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# 1

## Comic Racism and Violence

*Michael Billig*

Freud, in his book *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905/1960), argued that we constantly deceive ourselves about the reasons why we laugh. We like to believe that we laugh at the clever wittiness of jokes, but, as Freud argued, our pleasure may derive from less creditable sources that we do not care to acknowledge. Otherwise why should there be so many sexual and aggressive jokes? If, as Freud supposed, an element of self-deception surrounds much humour, then this would be especially true of racist humour today. The category 'racist humour' is itself contested. Because the prevailing standards condemn prejudice, people will like to believe that their behaviour, including their taste in humour, does not offend those standards. Those who laugh at ethnic jokes are likely to deny that their humour is racist. They will typically claim that they are 'just joking', defending themselves with a phrase that Goffman described as being one of the most commonly used in the English language (Goffman, 1974). As will be seen, there are academic versions of this position, defending the status of 'ethnic humour' from the criticism of being racist. On the other hand, the term 'racist humour' can create problems for those who criticise the telling of racist jokes. For them, the problem does not arise from the 'racist' part of the phrase 'racist humour'. It derives from admitting that racist humour belongs to the category of 'humour'. Generally, humour is acknowledged to be something good. In the present era, possessing a sense of humour is seen as a self-evidently desirable virtue (Wickberg, 1998). Psychologists and sociologists have also argued that humour possesses positive functions (see Billig, 2005, for a critical discussion of this tendency). Racist humour, then, cannot be humour because it is neither funny nor does it serve positive functions.

However, that is too simple a reaction. The category of 'humour' contains disturbing instances. Even racist and non-racist humour are not sharply distinguished as if they are totally different phenomena, sharing no common intrinsic properties. Indeed, the same basic joke can have racist and non-racist variants. Simon Critchley, in his book *On Humour*, gives an example of a joke that possesses a critical function because it mocks the pretensions of those in power:

How many men does it take to tile a bathroom?

I don't know. It depends how thinly you slice them.

(Critchley, 2002: 11)

Critchley classifies this joke as 'true humour' for it 'changes the situation, tells us something about who we are and the sort of place we live in, and perhaps indicates to us how it might be changed' (ibid.). Such a joke plays with accepted forms, and thus makes the accepted structures of society unreal. Critchley goes on to acknowledge that much humour is not of this type, but is reactionary and reinforces social consensus. Instances of such reactionary humour are jokes that laugh at the supposed stupidity of outsiders. Critchley specifically cites ethnic humour: 'the British laugh at the Irish, the Canadians laugh at the Newfies, the Americans laugh at the Poles ...' (ibid:12.). His list does not include whites laughing at blacks. Nor does he mention that the target of the 'true' joke is substitutable. Instead of it being about men tiling a bathroom, it can be about Irish, Newfies or Poles. Or, as will be seen in the contexts of deepest racism, it can be 'niggers'. The disturbing fact is that one word changes a joke from being 'true' humour to the most bigoted humour. To use Freud's terminology, the 'joke-work' is identical. And if the joke is clever 'true' humour in the one form, why, with one different word, does it suddenly become reprehensibly unfunny? Any theory of racist humour must confront this problem.

This chapter looks at the sort of unambiguously racist humour represented by the racist version of the tiling joke. This is a type of humour that analysts, including both Critchley and Freud, have tended to overlook. In order to avoid misunderstanding, the issue of terminology must be discussed. The chapter looks at racist jokes taken from Websites that support the Ku Klux Klan. Such jokes include offensively racist terminology. The analyst is faced with a dilemma: whether to quote the terminology of the original or to replace offensive words by dashes or asterisks. There is no completely satisfactory

solution to the dilemma for the arguments in favour of retention and replacement both have validity. The argument for replacement is based on the assumption that some racist terminology is so offensive that it should never be reproduced. Even if terms are being quoted, the mere fact of reproduction threatens taboos against their usage, thereby contributing to the perpetuation of a vocabulary that should never be employed. The argument for reproduction stresses the context of reproduction. In the course of an analysis of racism, the offensive words are not being used in a simple sense. They have become the topic of analysis. It is not possible to analyse racism without looking at its vocabulary, in the same way as a historian of Nazi ideology must quote from offensive texts such as *Mein Kampf*. Indeed, the bowdlerisation of the phenomenon itself is dangerous, for it might soften the full ferocity of extreme racism and bigotry.

A decision, nevertheless, has to be taken by anyone writing on these issues. Accordingly, I shall reproduce the racist material as it is found, without substituting the offensive terms (see Billig, 2001a, for a further justification of this strategy). Because the arguments for and against this strategy both have validity, it should be stressed that the decision is not an easy one. The argument has an extra dimension in the context of racist humour. Sometimes it is said that racist jokes are not serious because they are jokes. That is an argument that will be criticised later and is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of racist humour. It has been claimed that the portrayal of fictional characters uttering racist remarks or jokes can be humorous, because the audience is laughing at such characters. That was the justification for the racist remarks made by characters such as Alf Garnett in the BBC sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part* or Archie Bunker in the US sitcom *All in the Family*. Again, the reproduction of racist terminology for comedic purposes is deeply problematic. The context of reproduction is all important. The present context is that of analysis, not entertainment. It is not expected that any readers will laugh at the jokes. Rather it is expected they will be horrified that anyone might find such material humorous. In this regard, the terminology is certainly not retained for comedic purposes – quite the contrary, it is retained to expose for serious analytic purposes the unfunny aspects of so-called humour.

This leads to the problem of the word ‘humour’. Often when writers or speakers call a joke ‘humorous’ or classify it as an example of ‘humour’, they are indicating their own stance towards the funniness of the material. The word ‘humour’ is not being used in this sense.

Humour is the object of analysis, not the judgement of the analyst. There is a case for saying that the concept of humour needs to be critically questioned, in order to understand the social biases of humorous material. Such a critique cannot assume the funniness, or worse still, the moral goodness, of what is described as 'humour' practices (see Billig, 2005, for a discussion of the need for a critical approach to humour). Accordingly, the word 'humour' will not be put into protective apostrophes. Treating racist jokes as jokes does not mean that the analyst finds such jokes funny. As noted above, it is presumed that no reader of this chapter will laugh at any of the examples of racist humour. Nevertheless such jokes are examples of humour, for they are treated as being humour in the contexts in which they are produced. The bathroom-tiling joke does not analytically cease to be a joke when its target is racial and that target is identified by an explicitly insulting epithet. Accordingly, the category of 'humour' is being treated as an analytic category, not as a sign that the analyst personally derives amusement from what is being labelled as 'humour'.

This position is part of a wider critical view of humour which has been elaborated elsewhere (Billig, 2005). This approach seeks to analyse critically views that celebrate humour and downplay humour's cruelties. Such views, it is argued, overlook the central role of ridicule in maintaining social order. Humour fulfils this universal social function because social actors wish to avoid the possibility of ridicule (see also Billig, 2001b). All cultures may use humour to maintain social codes, but there are no universal social codes and so no universal humour. This is not just a matter of differences between cultures. Within all cultures, there will be debates and conflicts about what constitutes appropriate behaviour. Accordingly, there will be debates about the appropriateness, morality and funniness of humour. Thus, humour is a matter of moral, political and aesthetic debate.

The present critical approach draws upon the theories of Freud and also of Bergson, both of whom stressed the role of cruelty in humour (Billig, 2005). For them, cruelty and aggression were not peripheral features that might occur in some unfortunate examples of humour, but were central to the social and psychological functions of humour. Consequently, the present analysis does not seek to protect the category of 'humour' from discreditable instances, as if cruel and immoral jokes could not possibly be humour, or at least 'true' humour. For this reason, racist humour will be treated as a type of humour, but not, of course, as humorous.

## **Ethnic humour and racism**

If racist humour is to be considered as an example of humour – and to be analysed as such – then it must be conceded that racists may possess a sense of humour. This assumption is likely to be contested or, at least, found to be disturbing, given that possessing a sense of humour is often taken as a mark of a desirable well-rounded personality. It is easier to imagine racists as being humourless individuals, with their racism representing a psychological deficit. Certainly psychological theories of bigotry encourage such an assumption. The authoritarian bigot has been characterised as the sort of person who likes clear-cut rules and is unable to appreciate the ambiguities of jokes (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1988). It may be reassuring to believe that prejudiced people lack humour but there is little evidence to confirm the assumption. Extreme right-wing speakers use irony, sarcasm and humour as much, if not more, than mainstream speakers, and fascist propaganda frequently includes material that is humorous in its intent (see Billig, 2001a, for further discussion). Sartre (1948), in his analysis of anti-Semitism, argued that extreme bigots constantly mock liberalism's standards of rationality. They do not necessarily believe in the outlandish exaggerations of their own beliefs. Sartre's point is a disturbing one: there might be an intrinsic connection, not a complete disjunction, between humour and prejudice. This possibility needs to be explored. The first requisite for such an exploration is not to be over-protective about the category of 'humour'.

There is a further reason for countenancing a link between prejudice and humour. The 'just joking' defence of ethnic or racial joke-telling often rests on an assumption that because a remark is spoken as humour, it cannot be genuinely racist. Genuine racism, on this account, is serious. There is a notable academic version of this defence and its underlying assumption. Christie Davies (1990), in his major work on ethnic humour, classifies ethnic jokes according to the stereotypes they express. He analyses jokes that depict groups as stupid, dirty, mean, canny, cowardly or militaristic and he argues that there is no link between prejudice and the enjoyment of such jokes (see also Davies, 1988). According to Davies, those who tell ethnic jokes do not necessarily believe that ethnic group members really possess the stereotypes depicted in the jokes. Davies suggests that Jewish jokes, using stereotypes about money, are not necessarily anti-Semitic, for anti-Semites use devices other than jokes to express their animosity. He

writes that 'even today, when direct expressions of anti-Semitism rightly provoke criticism, anti-Semites have other preferred disguises than humour with which to cloak their animosity' (1990: 125). In arguing against those who view ethnic jokes as a sign of prejudice, Davies asserts: 'let us not also forget that jokes are first and foremost jokes' (ibid: 119). Thus, ethnic jokes are primarily 'just jokes' and racists are 'just racists', who would not waste their time telling jokes. As will be seen, Davies avoids examining unambiguously racist, or anti-Semitic, humour. Other analysts have taken protective stances towards ethnic humour. Often this can involve pointing out that two groups may equally joke about each other in seemingly benign and mutual ways. Gundelach (2000), analysing the jokes that Norwegians, Swedes and Danes tell about each other, suggests that ethnic joking can produce 'joking relationships' between groups, thereby reducing inter-group tensions. These jokes trade on well-known stereotypes that each group holds about the other.

Critics of ethnic humour, on the other hand, deny that jokes using unflattering ethnic stereotypes are harmless. According to Husband (1988), the repetition of such jokes serves to sediment stereotypes in the public mind, thereby perpetuating prejudice and racism (see also de Sousa, 1987). Boskin (1987) advances a similar argument in relation to white jokes about blacks in the United States. He links 'Sambo' jokes, in which blacks are depicted as childlike, superstitious figures, to the history of racism. Significantly, Davies hardly discusses these jokes in his survey of ethnic joking, just as Critchley omitted such jokes in his admittedly brief list of jokes that mock outsiders. Freud, too, did not discuss anti-Semitic jokes in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (see Billig, 2005, for details). It is as if there is a long history of analysts who wish to celebrate the virtues of humour while not looking directly at humour's unambiguously racist forms.

Two features can be mentioned about the debate whether ethnic jokes are 'just jokes' or whether they validate prejudices. First, the issues often seem to revolve around the role of stereotyping. Davies (1990) depicts stereotyping as constituting the basis of ethnic jokes: 'The general theme of these jokes is the pinning of some undesirable quality on a particular ethnic group in a comic way or to a ludicrous extent' (ibid: 4). The debate about the morality of ethnic joke-telling often focuses upon whether joke-tellers believe in the stereotypes expressed within the jokes and whether the telling of such jokes has the effect of perpetuating stereotypes as harmful representations. Davies, by claiming that the joke attributes the stereotype in a ludi-

crous manner, implies that there is no literal belief in the stereotyping and, because the stereotyping is acknowledged to be humorous, not serious, there is no lasting ill-effect.

A second point is that the debate often assumes that it is possible to determine whether a joke is prejudiced or unprejudiced by examining its content in the abstract, rather than studying the social contexts in which a particular joke is told. For instance, Oshima (2000), in a survey of ethnic joking in Hawaii, distinguishes between healthy and unhealthy ethnic jokes. The implication is that healthiness is a property of the joke itself and can be ascertained by its content. Similarly, Davies (1990) notes in defence of telling jokes about Jews being money-conscious that Jews often tell the same jokes about themselves as do non-Jews. If Jews tell such jokes then the implication is that the jokes cannot be anti-Semitic.

However, this sort of argument presumes that the meaning of a joke is contained within its explicit formal content. Thus, one can determine whether a joke is or is not racist by examining that content in the abstract. However, if joke-telling is a social phenomenon then the meaning of a joke can be affected by the context of its telling (Fine, 1983; Mulkay, 1988; Norrick, 1993 and 2003). As discourse analysts have stressed, the meaning of utterances must be understood in relation to the context of their utterance (Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1993; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). People do things with talk and what they are doing cannot be understood if the text of the talk is examined purely in terms of formal semantic meanings. For example, the meaning of ethnic epithets can change depending on context. The term 'nigger' will have a different meaning if it is used as a form of address by young black American males amongst themselves than if shouted by a Ku Klux Klan member from a passing car at a black pedestrian in the southern United States. If ethnic words can change their meaning depending on context, then so possibly can ethnic jokes, especially those that use terms such as 'nigger'. Therefore, the context of joke-telling is crucial for understanding the meaning of jokes.

In an analysis of an actual episode of joke-telling, Sacks (1992) showed how the joke's meaning was discussed and contested by the participants themselves (see also Mulkay, 1988; Hay, 2000; Norrick, 2003). It is possible – indeed it is likely – that the telling of an ethnic joke by members of the ethnic group will differ from its telling by outsiders. Insiders, who tell ethnic jokes about themselves, will acknowledge that there are limits within which the joke is being told. Sometimes when an insider tells a joke that repeats conventional

stereotypes, the joke can be understood and enjoyed as mocking stereotyping and prejudice, as Don Kulick (2000) has argued with respect to gay jokes. In this sense the target of the joke can be ambiguous. For instance, Freud analysed Jewish *schnorrer* (beggar) jokes as mocking the traditional religious codes that required the rich patron to give to the beggar. In this interpretation, Freud was putting himself in the position of the patron. The same jokes can also be enjoyed as a triumph of the impoverished beggar over his wealthy patron (Billig, 2005). If the joke is told by a beggar to an audience of beggars, the meaning of the laughter is likely to differ than if told by a wealthy patron to a wealthy audience. As a general rule, therefore, it is necessary to understand the context in which a joke is told and not just determine its meaning in the abstract.

### Meaning and context of racist jokes

To move forward debates about ethnic humour, a particular type of unambiguously racist joke will be analysed. As has been mentioned, an important part of the debate has been whether the stereotypes in ethnic jokes should be taken seriously or not – or whether even a joke qua joke can provide ethnic and racist stereotyping with implicit validation. However, by no means all racist jokes trade on stereotypes. The bathroom tiling joke, in its racist form, mentions no stereotype. It represents a type of joke that has been largely ignored by analysts of racist humour.

To understand the meaning of jokes – even unambiguously racist jokes – the context of the joke must be considered. Context does not necessarily refer to the immediate person-to-person context in which a joke is told. It can also refer to a more general ideological or political context that can affect the meaning and understanding of a joke. The role of the more distal context in affecting a joke's meaning can be illustrated in relation to Freud's distinction between the joke-work of a joke and the tendentious purpose behind the joke. The joke-work refers to the technical properties of the joke and the devices it uses to produce the humorous effect. The tendentious purpose refers to the emotional impulse that the joke might express. As Freud argued, the force of a joke frequently derives from its tendentious purpose. Most typically, according to Freud, the tendentious purpose is to express a forbidden desire, principally an aggressive or sexual impulse. We laugh more at tendentious jokes than we do at non-tendentious ones, but we convince ourselves that we are laughing at the cleverness of the joke-work. In this we deceive ourselves, for it is the tendentiousness that

provides the greater impulse to laughter. There is, in fact, experimental evidence that people are affected by the choice of targets of aggressive jokes, but are convinced that their enjoyment derives from the joke's technique not choice of target (Zillman, 1983).

Because joking occurs in a social context, then the recipients of a joke by their laughter validate the expression of the forbidden feeling. Freud's insights can easily be applied to racist jokes. Joke-tellers convince themselves that they are 'only joking' and that their jokes do not express real prejudices. Under the cover of the joking situation, prejudiced thoughts can be expressed and socially enjoyed. In this way, the downgrading of outsiders escapes the censure that would inevitably accompany the expression of 'serious' prejudice in many contemporary discursive situations. The joking context creates a temporary situation which seems to permit laughter at exaggeratedly stereotyped unreal members of the outgroup, as jokers celebrate the funniness of their joking and deny their own racism.

The importance of context for understanding the meaning of jokes that express aggression against a target group can be illustrated by considering a joke that Veatch (1998) cites to illustrate his theory of humour. Veatch's theory stresses how humour sets up expectancies of normality and then violates these expectancies. It is basically a variant of the incongruity theory, that looks at the semantic incongruities that structure jokes (see, for example, Giora, 1991, for an excellent analysis of this type of semantic analysis). In Freudian terms, these are theories that examine in detail the joke-work, rather than the underlying tendentious impulses. Veatch suggests that jokes sometimes present the violation before the 'normal' explanation of the violation. He offers an example:

Q: What do you call 1000 lawyers chained to a rock at the bottom of the ocean?

A: A good start!

Veatch suggests that in this case the joke works because the violation, which is a description of mass murder, precedes a 'normal' explanation – and it is incongruous to explain an abnormal event with a 'normal' explanation. Irritation with lawyers is a familiar feature of contemporary society, so the unusual event, suggested by the joke's question, is being explained by something disproportionately banal. One might note that the joke does not attribute any particular stereotype to lawyers but it assumes that recipients will hold negative stereotypes.

Veatch might have added that the joke uses what Freud called the technique of 'exaggeration'. Part of the humour is derived from the sug-

gestion that mass murder might be an appropriate response for the irritation caused by lawyers. Since the sort of person who might tell the joke will probably encounter lawyers in handling divorces, wills and house-sales, the murderous response is knowingly out of proportion to the shared irritation one might have about lawyers. No-one, including joke-teller and recipients, is seriously advocating the mass murder of lawyers. That is the point of the joke. Indeed, it is possible for lawyers to tell the joke among themselves, as they confidently laugh at the low esteem with which they might be held by their clients. The telling of the joke amongst lawyers would assume that none of the auditors genuinely feared that they might be murdered by their clients.

One can imagine the joke being told in a very different context, which would alter its meaning. For instance, there might be a totalitarian state, in which the so-called enemies of the state are regularly prosecuted and executed by the political authorities. Lawyers may act in defence but the state authorities may frequently judge the lawyers to be equally as culpable as their clients, because they are committing the crime of defending the state's enemies. In consequence, the authorities often execute lawyers for their 'crimes'. One might imagine 'the lawyers at the bottom of the ocean' joke being told in this state among the supporters of the regime. Then, the humour would not derive from exaggeration, for the joke is hardly exaggerating anything. Because the murder of lawyers is actually taking place, the joke would be urging extension of something that is occurring, rather than fantasising about something unreal. The basic joke-work would be similar in the two versions. However, the morality of the two tellings would be very different, as would be the tendentious force of any resulting enjoyment.

The 'good start' joke also has a racist version. It is not lawyers who are chained to the bottom of the sea, but black people. When this version is told by white people, then its tendentious force is likely to resemble the totalitarian version of the lawyer version, because racist murders of black people have taken place and continue to take place. The similarity to the totalitarian version would be even more unambiguous if the tellers of the 'black' version were members of a white racist organisation that has a history of violence, including murder, against black persons. It would be a celebration of the idea of racist murder in a context in which actual racist violence takes place. Such a telling would be on a par with an anti-Semite joking that the Holocaust was a good start. In this sense, the humour of irritation and the humour of hatred might use the same joke forms, but the tendentious force behind the similar joke-work has a very different meaning.

## **Ku Klux Klan joke sites**

The racist version of the 'good start' joke expresses violence without stereotyping. As such, it does not fit the category of ethnic jokes that, according to Davies, attribute unfavourable characteristics to others. It represents a type of racist joke that has been little explored by analysts. A corpus of racist jokes will be examined. These come from the unambiguously racist context of a Ku Klux Klan supporting Website which offers jokes. Such sites are not officially sponsored by Ku Klux Klan groups but their KKK sympathies are evident (for more details of such Websites and their links, see Billig, 2001a). I have previously focused on the 'metadiscourse' of such humour, examining the discursive meaning of disclaimers that the material was 'just a joke'. I argued that the KKK humour is never 'just a joke', for, amongst other things, it presents and celebrates a racist view of the world that was being taken seriously. The material itself often claimed to be more than a joke, as its authors indicated that a stereotype of blacks was, indeed, 'no joke' but was based on 'fact'. This earlier analysis did not examine jokes qua jokes, but concentrated on the more politically based material of humour, such as parodies of other formats, including dictionary entries, board games and advertisements.

The jokes studied here are taken from a Website entitled 'Nigger Joke Central' (NJC), produced by [Whitepower.com](http://Whitepower.com). This site specialises in jokes sent in by readers, thus providing an archive of contemporary extreme racist materials. The index page displays the White Power symbol and a Ku Klux Klan motif. By clicking on the KKK motif (which bears the legend 'My Brothers – the Klan'), the site provides a direct link to a Ku Klux Klan Webpage Index. This in turn gives links to individual Klan organisations. NJC, as is to be expected given its title, does not hide its racism. The site has an index page of 'Racist Jokes' that provides entries to 14 types of jokes; that is, 'Faggot Jokes', 'Hispanic Jokes' and 'Yo Mama Jokes'. The pages which are studied here are the 'Nigger Jokes' (NJ), 'More Nigger' (MN) and 'More Nigger Jokes' (MNJ). The very name of the site and its pages establishes the unambiguously racist context of the joke material.

Many of the jokes to be found in these pages can also be found on the various 'sick joke' Websites, and thus they have a wider circulation than the circles of the extreme right and its sympathisers. Some analysts of sick jokes have stressed that the primary motive of sick jokes is to shock and to break taboos and, in consequence, any sensitive topic is liable to attract bad-taste jokes (Dundes, 1987). It might be argued

that the tendentious motivation behind sick ethnic jokes, such as Holocaust jokes and also violent racist jokes, lies not in racism *per se* but in the desire to outrage decency. This might explain why such jokes appeal particularly to adolescent boys. Treating ethnic jokes in this way, of course, would fit the arguments of those who wish to divorce ethnic joking from prejudice.

It is at this point that context becomes crucial. It is hard to make the argument that such joking is not racist when the jokes are being transmitted in an explicitly racist context. The sites in question specifically promote the jokes as racist humour and the continual use of the word 'nigger' in this context unambiguously links the jokes to a racist perspective. These are not jokes that happen to be told by Ku Klux Klan supporters. The joke-tellers, in sending their jokes to the Website, have specifically wished to see these jokes portrayed as racist jokes in a context that supports the Ku Klux Klan. In transmitting these jokes the tellers are demonstrating their political loyalties and their racist hatred. If this joke-telling is not racist, then it would be hard to know what would qualify for that label.

### Characteristics of violent racist jokes

The first step is to identify the defining characteristics of a violent racist joke, so that it will be possible to distinguish between this type of joke and the sort of stereotyping ethnic joke that is more frequently studied by humour researchers.

The 'good start' joke can be considered as a violent racist joke when its target is blacks or any other ethnic group. Details of the joke can vary without necessarily affecting its status as a violent racist joke. The number of victims is not essential, nor is the chaining. On NJ the question in the joke takes the form: 'What do you call 50,000 blacks in the bottom of the sea?' MNJ uses a different wording: 'What do you call 15 niggers chained together at the bottom of the sea?' The punch-line is identical: 'A good start'. The choice of epithet used to describe the victims is not essential: the joke does not cease to be racist or violent if 'black' is used rather than 'nigger'.

The variants of the joke contain four basic features that will be used as defining characteristics of the violent racist joke:

- 1 *Racial/ethnic victim and context.* The joke has a victim or victims who are identified by their race or ethnicity, and the joke is told either in an immediate or more general context of prejudice, discrimination and violence against that group.

- 2 *No stereotyping*. The joke contains no stereotyping of the ethnic or racial group; the victims of the joke are not said to possess a particular characteristic that has led them to be victimised.
- 3 *Passive racial/ethnic victim*. The victim of the joke is not depicted as an actor in the joke's action, but is merely the recipient of violence on account of membership of a racial or ethnic group.
- 4 *Racist violence as humorous*. The punch-line presents the idea of racist violence and this violence is the point of the joke. The violence, therefore, is not incidental to the joke, but is integral to its point.

The racist 'good start' joke qualifies on all four criteria. The joke contains no descriptions of the characteristics of the victims who themselves only appear in the joke as victims. The punch-line introduces the idea of deliberate violence and the joke celebrates the death of the victims because they are blacks.

None of the four criteria mentioned above refer specifically to the joke-work or to the formal properties of a joke that mark it out as a joke. Consequently, it is expected that violent racist jokes will use joke-work to be found in other jokes, rather than employ joke techniques that have been specifically created for this type of humour. The 'good start' joke uses the techniques of normalisation and violation identified by Veatch (1998). Its switch from apparently asking about tragedy to exulting in violence is an example of what Raskin (1985) describes as a joke's text employing two semantic scripts of interpretation (see also Giora, 1991). Because the violent racist joke does not employ a specific form of joke technique, it is possible for the same joke-type, and thus the same joke-work, to be found in variants that are not specifically racist jokes. The lawyer version does not have a racist/ethnic victim and the joke is not being told within an ideological tradition of violent prejudice against the victim of the joke. The 'black' KKK version has a direct linkage to an ideological tradition of violence. The joke is not playing with an exaggeration of response but is suggesting that the actuality of racist violence is a matter of fun.

### Frequency of violent racist jokes

The number of jokes possessing all four defining characteristics of the violent racist joke was computed for each of the three KKK joke pages. Table 1 presents the total number of jokes on each page and the number of violent racist jokes.

Table 1 Number of violent racist jokes per KKK Webpage

Page	Violent Racist Jokes	Total Number of Jokes	Percentage of Violent Jokes
NJ	16	135	11.85
MN	6	39	15.38
MNJ	25	210	11.90
Total	47	384	12.24

It can be seen from Table 1 that over 12 per cent of the total number of jokes were violent racist jokes. These results suggest that a consistent and substantial minority of extreme racist jokes are violent racist jokes. It should be mentioned that the total number of violent jokes does not constitute 47 different jokes. Many of the jokes, whether violent or stereotyping, appear on more than one page. For example, the 'good start' joke, as has been mentioned, appears on two pages. Moreover, the same basic joke, whether violent or not, can appear in different versions both within and across pages.

The definition of the violent racist joke is strict, in that it was formulated to distinguish the violent joke from the sort of ethnic/racial joke that plays with stereotypes. The type of joke, which is here being recorded as a violent racist joke, is a *purely* violent joke, deriving its whole humour from the notion of racist violence and depicting the victim purely as victim. Jokes about racist violence, which also use racist stereotypes, are not included in this count. For this reason, it would be wrong to conclude that over 80 per cent of the KKK anti-black jokes contain no violent themes. In fact, racist aggression is common throughout the corpus. The point has been to identify a type of racist violent joke that does not contain stereotypes.

### Types of joked-about violence

Although violent racist jokes might possess common characteristics, they do not all joke about precisely the same sorts of violence. Distinctions can be made between Fantasy Racist Violence, Political/Historical Racist Violence and Banal Racist Violence. Examples of each will be given.

*Fantasy racist violence.* In some of the jokes, the violence appears as mythical, unreal or unlikely to occur in actual life. One joke on both the NJ and MNJ pages is a modern version of the pied-piper story. The joke tells of a man buying a brass sculpture of a rat in an antique store.

When he takes the sculpture out, he notices that rats start to run after his car. The man drives his car towards the river and jumps out at the last moment. The rats follow the car into the river and drown. So the man returns to the antique store to ask the seller whether he had any brass statues of blacks.

The violence might be unreal, for the events depicted in the joke are not expected to occur. However, the joke depends for its effect on the recipient finding enjoyable the idea of someone wishing to kill blacks. Thus, the joke represents a fantasy of unreal violence, but it assumes the psychological reality that the fantasy will be shared by recipients of the joke.

In some instances the recipient of the joke is enrolled into the fantasy by the syntax of the joke. This is clear in the racist version of the joke that Critchley (2002) identifies as 'true' humour:

How many niggers does it take to roof a building?

Ten if you slice them thin enough.

(NJ; variant about wallpaper on MNJ)

Again the violence takes a fantasy form. No violent racist is actually going to cut black people into slices in order to make roof-tiles or bathroom tiles. Although the violence is fantasy, the context of the joke and its telling is marked by actual racist violence. This distinguishes the racist version of the tiling joke from the radical feminist version, admired by Critchley. Feminist politics has no political heritage of lynching, burning or murdering males. The joke of the feminist variant is that women might wish they engaged in such things, but they do not. Racists joke about violence, knowing that racist violence has been and continues to be perpetrated. The joke is part of a political context that almost certainly will perpetrate further acts in the future.

The joke uses the pronoun 'you' to indicate the perpetrator of the fantasised violence: 'if *you* slice them thin enough'. 'You' as a deictic pronoun is ambiguous (Mühlhäusler and Harré, 1990). It indicates the specific person or persons being addressed; at the same time it refers to people in general, or what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971) called 'the universal audience'. In this way, the specific addressee is made to stand for people in general. In the case of the roof joke and other such racist jokes, this universal audience is assumed to be racially circumscribed. 'You', by assuming its audience to be white, excludes blacks from the universal audience. Moreover, the 'you' takes it for granted that the universal audience will wish violence upon blacks. In

this way, the wish for racist violence is treated as something that the universal audience would universally and normally wish for. Thus, the joke rhetorically enrolls the recipient into the racist community, which is presented as if it were the universal community. Although the violence might be fantasised, the existence of racists, who might celebrate such violence, is assumed by the joke to be real and to be normal.

*Historical/political racist violence.* In some of the KKK jokes the form of violence alludes to the types of violence that have been practised historically against blacks in the United States. Such jokes can be analogous to the sick Holocaust jokes described by Dundes (1987), in that they make the serious topics of racist violence into a joke. As in the Holocaust jokes, the violence can be attributed to other racist actors, rather than the joke directly enrolling recipient and teller in the idea of perpetrating violence:

What's black and white and red all over?  
A Ku Klux Klan house-warming party!

(NJ and MNJ)

Again, the context of the telling is important. In some contexts, the joke might appear primarily as a joke about the Ku Klux Klan, who might be considered distanced from teller and recipient, rather as many Holocaust jokes are about German Nazi actions. On the KKK supporting Websites, however, there can be no presumption of distance. The Ku Klux Klan is 'us' not 'them'. In this context, the joke shares the ideological heritage of the perpetrator, and thus it shares the violence of that heritage.

Some of the jokes use 'you' to enrol the recipient in the historically perpetrated racist violence of the Ku Klux Klan:

How do you keep niggers out of your back yard?  
Hang one in the front.

(NJ, MN and MNJ)

The joke does not ask how a racist third party would keep blacks out of their backyard. It directly addresses the recipient, asking how they would do so, while simultaneously universalising the recipient as a general 'you'. 'You' is not necessary for such a joke to express a shared presumption of the desirability of violence:

What do niggers and apples have in common?  
They both look good hanging from trees.

(MNJ)

In these jokes, the teller is not conjuring a fantastic image of racist violence, as in the pied-piper joke. It is no coincidence that the jokes refer to 'hanging' rather than any other form of murder. The jokes, especially when told in the context of the KKK, implicitly refer to the historical tradition of lynching: the tellers are positioning themselves and their recipients within that historical tradition. On other pages of the KKK joke Websites, actual lynchings are celebrated as objects of mirth, illustrated by actual photographs of black victims (Billig, 2001a). The jokes that enrol the recipient perform a similar function. They are not merely breaking taboos by joking about a topic that should not be joked about, as do many Holocaust jokes (Dundes, 1987). These jokes are more directly associating themselves with violent actions: they celebrate past historical racist violence, while fantasising its present and future recurrence.

*Banal racist violence.* There is a range of jokes whose violence is neither fantasised nor a reference to the ideological tradition of the KKK, but refers to the sort of accidental violence that might be encountered in ordinary contemporary life. In the main these are jokes about road deaths. The joke-work involves a sudden shift of semantic structure. An event is presented as a tragic accident, but to understand the punch-line the recipient has to reinterpret the tragedy as a deliberate act of violence because of the racial identity of the victim:

What's the difference between a dead dog in the road and a dead nigger in the road?  
Skid marks in front of the dog.

(NJ, MN and MNJ)

What's the difference between a pothole and a nigger?  
You'd swerve to avoid a pothole, wouldn't you?.

(NJ)

What do you do if you run over a nigger?  
Reverse.

(MNJ)

The latter two variants use 'you' as a form of rhetorical enrolment. The second emphasises the enrolment of the recipient by the addition of 'wouldn't you?', as if the joke is alluding to a natural, expected reaction that 'anyone' would have. Once again, the whiteness and racism of the 'universal audience' are assumed. Such jokes depict a world in which any white would wish to run over and kill a black person should the opportunity present itself. As in all these jokes, the word 'nigger' serves to identify the teller with this depicted world of racist hatred.

### **Concluding remarks**

This analysis of extreme racist humour contains implications both for theoretical debates about the nature of humour and also for wider debates about the inappropriateness of certain forms of humour. Theorists, who have sought to justify ethnic humour as playful and essentially innocent, have tended to overlook the nature of violent racist humour. Their analyses have often concentrated on the use of stereotypes in jokes and they have suggested that jokingly exaggerated stereotypes are not to be confused with 'real' stereotyping. Such arguments tend to give ethnic humour a clean, or almost clean, bill of health. However, this is achieved by ignoring the sort of violent jokes that are based on aggression, not stereotyping. One might suggest that the strategy of defending ethnic joking by concentrating on stereotyping depends upon a form of avoidance: the blatantly cruel and bigoted aspects of humour are ignored. This sort of avoidance is not peculiar to analysts of ethnic humour. The phenomenon is much wider. Today, there is a general cultural climate that looks favourably upon humour. Social scientists have contributed to this climate by producing theories that tend to sentimentalise humour and avoid examining its more problematic and crueller aspects. In this context a critical approach to humour is called for (see Billig, 2005, for more details). Certainly, it is possible to claim that defenders of ethnic humour downplay the social importance and problematic nature of humour when they imply that a joke is 'just a joke'. This is where the material discussed in this chapter can act as a reminder. It is hard to look at the extremes of racist humour and conclude that these are 'just jokes', as if 'just joking' excuses, or even explains away, the phenomenon.

It might be argued that the extremes of racist hatred comprise something separate from the general category of ethnic humour, and thus what has been discussed here is far removed from other, more 'respectable' forms of ethnic joking. It would be wrong, however, to conclude that violent racist jokes stand apart from stereotyping jokes

and that the latter represent more 'moderate', and thereby more 'acceptable' forms of joke. As has been mentioned, many of the jokes on the KKK Webpages are stereotyping jokes. The jokers make no distinction between the two types of joke, grouping them both under the label of 'racist jokes' and 'nigger jokes'. The fact that 'nigger', a term of extreme racist abuse, is used in both forms of joke indicates that both are used to derogate their victims and to celebrate a racist perspective. Moreover, the violent jokes are not rendered any less violent should they employ less offensive terminology to describe the ethnicity of their butts. An invitation to enjoy imagined violence is offered regardless of the epithets employed. In Freudian terms, the tendentious nature of the joke does not depend on the offensive nature of the terminology. It might be enhanced by the presence of knowingly offensive epithets, but it is not diminished by their absence.

The violent racist joke, especially one that is told in an overt racist context, represents an unambiguously racist form of humour. Its existence should act as a caution to any theoretical attempt to oversentimentalise humour. The question is not whether humour is in itself desirable or undesirable: what matters is the nature of the humour and the purposes that it serves. In the current cultural climate, which overvalues humour as being intrinsically desirable, critics of various forms of humour, including racist humour, can find themselves at a disadvantage when they contest the morality of certain examples of humour. They can be accused of lacking a 'sense of humour', whose desirability is taken for granted. The charge is easily made. However, the continuing existence of unambiguously violent racist humour illustrates that a so-called 'sense of humour' does not exist in the abstract. Different people – different ideologies – may find different things funny. The morality or immorality does not lie in the fact that people may be prepared to joke and laugh. The morality lies in the nature of the humour. So, when the charge of 'lacking a sense of humour' is made, the critic can reply that there exists a body of joking to which the appropriately moral response is not laughter, but outrage – and that such humour has no place within a moral society. On that basis, the critic can then proceed to debate the undesirability of other forms of racist, sexist or violent humour, that seem more ambiguous.

Certainly, the material that has been presented here can be used to question an assumption that is easy to make: namely that tolerance is on the side of humour and that bigotry knows no laughter. Psychological theories, as well as common stereotypes, lend themselves to depicting the bigot as stern-faced and lacking all sense of enjoyment. It

is a dangerous assumption: the bigot, in effect, can say 'Look, I can enjoy a joke and therefore I cannot be a genuine bigot'. However, bigotry is not without its own enjoyments, as Blee (2003) has shown in her analysis of the world of the Ku Klux Klan. This raises Sartre's neglected and disturbing idea that there may be an integral connection between bigotry and humour. The bigot derives pleasure from being outrageous, enjoying the freedom from the constraints of liberal rationality and truth. In this respect, bigotry is itself a form of mockery – indeed, for the bigot it becomes a form of fun.

If these notions are taken seriously, then this would entail re-evaluating many assumptions about the psychology of bigotry (Billig, 2001a and 2002b). Much previous work has portrayed the bigot as too emotionally fragile, too inhibited and too cognitively rigid to enjoy the pleasures of humour. The temptations of bigotry may include pleasurable temptations, and this may help to explain the persistence of bigotry. In this respect, racist jokes are not, and never can be, 'just jokes'. In addition to being jokes they are racist. And as such, they are serious. And as the tentaciously violent history of racism suggests, the racist joke can be more than 'just serious' – it can literally be deadly serious.

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