

**LAUGHING FOR A CHANGE:
RACISM, HUMOUR, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL AGENCY**

by

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Abstract

The thesis explores the nature of humour as a tool for both social oppression and social progression, as well as its implications for student identity construction. The study examines the discourses of six inner city high school students who participated in focus group discussions on humour, racism, identity and social change.

The theoretical framework of this thesis employs a socio-cultural approach (Bakhtin, Holland, Yon, Hall) to the complex, dynamic, fluid and often contradictory process of identity construction. It extends this approach to a consideration of humour, its complexities as well as its implications for identity construction in school spaces. The research reported here indicates that students navigate and negotiate complex and contradictory discourses of humour in ways that could be used in classrooms to help bridge the racial, linguistic and cultural differences that commonly separate peers from each other.

Dedication

*This thesis is dedicated to my mother, **Kim Tran** and my father, **Leang Hoat Kuoch**, for all the sacrifices they have made to enrich my life. I would never trade the subtle, yet much more meaningful ways in which you show your love for me.*

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Chapter One: Introduction

It would be tempting to say with the sceptics that we must be content to laugh and not try to know why we laugh, since it may be that reflection kills laughter and it would thus be a contradiction to think that it could discover its causes (Freud, 1960, p. 146).

Personal Reflections

“And when it rains in the winter, we’ll just say the hell with goin’ to work and we’ll built up a fire in the stove and set around it an’ listen to the rain comin’ down on the roof – Nuts!” He [George] took out his pocket knife. “I ain’t got time for no more.” He drove his [*nuts*] through the top of one of the bean cans (Steinbeck, 1965, p. 14-15).

There is a pregnant pause as I realize that I just butchered Steinbeck’s masterpiece, *Of Mice and Men*, by accidentally inserting the word *nuts* in place of the intended word *knife*. As my face is suffused with crimson, the class hollers in uncontrollable laughter at my Freudian slip. When *Ryan* yells over the chuckles, “Boy, Mr. Kuoch, George was sure hungry, hey?”, I succumb to both his sarcastic retort and my embarrassing faux pas. When another student screams, “If I was Lennie, I would say, no thanks George - I’m not hungry *anymore*,” tears are streaming down my eyes as my abdominal muscles contract and ache. The following day, a colleague, after hearing about my blunder, brings a can of mixed nuts and a can of kidney beans to my classroom and stacks them one on top of the other for display. To the delight of the class, she asks in jest, “Is this what you meant, Mr. Kuoch?” More laughter ensues.

When I wander the halls of my school, I hear some students laughing at jokes and some remaining silent. A student accuses another student of “farting” and “stinking like a Hindu.” They both laugh. The Hindu onlooker does not. During a class discussion about social issues, a student passionately argues against the government’s new legislation on restrictions for young drivers. He hollers, “Just because those Chinese guys are bad drivers, doesn’t mean we are.” He laughs. Some laugh with him – including an Asian student. A few, however, Asians and non-Asians, do not even smile. Paradoxically, the *joker* is Asian himself.

They say laughter can cure all ills. Mark Twain declared that “The human race has one really effective weapon, and that is laughter.” And a day without laughter, according to e.e. cummings, is a day wasted. Yet, in spite of these claims,

Very little research on laughter has been carried out by sociologists. Furthermore, there appear to be good reasons why this is so. For, at first sight, laughter seems neither to require, nor to be open to, sociological investigation. Laughter, as we all “know,” is essentially a physiological/psychological process which occurs when people are amused. The *sources* of amusement are certainly, as we have seen, social in character. They arise out of people’s organized use of cultural material in the course of interaction.... The possibility that laughter enters into social interaction in a methodical manner or that participants systematically employ laughter as an interactional device is seldom considered (Mulkay, 1988, p. 93).

Bakhtin (1984) adds, “laughter and its forms represent...the least scrutinized sphere of the people’s creation” (p. 4).

How often have I witnessed laughter mollifying tension between students and teachers or alleviating boredom, stress and anxiety in the classroom. I have seen humour ease students out of their protective shells and unite a classroom community with seemingly nothing in common. But I have also heard the sound

of tears brought about by ridicule and taunting. I have counselled students who would rather circle the perimeter of the school than face the humiliating jeers of their peers. The snickers and smirks of a clique are razors through an adolescent's self-esteem. Humour in schools seems to have a number of pedagogical implications. If humour can paradoxically both unite a community of diversely populated individuals, and also divide and segregate the student body according to gender, race, sexual orientation and etc., the magnitude of its impact in education needs closer consideration.

On an even more personal note, the experience of being the butt of a joke at a very young age for something I had no control over was not very funny, even though it brought hysterical laughter to many of my peers. Being entertainment to others for being different, for not being like them and for simply being myself, did not make sense. How their laughter and merriment were able to coexist with my tears and pain was very puzzling to me and needs some reconciliation. Through my research, I hope to gain a better understanding of the multifacetedness of this phenomenon called humour, especially in regard to its implications for education. This inquiry is for my current and future students, as well as for the student I was many years ago.

Inquiry

How do students perceive and understand humour which focuses on race? Do the students feel that this humour has implications for how they negotiate, form and position their identities inside classroom spaces and outside in hallways, gyms, lunchrooms and playing fields? Even though humour can be used to alienate, devalue and deny identities for students in schools, theorists

also suggest it has power to affect change (Berger, 1997), (Reeves, 1996), (Powell, 1988). How then can the potency of humour be channelled in a way that would foster equitable and inclusive learning environments? Do the students' perceptions of humour have implications for positive social change in schools?

Outline

In this thesis I will examine the implications of what I term *humour for oppression* in schools. More specifically I will focus on how students engage with racist humour and how these jokes impact identity construction in the *joker* – the individual telling the joke - and the *jokee* – the intended recipient of the joke. This examination will lead into a more comprehensive discussion of another form of humour – *humour for progression*. I will explore the transformative possibilities of one specific type of humour for progression, satire, and how it can act as a catalyst for enabling students to creatively construct their identities. A closer analysis of a variety of contemporary media including the animated satirical television program, *The Simpsons*, Eminem's music video, and Chris Rock and Margaret Cho's comedy will also be considered. The White Aryan Resistance's (WAR) racist humour will also be examined in relations to the satirical forms aforementioned. My research will focus on how the use of humorous social commentary in the classroom may help to liberate students' identities from restrictive institutional forces. I will also consider possibilities for using humour to help students understand how they might become active agents for social change.

Data for this research was collected from a group of my grade 12 students who volunteered to participate in four focus group sessions where

various issues regarding humour, racism, identity and social change were explored and discussed. It is my hope that my students' participation in this research is in itself an opportunity to bring about change, by deepening their understanding of the dynamics of humour and its potential as a base for constructive action.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

A variety of social / psychological theorists understand the operation of humour as both a tool for social oppression and a tool for liberation. These ideas intersect and are embedded in broader theories of the dynamics of social oppression and how education may serve as a liberatory tool. My particular concern is the implications of these theories for the way humour may operate in the social context of the school and especially its implications for student and teacher identities and the interplay of these varied identities. For illustrative purposes I draw on some of my own experiences as a minority, the way humour has positioned me, and how I have used humour to re-position myself in a number of different social contexts, within and outside of school.

When my family relocated to a new city in my grade six year, I was a bit hesitant about starting all over again, at a new school and making new friends. It was only six years earlier that we made our most monumental move from the bustling city district of Cholon in Vietnam to the quietude of a fishing and logging town in Campbell River. For the next several years my family struggled to find a sense of belonging in a community that did not speak our language, understand our culture, nor reflect the reality my parents were used to for so many years. Through various tales told by friends and acquaintances, my parents heard of a place that could offer some of the cultural comforts they dearly missed and

coveted. And so, packing all that we owned into a U-Haul and the prized first family automobile, we journeyed to Vancouver hoping to reclaim and reconnect with some of our lost culture.

Although I was conflicted with trepidation about the move to the Mainland, I was also excited about the afforded opportunity to *re-present me* to a group of people who had not experienced *me* before. I could alter, shape and form the kind of *me* I had always wanted to be back in Campbell River, but for a variety of reasons could not. Most importantly though, I could finally shed the layers of *me* that were laughed at – or so I naively believed.

Identity Theories

Identity is not as simple as I perceived it to be during that transition period. In fact, it is contrary to what Yon (2000) describes as the Enlightenment's belief that individuals are given an "autonomous inner core" (p. 13). Rather, in Yon's perspective and that of socio-cultural theorists, identity is "mediated and produced by cultures and socialization" (p. 13). Hall (1996) expands on Yon and Holland's (1998) assertion that identities "happen in social practice" (Holland et al., p. vii):

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies (Hall, p. 4).

Within the social matrix alone, political, economic and cultural influences intermix in a variety of capacities much too complicated to pinpoint or predict. Ghosh (1996) notes that race, gender, nationality, sexual preference and class affiliations are vital in shaping identity. The colour of my skin, the holidays I

celebrate, the language I speak, the flight from my home country, and so on, all work to shape the *me* I naively believed I could easily escape. Simply put, “Identity cannot be defined in isolation” (Dei, 1996, p. 31).

Even so, I learned at a young age that certain identities afforded certain privileges. Even though I was moving to a more multicultural school, I was determined to be less *boat person* and more *white person*. Yon (2000) describes racial identities as being a *two-dimensional process* where in “claiming who one is, one is also announcing who one is not” (p. 102). In a sense, I was attempting to act out the roles I watched my former white peers deliver to adoring social applause.

Butler (1997) discusses the *performative* aspect of gender where individuals are highly encouraged to ascribe to certain socially prescribed ideas about what a boy and a girl should act like. She argues that “discreet genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture.... [T]hose who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (p. 405). Although Butler focuses on gender, her performative theory is very applicable to the understanding of other aspects of identity. I wanted to assume the persona of white and perform this role, hoping to reap its rewards: “People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 3).

I made a conscious effort to present my new peers with a reborn and improved version of *me*. I was driven to orchestrate a representation of *me* that was free of all the *faults* that prevented me from fully participating in what the other kids were doing. On some level, I recognized that “Identities are not static,

we are forever negotiating who and what we are," (Dei, 1996, p. 31) and "Identities are always in the making" (Ghosh, 1996, 7). As Holland (1998) puts it, "persons are malleable, changeable," and "improvised" (p. 4-5). Identity is fluid. I was to discover however, that some have more social room than others to engage in improvisation.

Although some have choices when it comes to identity according to Yon (2000), many are "shaped by alienation, racism and a pervasive feeling of exclusion from the dominant culture" (p. 58). Ghosh (1996) details the characteristics of the dominant group in Western societies as "white, male, middle class, Christian, and heterosexual" (p. 5). Holland (1998) reminds us that identities are socially constructed "through the mediation of powerful discourses" (p. 26). Perhaps my eagerness to *re*-construct my identity stemmed from my being *over*-constructed at the hands of others. The possibility of reclaiming full ownership of my identity seemed more plausible once I was physically removed from the discursive spaces that tended to pillage parts of *me*. Even so, it was impossible for me to completely distance myself from the forces that dictated the making of *me*, good intentioned or not: "Ethnic identity formation is related to dominant-group perceptions of a particular ethnocultural group as well as their own perceptions and responses (for example, to their treatment at school)" (Ghosh, p. 7-8).

Identity and Humour

It is important to note that identity formation and humour are intricately connected: "One's sense of humor is an important mark of one's personal

identity" (Bleedorn, 2003, p. 49). Butler's (1997) performative theory not only connects to identity, it also applies to humour as Hertzler (1970) describes below:

We laugh when persons in some way depart from the standard behavior set for them as friends, parents, children, husbands and wives, followers of vocations, members of particular types of social groups, members of social classes or ethnic or nationality groups, occupants of other hierarchical strata, or in almost any other activity characteristic of or essential to a social system.... The laughter-arousing situations may be those of role confusion, role inconsistency, role contradictions, role misunderstanding, role uncertainty, role ignorance, role inadequacy, role ineptness or some other ambiguity in role performance (p. 86-87).

The intersection of humour and identity construction is explored in Peter Woods' (1990) *The Happiest Days? – How Pupils Cope With School*.

Throughout his book, Woods analyzes the various sociological positionings of students within a British school. He examines how classroom hierarchies are structured and how differences within gender and race are negotiated. For some, time spent in school are *The Happiest Days*, but for others, various coping strategies are employed on a daily basis to survive the oppressive institutional structures of a British education. In his final chapter, Woods focuses on identity construction and its relationship to humour:

Much pupil humour is to do with their own personal development, with experimenting with identities, and with the social formation of the groups to which they belong.... Some of this is to do with the quest for "normality," however that may be defined by the culture of the preferred group. Humour is a powerful device for celebrating one's own identity and for enhancing one's status, and for whipping others into shape (p. 194-195).

Woods (1990) argues that schools can be a "battleground for personal identity" because of the oppressive nature of the "customary emphasis on uniform and appearance, codes and behaviour, and mortification to purge the incoming tainted self" (p. 196).

Mandarin Humour

I distinctly remember being reminded of my *tainted self* when I encountered *Mack* for the first time at my place of employment.

One of the responsibilities for busboys at the *Sea Restaurant* (pseudonym) is to scoop fresh ice into an oversized container. Since the ice machine is located in the storage room downstairs, quite a bit of physical effort is required to carry the container into the upstairs kitchen, especially for a person my size. As I recall my first memories of being a busboy, I chuckle at the hysterical image of this little Asian youth with mopy black hair clinging to his sweaty forehead, attempting to wrestle this beast of a container twice his size, up a flight of slippery kitchen steps. I laugh when I remember the time I lost my grip on the container only two steps from the top of the landing, sending an avalanche of ice cubes cascading down the staircase. The close-knit staff never let me forget my little faux pas, occasionally *ordering* “a flight of staircase on the *rocks*” from me. I was even advised to bring a designated ice scooper on future journeys to the ice machine. This *benign* (Berger, 1997) form of humour became our *inside* joke. Although a bit embarrassing, I remember this incident with general amusement.

However, when I recall the day a new busboy greeted me during one of my ice scooping excursions, the memory is not as fond, nor as funny. While *Mack* (pseudonym) observed my awkward ascent, he remarked, with crossed hands and a smirk on his face, “Oh, let’s see you flex those *Mandarin* oranges of yours.” He laughed. I did not.

To suggest that all forms of humour are appropriate, benign or even empowering is to be ignorant of its much more complex dimension, some which may in fact be reason for great concern, not just for students in classrooms, but for society as a whole. Not all jokes are funny for all people. Racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic jokes are a few examples of what I term *humour for oppression*. Before we look more specifically at this kind of humour, it is important to pause here and outline related elements in theories of social oppression. This will provide a frame of reference from which to explore humour as an oppressive form. This will be followed by a consideration of how humour might operate for liberation as well.

Oppression Theories

Oppressive regimes throughout social history, as well as in modern times, have worked to enslave their people to what Bakhtin (1981) terms *authoritative discourses*, designed to preserve power, maintenance of tradition and perpetuation of social myths. People dictated to by *authoritative discourses* are stripped of their basic right to govern their selves:

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already acknowledged in the past. It is a prior discourse.... It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the world itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather, it demands our unconditional allegiance. Therefore authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it (p. 342-343).

Being enslaved to *authoritative discourses* makes individuals more susceptible to what Foucault (1997) terms *docility*. Foucault explains that the body was viewed by those in power as something that could be “manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces” (p. 136). The body was equivalent to the machine, something that could be built from scratch, repaired and tinkered with for optimal performance. Foucault equates this mechanical model of maintenance to the *disciplining* of the body: “Discipline ‘makes’ individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise” (p. 170). Those who fail to achieve the standards set for them are subjected to *punishment*, which in itself reveals a number of disturbing implications:

It [art of punishment] refers individual actions to a whole that is at once a field of comparison, a space of differentiation and the principle of a rule to be followed. It differentiates individuals from one another, in terms of the following overall rule: that the rule be made to function as a minimal threshold, as an average to be respected or as an optimum towards which one must move. It measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value and abilities, the level, the “nature” of individuals. It introduces, through this “value-giving” measure, the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved. Lastly, it traces the limit that will define difference in relations to all other differences, the external frontier of the normal.... The perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes* (p. 182-183).

The power to cause such oppression described by Foucault was experienced directly by Freire (1993) himself when he was exiled from his homeland at the hands of his own government. In his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire specifies a number of conditions that define and maintain an oppressive society. One such theory, termed *antidialogical action*, is characterized by its need to *conquer, divide and rule, manipulate and invade*. Similar to Foucault’s (1997) theory of *docility* and the body, Freire describes the

act of conquest as always needing a “conqueror and someone or something which is conquered” (p. 119). To prevent collective action for defence against oppression, “It is the interest of the oppressor to weaken the oppressed still further, to isolate them, to create and deepen rifts among them” (p. 122). Further oppression is manifested in what Freire sees as a misleading dialogue between the oppressor and the oppressed, where the former *manipulates* the latter with lies, deceit and myths. Finally, *antidiological action* is predicated on what Freire calls *cultural invasion*:

The invaders penetrate the cultural context of another group, in disrespect of the latter’s potentialities; they impose their own view of the world upon those they invade and inhibit the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression (p. 133).

Humour for Oppression

Humour for oppression is an extension of all that is encompassed in the history of social oppression itself. Humour for oppression is an *authoritative discourse* that allows it to be used to prey upon the powerless, the non-dominant, the marginalized, the “abnormal” and the *docile* in society. Humour that exploits religions, nationalities, mental or physical disabilities or physical appearances is oppressive in intent and nature. Humour for oppression is manifested through ridicule, humiliation, taunts, jeers, sneers, and snickers, to name a few techniques; these are the *antidiological actions* Freire (1993) describes. Humour for oppression helps to maintain a tradition of social oppression that refuses to relinquish its dominance over and manipulation of the people it oppresses. It has powerful implications for the identities of those who tell jokes, the *joker*, and those about whom jokes are told, the *jokee*.

The physical positioning of *Mack* while he uttered his joke in contrast to mine while I received it, is metaphorically appropriate for how *Mack* views the power dynamics between the two of us. His position at the top of the stairs in contrast to mine at the bottom of the stairs, only reaffirms his belief system about his place in the social scheme of things.

Racist Jokes

One common type of humour for oppression is manifested in the form of racist jokes, as illustrated in the *Mandarin* comment. Racist jokes are fundamentally framed around the concept of race itself: “[Race is the] principle of classifying individuals into groups and differentiating them on the basis of predominantly physical attributes” (Fleras & Elliott, 1999, p. 3). Racism then, “consists of a coherent set of beliefs (ideology) that labels, classifies, evaluates, and discriminates against members of a group by virtue of their inclusion in a predefined and biologically based category” (p. 52). Because this classification model can significantly impact an individual’s concept of self, the implications of racist jokes in regard to identity construction for the *joker* – individual producing the humour – and the *jokee* – individual who is target of the *joker*’s humour – warrant closer investigation.

Dei (1996) points out that it is important to understand that racism goes beyond a simple Black-White polarity, which falsely compartmentalizes its interconnectedness with a vast number of factors and elements. Racism, according to Dei, is about de-legitimizing home and community cultures and isolating gender, class, sexual orientation issues, just to name a few parts of its

complex makeup. Dei insists that whites must also be included in the dialogue because they too have been “racialized for power and privilege” (p. 52).

Thus, the subsequent sections will not only scrutinize the concepts and functions of racism and its oppressive influences on humour, but will also explore the intersections of these influences and their implications in the construction of both the *joker* and jokee’s identity. We begin with a closer analysis of the fundamental beliefs framing racist jokes by looking at the conditions behind *humour of hate*.

Humour of Hate

Oring (2003) deconstructs the hostility behind racist joke making in what he terms *humour of hate*. Oring studied the neo-Nazi group White Aryan Resistance’s (WAR) use of humour to promote an ideology of hate. On WAR’s website, he found countless examples of *humour of hate*:

“What is eight miles long and has an I.Q. of 68? – The ‘Martin Luther King Day’ Parade” (p. 44).

“How do you stop five niggers from raping a white women? – Throw them a basketball” (p. 44).

Oring (2003) goes on to describe the number of WAR cartoon images depicting exaggerated and stereotypical images of Black people with,

excessively thick lips;...enormously wide mouth and nostrils;...extra-large, but half-closed, eyes;...heavy brow ridges and absent forehead.... The figure has his finger in his nose, he is drooling, and action lines suggest that he is giving off an odor that is attracting flies (p. 44).

The caption at the bottom of the cartoon figure reads, “Don’t laugh, White man! This smelly, baggy lipped moron will get a choice job, college scholarship or emergency health care long before you will in today’s world” (p. 44-45).

Although Oring argues that the impact of WAR’s message of hate is somewhat “delegitimized” and “diminished” by its overly absurd humour techniques, for those targeted in the cartoons and jokes, as well as those belonging to groups of minority status, the sting of the message is still very potent.

Joker Positioning in Humour for Oppression

Oring (2003) believes that *humour for hate* allows racist groups such as WAR a vehicle for venting their *repressed or suppressed* hatred and violence towards racial groups outside their own. Freud (1960) echoes these sentiments when he writes, “Brutal hostility, forbidden by law, has been replaced by verbal invective” (p. 102), or in this case and in this technological age, replaced by Internet hate sites. The punch of a fist has been substituted by the punch of a computer keyboard. Whereas a physical act of aggression is less likely to be tolerated, veiling inner hostility in the premise that *it was only a joke*, allows individuals to escape from direct consequences. Freud recognizes this subversive attribute in humour:

A joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously; once again, then, the joke will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible (p. 103).

Freud (1960) and Oring’s (2003) observations suggest a number of things about how *jokers* position themselves when they construct racist humour. From the onset, the *joker* is operating from a position of privilege. We must not forget

who is telling the joke in the first place. *Jokers* gain this advantageous position because they are “taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal” (McIntosh, 2000, p. 10). Freire (1993) describes this social state of privilege as a *possessive consciousness* where individuals take for granted their generous supply of social capital:

The oppressors do not perceive their monopoly on *having more* as a privilege which dehumanizes others and themselves. They cannot see that, in the egoistic pursuit of *having* as a possessing class, they suffocate in their own possessions and no longer *are*; they merely *have*. For them, *having more* is an inalienable right, a right they acquired through their own “effort” with their “courage to take risks” (p. 41).

Using a *knapsack* analogy, McIntosh (2000) insists that individuals, especially white, heterosexual males, need to *unpack* their privileges in order to understand the advantages they possess over others. This *unpacking* is exactly what Dei (1996) does in the introduction to his book:

I set out to write this book from a vantage point as a male, African-Canadian educator.... I acknowledge both my position of privilege, teaching in a Canadian institution of higher learning and, I must add, the contradictions that come with this position (p. 13-14).

But unlike Dei, racist *jokers* take their privileges for granted. Racist jokes then, reflect the privileged reality of the *joker*. “Humour will generally fulfil an ideological function in supporting and maintaining existing social relations and dominant ways of perceiving social reality” (Powell, 1988, p. 100). With such privilege the *joker* can,

say certain things in a certain way which confers immunity.... But the joker is not exposed to danger. He has a firm hold on his own position in the structure and the disruptive comments which he makes upon it are in a sense the comments of the social group upon itself. He merely expresses consensus (Douglas, 1999, p. 159).

Mack not only delivered the joke *at the top* of the staircase, he conceived the joke *from the top*.

Since the racist *jokers* perceive their privilege as the *norm*, what ultimately occurs is an inherent need to define difference between the *joker's* racial grouping and the *jokee's* racial grouping. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Descartes and Bacon all believed that "laughter occurs when some flaw, imperfection, or deficiency is seen in others as we compare them to ourselves" (Shade, 1996, p. 12). This division, or *segregation*, "a geographic as well as a social separation of groups" (Fleras & Elliott, 1999, p. 11), allows *jokers* to distance themselves from those who are different from them.

This dichotomy invariably fuels irrational justification for the misinterpretation and mistreatment of those outside the normative group:

The goodness of White is always contrasted with the badness of Black – Blacks are involved with drugs; Blacks are unacceptable sexually; Black men attempt to invade White sexual space by talking to White women; Black women are simply filthy. This binary translated in ways that complemented White boys, as there is a virtual denial of anything at all good being associated with Blackness, and of anything bad being identified with Whiteness (Fine, Weis & Powell, 1997, p. 257).

Racist jokes, like the concept of race itself, act to regulate the division between racial groupings. Powell (1988) adds, "In any given society, humour is a control resource operating both in formal and informal contexts to the advantage of powerful groups and role-players" (p. 100). In this process, racist jokes relegate certain racial groupings to undesirable positions through *stereotypes*, "a universal tendency to reduce a complex set of phenomena to a relatively few observations that are generalized to the whole category," and *prejudices*, "negative, unsupported, and over-generalized evaluations (prejudgements) of

individuals and groups who are unfamiliar to us" (Fleras & Elliott, 1999, p. 55-56). Through these divisive beliefs and practices, racist jokes act to *discriminate*, "the process of putting negative cognitions into practice" (p. 56), and *segregate* cultural groups from certain positions of "privilege" and "normality." In short a racist joke,

operates to set apart and invalidate the behaviour and ideas of those "not like us" by creating and sustaining stereotypes and often projecting the practices of others to a presumed "logical" but of course "absurd" conclusion. What is achieved is a simultaneous bisociation of social integration and division (Powell, 1988, p. 100).

When the *joker's* social position is juxtaposed against that of the *jokee's*, there is no doubt who is privileged in this world. *My* grouping is different from *Mack's* – his being the *norm* – rather than *his* grouping being different from *mine*. *Mack* is *blessed* with "oranges"; I am *cursed* with *Mandarin oranges*. The *joker's* position of privilege affords him more humour capital to work with than does the *jokee*. "Let's see you flex your *normal sized* muscles" just does not have the same impact. Jacobs (1999) speaks about this deficiency of humour capital:

I challenge you to tell me *one* "White" joke.... I mean a joke that makes fun of the broad, generally understood American idea of being White, in the same way that a black joke makes fun of the very idea of being black.... Whiteness is therefore not funny. It is featureless. It is invisible. It is the norm (p. 130-31).

Aside from the racial name callings of certain "minority" white groups such as the Jews and the Polish, there are no white derogatory terms with the potency of *nigger*, *chink*, *jap*, *flip*, *chug*, etc.

Through his joke, *Mack* clearly paints the racial line between his white culture and my Asian culture. In his eyes, there is no doubt which side of the line is *preferable*.

In the process of distinguishing themselves from the *other*, the *jokers*' ethnocentrism, "uncompromising allegiance and loyalty to [one's] own cultural values and practices as natural, normal and necessary" (Fleras & Elliott, 1999, p. 55), becomes apparent. However even such powerful positioning is not without its risks.

Freire (1993) argues that those who oppress are constantly wary of those they oppress and develop a series of rationalizations to support their stance:

If others do not have more, it is because they are incompetent and lazy; and worst of all is their unjustifiable ingratitude towards the "generous gestures" of the dominant class. Precisely because they are "ungrateful" and "envious," the oppressed are regarded as potential enemies who must be watched (p. 41).

Because racist *jokers* are suspicious, uneasy and fearful of those who occupy spaces outside their dominant culture, these are *justifiable* grounds for the infliction of hateful humour:

"Low others" are a threat to the dominant group that constructs them, because...there is no point in "othering" people who have no claim to the identity space you are trying to occupy. Those groups we persistently "other" are actually those we perceive as very similar to ourselves, but different in one respect – skin colour, reproductive function, accent – which can be fastened on as entailing the low characteristics which make them so "inferior." The power threat that they pose is that of escaping this construction, which in consequence needs constant reinforcement (Hill, 1988, p. 66).

This *reinforcement*, as we have seen here, can appear in the form of racist jokes. It appeared in *Mack's* joke. By exploiting their position of privilege, distancing themselves from the other and pledging unconditional allegiance to their culture, racist *jokers* compartmentalize the *jokees'* unique experiences by stereotyping and stripping them of their complex makeup. In doing so, *jokers* are able to preserve and protect the very power structures they covet and are so

terrified to lose. Humour for oppression segregates, it isolates, it relegates, it regulates and it perpetuates.

Jokee Positioning in Humour for Oppression

Although much of the discussion thus far has centred on the racist *joker's* position, exploration of the *jokee's* positioning needs closer consideration here:

We must always ask, humorous for whom? Many studies of laughter assume too easy a link between laughter and shared jocularity which the butt of racist or sexist jokes often finds difficult to appreciate (Smith, 1996, p. 273-74).

What does this all mean for the students who hear about the Hindu who smells like curry, the Chinese bad driver, and other “Mack” like jokes on a daily basis in their schools? How are they positioned by racist jokes aimed at them or other minority groups like them?

When *Mack* prefaced his offer to “assist” me in carrying the ice container up the stairs with the comment, “Oh, let’s see you flex those Mandarin oranges of yours,” he was subscribing to the notion of racial superiority outlined by Hill (1988). The *Mandarin oranges* not only referred to the categorization of my racial grouping, but also connotes my inferior physical strength as a person in the Asian group. Unlike his “normal” shaped oranges, the size of *Mandarin oranges* in his joke is a symbolic commentary on my “deficiency,” something he could exploit and laugh at: “People derive pleasure from feelings of mastery or control” (Wyer, 1992, p. 663). Furthermore, the fact that he framed my identity with the word “Mandarin” but did not refer to my muscles as merely pebbles or marbles – something more neutral – suggests that there were racial implications behind his joke.

In the construction of racist humour, the *joker*, as mentioned earlier, inherits the privilege to tell the joke. The *jokee* then, is always *laughed at* rather than *laughs at* or *laughs with* the *joker*.

As a social control or social corrective activity, it [racist humour] consists in laughing *at* the violators and deviants. In laughter which separates, isolates, or excludes a portion of those in interaction, the intended or actual victims are laughed *at* by insiders, who are trying to exclude them. Laughter as a weapon or as a conflict or aggression technique is directed *at* or *against* the opponents (Hertzler, 1970, p. 84-85).

“Laughing at” is always aggressive, it “puts people down” in signalling that they are down-put, as in some way holding power over and thus (by definition) potentially threatening the laughter (Hill, 1988, p. 60-61).

Hill (1988) also notes that the Elizabethans regularly attended public tortures for amusement and would laugh at the sight of the helpless prisoners clinging to their last breath. Although only a simple preposition separates the laughing at and laughing with models, laughing *at* the *jokee* “can be seen as denied *discursive* potency – the power to be an agent who has intentional effect in the world” (p. 59). Hill posits that for students who are targets of jokes in schools, they “are constructed as identities who are significantly discursively incompetent, and whose ineptness distinguishes them from us, reinforcing our own identity as fully subjected, ‘law-abiding’ masters of discourse” (p. 59).

The first time someone *jokingly* called me a *chink* was in grade five at Evergreen Elementary, a school in Campbell River where my sisters and I were the only Asian students enrolled. As young as I was at the time and as ignorant as I was to the connotations of the word, I can still vividly remember how profoundly it affected me. I innately knew that the word *chink* could not be applied to *Curtis*, *Tammy*, *Shayla* (pseudonyms) or any other student in the

school. I, along with my sisters, were the inheritors of the word, and all the negative history that accompanies it. This *discursive incompetence* certainly tainted my conception of self, one which was somehow *half* of what everyone else was. Yet just a day before the incident, I felt as *whole* as *Curtis, Tammy, Shayla* and any other student in the school. In my state of perplexity, a number of questions streamed through my consciousness: *How did it happen? Do my parents know? How do I get all of me back?* The most pressing question, however, was, "*What will Curtis, Tammy and Shayla think of me now?*"

For school students especially, according to Noguera (2000), the impact of having one's identity marginalized at such a young age in life has many detrimental effects:

In adolescence, the awareness of race and its implications for individual identity become more salient.... They become increasingly aware of themselves as social beings, and their perception of self tends to be highly dependent on acceptance and affirmation by others. For some adolescents, identification with and attachment to peer groups takes on so much importance that it can override other attachments to family, parents, and teachers (p. 3).

Powell (1988) uses an intelligence test analogy to deconstruct the complex social discourse of humour for *jokee* positioning. How the *jokees* respond to oppressive humour determines their place and worth in the social scheme, much like their results on a culturally biased standardized test: "To get the joke and to respond appropriately demonstrates one's social competence, one's grip over and understanding of the way things are. Not to get it threatens shared meanings and jeopardises one's social position" (p. 100). Powell points out that even though individuals may not "get the joke," they may feel such social pressure to understand the humour that they pretend to comprehend, especially in the case of "subordinates [*jokee*] in respect of superordinates' [*joker*] jokes" (p.

100). When they truly do understand the oppressive joke however, Powell suggests that many individuals laugh, even though they are completely disgusted with the humour.

Furthermore, in order to cope with their unjustly prescribed identities, students may, ironically, self-inflict the humour for oppression:

The constant Butt [*jokee*] within a local social group is likely to be “resilient” in accepting or even initiating the joking – the effect is to claim a share in the “Teller” [*joker*] position and thus a measure of power status in the group. This is the strategy of “being a clown so they wouldn’t hit me” which comedians tend to claim as part of their childhood (Hill, 1988, p. 65).

Sadly, because *jokees* have so often been *dehumanized*, “a distortion of the vocation of becoming fully human” (Freire, 1993, p. 26), they come to believe that the derogatory messages in their self-inflicted humour for oppression is true:

Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything — that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive — that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness (p. 45).

For the rare brave individuals who attempt to question, challenge and resist the *authoritative discourses*, they encounter yet another layer of obstacles to their identity construction:

For minority students in particular, the nuances of their shifting identities and intersecting marginalities are exacerbated by the failure of the education system to recognize that all students enter classrooms with a reservoir of cultural and political capital. When minority students, for example, utilize such capital to resist hegemonic norms and values and patriarchal structures that they perceive as subordinating them even further, students are labelled “deviants,” “problem children” and “at-risk youth” (Dei, 1996, p. 78).

Inevitably, the *jokee* must always encounter *hostile terrain*, a less than ideal environment for “compet[ing] with or resist[ing] the social controls of the powerful” (Powell, 1988, p. 103). There seems to be a no-win situation for the *jokee*. In humour for oppression, the only winners are the racist *jokers* and their precious social institutions.

Novak (1976) believes that the fundamental problem behind racist humour is that there is an absence of what he calls a *shared bard*, where all ethnic groups are presented and represented equally and fairly in the joke, and everyone has access to the production of the humour. Racist humour controls the production of humour exclusively, dictating who can and cannot craft, weave or sow a joke.

Humour theorist Jacobs (1999) illustrates the essence of *shared bard* when he recalls how his sister told him a joke about putting Velcro on the ceiling to prevent Black children from jumping on the bed. He explains why he found the joke funny:

When one of my sisters, whose black self-esteem and love of children are unshakable, once leaned over conspiratorially and told me that joke, we both laughed and winced. We laughed not because we like to demean black children but because we are incapable of doing so – because we were once black children ourselves, grimacing when our mother pulled a plastic comb through our oiled hair; because, to our eyes, nothing can *stop* a nappy-headed black kid from being beautiful. Least of all the outrageous image of being stuck momentarily to the ceiling. But when a white man with a fake mustache and an unlit cigar turns to the camera, as Groucho Marx does in *Duck Soup*, to deliver a throwaway line about “darkies,” I do not laugh (p. 127-28).

Connected to the absence of a *shared bard* in racist humour is the lack of a shared community:

Humour implies a community; a fellowship of laughers with whom the humor is shared (Oring, 2003, p. 56).

When one identifies with a particular group or culture, special “in-group” humor occurs, often in the form of sayings, terms, slang, stories, pet names and nicknames, and situational joking. This humor is used to increase group camaraderie and create a special bonding (Shade, 1996, p. 28).

Without shared community and *shared bard*, the production of humour excludes the *jokees* from actively participating, while at the same time misappropriating their voices:

The sassing, gassing, sashaying, mutually dissing black characters of prime-time television, from *Amos n’ Andy* to *The Jeffersons* to *Booty Call*, are, in effect, a black joke told by a White-dominated media – with the help of career-savvy black stars and writers and producers willing to cash in on a trend.... And it’s not that the jokes on these shows are never funny. It’s that there is not a black voice – the voice of a broader variety of black experience – doing the telling. And, for me [Jacobs], it is hard to laugh at “nigger” jokes told by White television executives – even with black actors as mouthpieces (Jacobs, 1999, p. 129-30).

Speaking with Oprah Winfrey, comedian Chris Rock justifies his telling of “nigger” jokes by his reclaiming of its meaning and ownership in his humour.

When I announced to my friend *Kenji* (pseudonym) that I was planning to get contact lenses, he responded by saying, “And just how do you suppose you’re going to get them to fit into your tiny eyes?” He laughed and I laughed. To an outsider with no understanding of the context to *Kenji’s* joke, by all means, it sounds extremely racist:

Individuals not members of the in-group are often chastised for using any of the group humor. For example, a Black comedian can use certain derogatory terms for Blacks, but a white comedian may be considered a racist or bigot for using the same term or telling the same joke (Shade, 1996, p. 28).

How *Kenji* and I are positioned relative to one another; the fact that he and I have been close friends since grade six, belong to an Asian minority group, and share a history of common experiences and understandings, make his joke anything but racist. In contrast the lack of a *shared bard* and shared community [i.e. our unequal positionings] make *Mack's Mandarin* joke racist.

Race to Change

Jokes like *Mack's Mandarin* joke will continue to be told at places of employment, in the streets, at home and in the classroom. How do we move from an oppressive discourse that cleverly disguises itself in laughter?

I envision my role in education as not only a teacher, but an active agent for social change, much like that of the time traveler depicted in popular Science Fiction genres. The time traveller who journeys to the past is usually warned not to say, touch or do anything that could affect the future. If the time traveller prevents the death of an infant, for example, he or she could significantly alter the course of history, affecting the present and the future. Even the slight shifting of a coffee mug's handle on the kitchen counter has the potential to unravel the future's distinct path. Even so, the time traveller, when faced with the opportunity to rewrite history, usually seizes the opportunity and creates the change.

I find this analogy helpful on a number of levels for framing my concept of change in the classroom because it reminds me of just how much power and influence I can have over the *present* and the *future* of my students. For me, there is no doubt that even the smallest passing comment or simplest gesture can alter the course of my students' present and future, either positively or

negatively. Although I would never want to pen a complete story for any of my students, I hope to at least be able to provide them with enough blank pages on which to write their own narratives.

Theorizing Social Change

Hertzler (1970) defines social change as,

a widely inclusive term – the generic designation for all societal modification. More specifically, it consists in alterations of societal structures, of patterns of social behavior and relationships, of social positions and conditions of population elements, of social functions and processes. As in change in general, causation is always involved. Social change, of course, may be permanent or temporary, and beneficial or harmful in its effects; it may be planned or unplanned and unidirectional or multidirectional (p. 117).

Freire (1993) speaks about change as rooted in those who would most benefit from it. He asks, “Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?” (p. 27). He conceptualizes change in two distinct stages, the first being the “unveil[ing] of the world of oppression” (p. 36). The second stage is “permanent liberation,” (p. 36) where pedagogy does not belong to the oppressed but rather to all people. To achieve this, he advocates for the *dialogical theory of action*, in which change can occur through a number of transformative initiatives. Firstly, *cooperation*, in the sense that no one becomes a *subject* to be dominated, is essential to “transform[ing] the world” (p. 148). With *cooperation* is the need for *unity for liberation*, where leaders must focus their efforts in bringing the oppressed together. A natural progression from *unity for liberation* is *organization*, a process of establishing an efficient way of bringing about change. Finally, *dialogical action* involves *cultural synthesis*, “a systematic and deliberate form of action which operates upon the social structure, either with the objective of

preserving that structure or of transforming it” (p. 160). Social change for Freire can be either positive or negative.

Freire (1993) also envisions change not just for the oppressed, but also for the oppressors. He argues that the oppressed must liberate both themselves and their oppressors, because those who “oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves” (p. 26). Freire advocates for compassion, pointing out that in the act of oppressing others, the oppressors become de-humanized; the oppressed can help the oppressors to reclaim each other’s humanity. Berger’s (1997) ideas on humour suggest how this might occur.

Separate Worlds and Figured Worlds of Carnival

Berger (1997) posits that the world of humour is one place where change can occur. In his view the comic has the ability to create a *separate world* where “limitations of the human conditions are miraculously overcome” (1997, p. x). Berger describes this *separate world* as a place where restrictions of the real world are temporarily irrelevant:

In the world of comedy one senses that one is in a different order of things, one is transported to other places and other times, there is a kind of jolt (here marked by laughter or its anticipation) as one moves into the world of the comedy and a reverse jolt (one stops laughing) as one moves out of it, other people are experienced differently (the threatening tyrant, say, becomes a pathetic figure) and so is one’s own self (the victim becomes a victor over circumstance) (p. 206).

In this *separate world*, or as Berger (1997) further terms it, counterworld, the individual loses “citizenship in the ordinary world” (p.207), while the comic brings about *transcendence*. Although this cathartic experience in the *separate*

world may have religious implications, Berger is quick to emphasize that it is not always so. It does however, offer *redeeming* qualities, in the sense of “making life easier to bear, at least briefly” (p. 205). So for students to be actively involved in using humour as a tool for their own identity construction rather than passively subjecting to the constructions of others, they need to be aware of these dynamics and learn how to position themselves in humorous discourse and eventually how to use humour as a tool for liberation, something they might in fact learn how to do.

These *separate worlds* and *counterworlds* or what Holland (1998) terms, *figured worlds*, move beyond the realm of imagination, to spaces of possibilities where imagination might be enacted:

First, figured worlds are historical phenomena, to which we are recruited or into which we enter, which themselves develop through the works of their participants. Figured worlds, like activities, are not so much things or objects to be apprehended, as processes or traditions of apprehension which gather us up and give us form as our lives intersect them. Second, figured worlds, like activities, are social encounters in which participants’ positions matter.... Third, figured worlds are socially organized and reproduced; they are like activities in the usual, institutional sense (p. 41).

I, like a host at a dinner party, create a *figured world* with the invitations I send, the tablecloth I lay, and the menu selection I make. These, what Holland (1998) terms, *artifacts*, facilitate in fashioning what I envision will hopefully be a pleasant evening of merriment and celebration. Unlike a scripted scene however, the party guests’ engagement with the artifacts reveals just how fluid a *figured world* is and to a certain extent, how unpredictable it can be. The party guests mingle with the *figured world* with the flowers, wine and conversation they bring to the table. My degree of intimacy with each guest will also shape each individual’s positions within this *figured world*; some will play more prominent

parts while others will be relegated to supporting roles. Their individual response to an off-hand comment, offensive joke or even subtle insult for example, will determine the tone of the evening and the direction of the dinner party experience. Considering the celebratory intent of the *figured world* I initially moulded though, most of the guests will probably leave experiencing a pleasant evening with friends and family. But of course, there is no guarantee that there will be a unanimous consensus about the degree of enjoyment or lack of it.

Why engage with *figured worlds* in the first place, let alone find space for them in a classroom? Holland (1997) argues that “by modeling possibilities, imaginary worlds can inspire new actions; or, paradoxically, their alternative pleasures can encourage escape and a withdrawal from actions” (p. 49). This can be achieved through a process Holland terms *improvisation*,

Improvisations are the sort of impromptu actions that occur when our past, brought to the present as *habitus*, meets with a particular combination of circumstances and conditions for which we have no set responses (p. 17-18).

Unlike a scripted scene, improvisation, like theatre sports, requires the actors to leave their place of familiarity and comfort, for perhaps uncharted and even dangerous terrain. Within this condition, the actors must draw upon their past experiences and craft, and integrate them with the impromptu snippets of lines or spontaneous props occasionally thrown at them. A more experienced and trained actor with a greater repertoire of resources to draw upon is more likely to creatively confront the unscripted scene with greater success.

Similarly, when students’ identities confront “positioning by powerful discourses” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 16), such as in the form of racist humour, their ability to improvise with the discourse of humour has “potential beginnings

of an altered subjectivity, an altered identity" (p. 17-18). Their level of success in improvisation is dependent on how in depth their understanding of the function of humour is. Armed with very little knowledge about the intricacies of the dynamics of humour and the dangers that lie behind some jokes, these students will be less likely to achieve "a reformed subjectivity" (p. 18).

Bakhtin (1984) extensively studied such a *figured world* where improvisation was vibrant by looking at the Medieval laughter of *carnival*. He describes *carnival* as,

a boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations [that] opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. In spite of their variety, folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody – all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one culture of folk carnival humor (p. 4).

Bakhtin (1984) notes that *carnival* was a place that provided a counterworld to the oppressive religious and political indoctrination of the Medieval times, where all individuals could find freedom in merriment, celebration and laughter. *Carnival* was a "consecration of inequality" (p. 10), albeit temporary, where everyone enjoyed a sense of equality unimaginable in the real world. During *carnival*, "laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (p. 12). The potential for social transformation during these festivities, according to Berger (1997), is great:

The carnival may be seen as the final stage in the progression of the comic from brief interruption of social order to the full-blown construction of a counterworld. These comic intrusions are temporary, but they are always there as haunting possibilities, simultaneously liberating individuals and making the guardians of order very nervous (p. 84).

Humour for Progression

Humour for change, or what I will term here *humour for progression*, can offer a *figured world* of possibilities for educators and students as they position themselves and construct their identities vis-à-vis one another. The key word in humour for progression is, of course, *progress*. Within the framework of this thesis, progress means to move forward from a place of antiquation and stagnation; advance from a discourse of oppression and improve on a tradition of constructed normality. hooks (1994) uses the word *transgression* in a very similar fashion: “[Transgression is] a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom” (p. 12).

Hertzler (1970) posits that laughter and the person with a sense of humour are agencies of social change:

Laughter is a potent instrument in influencing human actions, feelings, thoughts, and decisions.... As engaged in, individually or collectively; unconsciously, incidentally or spontaneously; or consciously, deliberately and purposively (depending on the type of situation and the relations of the actors), it is an agent in the conduct of a large number of social, sociopsychological, and societal functions.... But the significant fact is that laughter is widely resorted to as a social utility to accomplish social purposes and ends (p. 83-84).

Hertzler (1970) supports her claim by alluding to children's inclination to be drawn to laughter at a remarkably young age. She also points out that the role of the comic can help to maintain the well-being of a society.

Humour for progression is also about resistance. It is “used as a weapon of opposition to superiors, to oppressors, to those wielding power and authority, with special reference to dictators and tyrants” (Hertzler, 1970, p. 156), and is a “defence against aggression, tyranny, conflict and intimidation” (Coasta &

Liebmann, 1997, p. 215). In humour for progression, race, gender, sexual orientation and other minority groupings are not targets for humour but rather participating voices in the production of humour. Humour for progression “opens the mind to diversity and allows it to view things from a different perspective. Originality, divergent thinking, and creative problem solving require that individuals be flexible in their thinking” (p. 224). Instead of being excluded by sneers, jeers and taunts, humour for progression offers access to the laughter.

Humour for progression is not about obtaining or maintaining oppressive power structures, but rather concerned with deconstructing the very power structures that act to segregate, isolate, relegate, regulate, and perpetuate.

Humour for progression is a form of improvisation for social change:

Such improvisations are the openings by which change comes from generation to generation. They constitute the environment or landscape in which the experience of the next generation “sediments,” falls out, into expectations and disposition. The improvisations of the parental generation are the beginning of a new habitus for the next generation (Holland et al., 1998, p. 18).

Satire

Satire is a specific form of humour for progression. Two possible etymological understandings of the word may prove to be useful: “[S]atyr (the half man-half beast, suggesting that satire is lawless, wild, and threatening and lanx satura (the ‘mixed’ or ‘full platter,’ suggesting that satire is a formless, miscellany, and food for thought)” (Griffin, 1994, p. 6).

Freud (1960), when deconstructing the various functions of jokes, asserts that humour is a “mechanism...for unmasking” (p. 201). Satire’s intent is to expose the frailties, injustices and corruption of society’s people and institutions:

“Laughter is a potent way of exposing our self-deceptions, dogmatisms, and pedantries, our exaggerations, and our gross misapprehensions of what is going on.... It can unmask both our lapses and excesses” (Hertzler, 1970, p. 104). In fact, Freud (1960) stresses that humour “unveils reality with such illumination” (p. 161).

Berger (1997) is also cognisant of the power of humour when he facetiously proclaims, “If you can no longer hit them with a machete, hit them with a joke” (p. 71). Berger sees the work of humour much like that of a sociologist, because it can often unveil and unravel the complexities of a society, often more effectively than sociology itself. He offers the following joke as an example of how humour can effectively unmask the modern cut-throat mentality of modern capitalism:

Two businessmen are on safari. Suddenly they hear drums in the distance. Their native guide calls out “A lion is heading this way!” and promptly disappears into the brush. One of the two businessmen sits down and puts on running shoes. “What are you doing?” says the first businessmen, “You can’t outrun a lion.” “I don’t have to outrun the lion,” says the second businessmen. “I only have to outrun you” (p. 70).

Once the injustice is exposed through the humour of satire, we are encouraged to resist the illuminated oppression. Powell (1988) describes resistance as “the practices of the powerless struggling to release themselves from the yoke of control” (p. 99). Humour, especially satire, can help lead to this resistance. Douglas (1999) argues that “all jokes have this subversive effect on the dominant structure of ideas” (p. 150), or as Orwell puts it, “Every joke is a tiny revolution” (Cited in Powell, 1988, p. 100). Thus, humour can be a “rebellion against authority” (Freud, 1960, p. 105).

Freire (1993) adds that an effective humorist is not necessarily a person who can make an individual laugh or smile, but rather is skilled in making the individual think (p. 162). Satire is also deceptively characterized by its subtlety, encouraging its reader, listener or viewer to play an active role in deciphering, interpreting and synthesizing the humour. Satire encourages individuals to disengage themselves from restrictive social matrixes in order that they can “exercise an independence or autonomy of judgement” (Stewart, 2001, p. 55). It encourages us to problematize the idea of social norms:

It [satire] is probably the most specific and at the same time widespread and efficient use of humor and laughter in probing for and revealing deficiencies in the reigning norms, absurdities in the norms in the making, and foolish or socially questionable or dangerous departures from standard norms (Hertzler, 1970, p. 106).

Only then, can we wake up from an *unconscious civilization* that will allow us to engage in critical thought about those who oppress: “Criticism is perhaps the citizen’s primary weapon in the exercise of her legitimacy” (Saul, 1995, p. 165). When we challenge the *authoritative discourse*, we become more in touch with our internally persuasive discourse:

When thought begins to work in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way, what first occurs is a separation between internally persuasive discourses and authoritarian enforced discourse, along with a rejection of those congeries of discourses that do not matter to us, that do not touch us (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 344).

One of the aims of education is not to prepare students for the workforce, but rather to equip them with the critical eyes that will allow them to see just what kind of a world they will be inheriting, social critique then must play an important role in the classroom. Educator Carol Reeves (1996) actively encourages her students to engage with satire in her classroom for many of the same reasons

articulated here. In her article, "Students as Satirist," Reeves writes that she "strives for a classroom environment that breeds conscious critique without indoctrination" (p. 16). She argues that the use of satire in the classroom offers a number of educational benefits: 1) It is "intellectually challenging" and 2) it has "potential transforma[tive]" qualities (p. 16). She offers a number of personal anecdotes about how her students utilize satire in her classroom, often as a "mediated engine of anger rather than pure, unmediated anger itself" (p. 16). Instead of physically or violently attacking their source of discontentment, Reeves argues that satire offers them a more reflective means of addressing their frustration or anger. When students are able to question and challenge their social patterning and its institutions, they can come to realize the social constraints that often dictate their thoughts and actions and ultimately their sense of identity.

Satire is multifaceted and contradictory: "[It] can be amiable, almost playful and good-temperedly jocular; but it may also be sardonic, biting, or caustic and furiously denunciatory" (Hertzler, 1970, p. 106). Irony, wit and a splash of hyperbole are used to execute the humour. Sarcasm, which traditionally has been viewed as oppressive due to its sneering and sharply cutting qualities, can ironically function progressively here. Often satirists utilize sarcasm not for silencing and suppressing, but rather for emphasizing and highlighting well-hidden injustices. The rawness and bluntness of sarcasm are effective for stirring up controversies, subsequently opening up doors for discussion and debate.

Unlike humour for oppression such as racist jokes, satire challenges the individual to question his or her preconceived notions of social norms, be it racial

or gender groupings. It does this by employing humour: "Satire exercises its critical appeals through its comic perceptions. Humor is an essential and identifying element" (Hertzler, 1970, p. 106). Ideally, through introspection, the enlightened individual then begins a journey as an agent for social change, whether it be in thought and / or practice.

From Swift and Shakespeare to *Tricksters* and *Simpsons*

Jonathan Swift, a forefather of traditional Anglo Saxon satire, attempted to reconfigure the *authoritative discourse* of his time. Babusci (1994) notes that Swift, a devout Roman Catholic, born in Dublin in 1667, was very critical of both his church and state. His *Tale of a Tub*, published anonymously in 1707, uses humour to criticize the "excesses in religion and learning" (Babusci, 1994, p. 474). His most renowned work, however, is the commentary found in *Gulliver's Travels*, a witty social critique of *authoritative discourses*, cleverly disguised as a children's book. The writing chronicles a number of Gulliver's sailing expeditions with a variety of humorous anecdotes about his encounters with the *other*, most notably the *Lilliputians*. After a number of what initially seems like farcical adventures, "Gulliver is led toward realizations about the flawed nature of the society from which he had come, and he returns to England filled with disillusionment" (p. 476).

William Shakespeare also challenged *authoritative discourses* by mocking the stringent conventions of the Elizabethan era. Shakespeare is renowned for his brilliance in capturing the diversity of human identities in his writings. Similar to the satire in Swift's prose for example, Shakespeare's verse and drama poke fun at social etiquette. In his "Sonnet 130," Shakespeare,

perhaps sick of the idealistic and essentializing construction of women's identity in love poetry, juxtaposes the refined conventions of sonnet writing with a seemingly unflattering ode to his object of affection. Instead of musing over the mythology of her beauty, he confesses that his "mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun," "black wires grow on her hair," and that "the breath from [his] mistress reeks" (lines 1, 4, 8). He purposely positions his mistress' identity in opposition to the unrealistic template of Elizabethan ideals regarding femininity. In doing so, Shakespeare poignantly illustrates that like culture, gender cannot be essentialized.

Tricksters

Humorist, playwright and poet Taylor (2000) travels throughout Canada to explore Aboriginal culture by looking specifically at its humour. In his documentary, *Redskins, Tricksters and Puppy Stew*, Taylor interviews a number of Aboriginals who use satirical humour to create *figured worlds* where their oppressive history of a culture that was denied and continues to be denied by *authoritative discourses* are confronted and addressed through the use of laughter. One of the individuals Taylor interviews says this about Aboriginal humour: "I find a lot of Native humour is an exploration of the dark side.... A lot of our humour stems from our tragedies that happened. We joke about that. It's partly a survival technique." Another interviewee speaks about how he used humour to distract his abusive father from battering his mother. A common theme by all the humorists interviewed, however, is their belief in the liberating possibilities of humour to heal a people hurt by a history and discourse that stole their land, language and children. As one Native woman puts it, "Humour is

transforming. It can take you to other places. Good, bad, ugly...things you want to hide...things you want to celebrate.” The *Trickster*, according to Taylor’s observations, is the *Redskins’* satirist.

The Simpsons

Satirists find their material in the daily events in which they live and participate. They deal with the most current social issues and address them to the people of their time. Perhaps the most popular satirists of our time are found behind the voices and images of the animated television program, *The Simpsons*. Because of its timeliness, I used an episode of *The Simpsons* in my research as a prompt for exploring students’ perspectives on humour. *The Simpsons* is so “of its time” that it is the first animated television series to *out* one of its central characters in the 2004 / 2005 season (Harris, 2004). After over fourteen years on the air, with over three hundred episodes and a consistently devout viewership, *The Simpsons*, humour for progression on a mass media level, has carved out a significant piece of the modern cultural landscape, impacting a fair number of adults and youths alike. In a recent survey, *The Simpsons* ranks as the most popular television program among Canadian children eight to fifteen years old (Schmidt, 2004). Schmidt quotes the director for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, Robert Thompson as supportive of the show because it “teaches kids about irony, political consciousness and skepticism about the media” (p. A3).

Matt Groening, the mastermind behind the longest running animated series on television, can be seen as the modern day Shakespeare or Swift. Like his counterparts, Groening, along with his team of writers, is a social

commentator who mercilessly strips society and its people of the facades obscuring the layers of injustice and corruption with, of course, humour as his weapon / tool of choice. One of *The Simpsons*' most popular targets for attack, for example, is the American education system. In one particular episode, a group of pre-schoolers are seen happily chanting and clapping to the song, "Bingo," while a team of administrators with stern looks and clipboards makes careful observations about the children's intellectual potential. When one of the boys accidentally adds an extra clap during the catchy chorus / rhythm section, an administrator writes, "Not college material." Similar to Shakespeare, Swift and *Tricksters*, Groening disguises his social critiques in both humour and entertainment, appealing to both the elite and the masse. Both the show's longevity and critical acclaim are unprecedented:

The Simpsons is rich in satire. Without question it is one of the most intelligent and literate comedies on television today.... It may seem incongruous to those who have dismissed it as a mere cartoon about an oaf and his family...to say that the show is intelligent and literate, but attentive viewing reveals levels of comedy far beyond farce. We see layer upon layer of satire, double meanings, allusions to high as well as popular culture, sigh gags, parody, and self-referential humour (Irwin et al., 2001, p. 2).

Consistent with the tenets of humour for progression, *The Simpsons* demands active participation from its audience, both visually and auditorally. Similar to the attention needed in dissecting the blank verse in Shakespearean soliloquies, "*The Simpsons* is a show that rewards you for paying attention" (Groening, 1997, p. 9). Only the most astute viewer, for example, can discern the mayor's official seal's inscription - "Corruptis in Extremis" (Strachan, 2003, p. 15). The show's incessant allusions to history, current world events, popular culture, literature, mythology, religion, politics, art, music and virtually every other culture facet imaginable is a testament to its refusal to be deemed as senseless

entertainment. Counter to the current educational trend for students to specialize in a field of study, *The Simpsons* rewards its viewers for their breadth of knowledge rather than their compartmentalized lens of experience. But perhaps its greatest success is “like all great satire...it [isn’t] just funny; it [is] true” (Turner, 2002, p. 47). Each episode introduces a new *figured world* where *authoritative discourses* are challenged and made fun of, sparking possibilities for social change, especially in the eyes and minds of *The Simpsons’* predominantly young audience.

Concluding Comments

The various theories, voices and personal accounts framing this chapter will help us to better understand just how humour is both a powerful force for oppression and a potential agent for social change. Tracing the oppressive forces that have and continue to dictate our daily discourses has offered a platform on which we can move forward. Racism, for example, continues to weave through our institutions, practices and lives. Although racism may not be as blatant as it once was, its danger lies in its apparent subtleties, often leading many to believe naively that it is extinct. On the contrary, racism is very much alive. It can hibernate in our humour, poking its nasty head out occasionally in the form of racist jokes. Although one’s identity is shaped and influenced by a myriad of social, cultural and political forces, to just name a few, humour for oppression can taint and deny the self. Paradoxically, as oppressive as humour can be, solace can be found in its hidden potential for bringing about social change. Humour for progression, especially in the form of satire, can reveal undiscovered *figured worlds* of possibilities where negotiation of social change

can materialize. Swift and Shakespeare did it in their own time, in their own ways. *The Simpsons* are doing it now.

Although the various theories outlined throughout this chapter serve a number of fruitful purposes, my students' ideas, thoughts and personal reflections also have an important perspective to contribute. What are their views on racism, humour, identity and social change? The next chapter will showcase and examine their voices in the chorus of change. A key objective of this thesis is, through a consideration of students' perceptions of humour regarding race, ethnicity, culture and identity, to gain a better understanding of how humour, whether developed by students themselves, their teachers, or drawn from popular media, could disrupt the oppressiveness of many of the mainstream "humorous" discourses dealing with language, race, ethnicity and culture.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Qualitative Research

The research takes a qualitative approach and examines “the lived experiences of real people in real settings... Understanding how individuals make sense of their everyday lives is the stuff of this type of inquiry” (Hatch, 2002, p. 5-6). A branch of qualitative research is ethnography, which “seeks to describe culture or parts of culture from the point of view of cultural insiders” (Jacob, 1997; Malinowski, 1992, cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 21). More specifically, this research is situated within the framework of educational ethnography, in which the data collected is from students and is “about the contexts, activities, and beliefs of participants in educational settings” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 8). The research assembled a group of students from the same secondary school and offered them a forum to express, discuss, collaborate, question, challenge and debate their personal views, ideas and perspectives about issues regarding racism, humour, identity and how it is constructed, and social agency. In fact, the students understood that their participation in this research was not only helping to offer further insights into a body of knowledge, but that these insights might prove to be helpful in bringing about positive change in their school environment.

Constructivist Paradigm

When embarking on qualitative analysis, researchers should first “unpack their ontological and epistemological beliefs” or “their beliefs about how the world is ordered and how we can come to know things about it” (Hatch, 2002, p. 2).

This echoes McIntosh’s (1989) *knapsack* analogy of asking us to *unpack* our privileges. The present research into how racist attitudes and humour come into being is heavily influenced by the constructivist’s idea of knowledge:

Constructivists assume a world in which universal, absolute realities are unknowable, and the objects of inquiry are individual perspectives or constructions of reality. While acknowledging that elements are often shared across social groups, constructivist science argues that multiple realities exist that are inherently unique because they are constructed by individuals who experience the world from their own vantage point (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 15).

Each individual’s experiences with racism, for example, share many threads, but can never be reduced or essentialized. Thus, it is through dialogue or *co-construction* (Hatch, 2002) that we collectively try to make sense of our encounters with racism.

Throughout this thesis, I have specified a number of theorists’ voices, from Bakhtin (1981, 1984), Berger (1997) and Butler (1997), to Foucault (1997), Freire (1993) and Freud (1960), to name a few, while incorporating my own ideas, experiences and narratives. I will also be including the voices of my students to weave some of the fragmented strands of understanding together. This whole process is constructivist in the sense that “it is through mutual engagement that researchers and respondents construct the subjective reality that is under investigation” (Mishler, 1986, cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 15).

The Focus Group

A qualitative, as well as constructivist approach to data gathering can be implemented through the use of a focus group:

Focus groups are sets of individuals with similar characteristics or having shared experiences (e.g., beginning teachers) who sit down with a moderator to discuss a topic. The focus is on the topic, and fundamental data are transcripts of group discussions around the topic (Hatch, 2002, p. 24).

All the students selected for the focus group were enrolled in the same secondary school, while I, their moderator, as well as their teacher, guided them through a number of activities, prompts and discussion questions regarding racism, humour, identity and social agency. Instead of individually interviewing the participants, I opted for the focus group model because it encourages dialogue and sharing of ideas between participants: “[T]he hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Morgan, 1997, p. 2, cited in Hatch, 2002, p. 24). In addition, focus groups allow researchers to capture group dynamics, while at the same time providing greater sense of ease for the participants. Unlike one-on-one interviews, participants are comforted by the fact that they are not necessarily the centre of attention (Hatch).

The first focus group commenced on the first Wednesday of October, 2004, and continued every subsequent Wednesday for the remainder of the month. Scheduling each focus session within the one hour timeframe served a number of purposes. It was long enough for each participant to engage with the discussion materials presented to them, while short enough that it was considerate of the six hours the students spent in school prior to the gathering,

not to mention the hours of work that awaited them after the meeting. Because I wanted the data to reflect the growth and change of the participants' views and ideas over a period of time, rather than a quick snapshot from a single meeting, it was decided that this could be achieved through the four sessions within the one-month timeframe. Hatch (2002) suggests that three to five sessions is generally appropriate. I was also very conscious that my participants were all in their most time demanding graduating year, with many of them balancing part-time employment or belonging to school and / or out of school clubs or organizations. Thus, the four sessions over a one-month period seemed to satisfy both the researcher and participants' various agendas.

Each session took place in my classroom, a room familiar to and comfortable for all of the participants. Every meeting officially began at 3:00 p.m., since both the students and I had our respective classes to attend / teach during the day. However, members would start trickling in ten minutes prior to the appointed time, usually to engage in informal conversation while snacking on some of the treats I provided. I felt it was important to create as many opportunities for dialogue before, during and after the official focus group timeframe, with food being an effective catalyst for generating conversation, not to mention satisfying hungry stomachs at the end of a long school day. Although many of the members were acquainted with each other prior to our first gathering, they were not all necessarily "friends," nor part of the same clique. Thus, I often commenced the "official" session 5-10 minutes after 3:00 p.m. to allow the students to make a natural transition from the casual and social part of the gathering, to the more formal aspect of the focus group discussions with greater ease and comfort, something that is essential for engaging in meaningful

dialogue. Hatch (2002) reminds us, that “participants are the ultimate gatekeepers. They determine whether and to what extent the researcher will have access to the information desired.” Creating a safe and trusting environment and making each and every participant feel as comfortable as possible allow for better access to their personal perceptions.

Although each session was originally scheduled for one hour, a number of them did exceed this time frame slightly because of the dynamic nature of the discussions. In order to avoid abrupt and unnatural points of completion, many sessions found their own “natural” ending. All group members accepted this inevitability without protest, but also with the knowledge that they could withdraw their participation at any time during or after each focus group session. When I could foresee a session exceeding the allotted one hour, as was the case with the third meeting, I approached each participant individually, requesting a thirty minutes extension to their time commitment; again, all members were receptive to the idea.

Since all participants were encouraged to share their ideas, views, personal experiences and reflections on the various issues presented during the focus group, all sessions needed to be captured on audio recorders and later transcribed for analysis. The data characteristic of qualitative inquiry is usually, “complex, detailed narratives that include the voices of the participants beings studied” (Hatch, 2002, p. 9). The audio recordings and transcripts allow me to reflect, organize, analyze and interpret the rich layers of data collected. All students were made aware of this procedure and the reasons for it in the initial orientation meeting. It was also made clear to the participants that all audio recordings and transcripts would be destroyed upon the completion of the thesis

and that their anonymity would be protected. Although the participants initially found the novelty of the audio recording a bit disconcerting, mostly because they cringed at the idea of hearing their own voices and ideas repeated, they quickly seemed to accept this formality as part of the research data gathering process. Half way through the first session, the audio recorder was virtually all but forgotten by the participants.

Site of Research

A qualitative approach to research recognizes that “social settings are unique, dynamic and complex” (Hatch, 2002, p. 9). Moreover as Hammersly (1992) suggests,

settings are not naturally occurring phenomena, they are constituted and maintained through cultural definition and social strategies. Their boundaries are not fixed but shift across occasions, to one degree or another, through processes of redefinition and negotiation (p. 43).

Two key reasons for selecting my current place of employment as the site of my research were my familiarity with the school and the students and the fact that the school has a history of events relating to multi-racial demography.

Since I have been teaching at *Diversity* (pseudonym) school for almost five years, I have acquired an intimate knowledge of the beliefs and practices of the school and its diverse student population. Having grown quite fond of the school and its unique student makeup, I acknowledge the strides *Diversity* has made towards a more inclusive environment for its students and staff in recent years, while at the same time recognizing that there is still much more to do.

The following historical and demographic factors etch in some of the “uniqueness and complexity” (Hatch, 2002) as well as the “boundaries” and “social events” (Hammersly, 1992) that contribute to making this an appropriate research site. *Diversity* first opened its doors in 1970 as a junior high school in what is now the largest school district in British Columbia. Back then, *Diversity* was populated by approximately six hundred students and forty staff members. One of its original staff members, who is still currently teaching here, informed me that the school was predominantly white, both in student and teacher makeup. The staff and students were a relatively cohesive group, sharing many similar cultural backgrounds, experiences and interests. The students and staff regularly participated in camping, hiking and skiing trips together. Staff members and their spouses would regularly socialize with each other in a number of out of school social settings. The smaller school population during this time afforded teachers the opportunity to not only know all the students by their face and name, but to interact and collaborate with their colleagues on a daily basis. The predominantly white, middle class families that lived in *Diversity*'s surrounding community, where it was common to see students riding their horses, would soon experience some significant changes with the ushering in of a new decade.

In the 1980's, the school, as well as its surrounding community, began to experience a number of significant changes. With the influx of newly arrived immigrants to the area, most notably from India, many lower-income housing and affordable apartment complexes and townhouses quickly replaced the spacious farm-like homes and properties encircling the school. “Monster Houses” also were constructed at a rapid rate to accommodate the multi-generation and multi-family living arrangements of newly arrived immigrants. With both the ever-

changing physical and cultural landscape of the community, *Diversity* was no longer a predominately white school.

In 1996, with the growth of its student population, both in numbers and cultural backgrounds, *Diversity* was officially declared a secondary school. The school's physical structure also expanded to accommodate the growth; most recently, another wing was constructed in 2001. Currently, there are 90 staff members, 67 of them teachers, and approximately 1280 students. Over 39 different cultures are represented here, with 48% of the students coming from a home where English is not the first language spoken. Approximately 65-70% of the student enrolment is of Indo-Canadian ancestry. The staff makeup is also reflective of the diverse student body, with at least one teacher of minority background in virtually every department of the school. The administration team consists of a female principal, and both male and female vice-principals, all of whom are white. In fact, *Diversity* was the first school in its district to appoint a woman secondary principal.

Throughout the past ten years or so, *Diversity* school has garnered an unfavourable reputation from the general public as a "tough" school with many "problem" kids. One of the school's most tragic events occurred on October of 2000, when one of *Diversity's* students was struck by a car and killed behind the school's basketball court. Apparently, rival students from another school were engaged in conflict with some of *Diversity's* students. Although details of the incident are still sketchy, there were many allegations of racial motives behind the unfortunate event. The media's rampant speculations as well as student gossip only flamed the divisive forces that created additional challenges for students, staff and administration.

Within days of this tragic event, a former graduate of *Diversity* was found dead in the Fraser River in an unrelated incident; her death was pronounced a suicide. Apparently, this Indo-Canadian girl was struggling with her Western influences in a traditional Eastern home that disapproved of her choice of partner.

Matters were made worse when another student was stabbed on the anniversary of the school's first student death, in yet another unrelated incident. Fortunately, this student survived the stabbing. However, the media spotlight, as well as a general sense of unease by students, their parents and staff, further divided the school community and seemed to confirm the public's perception of *Diversity* as a place brimming with racist tensions.

Much of this division can be found explicitly in both the girls and boys' washrooms, according to a custodian who has cleaned his fair share of racist graffiti over the past ten years at *Diversity*. The custodian describes the washroom walls, doors and stalls as daily bulletin boards of sorts where racist dialogue is exchanged between the almost exclusively "brown" and "white" student "authors." Almost everyday, the custodian, as well as his colleagues, will find some version of the following racist rhetoric in the student washrooms:

- Brown Power
- White Power
- Fuck off brown people
- White fucking asshole

In addition to swastika symbols, derogatory comments about interracial couples in the school are a common racist graffiti theme. In fact, two of my former students confided in me that they were not only constantly taunted by both their white and brown peers for their interracial relationship, their own parents express disapproval of it. Not surprisingly, their names regularly plastered *Diversity's* washroom walls and stalls.

Even more disturbing, students have recently found more sophisticated ways to spread their racist rhetoric, as was evident in 2003, when the administration discovered that an underground website was created by white *Diversity* students who launched it as a forum for spreading racist beliefs, predominantly towards Indo-Canadian students. When the Indo-Canadian students discovered this website, they in turn bombarded the site with their own racist rhetoric, igniting an all-out electronic racist war of words.

Most recently in the fall of 2004, three students were suspended for igniting firecrackers in the school's hallway. Because all three individuals happened to be of Indo-Canadian background, a number of their supporters threatened to "walkout" during Block A to protest the "all-white" administration's "racist practices." According to the custodian, the most popular target of racist graffiti is directed towards one of *Diversity's* white male vice principals.

Unquestionably, racial tensions continue to reverberate through the halls of *Diversity* school, where to this day, it is still more common to see students of the same colour congregating than students of different colours intermixing.

Selection of Participants

A number of specific factors were involved in the selection of participants for the focus group. Because an important aspect of my thesis involves examining the effects of racist humour on student identity construction, it was only natural that I would look for individuals who were currently enrolled in the school system. Who better to discuss issues on racist humour in the school than those who experience it first hand? Moreover, involving students' voices in my research is just as important to me as the theorists' words. If I endeavour to bring about change for students, they too need to be active agents in the process, or according to the constructivist paradigm, they need to be part of the *co-construction* (Hatch, 2002).

Deciding which group of students to focus on was the next challenge. Since I was going to be asking my participants to reflect and comment on a number of sensitive issues regarding racism and racist humour, I needed students who would feel comfortable enough with me to share such personal accounts: "Collaborative studies, by definition, require close working relationships" (Hatch, 2002, p. 51). This was the rationale behind my decision to enlist the help of my current students, as opposed to random students in a random school. Because I was currently teaching the students in a classroom that had already established a certain level of trust, respect and comfort conducive to the conditions required for the focus group, I felt it was most appropriate to solicit assistance from my current students.

More specifically, I targeted my grade 12 students over my grade 8 students for a number of reasons. Firstly, I have taught many of the students in my English 12 classes back in their grade 8 and 11 years. Because my

relationships with many of these students have strengthened over time and through shared experiences, their degree of trust and comfort with me is that much greater than those new students in my grade 8 class. Furthermore, the level of social, intellectual, psychological and emotional maturity required for the focus group discussions tends to favour the senior students. Because some of the material presented during the focus group discussions contains disturbing images, profanity and mature content matter, I, still their teacher, felt more comfortable with having the seniors participate than their junior counterparts. Unlike the grade 8's, the grade 12's have experienced a broader spectrum of the educational system. They have amassed not only more years, but most likely more encounters with the challenges and tribulations of the education system in which they have participated.

Once I received ethical approval from the university and after I organized the logistics of the focus group sessions, I informed both of my English 12 classes about my research and thesis topic. I briefly discussed the general premise of the issues explored in my thesis and continued to explain that a part of my research involves examining how students view issues on racism, humour, identity and social agency. I then mentioned that I would be conducting a focus group of roughly five to six grade 12 students that would meet once a week, for one hour, over a one-month period. After answering a few questions about some particulars of the focus group, I invited those interested in participating to meet after class on the following week for an informational orientation. Those who were unable to attend the orientation, but were interested in participating in the focus group were asked to speak with me individually.

During the brief pre-focus group orientation the following week, thirteen of my students attended with interest in participating in the focus group. To begin with, I emphasized yet again that participation in the focus group was completely voluntary and would in no way affect the student's evaluation in the course. This preventative measure helps to protect the integrity of the data, as it could be tainted by participants who believe that espousing certain views or even the fact that they chose to participate would garner them higher grades. At this point, I distributed copies of the university's "Informed Consent By Participants In a Research Study" form and proceeded to read its content out loud to the students, stressing their right to withdraw their participation from the focus group at any time during or after its natural course.

After explaining a few more particulars about the focus group and answering further queries, it was time to select the students. Ideally, a focus group is more effective when there are no more than five or six members, especially since each session is one hour in duration. Too many participants can prevent all voices from being heard in a meaningful way:

Most texts on focus group interviewing recommend that group size be kept in the six to 12 range. The idea is to have enough individuals to generate and maintain a discussion but not so many that some individuals will have a hard time getting the floor (Hatch, 2002, p. 135).

Because there were more than twice the students required for the focus group, I explained my reason for needing only six participants. In all fairness to those who attended the orientation, I announced that the selection of participants would be done randomly. However, to diversify the gender grouping as much as possible, I placed all the boys' names in one basket and all the girls' names in another. In front of all the students present, I drew three boys and three girls'

names. The selected members were then individually asked to confirm their participation before signing the consent form. All selected members agreed to the prescribed conditions of the focus group.

As both their teacher and the researcher, I felt it was important to conduct the entire selection process in as transparent and fair manner as possible, both to protect the integrity of the research and more importantly, the sanctity of my relationship with my students.

The Participants

The six selected participants were all students of *Diversity* school in their graduation year, representing a range of gender, ethnic, cultural, social and academic backgrounds. All but two of the participants have always attended *Diversity* school for their secondary education – one recently enrolled in 2004 while another was in her second year. Aside from two of the participants, none of the others belongs to similar social groupings inside or outside the school.

This was advantageous on some level:

Individuals who are familiar with each other engage in conversations based on what they assume they already know about one another and one another's perspectives. They take things for granted in group interactions that will have to be explicated among strangers, and what they take for granted is often the stuff of interest to the interviewer (Hatch, 2002, p. 134).

All the participants were currently enrolled in my English 12 class at the time with the exception of one, who was in my English 11 class the previous year.

In the first focus group session, each participant was asked to write a short description of his or her cultural background. The diversity of their self-

descriptions of race, ethnicity, religion and language will be detailed in the data analysis chapter.

Selection of Discussion Materials

The generating of discussions on racism, humour, identity and social agency was sparked by a number of scripted and non-scripted series of open-ended questions, which were grouped accordingly: Session 1 – Racism; Session 2 – Humour for Oppression; Session 3 – Identity and Humour; Session 4 – Humour for Progression. All discussion questions were formed with the following criteria in mind:

Questions should be open-ended.

Questions should use language that is familiar to informants.

Questions should be clear.

Questions should be neutral.

Questions should respect informants and presume they have valuable knowledge.

Questions should generate answers related to the objectives of the research.

(Hatch, 2002, p. 106-107).

Participants were also encouraged to reflect on their lived experiences as a frame of reference for engaging with the discussion:

"[I]nterviewers...encourage informants to explain their unique perspectives on the issues at hand" (Hatch, 2002, p. 23). Even though each session was predominantly guided by the researcher's agenda, there were always

opportunities for the participants, as well as the researcher, to diverge depending on the dynamics and direction of the discussion, which in fact occurred more often than not:

Interviewers enter interview settings with questions in mind but generate questions during the interview in response to informants' responses, the social context being discussed, and the degree of rapport established (p. 23).

Although the majority of the discussions involved the participants, on a number of occasions, I, as *co-constructor* of knowledge, would offer a personal narrative, especially when I had asked them to recall their experiences with racism throughout childhood and adolescence: "Researchers want to establish connections with informants, and offering personal information or telling stories that demonstrate affinity with informants will often serve to improve rapport" (Hatch, 2002, p. 110). Even so, I was very conscious to avoid having my perspective dictate the direction of the discussion.

Within each session a variety of activities, such as brainstorming in pairs on chart paper and presenting ideas to the whole group, allowed participants to engage directly with discussions on racist humour. A number of multi-media prompts were also employed, such as comic strips, animated cartoons and video clips. Included were materials by Margaret Cho, a Korean-American comedienne who uses humour to effect social change, black comedian Chris Rock, white rap artist and satirist Eminem, footage from *The Simpsons* by Matt Groening and the comic strips found on the White Aryan Resistance (WAR) website. Due to the extremely explicit nature of WAR's racist ideology depicted in its comic strips, the material was previewed and approved for usage by *Diversity's* principal.

Chapter Four: Data Analysis

Data analysis was based on transcripts from the audio recordings of the four focus group sessions conducted in the month of October 2004. The majority of the six participants' responses, with the exception of only a few minor sections, were left unedited, in their original vernacular speech, unless there were issues regarding readability or protection of the participants' anonymity. Bracketed text was occasionally inserted for clarification purposes.

The participants' general perceptions of the dynamics of racism and their response to the humour prompts presented were intertwined. Thus while I introduced a short formal discussion about racism prior to presenting and discussing the humour prompts, students' ideas about racism continued to be articulated and intertwined with the more focused inquires on humour. In order to streamline the presentation here I analyzed the data on these interconnected concepts in two distinct focus areas: one on general perceptions of racism, the other on responses to humour.

Within the focus on the broader aspects of racism, the data was analyzed in relation to the participants' understandings of racism through their *figured worlds* (Holland et al., 1998) of community, home and school. Presenting the participants' roles in and experiences with these *figured worlds* first, illustrated the richness and complexities of their past encounters with racism. It also

established a frame of reference within which the participants' responses to humour were embedded.

Once the participants' views of racism in the *figured worlds* of their community, home and school were articulated, the discussion shifted to a more focused consideration of racist humour. Focus group members were asked to personally respond and critically analyze the various prompts presented to them, such as the material found from the White Aryan Resistance's (WAR) website, rapper Eminem's music video, stand-up comedians Margaret Cho and Chris Rock's comic routines, the animated television series, *The Simpsons*, and one of the participants' spontaneous sharing of a joke. Sequencing the materials in this way reflected my own judgements of where they fell on a continuum of humour for oppression (WAR) and humour for progression (Cho, Rock, *The Simpsons*). The participants' personal reactions to the humour were again analyzed respectively in relation to their engagements in the *figured worlds* of community, home, or school (Holland et al., 1998). Bakhtin's notions of *authoritative discourses* (1981), and Foucault (1997) and Freire's (1993) social oppression theories provided tools for analyses, and Yon (2000), Holland (1998) and Dei's (1996) socio-cultural perspective on identity formation guided analysis of students' ideas about how humour is implicated in identity construction. The focus on humour concluded with the participants' response to humour and social change, humour and educational change and humour and personal change, as grounded in Holland's (1998) *figured world*, Berger's (1997) separate world and Bakhtin's (1984) carnival.

Focus: Racism

The Focus Group Participants

The first of the four focus group sessions was devoted entirely to the discussion of racism. At the beginning of the first focus group session, the participants were all asked to create a pseudonym for themselves as well as describe what makes up their cultural background. This activity served a number of purposes, one being that it revealed how rich the participants' culture is, and the other allowing each participant to better acquaint him or herself with each other. The following text is a reproduction of what each participant wrote. Spelling, grammar and capitalization errors as well as the structure of their response were purposely left unedited in order that the participants are presented in the ways that they presented themselves,

Alice:

"I am a Vancouver born Vietnamese-Chinese female. My parents immigrated from Vietnam in the 70's. My family are all practicing Buddhists."

Gary:

"I am an Irish-Canadian male, born in Richmond and raised in [the *Diversity* community]. Religion has never been a part of my life. Most of my family is from Armagh Ireland."

Celine:

"I am Hindu Indo-Canadian (not Punjabi) originally an East Indian from the Indian state, Uttar Pradesh. We speak Hindi and Urdu and my ancestors are all from the same state and same 'caste' according to the caste system prevalent in India, our caste being "Brahmins," the highest caste."

Steve:

"I am an indo-canadian --- Sikh
I am an indo canadian who is part of the Sikh religion. My parents were immigrants from India. I was born and raised in [*Diversity's* community]."

Jane:

"Ethnic background - Canadian (European)

English on my mother's side, Hungarian on my father's side. My paternal-grandparents came here 50 years ago and still cannot speak English. They fled the country during 2nd world war. We can trace my mother's family back a few hundred years. My father's side is strongly Roman Catholic.

Mother's side --- English, Irish, Scottish

Father's side --- Hungarian, Italian, Croatian"

Tito:

" - born Nanaimo

- indo-canadian

- not punjabi

- hindu

- gujurati

- Fijian"

The Participants' Understanding of Racism

After the participants identified themselves to each other, they were randomly paired up for the first activity, which was to brainstorm their

understandings of racism. Each pair then reported its ideas to the larger group. The group members were then asked to find commonality among each other's understandings of racism. The rationale behind this activity prior to launching into the central focus of the study was to help the participants frame each other's understandings of racism, which would then serve as the frame of reference from which their discussions could proceed.

Some of the themes about racism that recurred among the three pairs were,

Racism is,

- treating others differently because of their skin colour, religious or ethnic backgrounds (Alice & Steve).
- social rejection (Celine & Gary).
- in schools and places of work (Jane & Tito).

Other similarities included references to "prejudices" and "stereotypes." More specially, the pairs described racism as manifesting itself in the form of name-calling, vandalism, bullying and hate crimes.

There were also a number of unique responses. In particular, Gary included the concept of "sexism" in his understanding of racism:

Sexism was my idea because to me racism is just discrimination against any sort of person. And sexism is just against one sort of sex, so why not?

Alice identified another point unique among the views of her fellow participants:

I noticed in Gary and Celine's papers that they said it happens a lot with younger kids but it's ambiguous with older kids.

In summary, although the participants believed that they were able to highlight a number of the key points characterizing racism, there was a consensus from the group members that their lists were incomplete.

Within the framework of their understandings of racism established in the collaborative activity, the participants were asked to reflect back on how they have managed to negotiate with and navigate through the various racist attitudes and practices within their *figured worlds* of community, home and school.

The Participants' Figured World of Community

All the participants live within *Diversity* school's unique surrounding community. All communities have their various challenges, but according to the participants, *Diversity's* neighbourhood in particular has more than its share of idiosyncrasies. Jane articulated the general public's historically unfavourable perception of her community:

People will always find something to go against you for. And I find that living in [*Diversity*], that's quite easy, being a white female. Because the stereotype is that all girls are known as sluts, which is quite annoying. So whenever I go visiting anywhere, like New West or I go to Delta or something it's, "Oh, it's one of those [*Diversity*] girls," and that's quite offensive.

Alice offered evidence to support why she believed some people outside as well as inside *Diversity's* community peg it as an undesirable place to reside:

You notice like a lot of Indian people built like really huge houses. Like, they'll buy these lots out, and then they'll clear them and they'll build like these really big houses. Usually they'll rent out a couple of suites and things. And walking home from school, I see there's like this really gorgeous house I see and when you walk past it, you just know that it's an Indian house because of the really big architecture. And...but it was a really nice house and on the side you see like in black spray paint, "go home."

Through personal narrative, Jane recalled an incident that illustrated how racial tensions in her community have resulted in violent confrontations at times:

One of my white friends, I'm not going to say his name, was walking home one night and it was about 9:30 and it was dark, and he got jumped by a couple of guys on his way home and he got beaten up pretty badly. And he went and told his friends because the police didn't do anything about it. But because the people were brown...sorry, East-Indian.... He told his friends that they were East-Indian, don't know if they were Punjabi or not. Because they were East-Indians, they [Jane's friend's friends] took bats and sticks and things and they waited in the park, and they all beat up the first group of East-Indian guys to walk by.

The general consensus from the participants was that *Diversity's* community on the whole has faced and continues to deal with a number of challenges with its tarnished public image, often exacerbated by sexist and racist attitudes by those outside and inside the community. Throughout the discussion, none of the other participants verbally disagreed with or refuted any of the negative assessments made about their community.

The Participants' Figured World of Home

On a number of occasions, the participants alluded to their home lives as having a significant influence on the way they perceive themselves and people of different cultural backgrounds. Celine punctuated this point when she said,

I think parental influences is pretty predominant in people's perceptions towards other ethnicities and other cultures and religions.

In looking back at the way she was raised, Jane made this assessment of her home life:

Being white, I think that there's a difference between other cultures and our culture between going to school because we have a lot of different views on things. Like a lot of parents they'll just be happy if you graduate. Because there are so many different paths we can take, we're not just expected to go to university. We can take a trade, or we can run off to Hollywood and try to be an actor or something. With white people, they're from so many different countries, so if you're coming from somewhere like Hungary, where my grandparents went, all they did was have kids and kids and kids, so that they can work on farms and stuff. They didn't care about going to school because it wasn't a top priority.

Steve agreed with Jane:

But if I decide that I want to go into a trade, or I want to become a chef, they'll be just as happy, or even if I decide, okay I'm going to be a farmer.

Alice, on the other hand, painted a very different picture of her home life expectations:

Being Asian myself, my parents like, all my cousins are very high achievers and we tend to look down on relatives who don't do as well in school or don't go straight to university. And adding on to Jane about Japanese schools, I think it's true that they really push and there's a lot of pressure to succeed and do really well. There's a lot of competition to get into the good universities and that kind of thing. They can go to school on Saturday. In Asian cultures there's always a lot of pressure, much more so than usually in Caucasian families.

Celine echoed Alice's accounts of home life:

That also relates with myself and my family, which is East Indian. I'm not being racial, but it just seems like our family's got a perception that East Indians have always been bringing up, I mean it's just that Asians they've just been higher achievers. They've been getting higher marks and they've been stereotyped like that and so the expectations of my family and my parents are very, very high just based on stereotypes.

When cultural values in one home are inconsistent with cultural values in another, some of the participants expressed their feelings of being caught in the middle. Alice recalled a time this occurred:

My mom doesn't let me sleep over. She'll be like, "you're too young" and all this stuff. And so when my white friends will ask me like sleep over at a birthday party or something, I'll ask my mom if I can go. And she'll say, "oh does she have a brother?" or "does she live with her dad?" and I'll be like, "yah cause her mom doesn't live with her." And my mom's like, "oh you can't go." And so when I tell my friends that, "oh my mom said I can't go," they'll be like "why?"

Alice, however, is able to voice her discontent and frustration over clashing Eastern and Western values with others in similar situations:

But when I tell my Asian friend about it, they're like, "Oh yah, my mom's like that too."... But I have Asian friends who can also agree with me when I talk about how my mom was angry at me because I got a B in Science instead of an A. Like my white friends will be like, "What are you talking about? That's really good." And my Asian friends will be like, "Yah I get that a lot too. My mom's saying like she'll cut off my Internet."

The Participants' Figured World of School

In comparison to what was said about their past encounters with racist attitudes and practices in their home and community, the participants' accounts about racism and school were the most numerous. A number of the participants

first made reference to the differences between racism in high school and its elementary counterpart:

I think when you're younger, you're a lot more open to say things because you have that innocence. But when you get into high school and you get older, no one's going outright say something to your face so there's a lot more acts of violence. And that's when the hate crimes do happen and things because no one outright says things but there's a lot more... it shows a lot more. And there's more meaning behind it (Jane).

Like on the elementary school playground they'll be like, "What's with your skin colour?" But when you get to high school, the jabs get more subtle. They're not as blunt (Alice).

When asked to comment on their experiences with racism at *Diversity* school, Jane echoed the majority of the participants' perceptions:

I think we do have a problem at [*Diversity* school] with racism. There's always people who feel left out. There's certain clicks that are seemingly based on race. People branch off and they collect with their own kind. There's certain places where we don't go. Like many of us, like white people that were in my class last year in the Co-Op, we didn't go to Wendy's at lunch time because there were always so many East Indians in there. And they always go to Wendy's and because we have this... there's this stereotype that they're all rich and their parents all give them money and buy them cars. So we don't go cause there's not enough room for us.

Steve did not foresee an end to the practice of racial peer grouping at *Diversity* that Jane described:

Ever since I came to [*Diversity*] since grade 8, I've always noticed that the East Indian people would hang out together, and the Asians would always hang out together, and the white people would always hang out together. And this still continues and I think it will always will.

In fact, Steve admitted to consciously staying within his exclusively East Indian group of friends:

I have more common with... the things we do are more common. For example, most brown people, they like to play basketball as.... So most brown people like basketball and white people they usually like football and hockey, which I don't have an interest in so I like do what... so I stick to people who I have more in common with.

When Steve was asked why he refused to venture out of his exclusively East Indian group of friends, he explained,

Because if I do, then the people that I do hang around with will ask why I'm hanging with them right. And they'll start treating me different too because I hang around with them [students of other cultural groups].... No, I just don't like hanging out with them.

Steve also acknowledged that his conscious act to disassociate himself from students of other cultural backgrounds could be perceived as racist:

Well I guess it is a kind of a form of racism. Well I guess I do kind of fear that if I do hang out with people of different colour or different kind of lifestyle... yah, I guess I do fear that.

Contrary to Steve's approach to making friends, Alice and Tito expressed their tendency to gravitate towards students who belong to cultures different from theirs:

I used to hang out with an Asian group and just because they are the same colour as you, or the same ethnic background as you, it doesn't guarantee that they connect with you as a person as oppose to, like I said earlier, connecting with you on a cultural basis. For example, I used to hang out with a group of Asians and they were all you know, Chinese and Vietnamese and... I wasn't comfortable with them, like, I didn't feel like going out for lunch everyday and I didn't feel like... actually some of them were dealing drugs. But the current friends I

hang out with now, like none of them are Asian. They're all white and at the same time I feel very comfortable with them (Alice).

At [*Diversity*] there is this brown crew, Asian crew, and the white crew, and even though I'm Indian, I tended to hang out with the Asian crew, and I don't know, I was just more drawn to the Asian people (Tito).

When the participants were asked what *Diversity* school has done to encourage more cohesiveness among the different cultural backgrounds of its student population, many of them alluded to *Diversity's* annual Multicultural Day. On this designated date, all students are encouraged to dress up in their traditional cultural clothing and participate in a number of activities, such as sharing of cultural foods, dance, rituals, etc. Both Gary and Jane voiced their discontent for being made to feel excluded from Multicultural Day at *Diversity*:

I'm Caucasian and on those Multicultural Days, there's not really much I can do. I can dress all in green and say I'm Irish, yay. Or drape a Canadian flag over me but there's such rich culture in Asians and East Indians. There's not so much in us whities I guess. So it's kind of awkward on those days for people who don't really have that much cultural background (Gary).

Not to be racist, but I think we are just supporting newcomers to the country in a way. Because when we have Multicultural Day and stuff, there's so many Caucasian people that people who have lived in Canada for quite a few generations and we don't have anything. There's nothing there. We just dress like Canadians or Western. But then when you have East Indian people or Asians and things like that who have their culture at home. They still eat the kind of food that they would have eaten back in their homeland I guess. And they still have their traditional dresses and things like that. So that day is kind of for them, people who still have a connection with where they come from. And the rest of us are left out.... But the more they try to show off other cultures, the more others are left behind. And I think that if things are left unchecked, then racist feelings are just going to grow, like from certain groups.... I think that that's a little

unfair because we're not telling you that you can't dress how you want or anything like that on any other day of the week. Show your culture off and let it be. It's just that on Multicultural Day, we... us Caucasian people do feel left out. Because me being English or Hungarian, or Italian or something, I'm still going to dress like a Western person because that's what we have. I think that Multicultural Day caters to the more flamboyant. So you show off your dances and your food and your clothing and things. But it doesn't matter how rich our culture is. It doesn't add up. It's not as entertaining (Jane).

Celine responded to Jane and Gary's assessment of Multicultural Day at

Diversity:

According to what Jane and Gary said, Multicultural Day just ... it's just a single day dedicated to the other cultures... Multicultural Day is just a single day dedicated to the other cultures and the other ... but then there's the other 364 of the year when we, I mean being brown, tend to be left out. So how can that be accounted for?

Celine, as well as Alice, went on to defend *Diversity*, asserting that racial tensions are not exclusive to this school:

I wouldn't completely blame [*Diversity*] for racial purposes because I think every school within B.C. as far as I've seen it, every school has got a little bit of it [racism]. I mean the degrees vary, I mean. Certain schools could have it to an extensive degree. But I think every school has their little racial perspective (Celine).

Focus: Humour

The Participants' Understanding of Racist Humour

The remaining three focus group sessions were devoted to the discussion of humour and racism, with the last session focussing more specifically on humour and change. In pairs, the participants were asked to brainstorm criteria

for racist humour. Similar to the rationale behind the students brainstorming their understandings of racism before examining how racism exists in their *figured worlds*, it was also important for the participants to articulate their understandings ground of racist humour prior to analyzing the humour prompts. According to the majority of the participants, racist humour,

- singles out particular races.
- criticizes that particular race.
- exaggerates features, both verbal and physical.
- involves racial slurs, accents and misconceptions.

Jane added that racist humour is often constructed and told by white people. She further argued that,

People are racist if they laugh at these jokes [racist jokes]. I'm not putting anyone down because I laugh too and if we weren't racist or have preconceived notions in our head about how things are, then we wouldn't laugh because we wouldn't find them funny. We would automatically find them offensive.

White Aryan Resistance (WAR) "Comics"

My overall pedagogical strategy for beginning with WAR's brand of humour was to move along a continuum from humour for oppression to humour for progression.

WAR promotes a racist ideology as is explicitly evident in its mission statement:

As one strives to protect ones [sic.] family, so it must be with the cultural and racial extended family. The White European race is a minority in most places on this Earth; [sic.] fifteen percent and falling. WAR is not speaking of a minor problem, but the eventual extinction of Nature's finest handiwork. Whenever you hear the word minority it's not really the Black or Brown races, but the White race which has always been the minority race globally (Metzger).

The eight comic strips found on WAR's website depicting African Americans, Jews, Mexicans and immigrants in stereotypical images and rhetoric (refer to Appendix B) were used to prompt discussions on racist humour.

Reaction to the Humour

I gave the participants some time to examine the comic strips, without initially disclosing their source. I then asked them to offer personal responses. Although one or two of the comic strips were deemed humorous on some level, the majority of the participants did not find the comic strips as a whole funny, or as Tito put it, "I really didn't get the jokes." Some of them were critical of the artwork as contributing to the lack of comical appeal. Celine explained the group's lack lustre response as "...just something that we've not been encouraged to laugh at." Gary offered this response:

None of them really made me laugh. A couple of them actually made me a little angry.... I didn't find them funny because they're a little too lewd for me.

Steve was the only participant who found the majority of the comic strips funny.

When the participants were asked how they thought their peers at *Diversity* would respond to the comic strips, Celine offered this assessment:

I think that the younger students to an extent they would [find them funny] because they are not mature enough to understand the sternness of this topic of racism, but most mature teens that live in this school, I don't think they would find it funny because they are old enough and they are mature enough to understand that this is just a racially exciting portrayal.

Jane added her perspective on the student body's probable reaction:

It would be fair enough to expect to think that there are people within this school who would be offended by this, but I think many, many of the students wouldn't be because they have been so desensitized by T.V. and comics like these that it really doesn't affect them and would think it's funny. I think the kind of people who would not think this is funny are people such as Mexicans or Jews, like who have been portrayed in the comics because they could relate to the people in them.

Tito, however, offered a counter-argument to Jane's belief that people who are targets of the humour would not appreciate the humour:

Or the Jews or the Mexicans, they could find it funny. I find that when I watch humour that makes fun of Indian people, I find it funny because it's so stereotypical that it's funny.

When it was disclosed to the participants that the comic strips originated from WAR's website, the majority of them maintained their initial position to the humour:

Looking at these comics, I knew right away that it was either a Nazi, Neo Nazi group, or a KKK group that did these comics because the kind of humour you see on T.V. like S.N.L. [Saturday Night Live] it's different because it's more playful and there's not so much pictures of killing and tanks running over Mexicans. The humour is a lot more lighter and in this one you can tell that someone who has vicious purposes do this kind of thing (Alice).

On the other hand, Tito's perspective altered:

Since finding out these comics are by a Neo Nazi group and I previously said that I found some comedy making fun of my Indian culture funny. I think that if it was made by Neo Nazi group, there's like more meaning behind the comics. It's not really meant for comic purposes.

Deconstruction of the Humour

The participants were encouraged to critically examine what was behind each comic strip. Celine echoed many of the participants' deconstruction of the humour:

I think this is a form of racist humour. They actually used the stereotypical definition of all these races into portraying them in a very, very comical form.

Both Celine and Jane pointed out the possible repercussions of the production of such humour:

I think it's comics like these which tend to excite people throughout the world to [be drawn] to violence and violent actions and to initiate wars (Celine).

Without realizing it, when people look at these comics and say that they're funny, they're sending a message that it's acceptable to think this way about other people and to make fun of them and to have racist thoughts (Jane).

Construction of Identities Through the Humour

Before analyzing how the humour in WAR's comic strips construct identities, the participants were asked to articulate their understanding of identity:

Identity defines you as who you are from your personality to your habits (Alice).

Identity is who you are, like how you act and who you hang around with (Gary).

Identity is something that separates one person from a group (Steve).

Identity is your individuality (Celine).

Identity is your sense of being (Tito).

To me identity is how other people perceive you. It's kind of a personality fingerprint (Jane).

Once the participants had a better sense of how they understood identity, Alice and Jane focused on the artistic aspect of the comic strips and how the cartooning portrayed identities of black people:

Umm...the over exaggerated ways that the artist has drawn the black guy, like with the big nose, and the ears sticking out, and the fat lips and the drool, and the death looking eyes. It's stereotyping a lot of black people...because it's not like they do drugs so that they can talk like an idiot (Alice).

It's stereotyping all African Americans as being stupid and not being able to understand anything (Jane.)

Jane also deconstructed the identity of the audience for whom these comic strips were created:

It's meant for people like me who's Caucasian to laugh at. Which breeds racism.... I think it's made for Caucasian people because...it shows a Caucasian man whose been killed by a Jew, and almost like it's made for us. There are slurs in here, like they call the African American man "nigger," and that was a name the Caucasian man gave him.

Alice offered another perspective on the word "nigger" used in the comic strips and its function within identity construction:

In response to Jane, I think that nowadays, racial slurs, like "nigger" and "chink" are now used as a form of empowerment. Like you know how "bitch" used to be a really derogatory term referring to women, but now it's like a term, it was a way of empowering a woman by referring to herself as a "bitch."

In summary, many of the participants expressed how the comic strips present WAR's biased, prejudice and racist ideas about individuals of colour, while idealizing white people.

Eminem Music Video

Marshall Mathers, better known as Eminem, is an anomaly in that he is a white Rap artist in a predominantly black genre of music, who is infamous for, rhyming about his mother and ex-wife, about slavery to commercialism, about jealousy and spousal abuse, drugs and rape and boy bands and politics and the soul-destroying music industry. He mocks himself, and this rich famous monster he had created, and along the way laces every track with obscenity, violence, anger (Fralic, 2004, p. D15).

Initially, I had not planned to use Eminem's music video "Just Lose It," until the controversy over its content erupted into world wide headlines the week before the third focus group session. In the video, Eminem mocks Michael Jackson's private and public lives, with references to his pending child molestation legal proceedings by showing a group of young children jumping on Jackson's bed. Other scenes involving the burning of Jackson's hair and his infamous plastic surgery debacles, ignited a heated response from Jackson himself. The Black Entertainment Television (BET) network claims it halted the

airing of Eminem's video both out of respect for Jackson and out of concerns that the white rapper projects stereotypical and negative images of black culture. Viewing of the music video allowed the participants to engage with the controversies as they apply to issues of racism and humour in a very contemporary context.

Reaction to the Humour

Resoundingly, all the participants expressed their disagreement with BET's justification for banning Eminem's video from its rotation list on the grounds that the rapper portrayed black people in a negative light. Gary voiced the group's general consensus about the video:

No it's not racist. He makes fun of everybody. He makes fun of Madonna. He makes fun of himself even. How can that be racist?... It's not racist. If anything it's discriminating against celebrities. He doesn't make fun of one colour. He's making fun of all celebrities. He's making fun of M.C. Hammer, himself, Missy Elliot, and Michael Jackson, everyone, white or black it doesn't matter. He just makes fun of them.

Deconstruction of the Humour

Instead of trying to excavate for subtle racist elements in the video, the majority of the participants attempted to deconstruct the ulterior motives behind BET's banning of the video:

I would also like to comment that Michael Jackson is a highly influential figure in the Rap entertainment, so that might have been a factor (Tito).

It's just an excuse because Michael Jackson was offended (Jane).

Because they're giving into Michael Jackson's pressure (Alice).

Construction of Identities Through the Humour

Although all the participants were quite certain that the humour in Eminem's music video was not racist, their convictions were challenged slightly when the discussion led to issues of identity. Tito acknowledged that there may be more to BET's claims than their initial reaction permitted them to see:

I think that if this was made by an African American person, it would be a different story because supposedly black people know the things that other black people go through so it wouldn't be as racial if black people had made it.

Jane concurred and added,

So because it was a white man making fun of him [Michael Jackson], he can then say that I'm black and this is racial.

Alice, ironically declared,

I don't think that's racist because nobody considers him [Michael Jackson] black or white.

Margaret Cho Cartoon Clip & Comic Routine

Margaret Cho is a Korean-American comedian who uses humour to bring about social change. She taps into her own personal experiences of being marginalized by her predominantly white peers while growing up in an "all-American school" and criticized by an image-obsessed Hollywood for being too "ethnic" on her television series "All-American Girl" in 1994, which subsequently led to the cancellation of her show. Her identity is paramount to her comedy. Her humour is raw, blunt and unapologetic. She is about bringing people together for social change, as she describes here:

My parents were there [at her comedy show], and then my fan club—a bunch of leather daddies who call themselves the Ass Master Fan Club—were sitting next to them. They were looking at my parents and laughing, and my parents were looking at them, laughing. And they would nod at each other. I felt really great about that. There was this incredible opportunity for me to be a bridge of understanding between leather queens and old Korean people. That's what's wonderful about what we're doing (www.margaretcho.com).

Cho's satirical cartoon skit, "Grocery Store," about the need for Koreans and blacks to unite in order to defeat the white people, and clips from her comedy show, titled "Revolution," about the challenges she faced being Korean in an American school and a minority actress in Hollywood, were incorporated into the second focus group session to encourage discussions on the various functions of humour and the dimensions of identity. Because she is a minority, her humour offered the participants in the focus group a chance to hear a marginalized voice for social change.

Reaction to the Humour

Unlike their initial reaction to Eminem's humour, the participants' responses to Cho's humour were somewhat ambivalent. Many articulated seeing racist elements within the humour, but would not equate it directly with the humour used by WAR for example. In response to Cho's satirical cartoon clip about a Korean corner store owner and a black man uniting to oppose the white people, the participants were reluctant to deem it outright racist:

The video is racist, but I think, to put it in better terms, I think it's more of an attempt to undo the racism between the Koreans and the Negroes (Celine).

They said in the clip, "Let's be friends so we can go against the white people," which was very offensive and I think that this is a racist cartoon. It's lighter than the ones shown to us earlier but I think

that some people could find it offensive because there are still stereotypes (Jane).

Gary, on the other hand, was less indecisive about his response to Cho's cartoon skit:

This is Gary, the other white person and I found it kind of funny when they were just trying to go against the white people because for so long it's been the white people against everyone else that I thought the role reversal was kind of funny.

Asked how they thought students at *Diversity* would respond, Alice asserted,

I definitely think they would find it funny, but no intelligent person would actually take it to heart because you can tell it's satire.

In addition to the cartoon clip, the participants were also shown a snippet from one of Cho's comedy shows in which she sarcastically and facetiously recalls her childhood in a predominantly white community, eating dried fish and squid for her school lunch – something she just could not trade for a granola bar or a Ho Ho – using sticky rice in place of Scotch tape and glue for her school projects, having a mouthless Hello Kitty as a role model, and wanting to be a successful actress without a helicopter on the side of the stage or having to utter the words, “Welcome to Japan, Mr. Bond” while smoking Opium. Most of all, she did not want to write her memoirs about being a Geisha so that she could describe what being a “hoe” all day was like. Although Alice, Gary and Jane found Cho's satirical and sarcastic approach humorous, the others were less receptive to it. In fact, Celine, who was offended by Cho's humour, expressed her disapproval:

I think Margaret doesn't really appreciate her culture and ethnic background.... Because of the way she started off, discriminating [against] the food she used to bring to school and comparing that to the food brought by normal people.

Gary and Jane were quick to defend Cho's humour:

I don't think it was necessarily racist towards her own culture or anything like that. I think she's led a humorous life. She has humorous experiences and she's just sharing that (Gary).

You don't have to be Asian or white to find these jokes funny or offensive, or take a view of them. You can be any colour or person (Jane).

Alice, the only Asian participant, offered this blunt reaction:

It's funny because you know it's true.

Deconstruction of the Humour

Attempting to figure out exactly what Cho was trying to do in her cartoon and stand-up routine also divided the focus group. Celine was adamant in her assessment of Cho's humour:

I think that Margaret's jokes are adding on to the stereotypical concept of Asians.... Because she's just projecting the same ideas, the same facts about Asians. She's not doing anything to break down that concept or break down that idea.

Jane agreed, but also disagreed with Celine:

I think that it breaks down and perpetuates [stereotypes] because she is projecting these stereotypes out and there are people listening and there are a lot of people who would just laugh. And repeat it to their other friends so that they can laugh too. It also breaks it down because like what we're doing now, there are actually people who would think about it and talk about it and because it's said in such a

humorous way that people would realize how stupid the stereotypes are and not hold them anymore.

As she alluded to earlier, Alice tried to explain to the group that Cho was merely being satirical:

The style, the animation, the drawing style and it's kind of like when Margaret Cho and Bruce Daniels [a guest comic] are talking about turning against the white people, you can tell that they are using this sarcastic tone.... Like you could tell right away that that kind of statement and the wording, that it's not meant to be serious.

Construction of Identities Through the Humour

Most of the participants agreed that Cho's Korean cultural background lessened the racist implications behind her jokes and heightened the humour:

If Margaret were white then I'd definitely find the jokes really offensive because being an Asian, it seems pretty natural that she would actually say things like that (Celine).

If it was a white person saying, "I remember in elementary school that Asians got squid, we all laughed at them, ha ha," it would definitely be a lot less funny because it's the same as picking on yourself and making fun of yourself makes it a lot more light hearted than if someone else were making fun of you (Alice).

The participants also commented on the identities of the people in her audience. Steve was concerned about Cho's Asian audience:

I think the typical Asian person would feel slightly offended.

Alice disagreed with Steve however:

I think the average Asian person would find it really funny. All of my Asian friends would laugh at that kind of thing. Because it's not like

she's [Cho] serious about it. If anything she's probably making fun of white people.

Although the target of Cho's humour seems to be predominantly directed towards white people's ignorance, Jane and Gary still appreciated the humour:

Being a white person, I think that most white people would think that it's funny and we wouldn't see it as being racist against Asian people at all (Jane).

I agree. I'm a white guy. I think it's funny. I don't understand how it could be racist against my culture (Gary).

Chris Rock Comic Routine

Much like Cho, Chris Rock's brand of humour is an "improvisational" form of protest for social change. In 2004, he was voted America's funniest person by *Entertainment Weekly* and has been commonly described as,

a guy who likes to take on such issues as racism and abortion in his routines, who sometimes uses slurs when referring to African Americans, who appeared on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in '98 in whiteface makeup, and who inspires people who write about him to call him the funniest man in America paired with words like "caustic" and "profane" (de Moraes, 2004, p. C1).

Rock is not just a black comedian who offers another voice to the mix, but a man who uses his humour to attack the racist ideologies and practices of white America.

The particular video clip shown to the participants originates from Rock's "Bigger & Blacker" comedy show. In this clip, Rock espouses his views about racism through humour, making reference to being afraid of young white men under the age of twenty-one because of all the recent school shootings in

America. He jokes that black people are yelling racism, white people are yelling reverse racism and yellow people are yelling “side-way racism.” He mocks white people for complaining about losing things to affirmative action and illegal immigrants by responding with the rhetorical question, “Who’s winning then? It’s not the blacks.” Even though he is wealthy and famous, no white person, even a white one-legged busboy would trade places with him. He points out in jest that old black men are the most racist people in the world because they were the ones who truly experienced racism. He mocks contemporary black men who whine about not being able to get a cab. Rock, half-jokingly and half-seriously retorts, “The old black man was the cab.”

Rock’s often controversial approach to shedding light on the plight of black Americans allowed the focus group participants to engage in a number of contentious issues surrounding his use of humour for change.

Reaction to the Humour

Compared to Cho’s cartoon and comedy clips and WAR’s comic strips, the footage from Rock’s comedy show brought out the most vocal laughter from the focus group. The participants generally responded to Rock’s “in-your-face” approach and excessive use of profanity with great amusement. Although the majority of Rock’s jokes in the clip targets white people, the two white participants again expressed enjoyment for his brand of humour:

Being a white person, and having some of these jokes directed at me and my kind, I was not offended at all because a lot of the things he talked about are true (Jane).

I’m white. I laughed. I found it funny. I would hope that most people would (Gary).

Deconstruction of the Humour

Although their initial reaction to Rock's humour brought forth more laughter, like Cho, some of the participants were divided between whether Rock's humour breaks down or perpetuates racist stereotypes. Gary, who visibly enjoyed Rock's humour, offered this perspective:

I guess...he's still perpetuating the black stereotypes because if he didn't he wouldn't have any material for his humour.

Jane questioned Gary's assertion:

I think he is in a way breaking down [stereotypes] because people will look at what he's doing and think, "Oh, they did that in the past. That's bad. Let's not do it again.".... I think that it is being racist towards white people but not present day white people. Because he was talking about how the white man would ride on the back of the black man down to Time Square or whatever, and that just doesn't happen nowadays.

Construction of Identities Through the Humour

Since Rock is black and he readily incorporates this fact into his comic routine, a heated discussion ensued about the role of a *joker's* identity in the construction of humour.

Jane offered this insight:

If Chris Rock was white, I would find that [his comic routine] very offensive because nowadays that's just not done and it shouldn't be done.

Tito, on the other hand, believed that people of all colours should have equal access to making fun of any colour, even if it is a white comic making fun of a black person:

Since Chris Rock's skin is black, I think it makes it even more funny because he's finding the faults in his own culture I guess.... I think that since he's black, it may make other people feel that it's okay to make fun of black people. There's a black person making fun of himself so they may think it's okay too.

Tito's comments opened up further dialogue for examining the complexities of skin colour and joke telling. Gary pointed out, contrary to what Tito said, that there are in fact limitations white comics encounter in their routines, and rightfully so:

Everyone can make fun of white people but white people can't make fun of everyone. I guess it's to a degree because of what we've done in the past. Like technically Hitler was white and he killed a lot of Jews and anybody who wasn't white. And all the segregation and the thing with black people only allowed at the back of the bus, and like in Canada, the Asian rail workers were brought over because they were cheap labour. It's not right and I guess we have that in our minds that we can't do it because we've already done it. We've had our turn.

Jane agreed wholeheartedly:

I do consider that fair because the other races have been very oppressed.

Even though Gary alluded to people of other colours having the right to make fun of white people, he expressed, however, not feeling completely comfortable with a non-white person telling jokes about white people:

I think that most people of any colour, white, black, yellow, whatever, will want to have someone of their own colour tell them the jokes because if it is any other colour, it can be racist. I don't mind if a white guy is telling me jokes about stupid white people.

Tito was not satisfied with Gary's point:

I think that if an Indo-Canadian person told an Indo-Canadian joke it would be funny. But it could be also funny if, like say someone of a different race told a joke...I think that's alright to make fun of as long as you don't push the limits.... If the white person has a bunch of brown friends, he could probably make fun of brown people.

Alice did not believe it was that simple, but generally supported Tito's claims:

I think it really depends on circumstances. Being Asian, and most of my friends being white, actually I prefer to have a white friend to tell me to go back to the rice field or something as opposed to a brown person tell me because with my white friends, we joke about that kind of thing so I'm more comfortable with white people saying that kind of thing.

Jane, however, offered even more specific criteria:

I think it depends on what kind of jokes the white person is saying. If he's telling Nazi jokes, that doesn't work. If he's telling jokes about Chinese railroad workers, that doesn't work either. But if they are just general jokes that don't really affect any one colour, like, "What happens when two dogs walk down a street?" You know, general jokes that don't really have any colour in them. The boring kind.

In summary, the participants found it extremely difficult to come up with a set of concrete "rules" for deciding who can and who cannot tell what kind of joke to whom.

***The Simpsons* Cartoon Clip**

Every participant in the focus group was familiar on some level with the animated television series, *The Simpsons*. In fact, the show is so pervasive in its

influence that it would be difficult to find a student at *Diversity* who has no prior knowledge of the show.

In a previous focus group meeting, Tito had expressed his hopes to discuss humour that is directed towards East Indians. Although *The Simpsons* delves into a vast number of social issues, mocking a number of individuals, organizations, institutions, religions, cultures, etc., we focused on a particular episode that satirizes the perceptions of Indo-Americans in Western society, from both an Indian and white perspective. Virtually all the animated characters on *The Simpsons* are coloured in a bright yellow. Apu Nahasapeemapetilon and his wife Manjula, the only Indian characters on the show, are shaded in brown. Apu, who works in the town's convenience store, the Kwik-E-Mart, speaks in a very pronounced stereotypical East Indian accent and in a prior episode, was arranged to be married to Manjula.

In the particular episode used during the focus group, Apu and Manjula hope to conceive a child in what they believe is a "dangerously under-populated" America. When Manjula sees Marge, the matriarch of the show, caring for her child Maggie, Manjula is anxious to interact with the child. Marge comments on Manjula's wonderful gift for speaking "baby talk." To Marge's embarrassment, Manjula responds by saying she is actually speaking Hindi. After several unsuccessful attempts at conceiving a child, Manjula "overdoses" on fertility drugs, resulting in the birth of octuplets. The couple's new arrivals spark a media frenzy, igniting the American public's obsession to want to know more about the eight babies. Businesses hoping to cash in on the baby phenomenon offer the family corporate handouts, such as Pepsi-B – cola for newborns - which they immediately repossess when there is news that a woman in another town had

just given birth to *nine* babies. Financially strapped, the Nahasapeemapetilons are convinced by an entertainment mogul personality, Mr. Kidkill, to showcase their babies in an interactive live spectacle at the local zoo called, "Octo Sapien – the Eight Wonders of the Third World."

Reaction to the Humour

Similar to Rock's brand of humour, *The Simpsons* elicited laughter and chuckles from every member of the focus group. All the participants expressed familiarity with the cartoon and general admiration for its work:

I like *The Simpsons* because they basically make fun of everything and they don't exclude certain groups so they equally make fun of everyone (Tito).

I like *The Simpsons* because I like the characters and most of the jokes don't go over my head and I just like the sarcastic way that they're sent out.... They make you look at things differently sometimes (Jane).

Asked whether or not they believed students at *Diversity* would understand the satirical element of the show, Alice and Jane offered their evaluation:

Kids might not get the irony but I don't think that they take it seriously and try to...they don't try to model themselves after, say Bart [one of the central characters known for getting into mischief] because even as children, kids know the difference between pretend and reality, and if they don't, I think it's partially the parents who need to sit down and talk to them and let them know that that's not the kind of thing they should imitate (Alice).

I think they do understand the stereotypes because most of us go to public school and we see a lot of different multicultural people and we meet with them and we talk to them in school and stuff, and I

wouldn't see an Indian person after watching *The Simpsons* and assume that their parents work in a convenience store or something like that (Jane).

Deconstruction of the Humour

When the participants were asked to analyze the clip a bit more closely, Alice compared and contrasted *The Simpsons'* brand of humour with the others presented previously:

I think it's pretty much the same thing. Chris Rock, Margaret Cho and *The Simpsons* all use the basis of stereotypes for getting across humour, except *The Simpsons* it's probably, not as crude as Margaret Cho or Chris Rock because...they're shown on T.V., so they do have standards to uphold.

In regards to some of the stereotypical images of the Nahasapeemapietons, such as their family name, place of employment at the convenience store and East Indian accent, the participants were not too concerned with the possible racist overtones. Alice and Jane contrasted the intent of WAR's humour to promote racist thoughts and actions with that of *The Simpsons*:

I think *The Simpsons* perpetuates stereotypes but I think it's possibly not necessarily in a bad way. Like for example, I think you do become more aware of stereotypes as you watch it but you don't actually act on it in a harmful or intentionally malicious way (Alice).

I don't think it perpetuates stereotypes because people will look at that and realize it is a stereotype but done in such a funny way that it doesn't actually make them feel any racial animosity against other cultures (Jane).

Construction of Identities Through the Humour

Similar to the heated discussion about Rock's skin colour and its role in his humour, the skin colour of the animated characters on *The Simpsons* offered another focus for discussion. Initially, Jane believed *The Simpsons*, unlike Rock and Cho, were immune to the challenges that come with telling jokes about one's colour group and other colour groups:

And it's cartoon, so it's not actually a white person making fun of you. It's a yellow person with blue hair, so that's different.... I think *The Simpsons* are trying to be colourless because all *The Simpsons* are yellow. Most of them are yellow, and they have different colour hair like bright orange or blue or purple.

Even though Jane referred to the majority of *The Simpsons* characters as being "yellow," in actuality, she believed they embody what it is to be white:

The Simpsons are white because of the stereotypes around them. They've got the son who's always getting into trouble and the skateboard and they've got the overweight father who works at a dead end job that doesn't like to come home to his kids, and they got the mother who's the homemaker and the baby and the pearls and they're just very white.

As the discussion progressed, Jane acknowledged that *The Simpsons* in fact have to deal with many of the identity challenges Rock and Cho encounter with their humour. Once Jane perceived *The Simpsons'* central characters as being white, her evaluation of the show's humour became more critical:

I think *The Simpsons* would be more racist than Chris Rock or Margaret Cho because Chris Rock is a black guy and in his jokes he talks about things that have happened to him and to his kind of people and so does Margaret Cho but with *The Simpsons*, it's just made by a bunch of white people like Matt Groening and they make fun of everybody. They don't really have any right to make fun of other cultures.

Alice and Gary were quick to defend the show's reluctance to exclude any group from being targeted for its humour:

In response to Jane, it's true that Chris Rock and Margaret Cho do base a lot of their routine on personal experiences and things that they've gone through. But Matt Groening is the creator. He's the one that started up the character designs and they do have a lot of writers that work on things and they could all be black or Asian or white. They could also be basing that on their own experiences (Alice).

Because it's a cartoon, they have a certain anonymity so you don't know. Maybe the people who are doing the voices are brown, or black or yellow or white, whatever, so it's not like it's any one particular race. They may be representing a race like, the person who does Apu - he's white (Gary).

Participant Joke Sample

Throughout our discussion, many of the participants shared a number of what they believed could be interpreted as racist jokes. Aside from hearing them from their friends, a number of the participants commented on how readily available racist jokes are to them:

I heard mine [racist joke] from my brother who heard it from a member of the K.K.K. who he works with (Gary).

I heard mine [racist joke] on-line when I was, I think I was downloading I.R.C. conversations on bash.org (Alice).

During the last bit of the final focus group session, Alice was keen to share a joke she heard with the rest of the participants:

There's this guy driving home from a bowling tournament and his black bowling ball falls out of the car so he drives on and he says that

he'll come back the next morning to get it. So when he comes back, there's a dead black man and next to it is a bowling ball and poking the bowling ball is a farmer with a pitchfork. And so the guy's like, "What are you doing?" and the farmer's like, "Well, you killed this nigger. I gotta get this one before it hatches."

Reaction to the Humour

Every participant, including the joke teller, Alice, laughed quite hysterically upon the completion of the punchline. When Steve was asked why he laughed, he responded,

Because it's just funny.

When Steve was pressed to explain why he thought the joke was funny, he could not articulate a reason other than "It's just funny."

Gary, however, described why he laughed:

Just the fact that someone is stupid enough to think that a bowling ball is a black person's egg.

Deconstruction of the Humour

The participants engaged in a discussion over whether or not Alice's joke would be considered racist. Jane focused on the language used in the joke:

If you found the part of the joke about them saying "nigger" funny, I don't think that that's so bad because it's just a word that they use now, like a gay person saying bitch. It's just one of their words and black people use it on themselves. But if you're laughing at the fact that a black man died and let's kill more before more are born, then that's just bad and that's racist.

Alice explain the use of the word "nigger" and its function in the overall joke:

I think that even the word "nigger" just emphasized what kind of personality and what kind of upbringing the farmer had. And the part about the black guy being dead wasn't supposed to be funny. It's just part of setting up the joke.

Jane admitted that there are risks and dangers in the telling of these types of jokes because certain individuals in society may find enjoyment in hearing about the "black guy being dead," something that "wasn't supposed to be funny":

It might not be so much that they [racist people] think it's funny but if they're a Nazi or something or grew up being really racist and hate black people, just the fact that they're gone or they're dead, it gives them some sense of pleasure or joy. They're happy about it because they have so much hatred for them. Some of them think it's funny, but they're quite happy that it happened.

Alice dismissed claims that the joke is racist towards black people:

You could easily substitute a blonde or a Chinese person or anything else and it would still apply.

Construction of Identities Through the Humour

The participants were asked to try to put themselves into the shoes of a black person and discuss their response to Alice's joke from that perspective.

Steve believed the black person would not be impressed:

I think the black person would feel offended because everyone sitting at the table is...no one here is black and the fact that we're all laughing about someone who's black will offend him.

Alice disagreed and reiterated her earlier point about what was supposed to be funny in the joke:

I'd think he'd laugh too cause it's not like he's laughing about one of his homeboys being dead. Because the joke is making more fun about the ignorance of white hicks rather than the joke being about a black guy being dead.

Jane attempted to support Alice's perspective:

If they [black people] were one of the newer generations like generation Y'ers they would see that it's not meant to be racist - just laughing at the stupid white man.

Alice's joke prompted many personal reflections from many of the participants who spoke about experimenting with their identities in humour. For Alice, the type of joke she told the focus group was one of many she tells within her peer group on a regular basis:

Usually I just tell them to get a laugh out of my friends.... People who know me, they know that I am just screwing around and I don't really mean it.... I joke a lot with racist humour with my friends - like gays, Irish. One of my good friends is German, and we call him a Jew to be ironic. So you know we do it in good humour and it's just a joke. But definitely if someone that I didn't know just came up to me and started telling me a joke about me being a Chink, I probably would flip out....

Tito described the complex dynamics when identities, race and humour intermix within his peer group:

I tend to joke with my friends who are all Asians and one of my Asian friends prides himself of being Aryan and he means it in a joking manner so that's okay and for my other friend, who's also Asian, calls himself a Jew because he's cheap and one of my other friends, he's also Asian, he calls himself a Chug because, I don't know the meaning behind that but he calls himself a Chug, and their name for me is "terrorist" since I'm brown.

Especially since after the attacks on the World Trade Centre, many people sharing Tito's skin colour have been discriminated against because of anger, fear, and ignorance to name just a few reasons. When Tito was asked how he felt about being called a "terrorist," in light of what had recently occurred in the United States, he responded,

I am okay with it because when I refer to them [his friends], I refer to them as the Jew and the Chug so we mean it in a joking manner. There's not really meaning behind it. So it's okay.

Asked if he would feel the same way if those outside his peer group were to call him a "terrorist," Tito recounted such an incident occurring:

It depends on who calls me a "terrorist. A random person on the street...oh that happened to me once. I was walking down the street of my uncle's house and we were walking back from the park, me and my two cousins, and some white guy off of his balcony yelled, "Taliban number one!" and we didn't really find it offensive because it was so funny at the time.

The further the discussion progressed the more comfortable the participants became about sharing other jokes that could be interpreted as racist. The readiness of each group member to laugh as well as the increase in volume laughter only encouraged more brazen joke telling from some of the participants. On the surface, every member was enjoying and receptive to the exchanging of jokes.

The Participants' Understanding of Humour & Change

The final focus group session concentrated on the ideas of humour for change, or humour for progression. The participants were asked to reflect on the

past month's experience with humour inside and outside the focus group meetings. They were asked to re-examine some of the humour prompts from WAR, Eminem, Cho, Rock, *The Simpsons* and their own jokes and discuss how the various forms and sources of humour contribute to social change – *i.) Humour For Social Change*. The participants were then asked to comment on how they envision humour bringing about change at *Diversity* school – *ii.) Humour For Educational Change*. Finally, they were each afforded an opportunity to articulate their personal reflections about how they have changed or remained the same, through their experience with the focus group and their fellow participants – *iii.) Humour For Personal Change*.

Humour for Social Change

The participants were presented and engaged with a wide range of humour prompts. As they reflected back on the past month's discussions, the participants were asked to identify humour that they believe has potential to promote social change.

Celine recalled Cho's humour as having a particularly transformative effect:

I think it's an attempt to bridge the gap between two other races.

Gary also envisioned the possibilities behind Cho's humour when he alluded to the comedian's struggle to find acting roles outside the Hollywood stereotype:

Maybe the way we perceive people and maybe stop the different roles that all Asian women seem to get.... I think maybe the jokes are used to try to bring about change, like *Saturday Night Live* uses satire to try to bring about change.

Like Gary, Celine mentioned the power of satire:

Satire is using comedy to bring about a change in society.

Although Rock was especially unforgiving and unrelenting in his attack on white history, white culture, and white men, Gary, a young white man himself, believed the comedian's humour asked people to confront their history and demand that it never be repeated:

Knowing what you've [white people] done, knowing that you can accept it and know that there needs to be change.

Although Rock and Cho's humour presented the participants with various possibilities for social change, *The Simpsons'* brand of humour was seen by the majority of the students as potentially having a much greater impact, especially on the youth of today and specifically, the students of *Diversity*.

Similar to Celine and Gary, who both mentioned satire as humour for change, Jane believed *The Simpsons* embodies it:

I think *The Simpsons* is satirical because they have certain episodes that have the moral in them. They're not going to tell you to be a vegetarian or that it's wrong to hurt animals but they had one episode where Lisa decided not to eat meat and she went through a whole journey and at the end decided that she shouldn't project her beliefs onto other people and expect them to agree with her and she learnt to be accepting of other kind of people. So through humour, they made everyone else look at that too.... I think subconsciously it does change them because someone could be watching the show and see a stereotype, and later on in life they could be talking with someone

and realize that the stereotypes aren't true and try to make a change then. They may not realize while they're watching the show but it will have an effect on them.

Humour for Educational Change

When I initially presented the opportunity for my students to participate in the focus group, I mentioned that they would not only be assisting me in my research and furthering a body of knowledge in the areas of racism and humour, but that their committing to the focus group was a way they were helping to bring about change in their school. The participants were asked to envision how they see humour contributing to further change in their education. All the participants expressed support for incorporating more humour into the classroom and a number of them supplied a variety of reasons to support their endorsement.

Jane spoke about the academic advantages of humour in the classroom:

I think that humour in the classroom is very good. Like in our English class, we're learning about paradox and oxymoron or imagery or anything, we'll see clips of T.V. shows that are humorous and it'll help us remember things and it makes class more fun and it keeps us interested.... In Chemistry it's really hard to remember a lot of things but because we have breaks during class, we will laugh or joke about something. It kind of gives my brain a break.

Jane continued to argue that the absence of humour in the classroom decreases academic output and student motivation:

A lot of teachers don't use it [humour], and I remember in my Socials class it was always maps and boring reading and it made me not want to go and lot of the times I didn't go and received a really bad mark in that class because it was so boring and I couldn't relate to anything.... It can't all just be pressure and stress and tests because the

students get too worked up over it, and they [teachers] should try to incorporate humour into the teaching schedule everyday.

In addition to higher academic performance, Alice believed humour encourages interpersonal relationships between teachers and students:

I think teachers who joke around with their students and establish more personal bond with them get across their lessons better.

This strengthened bond will also reap other benefits, as was described by Jane:

I think another reason why humour is good to use in school is because if the teacher is very serious all the time and you need help, you might feel a little intimidated to go up and ask for help. But if you laugh and joke around with your teacher, then you know that if you're coming for help, they're willing to help you.

When the issue of teachers possibly using students as targets for their humour arose, the participants were quick to defend their position:

I think everyone knows when a teacher is picking on you or something, not picking on you they're making fun of you or directing jokes at you. It's all in fun and I'm sure the teachers wouldn't do it if the student couldn't handle it.

Alice offered additional support:

Students who take the humour too seriously I think most of the time I've seen in the classrooms they get all serious and upset when teachers use humour or something and they're usually really serious people and they don't joke around with the rest of the class and they're pretty reserved and just like in their own shell, and teachers who joke around and do that kind of thing, I think it helps them bring them out.... If people get hurt by racial jokes made without any harmful intentions, I can't imagine how they would react if they met

someone on the street who is really racist. You need to have a sense of humour to get through life.

Humour for Personal Change

The participants were given an opportunity to individually reflect on their experiences with the focus group and the discussions with their fellow members, and how they have changed, or remained unchanged in their perspectives on the dynamics of racism, humour, identity and social change. Each member's account is presented here:

I feel my perspective towards racist humour has really changed through this focus group. Earlier I took racist jokes very seriously...but now I just look at the same jokes with a different perspective and a different point of view and then it's not as offensive as it used to be. It's actually not offensive at all (Celine).

I don't think my views have really changed. I came into the focus group with an open mind and I don't get offended when people tell racist jokes even about Asians because it's either made to laugh and I laugh along, or they're jerks and I don't really pay attention. So I don't think my views have really changed at all (Alice).

I agree with Alice. I always came with an open mind. Before I was into a lot of racist jokes and they never really phased me. Now I understand a bit more about the other side, like who it's hurting. I'll probably still laugh at the same jokes (Gary).

I agree with Gary and Alice, and I pretty much came here with an open mind too and I don't think it's changed much - my way of thinking. But I'm going to wonder now where someone is coming from. Like when we saw the comics on paper, later after we saw them and I thought one or two of them were funny. I found it was from a White Aryan Resistance website and I'm just going to wonder now where these jokes are coming from. Who sent them out and what are their intentions (Jane).

Before I came to this focus group, I thought every type of racist joke was very bad but throughout the month and throughout these four sessions, I'll be like that not all...the meaning behind all jokes are [not] meant to hurt people but it's also to inform people that not all the stereotypes are bad and that they don't apply to everybody (Steve).

Before I came to this group, I didn't think my views would change, but now after these four weeks, I find myself wondering about the real meaning behind jokes. I might analyze the joke more to try to see the meaning behind it (Tito).

Chapter Five: Data Interpretations and Recommendations

Informed by Yon's (2000) ideas of *elusive culture*, it appears that the students with whom I worked must navigate through and negotiate with a very complex and richly layered *figured world* that is fluid, contradictory and ambiguous. The students' discourses regarding race, humour and identity, are framed by these complex and changing conditions.

This chapter explores the educational implications of how students perceive and situate themselves within this *figured world*. I consider how accounting for students' perspectives might foster a more inclusive, diverse and equitable learning environment. I develop the notion of a *grey figured world* to describe the school-based world they inhabit in relation to humour. This *grey figured world* is a complex, richly layered, fluid and often contradictory environment where the students usually feel more comfortable discovering, exploring and experimenting with discourses, such as race, culture, humour, identity and social change. Finally, the thesis closes with recommendations and reflections for present and future teaching practice related to encouraging students to move from experimenting in their *grey figured world* to becoming active agents in making of a better world.

The Grey Figured World

Signposts and Detours in the Grey Figured World

When presented with its racist comic strips, students had no doubt about the oppressive intent of WAR's brand of humour. All of the students have heard and / or have been the target of racist jokes at one time during their stay at *Diversity* school, and all clearly recognized WAR's racist and oppressive humour immediately. Speaking from personal experience, Alice expressed that being the butt of racist jokes is not a pleasant experience to say the least:

But definitely if someone that I didn't know just came up to me and started telling me a joke about me being a Chink, I probably would flip out.

Although Alice described what seems like a clearly racist use of humour in her scenario, the reality for many of the students is that their encounters with humour are not as black and white as the palette with which WAR paints.

Humour, that on the surface may seem oppressive in nature and in intent, may under unique circumstances and within certain discourses, may in fact be progressive; or it may (paradoxically) combine elements of the oppressive and the progressive. Hence travel down the slippery road of humour offers signposts, discussed throughout the thesis, that indicate at least two possible routes: oppression or progression. Even when the road appears to wind down one or the other general direction, invariably there will be crossroads, side-streets, alleys and paths that may divert the traveller down a very dangerous slope. These complex paths suggest something about the power and versatility of humour of which we need to always be conscious. By tackling sensitive issues

regarding race through humour and not shying away from the possible complications, while leading us down “the road less travelled,” may prove to be worthwhile for students and educators alike.

Although the thesis divided humour into its oppressive and progressive functions, there is clearly a vast *grey* region with its own contradictions and ambiguities, which became more apparent through the students’ focus group discourses. It would seem that from the students’ engagement with humour, race and identity, there was a tendency to gravitate towards this ambiguous place. This place, where their “rules,” such as one is racist if one singles out and criticizes a particular race with slurs, misconceptions, and exaggerated physical features and accents or even if one laughs at these racist jokes, did not necessarily apply in their discourses.

In Yon’s (2000) interviews with inner city students about their ideas on race and culture, he discovered that these young people engaged in their own unique and complex *figured world* of race, or what he terms the *elusive culture*,

A view of culture as elusive, and fluid, rather than rigid and determining, helps us to understand that multiple strategies and shifting positions that youth take up in these different and conflicting discussions. It also helps us to understand how they live their lives and construct identities in relation, and often in opposition, to the constraints imposed by gender, race, and culture (p. 122).

As was evident in a number of the students’ responses during the focus group discussions, how they positioned themselves in this *grey figured world* may help to explain a number of their glib, ambivalent, perplexing, contradictory and even at times racist discourses that they articulated around issues of humour, race and identity.

Race in the Grey Figured World

The “greying” of the students’ world as they negotiate with the discourses of race in the year 2005 has forced students to adapt to the myriad of complex and multi-dimensional challenges. Yon (2000) offers a few explanations for this phenomenon,

[A]gainst the backdrop of globalization and migration, of cultural hybridity and creolization, these conversations about race also suggest something about the transitional context in which these youth find themselves. This is a context that is fraught with complexity and contradictions because unconventional racist practices and old ways of thinking about race coexist with the new signifiers of race which these youth are in the process of producing (p. 104).

One of the more contentious issues during the focus group discussion centred around the two white participants’ belief that Multicultural Day at *Diversity* school was a day that prevented them from celebrating their own identities. Gary and Jane felt excluded from a day that parades colourful cultural costumes and cooking, something the white students believe they are unable to contribute. Yon (2000) describes similar feelings of being the “cultureless” white:

This situation becomes doubly ironic because those who talk about the need to celebrate difference, as in cultures and races, frequently see themselves as the “normal Canadians” who either “lack culture” or keep it private. In other words, their culture is normalized. This contrasts with those who are perceived as publicizing their culture by wearing it on their bodies and, in the process, segregating their cultural and racial selves (p. 77).

It is also ironic that just twenty minutes prior, Jane described her cultural heritage as consisting of English, Hungarian, Irish, Scottish, Italian and Croatian, quite contrary to her belief that she was lacking in culture.

As a response to being made to feel cultureless, many white students at *Diversity* have embraced “Cowboy Culture,” or what they endearingly label

“Redneck” culture, where wearing denim jeans and shirts, Stetsons, and boots, and listening to Country music allow them to “compete” with the saris and turbans. Yon (2000) explains that “normal Canadians’ (meaning White) see themselves as different from those who are saturated by culture (meaning ethnic)” (p. 76-77). The same rationale is behind the Goth and Skater movement, where the virtually all-white members deck themselves in apparels and trinkets that make them culturally identifiable, something they feel they could not do by “just being white,” a limitation Gary attested to: “I’m Caucasian, and on those Multicultural Days, there’s not really much I can do.”

It is the superficiality of Multicultural Day at *Diversity*, where candies are distributed to those who are “in costume” and contests are held to select the best cultural outfit, that breeds an environment where cultures and students are pitted against each other, especially between the colours and the whites. This is the racial reality the students are facing. In response to being made to feel left out on Multicultural Day, Jane said, “Not to be racist, but I think we are just supporting newcomers to the country in a way”; her comment is racist, but only racist within the meaning of her *grey figured world* reality. Qualifying her comment with the ironic words “not to be racist,” suggests that Jane senses the racial undertones behind her thoughts. When she uses the pronoun, “we,” she is referring to the normal, dominant white culture that she aligns herself with, while the “newcomers” are not only marginalized but labelled a burden.

Traditional understanding of race is re-interpreted in the students’ *grey figured world*, as Alice further illustrated when she described that words like “nigger” and “chink” are not necessarily about subordinating black and Chinese people anymore, but rather used by her peers as a form of empowerment:

Others believe that ripping the word out of the bigot's mouth and placing it safely and lovingly in the mouths of the targeted community is empowering.... Reclaiming a word can give it new meaning, as in hip hop's adoption of the word nigger, as "he's my nigga," to mean cohort or brother in spirit. The ironic and deliberate use by one of its traditional targets can also indicate the speaker's strengths and distance from the slur (Rigg, 2003, p. 22).

Chris Rock adamantly supports this notion, as do many Rap and Hip Hop artists who readily and defiantly reclaim the word "nigger" to market their new brand of comedy, music and lifestyle. In fact, they re-package the word in their C.D.'s, music videos and clothing lines and glamourize it with fast cars and expensive jewellery for the general masse to consume and re-appropriate, almost draining the word of all its hateful, derogatory and oppressive history. Once the words have been so filtered, the students understand on some level that words like "nigger" and "chink" are bad, but not as bad as they used to be.

This re-appropriation of traditionally racist words is the result of what Yon (2000) describes as,

a social landscape that is littered with a range of stereotypes and metaphors for race, culture, and identity. This landscape is a hazy one because those who populate it are also continually contesting and displacing its stereotypes and metaphors (p. 76).

Steve's confession about only "hanging out" with East Indian students and the significant number of colour cliques at *Diversity* are part of a social landscape of racial stereotypes. But within these pockets of stereotypes, holes, rips and tears exist, as was evident when Alice expressed not feeling comfortable with Asians and befriending whites, as well as Tito's gravitating towards Asians rather than East Indians. Both Tito and Alice are living and breathing in the "haziness" that co-exist alongside standard stereotypes within an unpredictable and often uncharted social landscape.

Humour and Identity in the Grey Figured World

Within their *grey figured world* of mixed messages and meanings, and contradictory actions and words, it is not surprising that the same elusive qualities would be found in the students' discourses regarding humour and race. Similar to what Yon discovered, Woods (1990) explains that students use humour in school for personal development and identity experimentation. Although the focus group members were very specific about their criteria for racist humour, such as the singling out and criticizing of particular races, and the exaggerating of features, accents and misconceptions, the lines between racist and non-racist humour were blurred more and more as each discussion unfolded. Jane can, and did, adamantly state that those who laugh at racist jokes instead of being offended by them are racist people. In the same breath, however, she can also confess to laughing at racist jokes, but somehow can exempt herself from being a racist person. In much the same fashion, Alice felt comfortable enough to tell a joke that included the word "nigger" in the punch line, defending her usage of the slur by saying, "Because the joke is making more fun about the ignorance of white hicks rather than the joke being about a black guy being dead." For Alice, her use of the derogatory slur "white hick" in her explanation about using the word "nigger" needs no apology or justification. Jane is even able to assign a name to this *grey figured world*, Generation Y, in which traditional ideas about race are uprooted and replanted by her, Alice and their peers: "If they [black people] were one of the newer generations like generation Y'ers they would see that it's not meant to be racist – just laughing at the stupid white man."

As with racist humour, the students' ideas of identity as they relate to humour offer further insights about just how murky their *grey figured world* really is. Gary, the only white male participant in the focus group, had no qualms about constantly being the butt of Chris Rock, Margaret Cho and *The Simpsons'* jokes. Instead of being offended, defensive or even slightly annoyed at constantly being portrayed as the ignorant, stupid white man, Gary offered this ironic response: "I found it kind of funny when they were just trying to go against the white people, because for so long it's been the white people against everyone else that I thought the role reversal was kind of funny." Gary is able to "appreciate" and put these jokes about his "whiteness" into perspective, recognizing the luxury his colour has afforded him in the overall history of joke making. In his *grey figured world*, Gary acknowledged and dealt with this reality: "Everyone can make fun of white people but white people can't make fun of everyone" (Gary). When it comes to joke telling, comics of colour enjoy a sense of immunity from backlash, criticisms and accusations not shared by their white counterparts. Comedians like Chris Rock and Margaret Cho can tell all the white jokes they want, but according to the students, white comedians are asking for trouble if they tell black, yellow, brown, etc. jokes. Jane and Celine both agreed that if Rock and Cho were white, they would find their jokes very offensive. Instead, Rock and Cho's skin colour makes their jokes funny.

Just when it seemed that they had established the criteria for who can tell what jokes about whom, Tito threw a wrench into the discussion by confessing that he enjoyed jokes about his Indian heritage told by a white comedian. The fact that the white comedian is stepping into taboo territory, for Tito, adds another element to the joke construction that ultimately makes it funnier for him, contrary

to what the others believed. Even when things appear to become clearer, the fluid and contradictory nature of their *grey figured world* seem to be the only certainty:

[T]he appeals to fixity begin to dissipate when they are brought to bear on how things are. It is against this landscape of dissipating race and elusive culture that identifications are precariously carved out, and positionalities claimed (Yon, 2000, p. 76).

As if their social landscape was not hazy enough, the students' discourses with humour and identity within their peer groups offered further fuzziness. Alice described how she and her group of friends called their German peer a Jew "to be ironic." Similarly, Tito recounted how his Asian friend called himself a Jew because "he's cheap." Although both Tito and Alice understand on a more than superficial level that these racial connotations have historically oppressed and unjustly killed a large group of people, their re-conceptualization of its meaning in their *grey figured world* allows them to play with the term in a disturbingly casual, almost flippant manner. Even though their experimentation with this new Jewish identity plays on some of the oppressive debris (and as much as we would like to chastise their behaviour for it), we need to acknowledge how and where they are positioning themselves, their peers, and their concept of Jews in their *grey figured world* before we pass judgement and punishment. As Tito demonstrated in his comment, "and their [his friends] name for me is 'terrorist' since I'm brown," the students occupy multiple positions, in their *figured worlds*, leaping from one spot to another and everywhere in between depending on the discourses they encounter along the way. Alice certainly illustrated this phenomenon of transience when she declared,

I prefer to have a white friend to tell me to go back to the rice field or something as opposed to a brown person tell me because with my white friends, we joke about that kind of thing.

Even though on the surface it may seem that Alice is just “putting up” with the joke to “fit in” with her peers, it is not that simple. She is so comfortable about her Asian identity and so trusting of her white peers because they in turn are comfortable with her comfort, that she finds the “rice field” comment amusing. Consistent with what Yon (2000) believes, Alice, Tito and the others position themselves in accordance to the set rules, broken rules and blurred rules of their *grey figured world*:

These youth are racialized subjects, but they situate themselves in the discourses of race in complex and contradictory ways as they both affirm and undermine the racialized constructions of their identities (p. 103).

From the Grey Figured World to a Better World

Having a better understanding of the *grey figured world* from which the students frame their discourses with humour, race and identity is a significant step towards the creation of a more inclusive, diverse and equitable educational environment. How do we then help students move from their *grey figured world* to the building of a better outer social world, whether it be in their school, community and / or home, will be considered in the remaining sections of this chapter.

Discursive Spaces

A week after the completion of the final focus group session, Celine approached me, expressing how she missed our Wednesday discussions. She articulated her frustration over the lack of such a forum in the classrooms for

such discussions about humour, race, culture, identity and so on. In particular she believed many students at *Diversity* school would greatly benefit from tackling these issues. She proposed to form a club of sorts, one she would name “Bridges,” that would model the focus group concept for those at *Diversity* who wanted a venue for discussion; she asked if I would sponsor it. Celine believed that there were others like her who would embrace such an opportunity to talk about who they are, something they do not get much of a chance to do in the regular curriculum.

Celine’s commentary on education is one that is shared by many of her peers, as well as by a number of educators and researchers. The constant move towards a more standardized, fact-based and exam-oriented education, where a black and white mentality dictates discourses, means that there is less and less time for educators to spend on discussions about issues immediately relevant to the students’ *figured worlds*. There is no time to consider students’ daily encounters and their development as living, active and complex people, within the constraints of race, culture and gender. What Celine was asking for is a discursive space of her own and for her peers, that would offer them an environment where they can discuss, question, experiment and engage with the various discourses, such as humour, that have implications for their development and construction of self identities. Yon (2000) acknowledges the necessity of such a space in education:

Conceptualizing schooling as a discursive space enables us to recognize how individuals come from contradictory locations and occupy contradictory positions. This makes it difficult to neatly categorize them in terms of binaries of good / bad (p. 127).

Moreover, the *grey figured world* the students occupy needs to be expanded beyond their immediate peer groups, and welcomed into the classroom in a variety of ways, including humour.

The Discursive Space of Humour in Education

Upon the completion of his data interpretation, Yon (2000) ponders the next step to his research:

The larger question that this focus on discursivity opens up for researchers and educators alike concerns the conditions that might be created in order to allow people to explore fluidity rather than rigidity (p. 125-126).

Using humour during the focus group sessions was my way of providing a discursive space that invited and welcomed students to engage with discourses of race, identity and social change. Creating such a space is by no means a simply task, as a number of specific conditions were put into place to facilitate the construction of a safe feeling focus group environment. The space can only be as effective as the educators' quality of understanding and sensitivity towards the complex discourses of race, humour, identity and social change as experienced by their students. How trusting, nurturing and caring the relationship between the educators and their students also plays a significant role in the development of the discursive spaces. When these conditions are aligned, students will be less likely to manipulate dialogue about racist humour for selfish, hurtful or other oppressive motives. In such a supportive discursive space, humour defuses some of the heaviness and seriousness of these issues, heightening accessibility, while increasing the probability that the students would not only participate in the discourses, but also offer more personal accounts, ideas and perspectives. Discussing important and serious social issues through humour

may seem paradoxical, but it is in this frame of contradictions, something the students are already familiar with, that the most profound thoughts and ideas about how to change the world for the better may emerge.

Satire allows us to straddle lightness and seriousness. Chris Rock, Margaret Cho and *The Simpsons*' brand of humour were incorporated during the focus group discussions because their comedy is the juxtaposition of laughter with tears, hoping that the interplay between the two realms will facilitate the conditions conducive to positive social change. Jane pointed out that their humour both breaks down and at the same time perpetuates stereotypes. These satirists make explicit many of the characteristics of the students' *grey figured worlds*. This helps to explain why the students were so engaged and drawn to this form of humour that challenges and plays with traditional ideas regarding race. Rock, Cho and *The Simpsons*' humour are as contradictory, fluid, ambiguous and ambivalent as the students' discourses. These satirists are controversial figures of comedy because they too are straddling the worlds, situating their humour somewhere in the *grey figured world* spectrum. This positioning is rarely popular with the conservative public at large. But these students, on the whole, are not part of that conservative public. The students found these comics both funny and enlightening, because they recognized the places that Rock, Cho and *The Simpsons* originated. And because the students see their own *figured world* mirrored and shaded within Rock, Cho and *The Simpsons*' comic skits and routines, they were more willing to give them a chance, by attentively listening to what they had to say behind the humour, all the while laughing their heads off.

As was demonstrated when Alice told the joke about the farmer who confused a bowling ball for the egg of a “nigger,” not all jokes encompassing race are meant to be oppressive in intent or practice, even if they seem seems inappropriate on the surface. In fact, Alice’s joke shed light on the fact that there are still people in the world today who are so ignorant about individuals of different cultures that their basic common sense has been severely compromised by their racist attitudes and belief systems, something she felt could be poignantly expressed in a joke. This approach may prove to be more impacting on other students than an “expert’s” grandstanding about how bad racism is.

Creating discursive classroom spaces requires making room for fluidity and contradictions, where Alice could tell her joke without being seriously reprimanded. It is not the regimented, standardized, practical and efficient oriented models of education that will promote a learning environment where diversity, inclusion and equity can flourish. In fact, such an oppressive environment will only breed hierarchies, competition, indifference, cynicism, and loathing just to name a few by-products of a mechanically driven educational system. Educators who adopt rigid regulations, such as zero tolerance policies in their classroom, without acknowledging the *grey figured world* from which their students experiment, fumble and create meaning and understanding perpetuate the cut-throat corporate model of running daily “business”:

Schools should not adopt zero tolerance rules and, if they already have them, they should abolish them. It is one thing to say that “we” will not tolerate certain kinds of behavior; it is another to insist on uniform penalties for infractions that cannot easily be categorized (Noddings, 2002, p. 231).

A diverse and inclusive educational environment does not mean shielding students of minority backgrounds from humour that is about them. Such a

project would be virtually impossible for these students who have most likely already encountered such jokes in and outside the school. All the participants in the focus group drew their experiences and narratives with racist humour from their participation in their *figured worlds* of home and community, as well as school. Even if the joke is ill-intended, brushing it off to the principal's office does not mean it will go away. Before teachers quickly demand suspensions, expulsions or the likes in the interest of "protecting" their students from such humour, educators as well as their charges need to know just what these students are being protected from and whether or not this protection is even necessary.

Agents for a Better World

If educators encourage their students to bring their unique *grey figured worlds* into their classrooms, the *figured world* of the school as well as the *figured worlds* of the home, community and the outer social world will move towards a more diverse, inclusive and equitable state. Yon (2000) makes a poignant observation about the youth of today as they negotiate with and navigate through the messiness of race: "They insist on being active agents rather than simply victims" (p. 104). When students are provided with discursive spaces to experiment, improvise, figure out, make mistakes, fail, succeed, learn, play, question, challenge, re-conceptualize, etc., and of course, laugh along the way, they are in essence grooming and refining themselves to be able to better negotiate with and navigate through the oppression, challenges and obstacles of their often unjust and unforgiving social world. With the tools they have acquired from their *grey figured worlds*, they are more equipped to begin mending the

holes of the outer social world, striving to make it a better world for themselves and their peers.

Although humour has been shown to be a very potent and effective ingredient for creating discursive spaces for students to deal with the various discourses of race, identity and social change, it is but one venue. What other elements and possibilities that have not been exhausted can assist humour in the creation of further discursive spaces for students in the classroom? Once the students are more equipped with the tools to navigate through and negotiate with their outer social world, what are the processes, steps, and further complications and challenges that await them and how do they go about dealing with these variables need further research and exploration?

But for the time being, it is nice to hear the students laughing for a change.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Discussion Questions

Racism:

Describe your cultural / ethnic background.

Describe your understanding of racism.

Describe your experiences with racism in your community

Describe your experiences with racism in your home.

Describe your experiences with racism in your school.

Do you believe racism is a concern at your school?

Humour for Oppression:

What are the criteria for racist humour?

Humour Prompts

WAR, Eminem, Margaret Cho, Chris Rock, *The Simpsons*

What is your personal reaction to the humour?

Do you consider the humour racist?

What is the humour trying to communicate?

Identity

What does identity mean to you?

How does the identity of the comic affect the humour?

How does the humour impact identity construction?

Humour for Progression

How is humour used in the school?

How do you envision humour being used in the school?

How do you envision humour helping social change?

Appendix B: WAR "Comics"

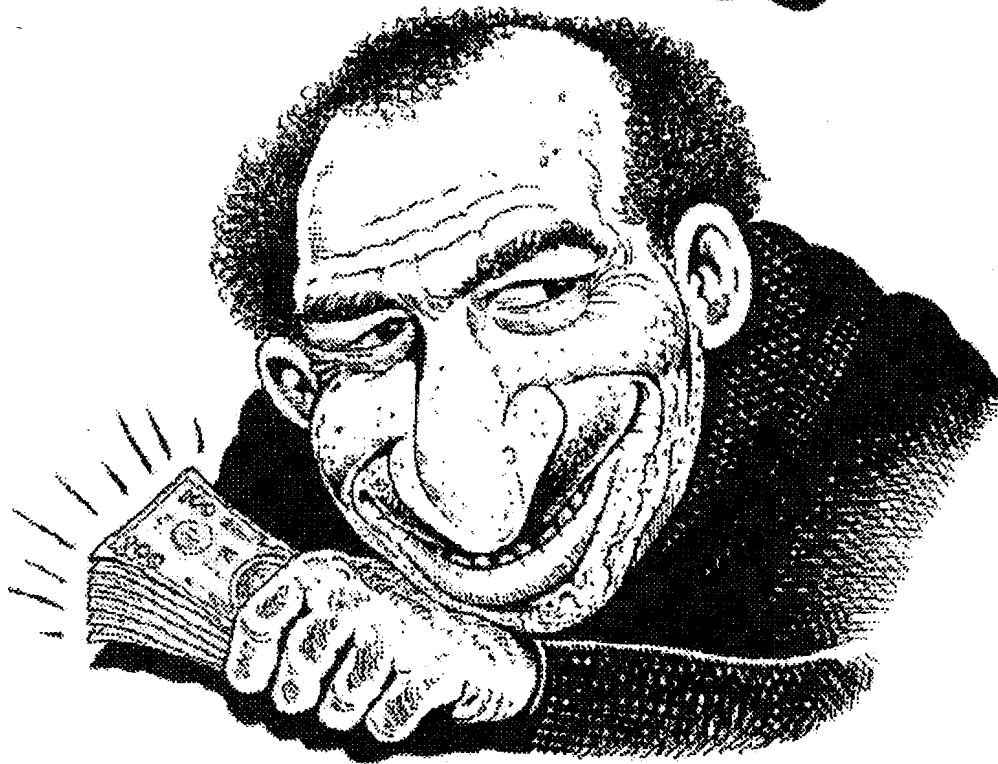
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... SERVES HIM RIGHT...



HE TRUSTED A **JEW!**

...WITH JEWS



... YOU LOSE!

Q: What do you call a black woman
who has three or more abortions?



A: A CRIMEFIGHTER.

EVEN WHEN NIGGERS ARE STONE
SOBER, THEIR SPEECH IS SLURRED
AND THEY CAN'T COMPREHEND
ANYTHING...



SO WHY ARE THEY ALWAYS
SO EAGER TO DO DRUGS?

THIS IS PEDRO... HE'S AN ILLEGAL ALIEN, BUT
IT'S O.K.... HE'S HARMLESS... ALL DAY, EVERY
DAY, HE STANDS ON A REMOTE CORNER IN
YOUR TOWN TRYING TO FIND SOME DAY LABOR
... BUT IT'S O.K... HE'S A HARD WORKER...

HIS WIFE HAS T.B... BUT IT'S O.K., SHE'S
BEING TREATED AT A FREE CLINIC... HIS
FOUR SONS ARE BUDDING GANG
MEMBERS... BUT IT'S O.K... THAT'S
WHY WE HAVE POLICE. PEDRO
AND HIS FAMILY ARE NO
THREAT WHATSOEVER... THAT'S
WHY LOCAL AUTHORITIES NEVER
BOTHER TO ASK THEM WHAT
THEY'RE DOING HERE...

STOP



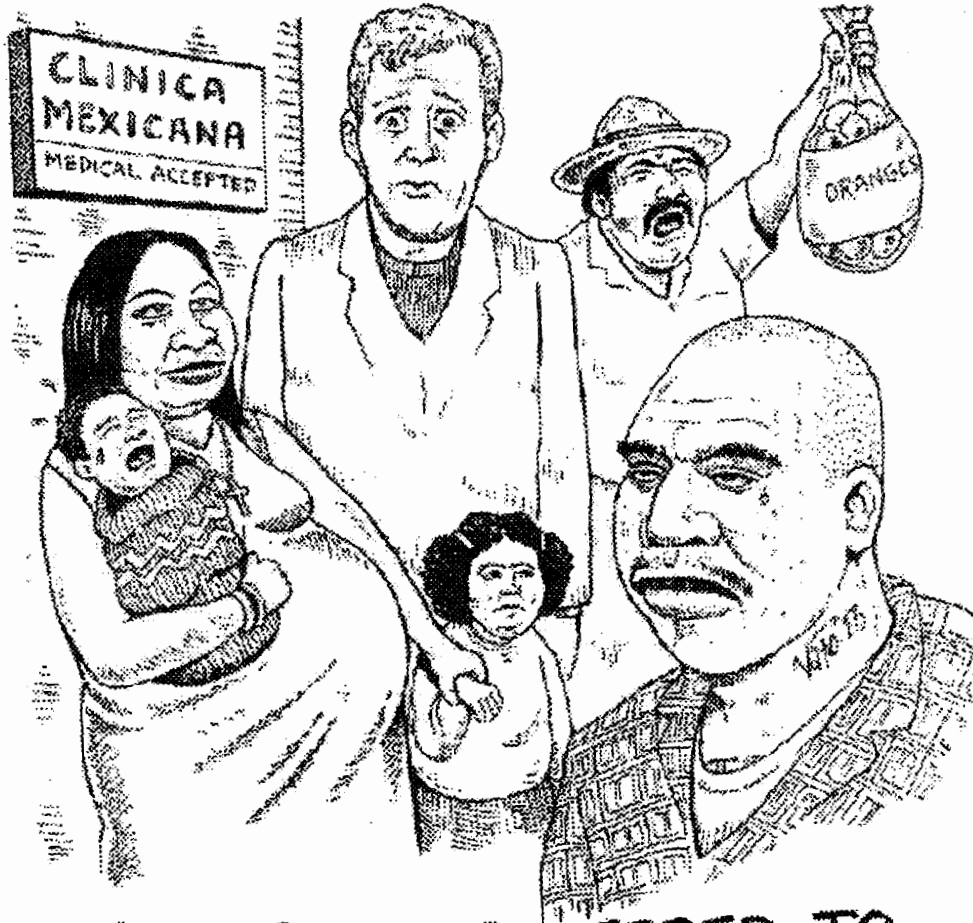
PEDRO HAS 237
RELATIVES BACK
HOME... HE JUST
WROTE AND TOLD
THEM HOW GOOD
IT IS HERE...
THEY'RE PACKING
RIGHT NOW...
GOOD 'OL
HARMLESS
PEDRO!

HEY, WHITE MAN... WHERE
WILL **YOU** GO...



WHEN THIS HAPPENS

HEY, WHITE MAN ... HAVE
YOU EVER WONDERED WHY
MEXICANS IN SOUTHERN CAL.



ARE STILL REFERRED TO
AS A MINORITY ?

**THE ONLY WAY TO STOP
A FLOOD...**



IS TO CUT OFF THE FLOW!