Mary Douglas' “Implicit Meanings”

In her book, *Implicit Meanings*, the anthropologist Mary Douglas explores the roles jokes play in mapping points of tension or transition within a culture. Only a thin line separates jokes and insults. The joke gives expressive form to an emergent perspective within a culture — something which is widely felt but rarely said. When a joke expresses a view already widely accepted, it becomes banal and unfunny. When a joke says something the culture is not ready to hear, it gets read as an insult or an obscenity. The job of the clown is thus to continually map the borders between what can and can not be said. This is why a good comedy routine is accompanied as often by gasps as by laughter.

I was reminded of Douglas's perspective on jokes when I recently participated in a screening and discussion of Sarah Silverman’s new film, *Jesus is Magic*. For those of you who have not heard of her yet, Silverman is a former *Saturday Night Live* writer who sparked national controversy in 2001 when she told a joke about “chinks” on Conan and when she defended
the joke on Bill Mahr’s *Politically Incorrect*. The Silverman controversy has resurfaced in recent months both because of a rather memorable appearance in *The Aristocrats* and because of the release of a film documenting her standup comedy show. She has recently been profiled in *The New Yorker* and *Entertainment Weekly* and is currently shooting a pilot for her own series on Comedy Central.

To understand the controversy, we have to return to the now infamous joke she told on Conan in 2001. She was explaining that her various efforts to escape jury duty and her friend’s suggestion that she could try to come across as prejudiced on the questionnaire by writing “I hate chinks.” Silverman pauses, suggesting that she would consider being embarrassed to make such a comment, even in jest, and so instead she wrote, “I LOOOOVE Chinks — and who wouldn’t.”

Greg Aoki, the president of the Media Action Network for Asian Americans, argued that the network showed a double standard in allowing the word, “chink,” to air when it would almost certainly have bleeped “nigger.” The network and host later apologized for the decision to air the joke but Silverman refused to apologize, contending “it’s not a racist joke. It’s a joke about racism.” The controversy is one which looks differently depending on whether our focus is on the words used (Aoki rightly sees “chink” as a word deeply entwined in the history of racism in America) or the meaning behind them (Silverman is right that her comedy ultimately raises uncomfortable questions about how white people “play the race card.”)

Writing in *Asian Week*, columnist Emil Guillermo argues that rather than seeing Silverman’s joke as “fighting words,” they should use it as “talking words,” as the starting point for discussing the current state of American racism. This is not what *Aoki experienced* when he tried to challenge the appropriateness of Silverman’s joke during their mutual appearance on *Politically Incorrect*, where the host and guests questioned his sincerity, made fun of his name, called him names, and cut him off when he tried to link the jokes to recent incidents of racial violence. And it is not what Silverman experienced when her critics simply label her a “racist” without exploring what she was trying to say.

How can we distinguish between racist jokes and jokes about racism, especially with the deadpan irony that is Silverman’s hallmark? Most of us have no trouble thinking of cases where jokes have been directed against minorities as a racist exercise of power. Yet we should also keep in mind the many different ways that comedy has been used to challenge racism — think about the first generation of African-American comics who went into black, white, and multiracial clubs and confronted their audiences with words and concepts that were designed to create discomfort; think about the ways that underground comics like R. Crumb sought to “exorcise” the history of racial stereotypes in his medium by pushing them to their outer limits; think about shows like *All in the Family* which exposed the ways that previous generations of sitcoms had remained silent about the bigotry which was often at the heart of American domestic life. And then there are jokes which are funny simply because they are “politically incorrect,” that is, because they thumb their nose at anyone who would set any limits on speech whatsoever. Perhaps most strikingly, there are jokes which deny the reality of both race and racism simply by refusing to talk about it at all. When was the last time that you heard a joke on a late-night talk show (Okay — outside the *Daily Show*) that you remembered the next morning, let alone one which provoked debate four years later.

Critics have read Silverman’s comedy as simply “politically incorrect.” There are plenty of times when Silverman’s jokes are, to use Douglas’s definition of obscenity, “gratuitous intrusions.”
Yet, at its best, her comedy reflects on the problems of living in a culture where old racial logics are breaking down and new relationships have not yet taken any kind of definitive shape and where there seems to be no established language for speaking to each other across racial lines. Her most consistent target is a white America which is so busy trying to watch its step that it falls on its own face. Several deal with the challenges of negotiating mixed race or multi-ethnic relationships. For example, she gets upset when her half black boyfriend objects to her “innocent compliment” that he would have made “an expensive slave” because he has “self-esteem issues,” smugly insisting, “He has to learn to love himself before I can stop hating his people.” This is after she has suggested it would be more “optimistic” to say that he was “half white” rather than “half black.” At another point, she describes a particular audience as “black,” then corrects herself to say that it was “African-American,” then decides it was “half and half.” Or again, she talks about how she and her Christian boyfriend will explain their religious beliefs to any future offspring: “Mother is one of the chosen people and Dad believes Jesus is magic.”

Sarah Silverman

Silverman’s jokes do not in any simple or direct way represent her personal views; rather, she has adopted a comic persona (perhaps multiple personas) through which she reflects confusions and contradictions in the ways that white America thinks about race and racism, much the way some hip hop performers have argued that the views about race, criminality, and sexual violence they express through their songs are attempts to make visible some of the issues confronting their community. In both cases, critics have tended to read such personas literally. There are no words to describe whiteness which have the same sting as “chink” or “nigger” and so she has to perform whiteness, against a backdrop of other racial identities, so that it can recognize itself in all of its insensitivity and self-centeredness.

Consider, for example, a Silverman routine about her lust for a jewel which is formed by de-boning and grinding own the spines of starving Ethiopian babies. There is a level to the joke
which is simply funny because of the cruel and insensitive way she is speaking about human suffering; there is another level, however, which works not unlike the way that Jonathon Swift’s similarly-themed, “A Modest Proposal,” works, exposing the infinite flexibility with which we can rationalize and justify the exploitation of the third world. Silverman delivers the joke with what New Yorker writer Dana Goodyear calls “quiet depravity”: “The expression that lingers on her face is usually one of tentative confusion or chipper self-satisfaction, as if she had finished her homework and cleaned up her room, and were waiting for a gold star.” She doesn’t smirk; she honestly thinks she has no real prejudice or animosity even as she bases her everyday decisions on gross stereotypes. Hers is the face of what cultural critics have called “enlightened racism,” the smug satisfaction with which white Americans excuse ourselves for our own lapses in taste and judgment as long as they do not become too overt or openly confrontational. As she describes this jewel, she hits a moment of conscience, realizing that they probably exploit the “unions” which mine the babies’ spines, but then concedes, “you have to pick your battles.”

Early in the jewel routine, she describes her acquisitiveness as “so JAP,” then pausing to explain that she doesn’t mean “Jewish American Princess” (a stereotype which she has self-consciously embodied throughout the routine) but rather “Japanese.” Instantly, she moves from a stereotype which is more socially acceptable (if only because she would be making fun of her own group) and into one which is totally unacceptable (and the joke only works if we recognize the offensiveness of the word). Indeed, she plays often on the ambiguities of her own status as white and Jewish — sometimes speaking as a member of an oppressed minority, other times blending into a white majority, and often making this desire of Jews to escape their minority status a central theme in her work. It crops up for example when she makes bitter comments about contemporary Jews who drive German-made cars or when she tells a joke about Jews who want to escape racist charges of having killed Christ by blaming the Romans (and then pushing this historical scapegoating one step further by suggesting that personally she blames the blacks.)

Silverman’s comedy depends upon the instability created as we move from thinking of race in black and white terms towards a multi-racial and multi-cultural society. A previous generation of comics would not have made jokes about Asian-Americans or Hispanics because they simply were not part of the way they envisioned America. Much contemporary race theory has sought ways to move us beyond simple black/white binaries in the ways we think about racial diversity. As recent demographic trends suggest, America is rapidly moving towards a time when Caucasians will be in the minority but they are not being replaced by a new majority culture: rather, America will be more ethnically diverse — some would say “fragmented,” “balkanized,” or “disunified” — than ever before and there has been few successful attempts to build coalitions across those diverse populations.

A musical number in Jesus is Magic self-consciously maps the fault lines in this new cultural diversity: dressed like a refugee from an Up With People concert, strumming a guitar, looking her most wide-eyed and innocent, she wanders from space to space, gleefully singing about how much Jews love money, how little blacks like to tip, how well Asians do at math, and ends with a particularly choice lyric about blacks calling each other “niggers.” Then, the little white woman looks over and sees two angry looking black men who glare at her for a long period of silence; then they start to laugh and she tries laughing with them; then they stop laughing and glare at her even more intensely and for an agonizingly long period of time. It is hard to imagine a comedian who is more reflexive about the nature of their own comic practices or more insistent that the audience stop laughing and think about the politics of their own
Much of the Silverman controversy centers around what anthropologists often call joking relations: in any given culture, there are rules, sometimes implicit, often explicit, about which people can joke with each other, about what content is appropriate for joking in specific contexts. During times of social anxiety, these rules are closely policed and transgressions of these boundaries are severely punished. Yet, in times of greater security, cultures may suspend or extend the rules to broaden the community which is allowed inside a particular set of joking relationships. But who determines which jokes are safe and permissible? She openly courts such questions by appearing on The Jimmy Kimmel Show, doing verbatim versions of Dave Chappel skits. Can a white woman make the same jokes as a black man or does changing the race of the performer change everything?

Comedy in the 1990s seemed often about securing boundaries as comedians emerged who could articulate the self perceptions and frustrations of different identity politics groups: Asians made Asian jokes, Blacks made black jokes (and sometimes about white people), Jews made Jewish jokes, and white comedians mostly avoided the topic of race altogether. This places an enormous burden on minority performers not simply to speak on behalf of their race but to bear the weight of any discussion about racism. And of course, when black comedians made jokes about black people, they often did so in front of white or mixed audiences. Just as white comedians were uncertain whether they could joke about race and under what circumstances, white audiences were uncertain whether they could laugh about race and under what circumstances. Silverman has thrust herself out there, saying it is time for white comics to joke about race, and has faced the inevitable push-back for trying to change the rules of discourse.

Contemporary cultural theorists have been urging a move away from identity politics towards one based on coalition building: race will not go away simply because we refuse to talk about it and we cannot meaningfully change how we think about race as a society by remaining within our own enclaves. Consider, for example, Frank H. Wu’s Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White. Wu is an Asian-American professor who has chosen to teach at Howard University Law School, a historically black institution, because he wanted to create a context where Asian-Americans and African-Americans can learn to communicate across their racial and ethnic differences. Wu argues that for such coalitions to work, one has to put everything on the table, confront past stereotypes, examine historic misunderstandings, give expression to fears and anxieties. We can’t work through the things that separate us until we feel comfortable discussing them together. This isn’t simply something that has to take place between different minority groups: there has to be a way where whites can express their own uncertainties about the future without being prejudged.

Jokes may fuel such social transformations because they force us to confront the contradictions in our own thinking. They are valuable precisely because the same joke will be heard differently in different contexts and thus can help us to talk through our different experiences of being raced. As Wu writes, “Race is meaningless in the abstract; it acquires its meanings as it operates on its surroundings. With race, the truism is all the more apt that the same words can take on different meanings depending on the speaker, the audience, the tone, the intention and the usage.” Mary Douglas similarly suggests that the reason our culture has such trouble drawing a fixed line between jokes and obscenity is that unlike traditional cultures, we do not occupy “a single moral order” and there are no agreed-upon boundaries.

And that brings us back to Guillermo’s appeal that Silverman’s “chink” joke might be used as
“talking words.” From my perspective as a white southern-born male, Silverman is raising important questions about race and racism which white audiences need to hear if they are going to come to grips with a multicultural society. From Aoki’s perspective, the same joke evokes a painful history, using words that many Asian-Americans hear too often. At the risk of sounding naive and idealistic, maybe that’s something we should be talking about, however awkward the conversation is apt to be.

Links:
Rotten Tomatoes
The New Yorker on Sarah Silverman

Image Credits:
1. Mary Douglas’ “Implicit Meanings”
2. Sarah Silverman

Please feel free to comment.

Comments

• Carly Kocurek (Author) said:

performing racism

Jenkins raises a number of interesting points about race, gender, performance and racism. Sarah Silverman seems to be able to slip between being “white” and being “Jewish.” Both of these identities play into her stage persona and her ability (and sometimes conscious inability) to grapple with racism.

Silverman’s own awareness of how the performer’s identity is readily apparent, as evidenced by her regurgitation of jokes from Dave Chappell’s program. However, how well would Silverman’s jokes work if she were, for lack of a better term, less cute? Would Roseanne Barr, for example, be able to tell similar jokes?

- November 8th, 2005 at 1:39 am

• Carly Kocurek (Author) said:

Nerve interviews Sarah Silverman

Nerve interviews Sarah Silverman about Jesus is Magic

- November 9th, 2005 at 1:39 pm
**Stephanie Liu (Author) said:**

Racist Jokes

Much like the Abercrombie and Fitch controversy, making racist comments about Asians as opposed to African-Americans is more widely accepted because of the way the two different races are viewed. The history of Asians are that they are meek and will tolerate discrimination, but African-Americans are seen as more threatening, thus the word “nigger” is more inappropriate, while “chink” is seen as acceptable. Silverman denies the fact that it is a racist joke, but there is a fine line between laughing with stereotypes and at them (In Living Color), and she has stepped over it for the sake of humor.

- November 12th, 2005 at 12:25 am

**Karlo Montano (Author) said:**

Silverman’s cuteness

The boarder between banal, funny and obscene seems to be popular ground treaded by comedians as dave chappel, carlos mensia as well as Sarah Silverman. Jenkins does a good job outlining the complexities in reading Silverman’s routine and use of racist images. i think its interesting, as the first poster commented, the difference in reading if Silverman were less attractive. IMO, Silvermans appearance seems to play a very central role in her racist satire, evoking the disarming naivite of the middle class white woman, safe from racism in the confines of colorblindness, living in an all white suburb, who may even have some black friends. I think that if Roseanne Barr were tell such jokes, audiences would be more willingly to read the text as racist due to the “othered” associations with lower economic class (her TV character Roseanne), similar to the backwardsness of white “hillbillies” and “crackers,” who aren't the morally upstanding middle class WASP.

- November 12th, 2005 at 6:49 pm

**Andre Powers (Author) said:**

“Exposed” but Unchallenged

The author of the article seems to applaud Silverman’s exposing the contradictions in our racial thinking, but I think it’s important to note that her jokes do very little to try and challenge those racist ideals. As much as she “exposes”, she does nothing to counter the racist notions she spouts, but rather adds only an idea of harmlessness to them as they are in the context of humor and are then laughed at but not really questioned. In addition to this, we really don’t know her true intentions when writing those jokes. Perhaps she really feels the stereotypes she jokes about are true, and is only upset because she is not allowed to use them, not because they exist in our society. When she
quotes Dave Chappel she highlights only the contradiction of racism being ok within one’s own race, not the fact that the racism exists. While she does bring race and racism out into the open, I certainly would not applaud her ambivalent approach to discussing it. Sure she makes us realize our racial ideologies, but for all we know it’s only because she wants to be able to make nigger jokes.

-November 13th, 2005 at 1:09 am

* Jeremy Garren (Author) said:

Hurtful Catalyst

I’d like to add that although Silverman’s “chink” joke may spark discussion, it does so primarily by insulting. In and of itself, her joke offers nothing in the way of intelligent commentary on race, so the burden of actual debate is left upon those that feel slighted by her words, like Guy Aoki. In other words, any genuine discussion that can come from her joke first depends on someone feeling offended enough to raise it as an issue. The cost of her “talking words” is someone, perhaps many people, being hurt.

I would change Guillermo’s description of Silverman’s act from “talking words” to “hurtful catalyst.”

The “chink” joke incites debate in the same way that a hate crime might – by angering individuals to the point that they will speak out, as Aoki did.

Jenkins suggests that Silverman is just acting out comic personas and that “critics have tended to read such personas literally,” but people don’t get immunity from consequence just because they are acting. Silverman has responsibility for her own words whether she means them or not. Given her anger in ‘Politically Incorrect’ towards Aoki when she loses it, says she hates him, and calls him a “douchebag,” perhaps Silverman herself is taking her own personas too literally.

-November 14th, 2005 at 2:25 am

* Danielle (Author) said:

Not funny

Many white performers, or shall I say Sara can perform her skits, becuase she’s mainly in front of an white audience. She doesn’t like most black comics have to work both a white and black comedy circuits. I really don’t find her humor funny, especially when she talks about race. You can poke fun at race, but she’s mostly offensive. I read where she says the best time to have a baby is when your a black teenager. Obviously she telling these jokes in front of a white audience so how brave is she???I’m not impressd, becasue most white women come off as meek, she gets points for trying to be controversial..Not impressed!!!!

-November 14th, 2005 at 2:26 am
Nicole Flores (Author) said:

Shock Value and Racism

Sarah Silverman’s shock value comedy routine has sparked much controversy and the question of whether the routine is purely to expose the contradictions and issues associated with our society, especially white America. I realize that Sarah Silverman’s routine can entirely be viewed and accepted as blatant racism. I also realize many people believe that the reasoning behind these jokes can be disguised by “shock value” that attempts to expose the racism in our culture. A few of the comments above mention that Sarah Silverman exposes the racism, but leaves the exposing unchallenged. I understand that there are techniques in which “challenging stereotyping” is used to battle long-standing ideas with race in our society. However, I do NOT believe that her approach with racism is entirely ambivalent. Typically, shock value is used to generate discussion and controversy. I am not attempting to minimize Sarah’s comments, I just believe that as a comedienne her stand-up routine isn’t meant to turn into a discussion hour on race concert, but rather used as a catalyst or idea to go on and discuss after hearing or viewing. Comedians are generally unapologetic, especially when it comes to their material. So while Sarah Silverman’s material may be unfavorable to people because of its racial content, she hasn’t moved to apologize. So instead of dwelling on things that she(amongst other comedians) will not apologize for, I believe people should continue to voice their opinions and their grievances and be ready to discuss it. Waiting for apologies, instead of actively discussing issues just seems to fuel the fire and material that comedians continue to use unapologetically. As a woman, I also believe that Sarah receives more attention because her comments are biting, nasty, rude, and often bashingly satirical of society. In the past, women were typically viewed as subservient housewives that didn’t really have a voice. Sarah uses the first amendment in every way. She’s has something to say, whether approved of or not, and she’s going to say it. Entirely offensive, harmful, or detrimental to society’s view on race, when her jokes fly out…they sting. I completely believe that the sting is entirely intentional. The sting is meant to spark interest, not only in her material, but for others to realize how contradictory racism can be.

In other words, to sum up, I don’t believe that Sarah actively wants to pursue challenging stereotypes. Her shock value tactic and unapologetic approach identifies racial slurs for what they are...unapologetic commentaries on race in our society. The author mentions “All in the Family” as an example of bigotry and “politically incorrectness.” Sarah Silverman is the new and more obscene Archie Bunker.

November 14th, 2005 at 12:39 pm

Jerod Couch (Author) said:

Jokes

Jokes are jokes… sometimes people take them way to far… sometimes you should just
take it as a joke... comedians don’t take themselves to seriously and in my opinion don’t
take too much time to consider their impact on society and being PC… not to say that
they shouldn’t… I just don’t think they do… Jokes are offensive… but in life sometimes
you are going to be offended… go out in the world and just listen to what people say and
I guarantee you that you will here something worse than the name “chinks”… by the way
I agree with the TV stations that they would have bleeped out the N word if substituted

- November 14th, 2005 at 3:20 pm
• **Bo Shin (Author) said:**

Laughing at or laughing with stereotype

The controversy stirred up by Silverstein reminds me of a concept that had been
addressed in class called contesting from within. It really is difficult to discern
where the boundaries of jokes lie in terms of telling racist jokes or telling jokes about racism. Part
of the controversy regarding Silverstein, like many comedians, is that if the actor or the
source of the joke is not of the same race as the role or subject, then it’ll automatically be
regarded as laughing at the stereotype. Although I agree that it is necessary to open up
the way for a mature discussion about race, telling jokes (whether it’s racist or seeking
to open way for race, whatever) is not the way to go about it. Not only is this an immature
way to go about it, but people who are treating the serious topic of race as a ‘joke’ are
being insensitive and ignorant to the history and experiences of those victims of
stereotype.

- November 14th, 2005 at 7:19 pm
• **Jackie O'Rourke (Author) said:**

is it her fault we value attractiveness

I find it interesting that so many comments are centered around Silverman’s’s
attractiveness and class standing. I am not sure how this makes the point that she is
racist. It does however comment on what Americans value as a society which is a whole
separate thought. Silverman uses her standing as a white attractive middle class female
to bring focus on racial differences rather than continue on with the colorblind traditions
of white America. Roseanne Barr would most likely be viewed as racist and comparably
to white trash if making the same jokes, but I do not think that reflects the quality of the
jokes but rather the structure of our society. Silverman utilizes her cuteness in with
attempts to contrast our traditional views of racism. I can not say that I know personally
that she is not racist, but whether she is or isn’t is moot. We should as the author
suggested use her comedy as a talking point rather than try and silence comedians bent
on pointing out flaws in our society.

- November 14th, 2005 at 8:39 pm
• **Zacchaeus Scott (Author) said:**
not the right person

Jokes are supposed to be funny but also tasteful. It seems to me that Sarah Silverman jokes are aimed at getting laughs and making her money than taking a stand against racism. It’s easy to say that the jokes are funny when you are not the person being made fun of. The case was made that she is trying to make people laugh at the stereotypes rather than with them, but she does not have creditability. She is trying to bring awareness to problems and situations among minorities but she looks like the oppressor. I think it is difficult for racism to be discussed by the oppressor than if the oppressed were making the same jokes. Richard Prior was that comedian who could tell the most racist insensitive jokes in front of anyone, white or black, and make them laugh and not be called a racist. His intentions were known by the audience and I think Sarah Silverman’s intentions are not known so they may sometimes be taken the wrong way or blown out of proportion.

- November 14th, 2005 at 9:49 pm
  • Sheila Lee Lopez (Author) said:

Putting the issue Out There

Silverman’s multi-racial jokes can be viewed as a way to put the issues of race, and who can say what about who, out there. However, a word like “chink” no matter if the majority views it as less inappropriate than “nigger” still carries a negative connotation with a history of racism. Silverman can argue that she confronts the issue of white comedians being able to joke about race, but historically when have white bigots or racist not? Is it really a progression, or the concept of laughing with stereotypes instead of at them, or is it simply a white woman’s mean to reinforce the history of racist jokes no matter how multi-racial the jokes or the ethnicity or race of the comedian?

- November 15th, 2005 at 2:06 pm
  • Elissa Malek (Author) said:

Talking About Race

There are not many comedians that cross the invisible racial lines that have been defined by what is socially acceptable to laugh at. Silverman, however, does raise the topic of race within the United States with her sometimes tasteless jokes. Whether her audience is laughing at or with the joke is important, but at least the jokes are bringing the problems about race within the U.S. to the forefront of discussion. Nothing can improve the race problem and discrimination without the conversational stimulant which Silverman provides. Even though Silverman has been criticized for creating controversy but the question is if she or other comedians were not so boisterous in their jokes about race would it still be a topic of discussion in a society that would rather ignore the problem than attempt to fix it out of fear of offending others.
-November 15th, 2005 at 2:08 pm

**Jordyn Hunter (Author) said:**

reversing stereotypes

I think that Silverman could just be transcoding the stereotypes many minorities feel about white people. She is getting her audience to laugh with her about the stereotype that white people are racist rather than laugh at her.

- November 15th, 2005 at 3:31 pm

**Jessie Evans (Author) said:**

The Problem is Society's

If Sarah Silverman's intention is in fact to make fun of racism then the problem is not her, it's society. Just like Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal", Silverman's comedy is misinterpreted. When people read Swift's work they believed he was actually proposing they eat babies! Now, when people hear Silverman's comedy they think it really is comedy. It's an embarrassment our society that we think the things she says are funny. In a perfect society, Silverman wouldn't have a job as a comedian. But, since our society is not perfect and jokes are only funny if one group is being made fun of and another is being lifted up, she is very successful. If I had a dime for every racist or "Yo' Momma" joke I've ever heard I would be a millionaire! Silverman, and almost every other comedian, is reaping the benefits of living in a messed up society. If she is trying to enlighten us by pointing out how ridiculous racism is, then I believe she might need to reevaluate her audience. I agree that Silverman's way of contesting racism may not be the most clean cut, but I assure you that we would not be discussing these issues if not for her.

Also, it is an awful injustice that a woman comedian must totally cross the line in order to gain any attention/fame. Sarah Silverman would have never been noticed if her comedy was squeaky clean.

- November 15th, 2005 at 9:04 pm

**Zach Posner (Author) said:**

Comments on society

Silverman's joke about chink's was meant to poke fun at our society as a whole, not the Chinese race.

The joke displays Silverman's feeling about how society is over sensitive as well as too concerned with topics about race. The concept that she is able to skip out on jury duty by
simply writing one sentence containing one derogatory word is the joke itself.

Silverman wishes to make fun of the seriously heavy connotations people in society place on a single word, and let it have more significance than it probably should. Any race could have been substituted in the joke and it would have given the same results.

Silverman’s comedy is based on shock factor. She is most likely aware that the joke will offend many people, but she does not care. Because that was the point of the joke in the first place – she finds it absurd that she can say one derogatory remark, in jest and be persecuted for it.

-November 15th, 2005 at 11:26 pm
- Shannon Douglas (Author) said:

Cultural Relevance or Sensationalism
by Shannon Douglas
1:09 am CST November 16th, 2005
[Edit] [Delete]

In America today many people seem to believe that the cure for racial tension is to simply ignore race all together. However if a problem is never addressed then it can never be solved. Does Sara Silverman actually attack this notion of “colorblindness” with her comedy? It is difficult for me to determine the answer to this question. I am certain that she does draw out uncomfortable racial issues with her humor. However, in which community does her humor spark debate over racial issues? I am still not convinced that using words like “nigger” and “chink” that evoke memories of years injustice and prejudice open any minority’s mind to debate. I also think its fair to question Sara Silverman’s intentions. Is she using sensationalism simply to draw an audience? It certainly seems to the passive viewer that she has built her entire career on being a white girl who is not afraid to address race.

-November 16th, 2005 at 1:09 am
- Ryan Parma (Author) said:

Counterrevolution and “Colorblindness”

I think Silverman is creating a way to attempt to change the white comedian stereotypes by counterrevolution to make people understand that comedians, white, blacks, europeans, and asians, should be able to cross boundaries because of the extremely diverse society that we live in today. However, the idea of “colorblindness” creates the tension for Silverman’s effort to counterrevolutionize the white comedian stereotype because most of the population believes that if they notice other racial categories or recognize that the joke is crossing the racial boundaries, immediately they might perceive themselves as racist and therefore become uneasy and resistant to change. I believe by Silverman’s blowing up of the White person as racist stereotype is a first step
political-correctness

In the Nerve.com interview with Sara Silverman that I linked above, she says that much of her task is undermining political correctness. She believes that PC language is used to mask racist ideas and feelings that persist regardless of vocabulary. To her, this culture of political correctness is problematic because it emanates not from a desire to eliminate racism, but from economic motivations (if we don’t offend anyone, we’ll make more money!).

Several commenters have said that Silverman’s joke invokes stereotypes. However, how does the 1-line joke, “I love chinks” invoke stereotypes of race? To me, it seems more to invoke stereotypes of middle- and upper-class racism. The speaker has lumped together a huge group of people under one umbrella term, but she “loves” them, so surely she isn’t a racist. The joke plays on the way that racism works, which is often similar to the way sexism works. We accept “for him” and “for her” lists of Christmas gift ideas just as we accept race as a viable category for rendering people similar. Very few statements that begin “Women are” or “Men are” are true, just as very few statements that begin “Black people are” or “White people are” or “Asian-American people are” are true, with possible exceptions like “Women are routinely paid less than men for their work,” or “Asian-Americans are assumed to be industrious, intelligent and soft-spoken” or “Black people in the U.S. are still the victims of institutional and individual racism.”

Colorblindness in Society

In my opinion, Silverman is trying to help society see that race is an issue that should be discussed (or joked about in the case of comedians). I feel that she brings racial issues into her comedy routines with the intent of easing relationships between different races and ethnicities by attempting to make people feel that they can talk about race no matter what race, religion, sex, etc. they are. Her only problem is that her jokes are sometimes a little too progressive for current society and bring on controversy.
Uncomfortable Laughter

In my personal opinion, I believe that Sarah Silverman’s comedy is doing more than just commenting on race relations in America. Like many people who have commented already, I believe that Silverman’s comedy is a step towards creating room for dialogue about race in a society who has somehow come to forget that race exists.

Many ‘white’ people in America live their entire lives ignorant to the fact that race plays a huge role in determining what type of life you will live. This notion of colorblindness has led many Americans to forget that we live in a very diverse society with diverse cultures who deserve equal respect and treatment. By not talking about or even joking about issues that do affect people of color, we are simply saying that they are not important. If this country is truly serious about improving race relations among a diverse society, we must first open our eyes and realize that race does exist and if it takes someone creating uncomfortable laughter for us to do that, then we must stop criticizing Silverman for what she said and instead talk about why it is so difficult for us to get into a discussion about race without anyone getting offended.

-November 16th, 2005 at 7:30 pm
• Hussain Pirani (Author) said:

You can’t joke about this

It feels as though in today’s society, most people are absolutely terrified of discussing something as controversial as race and racism—let alone make fun of it. The fact that a joke a standup comic made triggered such an outrage shows that society is simply not comfortable. While comics all over the world poke fun at virtually everything—the nature of their humor comes from observations and the ridiculousness of our culture and its people—only certain jokes are singled out and labeled offensive. The sooner we learn to discuss race without fear of opening up a Pandora’s Box, the easier it will be for our society to develop its sense of humor. And as for the idea of colorblindness…I don’t believe Silverman is “colorblind”; she definitely knew the word ‘chink’ is not the most appropriate to use on network television. Perhaps this is just one standup comic’s way of testing the waters, and seeing exactly how far entertainment is allowed to go in our culture.

-November 16th, 2005 at 7:48 pm
• Emilie Tingey (Author) said:

Where do we draw the line?

I think that it’s interesting to think about what Jenkins says about the difference between racial jokes and jokes about racism. Some people can draw a line and generally tell you what is politically correct and what’s not. But through my experiences I have found that in what ever you do, believe in, talk about or whatever there will always be someone who is
offended and there will be those that aren't. I think that it is up to us to learn about these issues and conduct ourselves accordingly and be respectful to those that we encounter. I'm not saying that colorblindness is the issue or that we should pretend to be something that we're not but we need to be respectful to others.

-November 16th, 2005 at 8:39 pm

● **Wesley Nisbett (Author) said:**

Boundaries

Sarah Silverman brings up some very interesting topics, one including how far whites should be pushing the “race card” in terms of their comedy. Many white comics have maintained the unspoken rule that they are not to include racist or insensitive jokes—many black and Hispanic comedies, however, DO actively pursue this due to a justification of their oppression within the United States. As a result, there becomes a trend that only minorities are able to make jokes about race. Through what I believe to be an (inevitable) evolution of “white” comedy, we see Silverman resisting against only minorities joking about race, and therefore, pushes the boundaries significantly. It's also interesting to note that she does jokes about her being a minority as Jewish, so that she doesn’t come off as TOTALLY offensive and guilty.

-November 16th, 2005 at 11:19 pm

● **Nicole Bernal (Author) said:**

Racist in Any Context

The main point to consider when reading this article, in regard to Silverman’s joke, is the fact that the word “chink” was one – used in a joke, and two – the joke was allowed to be aired, unedited. First, the article brings up the fact that the word “chink” was allowed airplay, while a word like nigger would most definitely be edited out. However, what does this say about the context of the word chink? The word Chink is just as historically offensive as the word nigger. However, because the discrimination towards Asian Americans is constantly elided and swept under the rug, it is assumed by comedians and network producers alike that the word chink and it's original, hateful context, are far removed from any emotions towards Asian Americans felt by “the norm” today. This point, then, goes back to the “white norm” deciding what is offensive and what is not, which further creates boundaries and subcultures, and eventually defines exactly who and what “the other” is. Deeming the word “chink” acceptable for a joke and for national broadcast, shows how society (and media in particular) helps to mold “the other's” culture. By using “chink” it allows “the norm” to assume that race is no longer an issue because it can be brought up without harm or consequence in a fun manner. Therefore, “the norm” states that any racial tensions have been solved and that it is now okay for “the norm” and “the other” to get along. Does the other, in this case the Asian America Community, even get a say as to whether or not they still feel discriminated against?
What NBC and Silverman really need to do is take a step back and substitute the word “chink” for the epithets “nigger” or “wetback”, which are equally as ugly and racist, and air that on the Conan O’Brien show. Who’s laughing now?

-November 16th, 2005 at 11:33 pm
• Katherine Hughes (Author) said:

So, why was it when Silverman said that she loved chinks it became a better joke? Why it so outlandish to believe? Its because Asian males are seen as asexual in America. Nobody believes that they are very sexy, therefore it would be ridiculous for a white female to exclaim her love for them. This joke worked because this sentiment is so widely felt in our culture.

-November 17th, 2005 at 1:10 am
• Greg Gustafson (Author) said:

Persona of the Comedian

The shocked reactions to Silverman’s racial humor remind me of reactions to Jewish-British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen and his various characters on HBO’s Da Ali G Show. Comments on here have discussed an inherent shock value in Silverman’s and also Dave Chappelle’s humor and Cohen’s humor also posseses this quality. However, there are some key differences about they way he presents his jokes. Silverman’s stand-up routine is a fairly abstract presentation where she describes supposed events from her life, but Cohen adopts a different tactic by morping into other personas rather than representing a ficitional version of himself.

On Da Ali G Show, Cohen adopts various inane personalities and then conducts feaux-journalist interviews and investigative reports with various real people while in-character. His three different personas all involve race issues to a degree, but his “Kazakhstani” Borat Sagdiyev in particular tends to deal with humor about race and gender. Borat conducts reports meant to “educate” Kazakhstanis about American (or British, in the original series) culture, and these reports are “intended” for Kazakhstani television, but actually shown on Cohen’s Ali G show. In the process of making these reports, as he tries to learn about culture from various people, he acts in such a way and espouses such views that are outrageously sexist and racist. The humor then results in the natural reactions he is able to elicit from his astonishing behavior.

I am reminded in particular of an incident in which he performed in character as Borat in a country-western bar in Tuscon, Arizona. Cohen as Borat performed a song about problems in Kazakhstan. The song started out about transportation problems but quickly digressed into being anti-semitic: Cohen sang how people should “throw the jew down the well, so his country can be free.” What was amazing about the segment was that by the end of the song, he had the bar patrons enthusiastically singing along, completely agreeing! Part of Cohen’s humor relies on how he can adopt a persona that is obviously
fictional if you put it in the context of who he really is; the audience of the show knows Cohen is not really like this, but the real people in his segments do not — thus they are confronted directly with the outrageousness of his behavior. Cohen’s humor to me, seems much more expository of racial ignorance than Silverman’s because it is obviously not really him acting this way when you watch the show; it is also presented in a much less abstract setting: people interacting in the real world. Silverman’s identity, however, is closely based on herself, and it then becomes harder to distinguish if she really is racist or not. I think this is part of why Silverman has received some of the backlash that she has.

However, some of the time Cohen’s identity has not been perceived as obviously fake, or the outrageous shock value of his humor has offended despite the knowledge of his real persona: Borat’s “Jew” song incited the wrath of the Anti-Defamation League as being hateful. Apparently the league felt it was not obvious enough that Cohen is actually Jewish, despite “espousing” anti-Semitic views. His Borat schtick also revolves around American ignorance of Kazakhstani culture. Borat actually bears no resemblance to an actual Kazakh. However, as people are ignorant of Kazakhstani culture and thus don’t realize how fake he is on-camera, they might not know off-camera either — Kazakhstani officials familiar with the show denounced it publicly. I think the reason the character still works is because he appears so outrageous when presented in the series — it is obvious that Ali G, Borat, and his third character, Bruno are all played by the same person — that even if you are unaware Cohen is Jewish or not Kazakhstani, you realize the whole thing is an insane act. It is also amazing to me, how the show demonstrates how little people actually know about Kazakhstan. Ultimately, Cohen’s show reached immense popularity in Britain, and I think part of this is, again, the presentation of various personas as being different from Cohen’s own. Part of the thrill of the show is seeing what he will get away with next and if he can go about it without exposing himself as a fake. The other part is seeing his interviewees squirm and react unpredictably to his own ad-libbed behavior. Eventually, Cohen became too well known in Britain to continue pulling his pranks — his characters would be too easily recognized as being hiim. Thus, Cohen then had to import the show to America where people were not aware of his characters yet.

I think that some of these differences in Silverman’s and Cohen’s presentation show interesting parallels in acceptance or disgust over edgy humor in comedy, and again, all of this revolves around the perceived in-group of the comedian.

-November 17th, 2005 at 1:26 am
• Alyson Parchman (Author) said:

Uncomfortable Laughter

This joke really illustrates pointing out someone else as an other. Perhaps it could be seen as an ‘almost white’ pointing out negative characteristics of a different race in order to try and make herself as a Jewish less distinct from white culture. Something I think should be discussed here is how would people have responded if this were a black male saying this? It is shocking because of the racism behind the words, or merely because of
the fact that it is this white female doing it?

- **November 17th, 2005 at 9:29 am**
  
  **Sam Willett (Author) said:**

  Dared to Laugh

  I have to admit I was a bit surprised by the controversy discussed in this article. I have seen bits and pieces of Silverman’s work and never found any problem with it. That being said, one of the points that stuck out to me was the notion of the ‘politics of laughter,’ the idea that Silverman’s jokes force the audience to examine why they are laughing at a particular stereotype or racist remark. This seems like a rather effective way of questioning representation as it shares the burden of the question among everyone who hears her jokes and responds to them. As with other comedians who joke about race, it all comes down to whether you trust that this performer is actually trying to say something constructive by using these stereotypes. In Silverman’s case, I do.

- **November 17th, 2005 at 11:18 am**
  
  **Jeff Matthews (Author) said:**

  Enlightened Racism – Naivete

  I think the key with Sarah Silverman’s humor is that she retains the persona of naivete. She acts like a sweet, naive white woman who has no idea or doesn’t care about the impact of her words. I think that this is a comment on the way that she sees white America, as naively racist. Sure, she uses shock value to get national attention and get laughs (she has to earn a living after all) but actions speak louder than words. Silverman is a liberal who devotes herself to a variety of causes that would definitely vindicate her as a real racist. She is using her platform to parody and call attention to naive white enlightened racists, perhaps in hopes that they will recognize the ridiculousness of their ways. Personally, I would be more concerned with her jokes about rape, which are harder to justify than jokes about race.

- **November 17th, 2005 at 12:33 pm**
  
  **Carly Kocurek (Author) said:**

  With regard to the N-word

  Several people have commented that the word “nigger” would have been edited out of Silverman’s joke. I do not believe this is necessarily true, as I have heard a number of comedians, including Wanda Sykes, use that word on television.
Zach Ernst (Author) said:

A Conflicted Interpretation

The fact that Silverman is a white woman is definitely important to understanding this controversy. No white female comedians in recent memory have sought to push the envelope as Silverman has. Her association with Conan-era SNL and marriage to Jimmy Kimmel give her several sure-fire outlets to test the boundaries of what can be said in the public forum. While ideally I would like to agree that her comedy can be interpreted in the manner of “A Modest Proposal,” I am still hesitant to do so. For whatever reason, there is a certain indistinguishable quality of inconsistency that she seems to embody. It seems as though most are still unable to know exactly where she’s coming from – a direct contrast to most of her controversial comedian contemporaries – and her relevance as a controversial figure is dependent on this idea.

-November 17th, 2005 at 12:51 pm

Colby Crain (Author) said:

Race Is Race

The point behind everything is that race is exactly what society makes it up to be. There would be no stereotypes, no insults, no problems if our ancestors didn’t come up with such things. Everything has been passed on down from generation to generation and the fact of not speaking about race makes problems even worse. Then again, speaking about race in terms of insulting others is not a good thing either. We need to recognize race, not in a joking matter, but in a serious way and realize that it IS a different generation. So many events have happened to change the way America works, let alone the world. Stand up for your culture, be different, love yourself and others, and keep on living life to its fullest. Comedians can talk about race, but why is it so intriguing to speak of it in a way that is exactly the opposite of what society needs? What makes offending people so hilarious? I do not see race as a joke, it's a serious matter.

-November 17th, 2005 at 1:01 pm

Rebecca Anderson (Author) said:

Readings of Racial “Comedy”

In the attempt to distinguish between racial insults and comedic jokes, one has to consider all of the possible interpretations of a comment. Everything that is said or written is read differently based on the listener/reader's point of view, and while Silverman may have honestly meant no “harm” in her jokes, many other people are likely to interpret them differently and possibly take the jokes as highly offensive. While some people can argue that she was just trying to make a point about race, and made that
point through the shock value of publically telling racially obscene jokes, others were insulted. It is an interesting point, though, that it is socially appropriate to make fun of one’s own race/religion/ethnicity while commenting on others is off limits. Does this mean that Silverman is stuck with white female and Jewish jokes only? Further, while “chink” was allowed to be said on TV while “nigger” is completely forbidden and censored, it is interesting to note that the term “savage” for Native Americans is equally derogatory but was actually a song, and used throughout, Disney’s Pocahontas. Once again, it is all about interpretation. Dave Chappell can tell jokes about white people, though, and it doesn’t create a big scene. Is this because the white majority feels comfortable in their position of power, or do they let him get away with it because they still feel guilty about the sins of their white ancestors?

-November 17th, 2005 at 1:28 pm

• **johnathan thompson (Author) said:**

This is just my opinion, but I agree with Jenkins that it is important to discuss such things. I firmly believe that comedy is a very effective tool for bringing about social change and creating discussion about “controversial” matters. In her Late Night joke, she successfully satirizes insensitive name calling by suggesting to the audience that her use of the word was not a sincerely hateful thing to say, but rather just something nonsensical to get her out of jury duty. She furthers the comedic and social aspects of the joke by asserting that her response was that she “LOOOVED Chinks”. This works because it further reinforces the ridiculousness and lack of necessity for such cruel speech. How a person can love someone and call them a name like that shows the intended irony in her statements, and when her comments are taken from her ironic perspective it is evident that her purpose was to talk about racism, rather than talk in a racist fashion. If people stopped causing discussion about matters such as this, then the words will continue to be hateful and used insensitively. It’s like Jenkins says in the article, one of the reasons for poor race relations in our country is that there are no clear lines as to what is acceptable and what is not, and by bringing these issues to the forefront, Sara Silverman and other comedians are addressing that need and changing this country for the better.

-November 17th, 2005 at 1:43 pm

• **Madolin (Author) said:**

Jokes?

In using her race based jokes Sara Silverman often time brings up touchy issues not often readily discussed in our society. Jenkins argues that from his point of view these jokes bring up issues that need to be discussed in our society. Sometimes this may be necessary and often times touchy issues are brought up in comedy and then people are more likely to talk about them, but other times the joke can go too far, and out right offend people. When a joke is too offensive it garners little real reaction as opposed to an emotionally charged less thought out response. This kind of response doesn’t always
help create a good dialogue to talk about the issue. Comedians can use the excuse of “bringing up a touchy issue” to excuse their jokes, which doesn’t always work. So while people may find some of Sara Silverman’s jokes to be funny, and just poking fun for the sake of poking fun, how many people take what a comedian says as a cue to discuss controversial social issues. I would have to say not many.

-November 17th, 2005 at 2:08 pm
- **Richard DiLorenzo (Author) said:**

Saving Sara Silverman

Many people seem to think that it is a problem that Silverman’s jokes only expose the problems of racism, but do nothing to challenge these racial stereotypes she uses. I believe that exposing the problems of racism is more than enough. By bringing up racism in the form of jokes, she is also contesting these stereotypes by laughing at them. And this, as most admitted, makes the stereotypes seem harmless. So what if it takes an offended viewer to actually write a discourse on the problems of racism? The last thing we need is another boring article that says how powerful the media is and how dangerous racial stereotypes are. These articles accomplish nothing and have never offered a suggestion to fix racism, at least not one that would go unchallenged by another article. In fact, I feel that making jokes that obviously mock racism does far more to challenge racism than any article I have read in my Communication and Culture class. Think of it this way, if we agree that the problem with racism and stereotypes is that it offends people and creates a power hierarchy, than by making the stereotype of “chink” to be meaningless or at least less harmful, than we are fixing the problem of racism. Albeit very slowly. Also, I think that Silverman’s appearance also has a strong impact on the message. Because she is a cute white girl, she easily plays the part of a naive racist, and this makes racism seem stupid, which again is a step toward alleviating the strong impact of stereotypes. I think we should applaud Sara Silverman and join her in laughing our way to equality.

-November 17th, 2005 at 3:05 pm
- **Lindsay Molsen (Author) said:**

The choice is yours to listen

Silverman clearly spells out the factor of exnomination when she explains how whiteness is never talked about so in order to comment on whiteness she uses it as a back drop to racial jokes. I do think that many can find Silverman’s humor very offensive, although, some jokes she makes are clear problem in which our society exists within. Her jokes are comments on the actual behavior of our society towards stereotypes. When she tells the jokes, it is thrown into the faces of society making society visualize and see the issue. I do that that she goes too far at times on some of her jokes. There are words and issues which have a long history which should be respected. Overall, she is a comedian and people can choose to listen and watch her or not. They can turn her off when she is
on TV if they take what she says offensive; freedom of speech.

- November 17th, 2005 at 3:26 pm
  * Linda Dang (Author) said:

  It’s just based on your own perception

  Race is always a touchy subject, no matter how it is addressed. Based on the nature of Silverman’s profession, it makes me question her true intentions. Is it really for the sake of comedy or is comedy used to mask something else? I first pegged her as an insensitive comedian. However, my views changed as I continued to read the article. According to Silverman, it is time for white comics to joke about race. Race is usually shown from a minority viewpoint like when Asians make Asian jokes or when Blacks make Black jokes. To truly address the race issue, we need to look at both sides. Her routine forces the audience to be in the hot seat, so that they can really think about what they are laughing at and if it’s okay to consider a racial stereotype as funny. She effectively creates a point of illumination.

- November 17th, 2005 at 4:55 pm
  * Vivian (Author) said:

  I disagree that Silverman should be accredited for actively breaking down stereotypes. I think this example, along with many of the critiques that downplay the issue, often use humor and oversensitivity as a scapegoat to excuse it. Humor isn’t a good enough scapegoat for blatantly offending others. If you say something, you should be accountable for the impact that message has. When people don't recognize these underlying racial issues in these jokes, I think it further emphasizes how normalized and desensitized we are towards racism existing in society, even if it is subtle. On a different tangent, I definitely think intersectionality plays a role in how these jokes try to escape criticism. Looks and attractiveness validate and excuse what people can say and even more importantly, what is heard.

- November 17th, 2005 at 5:07 pm
  * Jordon Street (Author) said:

  Sarah Silverman and intersectionality

  I don’t necessarily agree with everything that Sarah Silverman sais or does. Mainly probably because it is difficult to tell if she is laughing at stereotypes or with them, and also how much she herself believes what the “personas” that she portrays actually are saying. But, I do think it is very interesting how she brings up and questions who’s aloud to laugh at certain racial jokes. She points this out specifically in her display where she laughs at a racist joke with two black guys, who are already laughing, and when they see
her laughing they stop and give her a mean look. This is an interesting way of pointing out intersectionality that isn’t spoken about very much. Intersectionality plays a role in what we can and can’t laugh at, thus increasing the tensions between different ethnic groups and cultures, because one doesn’t want to make the other(s) angry at them and/or at least don’t want to make themselves to look bad.

-November 17th, 2005 at 6:01 pm

- Zach Gallenkamp (Author) said:

What constitutes a racist joke

There is a thin line that separates jokes and insults. Expressive jokes form to an emergent perspective. That thin line causes society a hard time distinguishing between racist jokes and jokes about radiois. Sarah Silverman told a racist joke on Cohnan in 2001, sparking much controversy about Asians. Newspaper and magazine writers across the country had a opinion about her comment. Greg Aoki the President of Media Action Net Work for Asians said there can’t be double standards towards Asians or any other race. He also state that the viewing audience interpretes these joke as racist humor not just humor. He calls for action, because he is rightfully upset, Asian Week columnist Emil Guillen said that the words from the joke should not be used as “fighting words” but as “talking words”. Meaning, educate the world on how to distinguish between the two forms of jokes. There are critics for both sides, for the Asian community and Sarah Silverman. Both sides have different view points, but lets face it racist jokes are wrong and should not be said on live air, or on t.v. because our viewing audience is very nieve. The racist jokes lead towards stereotyping race and gives bad connotations to the viewing public. This article definitly hits home to all race, and should be a building block for future criticism.

-November 17th, 2005 at 6:35 pm

- Shawn Douglas (Author) said:

The perception that Silverman’s remarks are to expose racism is ridicules. Silverman clearly uses her racist remarks as a sideshow for their shock value. Comedians often do this to set their selves apart. If they can start a controversy they can get their name out there. If they comment in an area considered out of bounds they will increase their audience, even if it means alienating another potential audience. Considering that minorities are underrepresented in all ways on television, the majority has a social responsibility to represent them fairly. They should not simply make excuses for misconduct and tasteless choices.

-November 17th, 2005 at 7:04 pm

- Jaime Guerra (Author) said:
Challenging the White privilege and invisibility

In my opinion, Sarah Silverman’s joke was a classic example of the “contesting from within” method of transcoding. The problem arises, however, because of her race — she is not Asian. Dave Chapelle makes black jokes, and can say the word “nigger,” and Carlos Mencia can make jokes about hispanics and say the word “beaner” without any problems. They both can even make jokes about racial “others.” So why can’t Sarah Silverman also attempt to transcode stereotypes of racial “others”? And why does her “white privilege” and “invisibility” suddenly disappear?

-November 17th, 2005 at 7:39 pm

- Audrey Ley (Author) said:

I feel that Silverman’s jokes are emphasizing the theory of ‘otherness.’ By pointing out common stereotypes of ‘others’, the jokes are only helping to create deeper stereotypes. I think that by talking about it, although in a joking manner, the issue is raised even more. Hence, this only greatens the sense of ‘otherness’ within society. Obviously her jokes are offensive at times, but I do feel that the humor she draws upon is creative and brave!

-November 17th, 2005 at 9:15 pm

- Jackie McCardell Jr. (Author) said:

A Much Deeper Issue at Stake

I am Black. My favorite comedians are Black, And, yes, they do joke about other races. However, why is it that Blacks could joke about White people, “Chinks,” and “Spics?” The main reason is that Blacks and other minorities do not have to worry about the “Guilt” factor. I have heard Black comedians talk about “Chinks” and “Spics.” I have heard Mexican comedians talk about “niggers.” What validate their ability to announce such racial terms is because they are not the dominant cultures. Because White culture is dominant, it appears racist for them to make jokes about minority cultures. It’s as if Mike Tyson got into a boxing ring with Woody Allen. It would look bad for Mike Tyson to knock the lights out of Woody Allen. However, it’s empowering for Woody Allen to make vain swings at Iron Mike. In this case, Silverman (Dominant Culture) takes a stab at “Chinks” (Minority Culture.). Therefore, people reacted from both sides of this spectrum; those with Guilt, and those from their non-dominant position. I’m in no way agreeing with the idea that Blacks or other minority groups are allowed to take stab at racist jokes or mention racist terms, I’m just expressing that it’s widely accepted and that the unfortunate position of the White Dominant Culture.

-November 17th, 2005 at 10:43 pm

- Kaitlin Piraro (Author) said:
white people don’t have to be colorblind to be funny

Sarah Silverman is a comedian. She pokes fun at racism in the same way “All in the Family” did in the 1970s. The only problem is that there are still people that think that whenever white people mention race they are automatically racist. This idea that white people must be colorblind is absolutely ridiculous. Silverman’s stage persona contests the ideas about race by appearing to be racist and poking fun at racism. Silverman’s refusal to be colorblind in her act leads to people’s incorrect accusations that she is racist.

-November 17th, 2005 at 11:07 pm

• John Bradley (Author) said:

Offensive Jokes and Nervous Laughter

In this article about the controversy swirling around comedian Sarah Silverman and her provocative brand of humor, Henry Jenkins seeks to define the entertainer as important in that she promotes discussion of racial tension as Americans now perceive it. Jenkins seeks to understand and qualify both sides of the argument about Silverman’s often offensive humor, stating the comedian’s opinion that the jokes are not racist but instead about racism while at the same time recalling others’ views that her work is derogatory. This article’s author seeks to merge both sides of the issue into a discussion about how Silverman’s humor brings ideas about bigotry to the forefront, allowing white americans to actually see and deal with racism, rather than simply ignore it altogether. “Awkward Conversations About Uncomfortable Laughter” goes on to explain both sides of the debate, giving examples as to how Silverman’s comedy is offensive but at the same time, enlightening in how it vulgarly displays what some white people feel but are afraid to say when dealing with a society that has shifted from simply white and black to multiracial. Wholly, Jenkins argument is, though one may love or hate her brand of comedy, the discourse on different interpretations of offensive humor is a topic worthy of discussion.My opinion on the subject, in line with Jenkins, is that Silverman's comedy, though definitively offensive, is raising important issues about how white people deal and will continue to deal with American society being racially mixed. However, her brand of humor is certainly not for everyone but the open minded and hard to offend amongst us. Her humor, strangely enough, appeals to the lowest common denominator, who could take her jokes literally, and a high-brow audience, who simply understand how racist jokes can be self-reflexive and examples of how rediculous racism truly is.

-November 17th, 2005 at 11:51 pm

• Vanessa Freeman (Author) said:

Laughing Matters

This is yet another example of the age old controversy surrounding the boundaries between joking and being racist. I personally believe that in the case of Silverman's
“chink” joke, it is only perpetuating racism and its effects. Although many comedians, like Silverman, do not intend to be racist (and often are trying to point out how silly it is for people to be racist), by using such loaded words in their jokes they are sending out the wrong message to people everywhere. This is a wonderful example of contesting from within and is a common controversy that will not be disappearing anytime soon. It is our job to be aware of the deeper meanings that lie in even seemingly innocent jokes such as Silverman’s.

-November 17th, 2005 at 11:54 pm
• Sara Hickman (Author) said:

I applaud Sarah Silverman for trying to change the discourse of who is allowed to make and laugh at which jokes. That awkward laughter has been there plenty of times on a day to day basis where no one knows if they are ‘allowed’ to laugh or not. While I do not commend Silverman for taking comments a step or two too far, I do appreciate that she, like many other comedians, is just trying to embrace these boundaries of who can say what. We talk so much about colorblindness, but turn around and accept racial/racist jokes from comedians of a certain race more easily, instead of treating them as they would a white comedian.

I think intersectionality plays a huge role in viewing Sarah Silverman as a comedian. It is impossible to judge her comedy without including several aspects of who she is, either as a woman, ‘white’, Jewish, et al. Because she herself acknowledges these labels and jokes about them, she is seen as racist and not colorblind, as she ‘should be’. But haven’t we discussed what’s wrong about being colorblind anyway? How it’s not always a great thing because it prohibits what people are thinking and just stifles the obvious differences of people? She’s not claiming to be a serious speaker, talking about serious matters, she is a comedian. A comedian who makes jokes about awkward, uncomfortable, but everyday situations that we deal with on a day to day basis. Talk of racism is out there constantly, if we can’t laugh at the obvious things we see happening every day, how will we ever see how ludicrous it all really is?

-November 18th, 2005 at 2:16 am
• Joshua Tate (Author) said:

Exnomination & Intersectionality

As mentioned by Jenkins, there is a complex relationship among the true racially-related sentiments of Sarah Silverman and the motivations behind her comedy routine. Apparently attempting to bring simmering racial issues to the forefront, I believe Silverman has healthy intentions to incite thoughtful discussion and enlightening arguments. The very existence of controversy over Silverman’s routine, however, indicates the suppression of racial topics within dominant American (and particularly white) social discourse. This fact mars the innocence of Silverman’s intentionally-provocative, racially-charged comedy.
Silverman seems to claim her Jewish heritage as a “minority pass,” so to speak. Since she is technically a member of an historically-persecuted ethnic group that happens to be a minority in the United States, she attempts to seek common ground with other minorities groups to transform her racist jokes from offensive to acceptable.

In my opinion, this attempt at using intersectionality and hybridity is a ill-conceived justification for-albeit well-intentioned- racial comedy bits that quite possibly incite more sincere belief in stereotypes and racial division rather than it encourages open-minded discussion and a radical change in contemporary American social discourse.

Silverman, regardless of her Jewish heritage, is still accepted as white in America, and is still a subject of exnomination, whether she claims it or not. Her references to race, by default, cannot include any amount of empathy for her scapegoats, but rather emphasize an incessant fixation on the stereotypes of racial ‘Others’ and the historically significant and abhorrantly derogatory terms for ethnic groups (such as “Jap,” “Chink,” and “Nigger”) that she uses without hesitation in an attempt to expose these terms and deny their significance.

This denial, in my opinion, is form of “enlightened racism,” because it indicates a blind ignorance to the sensitivities of other ethnic groups to symbolic representations and expressions for whose suppression, for decades, have been doggedly striven.

-November 18th, 2005 at 11:36 am

• Mark Williams (Author) said:

A time to test the new waters?

Silverman is a comic that is living in a society that is rapidly changing, the sensitivity towards racial comedy is changing, and her jokes reflect the uncharted area between right and wrong when it comes to jokes. She might not be telling the jokes from her own feelings about the topics, or she might be hiding them behind the many personas she uses to tell the jokes. With the added influence of different cultures in the US in this decade and the next, the fragmented audience will have to sit back and shake their heads for a while as the different cultures learn what is funny, and what is crossing the line. Carlos Mencia warns the audience before every show that there will be a few members of the audience that will not agree with him, or that the jokes might cut too far, but the fact that he is a Hispanic comic making a living telling jokes is a step in the right direction. He and other comics who are testing the waters are taking a few steps forward, in a bigger picture that will allow us to better understand one another as time goes on.

-November 22nd, 2005 at 11:05 am

• Chuck Kleinhans (Author) said:

the N word, etc.
It might be useful to discriminate different kinds of “television” here:

Network broadcast (Conan O’Brian)Basic cable (Daily Show—which does bleep)subscription cable (HBO—including Politically Incorrect, Curb Your Enthusiasm (Sykes saying the N word), etc. Is Chappelle on HBO?

These are governed by different laws, agencies and gatekeepers and agendas. Silverman’s film falls into a different category.

It might be useful to ask as well why it is that network wouldn’t use the N word, while it continues to allow jokes that assume gay male sex is always anal and thus always abhorrant, that jail and prison for men means being anally raped and that this is funny. Before and after 9/11 derogatory jokes about “Arabs” remained common on networks.

What topics remain taboo on TV (the spectrum of it) and theatrical film comedy? and why?

It seems like menstruation jokes are off limits…why is that?

- November 29th, 2005 at 1:14 pm
• Matthew (Author) said:

A joke is a joke!

I’m not sure why people get so bent out of shape about these sorts of comedy routines. To have the nightly news talking about race in this way would be one thing, to have a comedian talking in this way is quite another. She’s telling jokes! She isn’t trying to change America, and she’s certainly in the wrong business if she wants people to go home and talk about “what they learned about race tonight”. People just do not do that. You go to a live comedy show to laugh – not to learn. I feel like Silverman’s jokes are taken out of context, where academics everywhere try to cram them full of meaning, forgetting that jokes are just about the most meaningless things out there.

No one will go see Silverman and then have a deep conversation about race relations in America!

- December 5th, 2005 at 12:46 am
• Meyrien Janevine (Author) said:

Laughing AT Her

Controversial issues always bring high ratings to the media industry. I think Silverman has become the media’s “instrument” to achieve more attention. Although she was banned, but other TV station adopted her, proving that her sharp jokes are attractive and might bring more ratings.
“Silverman’s jokes do not in any simple or direct way represent her personal views.” This statement is not fully correct. Silverman, the audience, the readers, have different perspective in looking at this issue. The way this issue was looked and perceived by the society is called Discourse Analysis. It can be characterized as a way of approaching and thinking about a problem. As John Dewey illustrates: “Critical or Discourse Analysis is nothing more than a deconstructive reading and interpretation of a problem or text (while keeping in mind that postmodern theories conceive of every interpretation of reality and, therefore, of reality itself as a text” (Experience & Education). When Silverman “adopted a comic persona,” used it for her jokes, and later on when her audience perceived that the issue of race was taking a big part in her jokes, it has become the discourse of viewing this society.

I suggest, we must carefully examine our readings. Her jokes are subjective and do not actually reflecting the society. We should laughing AT her as an instrument for media industry. We should not laughing WITH her for using racial jokes.

-December 6th, 2005 at 8:28 am
• Sarah Yu (Author) said:

It’s a free country=A Joke=Funny Ha-ha

Who cares about Silverman’s joke–comediennes relieve my stress when they poke fun at aspects of daily life… let them feel free to satirize anything they want and express themselves, thats what makes them funny. The key here is irony*: most people DON’T get it and some people don’t know how to use it. Silverman complicates things when she claims she is not making a racist joke but gaining awareness by making a joke about racism. (gimme a break!) that is her way of trying to appease things without having to apologize because lets face it: her “shocking jokes” are her signature and gets her the fame, when has she last done her community service to actually promote awareness. But WHY should she have to explain things: it was a joke, meant to be taken as a joke. I guess the controversy really stems from the connotation of the word “chink” and audiences’ ability to reconize the irony. Anyway,it is really pointless to analyze comedians’ materials; it’s like watching a dog chase his own tail. If you are laughing at Sarah or whoever she is suppose to represent in the joke aired on Conan, then you get the irony. If you are laughing at what she says, the word “chink” then you are a racist. hahaha In the end, lets just blame this on NBC (a non-cable station), they should have just bleeped out the word, someone fell asleep or something and opened this flood of muck.

-December 9th, 2005 at 4:48 pm
• irtechie (Author) said:

S Silverman prrof you can sleep your way into comedy if your Jewish

Have yet to know a single funny female comedian, there were a few in the early 90’s that
were “ok”. But I have never had a woman make me laugh that hard.

Margaret Cho? Woopi Goldberg? if these ladies are funny to you, then you lack a real sense of humor. These people usually rant on political issues that only they are concerned about, and to be honest I can’t remember the last time I laughed at any of them. WOopi is a good story teller, but she is by far not funny.

Try these:Dane Cook

Carlos Mencia (get uncensored standup)

Robert Schimmel

-December 31st, 2005 at 11:59 am