

## Book review

**Pérez, Raúl (2022). *The Souls of White Jokes: How Racist Humor Fuels White Supremacy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.**

It is not a new observation that humour is sometimes deployed as a mechanism of power and exclusion, or that it can do harm. However, there has been a tendency in humour research to downplay this harm in favour of emphasising humour's potential to subvert harmful ideologies. In *The Souls of White Jokes*, Raúl Pérez traces some of the ways in which the seriousness of racist humour has been downplayed in humour research and urges the reader to join him in recognising the insidious power of racist humour to produce and perpetuate racial alienation, dehumanisation and violence. He makes this case through an analysis of racist humour within three different settings in the context of the United States: far-right extremist groups, law enforcement, and political organisations. Through analysing racist humour across these three sites of power, Pérez compellingly demonstrates that some jokes are not 'just jokes' (even if those telling them disavow them as such), but can have serious, and even sometimes violent, implications.

The first two chapters of *The Souls of White Jokes* introduce key theoretical and historical dimensions, and situate Pérez's intervention within humour studies. In chapters 3 to 5, he examines how racist humour plays out in his three case studies. Finally, in the epilogue, Pérez returns to a broader picture, bringing together his conclusions and reflecting on the need to decolonise the way the "sense of humour" is conceptualised in humour studies. In this review, I will describe each chapter in turn before sharing a few critical reflections on the contribution of *The Souls of White Jokes* to humour research. I will expand in some detail on chapters 1 and 2, since these theoretical interventions provide the foundation for understanding the book as a whole. For chapters 3 and 5, I give an overview of the material and approach, but a summary cannot do justice to the breadth and richness of Pérez's analysis.

In the book's first chapter, "The racial power of humour", Pérez situates his project, tracing the history of racist humour in the context of the United States from 19th-century blackface minstrelsy to the present day. Bringing together key theoretical strands from scholarship on humour, race and emotion, Pérez emphasises the ways in which humour is connected to individual and social emotions. Building on sociological theories which characterise emotions as social phenomena that can shape and maintain social orders and structures, Pérez focuses on *racialised* emotions. Such emotions, he argues, are central in shaping how we "understand and filter all aspects of our current social, cultural and political era" (p. 9). In this chapter, he introduces the concept of *amused racial contempt* as a core affective mechanism of racist humour, which he theorises and illuminates throughout *The Souls of White Jokes*. As I understand it, *amused racial contempt* describes a shared emotional state that is expressed through humour and functions to re/inscribe notions of racial hierarchy. This concept of amused racial contempt builds on Du Bois's (1920) essay "The souls of white folk" (the inspiration behind the title of Pérez's book). In this essay, Du Bois theorised whiteness as a social and political construct tied to a sense of white superiority over racialised others. Pérez's re-reading

of Du Bois' essay in the context of racist humour provides a strong foundation for his theorising of amused racial contempt.

In chapter 2, "A theory of white racist humour", Pérez situates several important threads in humour research as they relate to white racist humour. He begins by outlining theorisations of humour as a tool for social alignment. In such approaches, humour is viewed as a sort of 'social glue' for building community. Pérez notes that some scholars have challenged this understanding, emphasising the potential for humour (in particular ridicule) to be socially alienating and to reinforce social divisions and structures of exclusion. However, Pérez argues, the narrative that humour is something predominantly or even inherently 'good' prevails in the field of humour studies as well as in 'common-sense' contemporary discourses. Pérez traces this emphasis on humour's 'positive nature' back to 18<sup>th</sup> century European Enlightenment thought. While Enlightenment thinkers questioned 'hostile' uses of joking, emphasising the need to cultivate more 'benevolent' or 'virtuous' forms of humour, Enlightenment views on humour also developed, as Pérez points out, alongside colonialism, empire and racial slavery. So, even as humour was being rethought as something 'benevolent', racial caricature and ridicule were becoming increasingly popular forms of entertainment. This use of racial ridicule often went (and still goes) unexamined, not conforming to the model of 'benevolent' humour. In this chapter, Pérez traces the ways in which what sociologist Joe Feagin (2010) calls the *white racial frame*, which treats whiteness as the 'default', is entangled with white racist humour. In a more recent development, Pérez adds, white racist humour is framed as something 'of the past' that is no longer a problem in the post-civil rights era. Referencing Goldberg's *Are We Postracial Yet?* (2015), Pérez connects this framing of white racist humour to the notion of *post-racialism* - a new, insidious form of racism, which disavows itself by claiming "racism is no longer a serious social problem" (p. 33). Pérez argues that post-racialism also characterises the work of ethnic humour scholars such as Christie Davies, who took the position that 'ethnic jokes' were not connected to issues of power or control but rather an entertaining way to delineate and play with norms and boundaries between groups. Such a reading denies the specific relationship between racism and humour. While overt and explicit racism may be (ostensibly) in decline, Pérez observes the growing phenomenon of racist humour as a form of "forbidden pleasure" (p. 45). This notion is closely tied with the concept of amused racial contempt, as is illustrated in the three case studies Pérez takes up.

Having set up the theoretical interventions of *The Souls of White Jokes*, in chapter 3, Pérez focuses on the uses of racist humour by the Far Right in the United States to circulate racist ideologies, while making them 'palatable' to a wider audience. While the Internet has changed the landscape and scope of expressions of racist humour, Pérez emphasises that this phenomenon of using fun and amusement to gain support for racist ideologies is not a new one. The use of cartoons, memes, stories and jokes has long been a strategy of the Far Right to normalise racism and racial dehumanisation. Appealing to the emotional state of amused racial contempt in cartoons and memes is a strategy by Far Right groups to advance their ideology, hiding their racism and white supremacy "in plain sight" (p. 63).

In chapters 4 and 5, Pérez looks at the consequences of racist humour in more mainstream areas of society (in chapter 4, among law enforcement officers; in chapter 5, in the political arena during the 2008 presidential election). Pérez draws on a rich variety of sources, including newspaper coverage, public records, legal documents, federal reports (chapter 4) as well as memes, cartoons, images, racist jokes circulated online, and news media (chapter 5) to demonstrate the prevalence of amused racial contempt, as well as its serious implications in fomenting racial discrimination and violence. In chapter 4, Pérez demonstrates that racist jokes can and do escalate into threats and acts of racial violence in the context of law enforcement. In chapter 5, examples are given of the function of amused racial contempt in representations of

Obama in 2008, as well as during and after his presidency. Such representations, Pérez argues, played a key role in fuelling the politics of white nationalism and white supremacy from 2008 onwards. Wrapping up the material from chapters 3 to 5, Pérez concludes that the use of racist humour has played an important role in normalising, circulating and popularising racist ideologies in many powerful institutions in the United States.

In the epilogue to *The Souls of White Jokes*, Pérez characterises racist humour as a form of “ritualised and racialised discourse” (p. 160). While it may be a difficult pill to swallow for those invested in the idea of humour as inherently positive or benevolent, Pérez demonstrates in this book that humour can act as an integral part of the emotional and cultural politics of racism. In this final chapter, Pérez suggests that we must look critically at how we understand the concept of the ‘sense of humour’ – not as a universal but rather a normative framework born out of a particular (namely white and Eurocentric) historical context. Pérez argues for a decolonising approach to the sense of humour, which engages seriously with humour’s power to reproduce and maintain structures of inequality and domination.

In sum, this book makes an invaluable contribution – intervention, even – in the field of humour research. It can be tempting, as a scholar researching humour, to idealise or even romanticise humour, to lean into ideas of humour as a tool for ‘speaking truth to power’ and building community. In *The Souls of White Jokes*, Pérez calls for us to think carefully about the history of this understanding of humour, and the oversights that may result from it. That is not to say that research on humour as a form of contestation, self-representation or community-building is not valuable or meaningful. However, it is strikingly rare to read an analysis like Pérez’s, one that delves deeply and unequivocally into a violent form of humour and challenges those scholars who suggest that humour is ‘harmless’ or even benevolent. I would suggest that this alone makes *The Souls of White Jokes* important reading for humour scholars. In addition, I find Pérez’s application of sociological theories of emotion as a lens for understanding racist humour illuminating and original. He disrupts the assumption that racism derives from (and becomes visible as) hatred, anger or fear. Instead, through his concept of amused racial contempt, Pérez puts words to an insidious entanglement of racial alienation and dehumanisation with amusement, play and fun. This begs the questions: In what other contexts and ways is racist humour sustained by its entanglement with such ‘positive’ emotions? And in what other ways can sociological theories of emotion be brought into dialogue with humour?

Another valuable intervention offered by *The Souls of White Jokes* is that, while analyses of humour often emphasise individual cases or performances, Pérez takes a holistic approach, including a wide variety of sources to inform his analysis. Rather than looking at humour in isolation, he places it carefully in social and historical context, and uses public records requests, legal documents, and federal reports to substantiate his argument about its societal implications.

This approach could be replicated to examine other sociopolitical and cultural contexts, as a way of taking humour and its connections to structures of power, exclusion and violence seriously. If I understand his argument correctly, this kind of critical analysis is part of what Pérez points towards in the epilogue to *The Souls of White Jokes*, in his discussion of decolonising the ‘sense of humour’. On this point, my one criticism would be that the interventions in the epilogue arrive a little abruptly at the end of the book. Having said this, Pérez’s characterisation of decolonising the sense of humour as a process of revealing the power that humour has in “reproducing, maintaining and normalising forms of inequality and domination” (p. 172) is powerfully exemplified throughout this book. In sum, I find *The Souls of White Jokes* an important, theoretically rich and thoroughly convincing study of the entanglements of racist humour with white supremacy. I look forward to seeing how this book will influence scholarship in the field of humour studies in years to come.

**Lucy Spoliar**

Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

[lucy.spoliar@ru.nl](mailto:lucy.spoliar@ru.nl)

## **References**

- Du Bois, W. E. B. (2007). 'The souls of white folk', in Gates, H. L. Jr (ed.), *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Feagin, J. R (2010). *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. London: Routledge.
- Goldberg, D. T. (2015). *Are We All Postracial Yet?* New York: Polity Press.