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# The Pleasure in Cruelty is the Point: Reflections on The Souls of White Jokes

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PRE-PRINT VERSION
DATED: February, 2023

# *The Pleasure in Cruelty is the Point: Reflections on The Souls of White Jokes*

*Book review of The Souls of White Jokes: How Racist Humor Fuels White Supremacy.
Stanford University Press, 2022, by Raúl Pérez, Reviewed by Jessie Daniels.
Paperback ISBN: 9781503632332*

I grew up hearing racist jokes. In the Texas of the 1960s and 1970s of my youth, they were simply background noise, like the radio. Even though our neighborhood in Corpus Christi was ethnically diverse with families on our block from Mexico, Greece, and Italy, there was also a deep current of anti-Blackness.

One of my father's favorite jokes, not in the least funny, was a retort to any positive mention of Black people ("I don't have anything against Black people," then a pause, "I think everyone should own one"). This was such a common refrain for him, it was practically his tag line, and he enjoyed the provocation in delivering it. But racist jokes were neither unique to my family nor to that time period. In the 1980s, for example, a book with many overtly racist jokes called *Truly Tasteless Jokes*, remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for over twenty weeks, as Raúl Pérez reminds us.

What are we to make of racist jokes? This is the central question of Raúl Pérez's excellent, if impartial, *The Souls of White Jokes.* It arrives at a time when the racist far right is ascendant, partly due to deploying humor and memes to spread white supremacist ideology. When confronted about this, the deflection - *it's just a joke* - is well rehearsed and frequently deployed. Pérez asks readers to take the fact of racist humor seriously. In so doing, he illuminates a fact about white people that we would rather ignore: we enjoy them.

The book opens with a telling example from a police officer, Sergeant Cleon Brown of Hastings, Michigan, who was raised white and believed in his own whiteness. In 2017, Brown took one of those commercially available DNA tests. It revealed his genetic ancestry to be "18% Subsaharan African." After sharing this surprising result with his fellow officers, Brown and his supposedly "new racial identity" became a "running joke at the station," as his coworkers began to relentless harass him with racist jokes to the point of abuse. Brown sued the city of Hastings, and in 2018 they paid him a meager $65,000 to settle the case, with the added stipulation that Brown had to resign from the force. Pérez uses this case study as the jumping off point to ask the reader to set aside the excuses made for racist jokes and reflect on the very serious work that this kind of humor does in upholding white supremacy.

Pérez starts his discussion of theory with W.E.B. Du Bois's foundational "The Souls of White Folks," originally published in *The Independent* in 1910, for which I am grateful because as Aldon Morris has documented, Du Bois's contributions to the sociology of race and ethnicity are often overlooked. Pérez goes on to build a theoretical argument that weaves in the insights of Emile Durkheim's "collective effervescence," in which people who experience something simultaneously become excited and unified around that experience. Alongside this is a brief discussion (too brief, in my view) of Sigmund Freud's idea that jokes are an expression of the unconscious. He also includes the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal who in his 1940 study of *An American Dilemma*, identified a "white sense of humor."

Pérez goes on to discuss C.W. Mills' epistemology of ignorance, the idea that we who are raised white are hobbled by that upbringings, rendering us unable to fully understand the very world we have helped create. Joe R. Feagin's concept of the white racial frame, his concept in which white people have combined racial stereotypes (the cognitive), metaphors and interpretive concepts (a deeper cognitive aspect), along with images and emotions in order to justify and explain systemic racism.

From here, Pérez ties all these theoretical threads together when he writes: "…what is rendered in the process is not only a theory of racist humor but of a "white sense of humor," – a humor that has played, and continues to play, a significant role in the racial pleasure, subordination, and cultural politics of racism in white-dominated societies that lack multiracial democracy" (p.41). Pérez acknowledges that the humor under investigation here is "not a new phenomenon, despite the new ways it manifests."

The key concept in the book is that of "amused racial contempt." By this, Pérez means that "racism is not only about ignorance or hate, but about reproducing a pleasurable racial solidarity." (p.48) As someone who has studied the far right for more than thirty years, Pérez's intervention strikes me as innovative and important because it provides a way out of the limiting framework of "hate," and moves us into the much more troubling terrain of "pleasure," to explain the enduring appeal of racism and white supremacy. Prominent figures on the far right, such as David Duke, have been saying for decades some version of, "I don't hate anybody, I just love white people" (Daniels, 2009). Pérez's work helps point us in the direction of the understanding the complicated emotional valences of white supremacy.

Pérez does this by examining amused racial contempt in three contexts: 1) among the far right, in publications such as Tom Metzger's the printed newsletter *White Aryan Resistance* and in online forums frequented by the so-called alt-right, 2) in law enforcement, and, 3) among political candidates and elected officials. The selection of these three sites of investigation, from avowed white supremacists like Metzger and his contemporary progeny to the agents of state-sanctioned violence, including police and politicians, Pérez makes another contribution to our understanding of the "extreme" and "mainstream" of white supremacy. The notion of "extremism" when it comes to white supremacy is often a way for white people of more middling political views to take comfort in the fiction they do not have any role in upholding the existing racial order.

The idea that white people take pleasure in telling racist jokes is at the core of Pérez's argument here, but as compelling as this is, it doesn't go far enough. His emphasis here is on "racial solidarity" is rooted in a Durkheimian notion of society. There is simply no way that the theoretical tools layed out here can help us to understand the deeper forces driving the cruel enjoyment in the suffering of others.

Take, for example, the research of Stanford University psychology researchers Rebecca Hetey and Jennifer Eberhardt. In a 2014 study, they investigated what might move the dial on white people's enthusiastic support of prisons. They informed white participants of the higher racial disparities in incarceration rates; in other words, that African Americans are locked up more often than other groups. Rather than rousing compassion, they found that white people in the study reported being even more afraid of crime and more likely to support the punitive policies (Hetey and Eberhardt, 2014). This research on implicit bias demonstrates that racism often operates at a level below the purely cognitive (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995). Connected to this is the research on the "white empathy gap," which refers to our collective failure to empathize with Black people when it comes to the very real consequences of systemic racism (Gutsell and Inzlicht, 2012).

But even the extensive research on implicit bias and the white empathy gap does not go far enough to explain the clear evidence that a significant portion of white people enjoy seeing people suffer, especially when we perceive them as racialized Others. For this, sociology must rely on the insights of psychoanalysis to explain these deep psychic structures. In her classic sociological text, *Sadomasochism in Everyday Life*, Lynn Chancer makes the connections between sociology and psychoanalysis clear (Chancer, 1992). She notes that while the sexual connotation of sadomasochism is the most well-known manifestation of this, it is not the most common. Instead, the dynamic of sadomasochism pervades our relationships, our schools, and our workplaces. This is the social psychology that capitalism and patriarchy have wrought, leaving us in a repetitive cycle, reenacting rituals of dominance and submission. In the plainest terms the dynamic is this: we inflict pain on others because we enjoy it at some level, then we resent the person we are harming for making us feel bad about it. If we expand Chancer's ideas about sadomasochism to include race a pattern becomes clear, and it is possible to see this pleasure in cruelty in two disparate but related events that occurred on the same day.

On May 25, 2020 George Floyd was murdered, slowly and with a defiant, self-satisfied pleasure, by Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer. Some twelve hundred miles away in New York City's Central Park, a white woman named Amy Cooper threw her voice up to a higher, damsel in distress register, as she dialed 911 and told the police dispatcher that an "African American man is threatening me." The Black gentleman in question, a peaceful, gay, bird-watcher named Christian Cooper, recorded her on his phone while she nonchalantly strangled her dog, and looked defiantly back at his cell phone camera. Derek Chauvin's face has the same defiance as he stares down the seventeen-year-old Black girl who recorded George Floyd's murder. The cruelty in both of these moments – one death-by-cop, the other a threat to do the same – are about inflicting pain on racialized Others, specifically Black people, as nonchalantly as Amy Cooper strangled her dog. As both these videos swirled into social media virality, many were outraged (Daniels, 2021, p.215). Pérez's work forces us to ask a tougher question: what do we make of the white people who shared those videos and enjoyed them for the way they affirmed our basest inclinations, just as white people of an earlier generation circulated lynching photographs like greeting cards?

The defiant satisfaction of a Minneapolis cop and a nice white lady in Central Park are not the precise same kind of pleasure as Pérez's amused racial contempt, but they do rhyme with it. There is something much deeper and more sinister happening with us, people raised to believe in our whiteness who, emboldened by that upbringing murder or threaten to murder our fellow humans, and then enjoy circulating the photos afterward. Related to this is the self-satisfied pleasure of white liberals who built the ever-expanding gulag of prisons and jails that lock up Black and Brown people at levels the UN has called a human rights violation (Murakawa, 2014). It is a complex pleasure in cruelty, in which feelings of comfort, safety and superiority, as well as amused racial contempt, sit at the center of white supremacy whether it manifests in jokes or calls to 911 or knee one someone's throat for 8 minutes and 46 seconds as they cry out for their mother. To be fair, most graduate programs in sociology do not teach psychoanalysis (unfortunately) and so I can understand why Pérez might not have included more on this.

I am less magnanimous about is the erasure of gender here, which is a common mistake in writing about race (Hull, Scott, Smith, 1982) and whiteness (Ferber, 2007). In the introduction, there are nods to the work of Sara Ahmed's affect theory and her notion of "happy objects," a critique of the contemporary social compulsion toward happiness. There is also a brief mention of Patricia Hill Collins' idea of "controlling images," for the way that stereotypes, particularly of Black women, serve as mechanisms of social control. But these are passing references to the work of two towering feminist scholars and they do not appear in the more extensive discussion of theory in a later chapter. The approach to feminist scholarship here seems extractive: taking "happy objects" and "controlling images" but leaving behind the feminism. I mention this not simply to call attention to the politics of citation (Smith, et al., 2021), but because gender is so centrally relevant to the white supremacy. By turning the lens of our attention to the far right, to policing, and to politics, yet leaving out the way gender and sexuality shape this ideology is both an oversight of the existing literature (e.g., Daniels, 1997; Ferber, 1998; Marwick and Caplan, 2018). It also makes this text much less useful for understanding the way white supremacy operates and what to do about it. This failure of intersectionality here opens the door for subsequent narrow and unhelpful takes about misogyny being a "gateway" to white supremacy (Romano, 2018).

That said, I appreciate Raúl Pérez's*The Souls of White Jokes* for helping me understand a bit more about my father's enjoyment of telling racist jokes. As a child, I responded the way most kids do to "dad jokes," with a groan and a roll of the eyes. While I didn't understand much about the landscape of my father's, not to mention the world's, white supremacy, I did intuit that he enjoyed repeating racist jokes. As Sigmund Freud observed, that repetition is key to understanding unconscious motivation. We return to traumatic events again and again when we cannot process them consciously. For my father, the repetition was a form of repeating a trauma that he learned somewhere: to discipline whoever had allowed an explicit and favorable mention of Black people to enter a conversation and adjust the trajectory back toward racism.

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