightforwardly to a person's concept of what is essential to the self. Of course, identity is socially constructed at least insofar as culture acknowledges and instructs our ability to self-identify. I cannot arbitrarily choose to identify as an African-American male if I am a Latina woman, but the extent to which being a Latina affects my self-image and projection of self is to some degree within my control.

Aesthetic identification, on the other hand, is imaginative. It puts us in the position of the *other*, seeing through that individual's eyes. We are likely to identify with Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, for example, however uncomfortable that may make us because, as a first-person narrator, he controls our knowledge of the title character.

Identification with a character or point of view may or may not induce sympathy or empathy. I characterize the distinction between sympathy and empathy as the difference between *feeling for* and *feeling as*. I feel for Lolita, although Humbert gives me too little information to really imagine being in her position. Empathic identification, which allows us to feel what a character feels, is the strongest form of emotional engagement. We may or may not feel sympathy for the character as well. If we feel Anna Karenina's despair but think that she deserves her fate, we could describe our aesthetic identification as empathic but not sympathetic.

Suppose that racist jokes do not necessarily "propagate stereotypes" since, as Cohen points out, such a universal claim is difficult to establish. At least two problems other than stereotyping deserve attention. When a racist joke about someone of my race is told in my presence, there are two ways I might interpret it. On the one hand, the joke cheats me of my individuality, anonymously grouping me with all people of a type. On the other hand, when a person tells a racist joke *intending* to exclude me, they disrespect my cultural identity. Consider this recent real-life situation: a group of my colleagues was discussing the existence of a philosophy list-serve, called 'Hisp-list,' for Latin American philosophers, and one of my colleagues remarked, "They should call it 'Spic-list.'" A round of laughter followed. If the joke teller didn't intend to mock *me*—aiming at Latino philosophers in general, not me personally—the exclusion was in bad faith because everyone there knew that I am a Latina philosopher. There was no reason to exclude me from the mocked group except that I was present. Moreover, I do not

want to be excluded from a group with which I identify. While it is easy to grow weary of discussions about race in American society, and some would like to discard race as a subject altogether, we as philosophers must recognize that analysis of race is necessary so long as people identify and are identified by race and culture.

4. Identification and audience uptake

Ironic racist jokes, those jokes allegedly made at a racist character's expense, and by implication, at the expense of real racists too, share features with straightforwardly racist jokes that qualify them for the same critique. Often, when someone tells a joke intended ironically, some listeners feel uncomfortable even when they recognize the ironic intent. The listener is asked to identify with the racist to make the inferences needed to understand the joke. If the listener does not in fact sympathize with racist sentiments, she is trapped in a perturbing contradiction. Moreover, racist jokes can be disturbing if we are not certain they are intended in an entirely ironic way—in other words, if the joke teller is deploying an element of self-protective irony. While the ironic joker claims an intention to mock racism, if the joke's message survives the irony, then either the irony has failed or it was never intended to reverse the racist message.

Immorality in art works, as David Pole argues, creates an internal incoherence: when a work of art presents an immoral view, it will be jarring, causing a distortion that detracts from the aesthetic impact. However, an immoral view will not distort a work that is immoral as a whole.^[17] Furthermore, in the case of jokes, a nonsensical narrative twist does not necessarily constitute an aesthetic flaw. While internal incoherence detracts from many forms of art, jokes often depend upon it. Consider this, from the anthology *Truly Tasteless Jokes*:

Why didn't the black man want to marry a Mexican?

—He didn't want the kids to grow up too lazy to steal.^[18]

The humor here depends incoherently upon racist stereotypes of blacks and Mexicans as, respectively, criminal and lazy, and upon the counterfactual notion that learned behavior is inherited. With jokes we are ensnared by more problems than arise with the ordinary fictions Pole takes into account. In seeking a basis for ethical criticism that is aesthetically relevant to humor, a critique of mere internal incoherence is inadequate. The formal structure depends on the twisted logic, as is often the case with humor.

As an alternative, Gaut proposes the "merited response" argument. When a work prescribes an unmerited aesthetic response, it is aesthetically flawed. If a tragic love story is more comical than poignant, for example, it is flawed because it has not earned the kind of response it intends. Genre markers are an obvious way that works prescribe a particular audience uptake. Consider Gaut's merited response argument applied to racist jokes. Jokes by definition prescribe humor and stereotyping by definition is unimaginative. Thus, even if

a racist joke successfully manipulates its audience to laugh, the quality of their amusement is subject to criticism. Gaut writes: "The aesthetic relevance of prescribed responses wins further support from noting that much of the value of art derives from its deployment of an affective mode of cognition—derives from the way works teach us, not by giving us merely intellectual knowledge but by bringing that knowledge home to us."[\[19\]](#)

Ironic racist jokes introduce another level of difficulty. Racism is generally unimaginative and racist jokes are correspondingly dull, qualities resulting from the nature of racism itself. It would then seem to follow that racism would constitute an aesthetic flaw. In ironic racism, as I interpret Gaut, the joke prescribes laughter but also unease with the cause of that laughter. The resulting revelatory humor reveals some uncomfortable truth about the world that is usually hidden or ignored. If the revelation is obvious, unenlightening, or unconvincing, the prescribed unease is unmerited and the laughter inappropriate. I believe that such revelation falls flat precisely when the teller lacks empathy with both the subject and the audience. Revelatory humor depends upon the *need* for revelation. Jokes about race often fall flat if the audience is already aware of their irrationality and has suffered from it. An audience that feels empathy for such suffering will also make revelatory humor inappropriate and laughter unwarranted.

When does revelatory humor succeed? Ted Cohen directs his attention to devices for achieving intimacy. A Polish or Irish joke in which it really matters that the character is Polish or Irish demands more of the hearer, involves him more intimately, and gives him a greater opportunity for self-congratulation in his appreciation of the joke. In Cohen's view, then, the devices a joke employs to achieve intimacy with its audience are relevant to its appreciation. However, self-protective irony precludes intimacy. Thus it follows that the role of self-protective irony in joking must also be relevant to its appreciation.

Consider the following offensive joke:

How do you keep blacks out of your backyard?

—Hang one in your front yard.[\[20\]](#)

Cohen would categorize a joke like this as conditional because it requires background knowledge in its audience and affective because the background required is a certain prejudice or feeling. Consider a listener without the necessary background: How would she have access to the joke without concerted effort?

If I analyze the stages of my own response upon hearing this joke, I realize that I first considered the teller: He likely comes from a mostly segregated community. I then recalled hearing an old man on television worrying about undesirables moving into that community's "backyard." I grasped the literal and figurative meaning of *backyard*. I considered the vile American history of lynching black people, the joke's sinister subtext. Finally, I also smelled the stench of a certain nostalgia that anticipates a particular inclination: To get this

joke, the listener must recall the early twentieth century, and a predominantly rural America in which most people had back and front yards and lynching was an essential part of the regime of terror that maintained Jim Crow. A joke like this told to an audience without the requisite background requires too much effort for the uptake of humor than a more straightforward racist joke requires. Apparently, then, it must have been told ironically, since the audience was diverse and lacking the affective disposition I have described. However, the revelatory success of irony also requires conditions not met by this audience. Telling the joke, then, falls into the category of self-protective irony because it demands inferences that convey the straightforward message without intending second-order revelation.

5. Getting it: empathy and affect

If I am the subject of the joke or empathic with its victims, there are certain conditions under which I will not find it funny, conditions that set up a tension between my self-respect and my ability to step outside myself and assume an external viewpoint. When the joke demeans some valued aspect of my identity, aesthetic appreciation requires objectivity beyond the joke's worth; to laugh requires that I rank humor above my own subjective experience. A joke that belittles women would require me as a woman to demean myself. It is one thing to laugh at oneself; we humans are funny animals. Yet a contradiction in values arises when I must *unidentify* with a hard-won and perhaps still threatened self-conception or belief.

I explain Cohen's original explanation for some people's inability to laugh at certain jokes because of a predisposition that interferes with a particular aesthetic value thus:

1. The joke in question demeans X, and I am X.
2. Either laughter is more valuable or X's self-respect is more valuable.
3. Thus aesthetic appreciation in the form of laughter implies negation of the value of self-respect.

Conclusion: Self-respect prohibits laughter and appreciation of X-demeaning jokes.

However, Cohen holds that a personal reaction alone does not establish a joke's immorality: "This does not mean that it is unreal, that you should persist in telling me such jokes on the grounds that is only a personal, subjective matter that they do not agree with me, but it would mean that my complaint that such jokes are in bad taste or unwholesome comes to nothing more than my wish to be free of them."^[21] I cannot condemn the joke in itself; I may merely assert my wish to be free of it.

What if I am predisposed to be offended by a given joke by virtue not of my identity but my empathetic imagination? Consider the following paradigm:

1. The joke in question demeans X, and I put myself in X's shoes (I imagine being X,

specifically, what it feels like to be X in this situation).

2. Either laughter is more valuable or X's self-respect is more valuable.
3. Thus, aesthetic appreciation in the form of laughter implies negation of the value of *imagined* self-respect.
4. Self-respect prohibits laughter at X's.

Conclusion: Empathy for X prohibits laughter at and appreciation of X-demeaning jokes.

I believe that empathy, not sympathy, makes the humor in such cases inaccessible. Being sympathetic to X, I would disapprove of and discourage such jokes, but my sympathy would not necessarily interfere with aesthetic appreciation. If I am kind when I hear a well-constructed racist joke, I might laugh *and then* disapprove, precisely the paradoxical response of the listener who does not like the joke but insists that ethical objections do not prevent his finding the joke funny. Nonetheless, ironic racist joking depends on an absence of feeling that compromises the listener's humanity, and this constitutes an aesthetic as well as an ethical flaw.

When people laugh at racist jokes, even those told ironically, they often feel uncomfortable. Why should someone who finds a joke immoral laugh? I believe a suspension of identification allows the listener to follow the joke's logic while an awareness of the assumptions necessary to get the joke provokes guilty feelings. Identifying with the racist point of view enables the assumptions; shifting away from that point of view entails the guilt. Moreover, perhaps catching the implications too easily makes the listener feel self-conscious about making racist inferences.

Ironic racist jokes are jokes at racists' expense. Here is my favorite example, a philosopher's joke *about* racist jokes, a meta-joke:

How many X's does it take to screw in a light bulb?

—A whole lot, because they are so dirty and stupid.[\[22\]](#)

Here X is not a variable but a constant that signals the variability and thus the irrelevance of ethnicity in this class of jokes. The irony succeeds in part because the joke offends no particular group. The ulterior message demonstrates the absurdity and bad faith of the surface message in ordinary jokes of this form. The irony here is entirely distinct from self-protective irony, through which the speaker invests feeling in the joke's overt message but seeks to disguise that feeling with apparent irony. This is also a good example of revelatory humor, because it shifts the focus of the behind the scene facts of so many offensive jokes: they are meaningless except to express hatred.

I am interested here primarily in neither this rare kind of meta-joke nor in self-protective racist irony, but in ironically

framed and delivered racist jokes as I defined them above. I do not argue that ironic racist jokes numb the heart *differently* from nonironic ones. Rather, I seek to fill the gap where arguments for the immorality of racist jokes fall short. Ironic racist jokes are acceptable to an audience that already rejects racism but feels comfortable with ironic racist joking precisely because its members feel confident in their own rejection of genuine racism.

I have argued that empathy with marginalized people interferes with finding humor in at least some racist jokes, ironic or otherwise. Yet I question how certain individuals who are not racist nonetheless at times find racist jokes humorous?

I argue that this reaction results not from their inherent immorality but because they lack empathy specifically for those who are the object of the joke. Their laughter reflects denial of the real nature of their response, a detachment from the concerns of the real world outside the joke world. When we are "just joking," we claim not to truly believe the ideas we entertain. Such detachment superficially resembles the appreciation some philosophers prescribe for any aesthetic response. In Gaut's terms, the revelatory aspect is lost when the lack of empathy makes the first-order prescription for laughter impossible.

An example may help here. The film *Guess Who?* (2005) attempts an ironic twist on the classic *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* in which a white girl brings her black fiancé home to meet her parents. In *Guess Who?* Theresa Jones, a black woman, brings her white fiancé, Simon, to dinner at her parents' home to meet her family.^[23] By dinnertime her father, Percy, who is unhappy about his daughter's white fiancé and determined to dislike him, has set Simon up for failure several times already. Over dinner, Percy continues to manipulate Simon into revealing how unfit for Theresa he really is. While Percy's motive is to encourage Simon's unwitting self-destruction, the insight lying behind that motive warrants attention.

When Simon comments on his distaste for racist jokes, Percy pounces, asking for examples of the jokes he has in mind, expecting Simon to slide cluelessly down the inevitable slippery slope and expose the chasm between himself and the Joneses, and indeed all who cannot empathize with someone whose racial identity differs from their own. Theresa quickly recognizes the setup and begs Simon to refuse, but he gives in, with the best intentions. Since he tells the jokes ironically, Simon believes no harm can be done:

[Guess Who Jokes Clip \[24\]](#)

Simon's first jokes are met with mild giggling and cause no offense. When Percy encourages Simon to tell more, he obliges. The screenwriters calculate the scene's progression tellingly, with each joke slightly less innocent than the one before. As the jokes become more provocative, they produce bigger laughs. Finally, Simon tells a joke that manages to insult and hurt everyone at the table. Clearly, Simon intended to tell his jokes ironically; he even explicitly stated that by telling such jokes, he believes he lessens their power. Yet despite his explicit intentions, the irony is doomed to failure.

The progression of jokes in the movie's dinner scene demonstrates the subtle distinction between harmless jokes and hateful ones when ironic intentions fail. There is no question of self-protective racist irony in *Guess Who?* The jokes' racist messages are in no way valorized. The Joneses are not insulted because they believe that Simon agrees with the racist message he ironically mocks. Before the dinner scene we witnessed the particularly high value the Joneses place on the dignity of employment. By telling the final offensive joke, Simon has communicated a lack of respect for the experience of workplace racial discrimination. The perceived insult is not rooted in a vague belief that Simon is a racist despite his assertion to the contrary; rather, his offense lies in his singular lack of empathy toward job discrimination.

6. Difference and indifference

Ironic racist joking requires a certain complicit objectivity on the audience's part. Listeners cannot empathize with the particular ethnicity being disparaged. If they merely sympathize, however, they may enjoy the joke despite their ethical disapproval, laughing or conceding that the joke is funny, while then expressing feelings of guilt, discomfort, or even making a comment such as "That's just *wrong*." Cohen insists that our ethical disapproval not blind us to the fact that such a joke is funny.[\[25\]](#)

The problem with racist and otherwise offensive jokes is perhaps less specific than other categories of aesthetic flaw that I have discussed. The arts—and here I consider joke telling a kind of art—enliven our interaction with the world. They teach us to see more, to see more clearly, and to see differently. Eaton emphasizes that the aesthetic is the opposite of the anesthetic, that art should bring the world into focus and make us feel more of the world, not less.[\[26\]](#) When we must detach ourselves from our feelings for others in order to laugh, the intrinsic nature of the aesthetic experience is twisted. Invoking detachment, feeling less of the world for the sake of laughter, numbs the heart, whereas the aesthetic should make life more vibrant.

Aesthetic appreciation of a joke, play, or movie, etc., can result from a performance that overcomes the artistic shortcomings of its text. It is therefore not inconsistent to say that the *Chappelle's Show* is funny *and* at the same time racist if Dave Chappelle's skill as a performer outweighs the faults of his material. People sometimes resist the idea that racist humor fails on aesthetic grounds, simply because they find it funny. They make the case that we can enjoy its comic aspects by directing our attention more to the rhythm or delivery than to the content.

This peculiar form of humor is a kind of distorted mirror image of tragedy in which a listener who does not condone racism laughs at a racist joke. The nonracist listener's pleasure depends upon following a racist joke's inferences to successfully get the joke, while he enjoys something that in principle disgusts him. Likewise, we *enjoy* the sadness resulting from our empathy with a tragic fictional character such as Anna Karenina. Yet when we feel heartbroken at her death, our response is expected and appropriate. By contrast, the controlled attention demanded or even extorted by ironic

racist humor is made possible only by forsaking empathy, as the listener divorces himself from the feelings of those affected and he becomes a complicit if impartial spectator.

When I say that a joke is not good because it is racist, it does not necessarily follow that there is nothing funny in the joke. What does result, however, is that appreciating such humor entails a lack of empathy, for it insists upon numbing the heart. [27]

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Endnotes

[1] Henri Bergson. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1914), p.5.

[2] Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 84. Hereafter, Cohen 1999.

[3] See Aristotle's *Poetics*, Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*, and Tolstoy's *What is Art?*

[4] See Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Hereafter, Gaut 2007.

[5] Marcia Muelder Eaton, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[6] Noël Carroll, "Moderate Moralism," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 36, 3 (1996), 223–238; ref on 223.

[7] Gaut 2007, p. 51.

[8] Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970), p. 62.

[9] Cohen 1999, p. 77.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

[11] Berys Gaut, "The Ethical Criticism of Art," in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 183. Hereafter, Gaut 1998.

[12] Aristotle, p. 19.

[13] Ted Cohen, "Jokes," in *Pleasure, Preference and Value: Studies in Philosophical Aesthetics*, ed. Eva Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 120–36;

ref. on p. 134. Hereafter, Cohen 1983.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 135.

[15] Cohen 1999, p. 79.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 83.

[17] See David Pole,'s *Aesthetics, Form, and Emotion* (London: Duckworth, 1983).

[18] Blanche Knot, ed., *Truly Tasteless Jokes* (New York: Ballentine, 1982), p. 35.

[19] Gaut 1998, p. 195.

[20] Knot, p. 35.

[21] Cohen 1999, p. 79.

[22] I have my friend and colleague, Tim Murphy, to thank for this excellent meta-joke.

[23] *Guess Who?*, dir. Kevin Rodney Sullivan; written by David Ronn, Jay Scherick, Peter Tolan, and William Rose (2005; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, USA, 2005), DVD.

[24] <http://youtube/djGLBzR4FDg>.

[25] Cohen 1983, p. 77.

[26] Eaton, p. 210.

[27] A warm thank you to the anonymous reviewer of *Contemporary Aesthetics*, whose thoughtful comments contributed much to improve this paper.