“Somebody Going to Get Hurt Real Bad”: The Race-based Comedy of Russell Peters

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Abstract: The popularity of comedian Russell Peters, with his ethnic-based humour, bears examining for what it may tell us about the acceptable limits of racialized discourse. Peters, a Canadian of South Asian descent, has an extensive, ethnically diverse fan base around the world. In his work, Peters skewers all of these fans, often drawing upon heavy accents, caricatures, and in-jokes informed by common stereotypes of each group. Such techniques can validate racist assumptions but may also diminish them by bringing them into the open. This article examines comedy’s potential as a venue for frank and engaging discussions of race and diversity.

Keywords: Cultural industries; Mass communication; Cultural analysis

Résumé: La popularité du comédien Russell Peters, avec son humour à base ethnique, mérite qu’on y porte une attention approfondie, car elle pourrait permettre de comprendre les limites acceptables du discours racial. Peters, un Canadien d’origine sud-indienne, possède des admirateurs d’origines ethniques diverses partout dans le monde. À travers sa comédie, Peters se moque de tous ses fans, utilisant accents, caricatures et blagues basés sur des stéréotypes propres à chaque groupe. Ces techniques peuvent, d’un côté, valider ces stéréotypes mais, alternativement, elles peuvent les atténuer en les portant au grand jour. Cet article examinera le potentiel de l’humour comme avenue pouvant mener à de franches et engageantes discussions sur la diversité et les races.

Mots clés: Industries culturelles; Communication de masse; Analyse culturelle

Russell Peters is nothing short of an international phenomenon. Like many stand-up comedians, Peters toiled for years in small towns across the country, working to build a reputation, but a series of video clips posted on the Internet by an anonymous fan helped to boost his global popularity. Those clips, taken from
a televised 2004 special, struck a chord with audiences in cities as diverse as London, New York, Mumbai, and Toronto, among others. The relatively recent popularity of Peters, with his ethnic-based humour, bears examining for what it may tell us about the acceptable limits of racist discourse and about the suitability of comedy as a space for public and explicit discussion of race.

Peters, a Canadian of South Asian descent, attracts large and diverse crowds around the world. In his work, Peters skewers fellow South Asians as well as Chinese, Ukrainians, Italians, Jamaicans, and more, drawing upon heavy accents, caricatures, and in-jokes informed by common stereotypes of each group. Given that the success of a joke relies upon the responsiveness and shared cultural understanding of audience members, Peters’ popularity raises questions that I wish to examine here. What does it mean when large crowds—including Whites, who are not spared in Peters’ critiques—gather to laugh boisterously at a routine that draws upon and validates processes of racialization?

On the one hand, it could be suggested that Peters uses these stereotypes and juxtaposes them against critiques of Whites as a way of openly disdaining any group’s superiority. On the other, the accents, the reclamation of worn-out tropes, and the consistent deprecating humour about his own ethnic group may also speak to a kind of insecurity and alienation present among minority groups as well as a validation of the place of racist discourse. Drawing upon a close reading of Peters’ work as well as that of other comedians, this article suggests that ethnic humour can offer a space, though one fraught with risk, for discussing stereotypes about race and culture. This space is by no means safe for the comedian or for the audience, imbued as it is with the dangerous, constant possibility of legitimizing racist thoughts and discourse.

The following passages investigate the limitations and potential of such space, working through an analysis of Peters’ work as well as his own comments about the purpose of his routine, and place this in the context of theories regarding humour and ethnicity. These theories are also discussed in relation to an analysis of race, difference, and prejudice in other comic performances, such as the routines of Chris Rock and Sacha Baron Cohen, or films such as Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle (Leiner, 2004).

Peters’ approach to race and difference is certainly one that he cultivates consciously and that he considers to be part of his appeal, and it is this distinction that makes his work especially noteworthy in a discussion of ethnic humour. As his website proudly notes, Russell Peters has built a following around the world, selling out major venues without the benefit of a television show or movie to help publicize his work. The same website goes on to suggest the reasons for Peters’ popularity, which is widespread while retaining an underground feel:

Russell has made his reputation by speaking to people that no one else is talking to. Much of his comedy speaks to immigrant communities around the world—Indian, Arab, Caribbean, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, and other South and Southeast Asian communities that remain invisible to the mainstream media and sometimes to the broader white population. (The ‘Official’ Website of Russell Peters, Biography section, Outsourced, para. 1)
Although there seems to be a hint of romanticism both in this description as well as Peters’ accompanying comment that he does not “put people down” but seeks instead to “elevate them,” it is quite fair to say that Peters’ claim to fame is his ability to speak to minorities, grounded in techniques that include his “quick wit and ability to mimic language and accents.” Lest one think that his popularity is confined to specific migrant groups, it is worth noting that Peters has participated in USO tours for American troops and has also headlined in China, South Africa, India, Sri Lanka, Jamaica, and elsewhere.

The source of Peters’ success may lie at least partly in his delivery, not simply in fine content. Witnessing his act, an audience member might occasionally feel a sense of familiarity as he moves in a relaxed way from one caricature to the next, utilizing stereotypical accents to mimic Indians or Chinese, among others, while pushing the boundaries further by commenting on, as examples, the notorious frugality of these two groups, the unusual names found in South Africa, or the relaxed parenting methods employed by Whites compared to immigrant parents. Occasionally he has moved away from ethnic humour, but it serves as the chief basis for his act and is clearly, based on audience response as well as his own marketing material, his calling card.

Peters’ high levels of popularity indicate that this type of humour is regarded positively by large numbers of people. As a Canadian of South Asian ancestry, I myself am amused by his jokes about Indian tendencies regarding matchmaking, strict parenting, and prejudices toward other ethnic groups. At the same time, I am sometimes aware of discomfort, of uncertainty as to whether there is really a difference between a comic routine and bigotry. When Peters adopts a strong Chinese accent to mimic a Chinese shopkeeper or martial arts expert, I am reminded of times when I have heard other individuals use such accents to mock Chinese Canadians and have felt, with utter conviction, that I was witnessing racist acts. How does one define the difference? Can we say that Peters’ routine is not racist because he uses such humour on a number of ethnic groups, including his own? Can we suggest that the audience’s pleasure and applause legitimize this type of satire and remove the sting? Is it more acceptable because the audience laughs along? These questions may seem overly weighty for a comedy routine, but as Charles Husband suggests, in discussions of ethnic humour, one should bear in mind that a joke is never “just a joke” (quoted in Billig, 2001, p. 269).

Race and comedy: Old frontiers, new approaches

Racially based comedy is hardly new. In earlier times, it was not surprising for entertainers to invoke racist stereotypes quite openly, mocking subordinate groups with no hint of apology. Indeed, such stereotypes were seen to be based in reality, a reality where certain races were clearly superior and entitled to belittle others. Stand-up comedy was one venue for this, but any number of films, television programs, or radio shows demonstrated much of the same, as in Amos ’n’ Andy (1928-1943), the popular and long-running radio show that openly drew upon African-American stereotypes. Racism continues to pose a problem in many forms of media (see Cottle, 2000; Fleras & Kunz, 2001; hooks, 1994; Jiwani, 2006; Karim, 2000; Mahtani, 2008, for discussion of some examples). Although racist sentiments may be indicated in ways that are less overt in contemporary
times, Billig (2001) notes that some racists see comedy as an ideal venue for mocking ethnic minorities: “If today there are taboos against the outward expression of racism, then the racist joke becomes a way of saying the unsayable” (p. 285). Humour, he argues, is not so far removed from hatred, drawing upon “unambiguous stereotypes of gender or ethnicity” and demanding “a suspension of empathy, with the target being an object of ridicule” (p. 268; see also Hutcheon, 1995, for a similar point about irony’s victims).

I am not implying here that comedians who employ ethnic humour are racist, and Billig is careful to point out that audiences who enjoy such humour are not necessarily racist either. However, Billig raises points that merit further investigation; at the very least, they ask audiences to consider why it is that they laugh at ethnic humour. As he recounts, scholars in this area are divided on the reasons: some, drawing upon Freud, feel that ethnic humour is cathartic, a release of possible aggression or a permissible social transgression, while others feel that a joke is simply a joke and that the very format indicates how far removed from hatred the audience’s sentiments must be (Billig, 2001). Regardless of the reason, Charles Husband suggests, it is not appropriate to defend ethnic humour when it may in fact validate negative stereotypes (quoted in Billig, 2001; also see Lipsitz, 1988). When audience members laugh at humour derived from a racialized parody, they validate any stereotypes embedded within.

Moreover, such laughter may be derived from a sense of superiority over others (Billig, 2005), although there are scholars who believe that humour helps grease the wheels of human communication: “[M]any analysts of laughter imply that humour is useful for maintaining social relations and averting a breakdown in communication” (Billig, 2005, p. 124). Bakhtin (1973), in his discussion of the carnivalesque, seemed to see humour as both release and unifier. All the same, while humour, as Freud implied, may allow the unconscious to rebel against societal repression, there is also a kind of coercion for those who do not see the joke: protesters, Billig notes, “risk the accusation that they lack a sense of humour” (2005, p. 155).

Ultimately, Billig (2005) tries to give voice to the complexities of ethnic comedy by demonstrating three paradoxes of humour itself: Humour, he first states, is both universal and particular, meaning that humour can be found everywhere, yet not all people agree on what constitutes humour. Secondly, humour can be simultaneously social and antisocial, bringing some individuals together while fostering division among others. Finally, humour lends itself to, and yet denies, analytical treatment. Hutcheon (1995) echoes the first two paradoxes in her suggestion that “the same utterance may have opposite pragmatic effects: what is approved of as polemical and transgressive to some might simply be insulting to others; what is subversive to some might be offensive to others” (1995, p. 52, emphasis in original). This is what makes an analysis of ethnic humour so complex: is there ever a point at which the joke can be certified as absolutely non-offensive? Probably not. The potential to offend, to hurt, lies underneath the surface of many types of humour, even if the majority of the audience roars with laughter and enjoyment.

This may be particularly true if the person who expresses a racist opinion is White or otherwise belongs to a dominant group. When the person speaking is not,
in fact, part of the majority or is not dominant in some way, the reaction of audiences appears to be far less critical, even though the comments being made would have been deemed racist when expressed by another. The complexity of this position in relation to “humorous” stereotypes is discussed by Billig (2005), who comments that any “stereotypes, which are to be momentarily enjoyed by insiders, are assumed to be ‘just stereotypes’. The outsider is in a different position—their very being does not distance themselves from the stereotypes” (p. 165).

Indeed, racism has rarely been a clear-cut phenomenon. People may possess identities that are far from straightforward: someone of mixed race may occupy shifting social positions, for instance. The same may be true of a person who belongs to an ethnic minority but is dominant in one context and disempowered in another. Such a position has allowed social critics such as Muslim Canadian Irshad Manji, for instance, or Trinidad-born Canadian Neil Bissoondath to espouse opinions that would arguably be considered discriminatory or misleading if uttered by a member of the social majority: Manji (2005) criticizes Islamic practices sweepingly and with limited reference to Islamic history or scholarship, while Bissoondath (1994) is a strong opponent of multiculturalism and pluralism.

When comments demeaning minorities or liberal policies are made by other minorities, they are imbued with such authority that even a more informed observer may be loath to point out any fallacies in their argument. In those situations, social conservatives are able to strengthen their own beliefs and to present them to a broader audience, pointing out that even minorities themselves endorse their views. Naturally, diversity of opinion within an ethnic group is both appropriate and desirable. All the same, when a minority expresses a negative point of view about another minority or even the same ethnic group, this carries a certain amount of weight and may be even more damaging than a comment made by a member of the dominant group. Comments by minorities tend to seem more credible because they are presumably grounded in experience, and because shared ethnicity or subordinate status rule out, for some, the possibility of racism.

Yet, as commentators on race and racism have pointed out, horizontal racism or cross-racial hostility is a fact of life as surely as vertical racism (see Pyke & Dang, 2003; Tamale, 1996). It may be concealed and thus more insidious, but it exists. This is not to suggest that Peters, or any other comedian, is racist. It is important to note, though, that such racism does exist and that viewpoints such as Peters’ may be used for racist purposes: if this is the case, how effective can humour be in providing a space for discussion? Ethnic humour can simultaneously deflate racial stereotypes and promote the same, ensuring a level of risk and a potential for danger, both of which Peters acknowledges. His intentions may be entirely benign, and in fact he describes them as such, responding to a reporter’s inquiry about possible offence to others by saying that distressed audience members are “really missing the point of what I’m doing. Because my intention is never to get that [kind of] reaction; my intention is to make you laugh” (MacPherson, 2007, para. 12).

Undeniably, Peters’ intention to make the audience laugh is fulfilled over and over again. Unlike public figures such as Bissoondath and Manji, who tend to assume clearly defined political stances, Peters, in contrast, makes no such
political claim for himself. Nonetheless, a type of politics, however facile, has become attached to his persona, where he is seen by some to embody multiculturalism’s great promise. Part of this is externally assigned, as when Tourism Toronto named him the city’s global ambassador (Bonoguore, 2008), but in making his claim that he wants to elevate people through his humour, Peters also raises the stakes of his comedic interventions. In a profile of Peters, journalist Kristie Bertucci (2008) suggests that Peters is in a class of his own when it comes to race-based comedy: “Instead of typical racial jokes comedians usually tell, Peters likes to examine racial stereotypes and break them down in his comedy routines” (p. 61), a claim that Peters later supplements by stating that he aims to “dispel myths about people” (in Bertucci, 2008, p. 62).

Asked to explain the basis for Peters’ popularity, one of his agents describes it in this way: “He’s a naturally funny person with a multicultural outlook that allows him to be entertaining to people of all races and backgrounds. Nobody’s ever had an outlook like him before” (The ‘Official’ Website of Russell Peters, Biography section, What’s Next for Russell? para. 1). It is unclear from this quote whether the agency representative, Rob Light, is suggesting that this outlook “allows” Peters to be entertaining to people of all backgrounds because he is a minority whose ethnicity and immigration history justify any racialized comments he makes, or whether he is implying that Peters in fact embodies multiculturalism’s very ethos, bringing a perceptiveness to his work that is both unique and transformative.

My own view of Peters’ work is that his outlook is not necessarily unique. The laughter he provokes from his audiences may be due in part to the fact that he has voiced what they and he see as fundamental truths. Describing the basis for his humour, Peters refers to his upbringing and his use of personal experience: “We’re a working-class South-Asian family. That’s where I come from and that’s what I know” (The ‘Official’ Website of Russell Peters, Biography section, What’s Next for Russell? para. 2). Perhaps Peters’ comedy is emblematic of what Ray Lillis (2007) describes as the ultimate goal for a mature ethnic comedy, one where “there’s no political agenda at all—just some funny brown guys writing down the things that make them laugh” (p. 82).

Peters, who certainly fits the category of “funny brown guy,” uses an approach and outlook quite different from that of comics such as Andrew Dice Clay or Eddie Murphy, who once garnered fame by providing raunchy, crude humour meant to shock and offend. Peters makes the audience laugh probably not out of shock at his outrageousness but in amused recognition of observations that have the ring of familiarity. As Ray Lillis (2007) comments when describing his own experience making a satirical television series about Maori-European relations in the 19th century, “Comedy isn’t meant to educate anybody, it tells you what you already know. The spark of comedy is a spark of recognition” (p. 80).

Many audience members would likely agree, yet despite this perspective, Lillis is also indicating the ways in which television comedy can be influential—in reversing racism between the Maori and Europeans in his series, he passed comment on the nature of bigotry and also discovered that there can be considerable difference in the ways viewers may interpret race-tinged satire. While the
amused recognition mentioned earlier may be shared by some, others may feel offended and marginalized: the laughter that Peters provokes may signify an unthinking acceptance of stereotypes that would be rejected by most individuals under ordinary circumstances. The following section examines historical and contemporary examples where various forms of comedy have proved to be simultaneously apt and unmanageable as a setting for the discussion of taboo topics such as race.

**Tricky terrain: When the joke is too funny**

The mixing of comedy and race can indeed be tricky terrain. If there is, as many sociologists contend, a little truth in every stereotype, how far does the black comic go in bulls-eyeing the stereotype? How massive can a backfire become? (Haygood, 2000, p. 32)

Comedy is not the only form of entertainment that makes race talk acceptable. Yet comedy, in the form of stand-up but also in film and television, offers a vehicle for putting forth notions that might otherwise take audiences aback. Discussing the ways that ethnic humour was infused into seemingly liberal situation comedies on television, Hamamoto (1989) points to examples of 1950s shows that portrayed immigrants with heavy accents, fractured English, and old-world values, and the way that these were juxtaposed against more sophisticated, Americanized sons and daughters with whom the audience could relate.

Dialect humor is only possible when placed in opposition to the “official” language of a given speech community. The use of dialect humor in *Life with Luigi* had a twofold thrust: It heralded the triumph of the assimilative strategies of the second generation in American society as represented and mediated by language. At the same time it gave a nod and wink to the restricted sociolinguistic world of their fathers. (Hamamoto, 1989, p. 37)

The world of television has significant differences from that of stand-up comedy, yet in Russell Peters’ employment of heavy Indian, Chinese, Jamaican, and other accents, there are some similarities to what Hamamoto describes, even though 50 years have passed since *Life with Luigi*. It could be argued that Peters’ routine is especially popular with second-generation youth because they recognize the accents he adopts while remaining aware that for the most part, he and they have some ironic distance from the personalities he impersonates.

Hamamoto sees the pleasures of laughter here as partly ideological, given the way audiences either relate to certain values or do not, based on their own position in society. Likewise, the comedic format of *All in the Family* (1971-79) allowed the characters to debate societal issues of the day while continuing to offer entertainment. However, such entertainment is also fraught with the potential for misunderstanding. Portrayed expertly by Carroll O’Connor, the bigoted Archie Bunker actually struck a chord with audiences who supported his racism and who watched the show out of sympathy with his ideas. *All in the Family’s* producer, Norman Lear, created that program as a way to showcase his own liberal beliefs, only to find that audiences had their own way of interpreting what they saw (Ozersky, 2003). Howells (2006) identifies a similar phenomenon in *All
in the Family’s precursor, the British series *Til Death Us Do Part* (1966-1975), wherein the prejudiced anti-hero, Alf Garnett, became extremely popular with audiences. Howells concludes that comedy such as this, or that of another comic character, Sacha Baron Cohen’s alter ego of Ali G, is polysemic, and he goes on to note that “the reader or recipient brings his or her own background, culture and experiences to the act of reading, listening or viewing. The received meaning, then, is a collaboration between writer and reader over which the writer has only partial control” (p. 169).

Similarly, several contemporary social satires, such as *The Simpsons* or *South Park*, run a considerable risk that audiences will laugh at the jokes without connecting them to social context. Likewise, movies such as *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (Leiner, 2004) or *Malibu’s Most Wanted* (Whitesell, 2003) juxtapose clever jibes about racial/cultural assumptions with such puerile stunts that it is not clear whether audiences absorb the movies’ incisive commentary about racism. In the recent sequel to *Harold and Kumar*, in fact, the film (Hurwitz & Schlossberg, 2008) makes constant reference to stereotypes through an unpleasant, ludicrously dim-witted neo-conservative who tries to coerce witnesses by catering to the perceived weaknesses of each ethnic group (e.g., a sugary drink for an African-American whom he apparently believes to be a petty criminal, or a bag of coins for two young Jewish men). It is unclear what message the movie is trying to send, as the African-American (a civic-minded orthodontist) challenges preconceptions, but the young Jewish men, initially denying their interest in the loose change, hurriedly scoop it up by the end.

Likewise, Harold and Kumar are surprised to encounter an apparently sophisticated White couple living in the backwoods of the United States, only to discover eventually that many of their assumptions about inbreeding and abnormality are correct. In that vein, Harold and Kumar, minorities who mingle freely with people of different races and ethnicities, also assume the worst when they drive into a predominantly African-American neighbourhood. They flee in fear, unaware that the men they saw were friendly and inclined to help them. The film thus offers mixed messages, not only because of the contradictory outcomes to each of these racialized assumptions, but also because the racism is embedded within such extravagantly comic scenarios that it is not clear whether the audience would grasp the underlying seriousness of the problem.

The film *Malibu’s Most Wanted* (Whitesell, 2003) also addresses explicitly what it means when minorities make assumptions about one another. In one of the movie’s most revealing scenes, two young Black actors in Los Angeles are approached by a well-heeled Black political aide who solicits their assistance in frightening a Black-wannabe White teen back to his affluent neighbourhood. The two young men agree to take the job, which involves masquerading as violent street thugs. In actual fact, neither is remotely suited for this role, since they are middle-class citizens with no more experience of the ghetto than the White teen. However, they need the work so they do not betray their fundamental inability to appear menacing.

Preparing to play this part, one of the young men huffs indignantly to the other that he is tired of having to play gangbangers when he has spent many
years training at Juilliard and elsewhere to become an actor who can handle a variety of roles. Much of the movie’s humour stems from the fact that the characters’ realities are so completely disconnected from the Black stereotypes that they try to accommodate. The aforementioned Black actor unwittingly evokes laughter when he accuses the White aspiring rapper of stealing his culture. The irony, of course, is that the culture to which he refers—replete with street lingo, rap music, and so-called urban clothing—belongs neither to him nor to the White teen, who persists in believing that he is Black despite being visibly White. Race alone is insufficient to determine the culture either one of the young men embraces, and ultimately several of the characters become friends, crossing racial boundaries, in a movie whose discussion of racial authenticity and appropriation is far more explicit than that found in Ali G, examined below.

How much of this messaging, however, do audiences engage with? Is comedy an ideal forum for investigating racism, or one where harsh truths lose much of their grit and impact? In All in the Family, the racist discourse is validated by audiences. In Harold and Kumar, people may disregard the significance of the commentary, seeing it as amusing but not central to the movie’s overall charm. The work of Peters is different in one sense—the racial humour is the basis of the entire joke and the audience must react to it. The similarity may arise in that audiences may not always take these comments seriously, dismissing them as a good laugh.

Joke’s on you: Laughing with or at minorities

Comedy has been good to Peters, who attributes the best part of his job to being free to say anything he wants to anyone at anytime. “But, they have to know you’re a comedian,” he adds. “If they don’t know what I do, they think I’m crazy. But, once you say you are a comic, everything you said is suddenly okay. It’s like a weird authority to have.” (Bertucci, 2008, p. 62)

Without question, Peters does provide a good laugh. However, what is the root of the joke? Is the joke different depending on who is the subject? For instance, some of Peters’ most-repeated lines pertain to his own family or to South Asians generally: one example is his signature comment, “Somebody going to get hurt real bad,” delivered in a thick Indian accent intended to mimic fathers who would cow their children with threats of violence. Although this routine does incorporate issues around race and integration in a humorous way, it may also hint at questions of domestic violence and patriarchy without addressing them meaningfully. In a segment that is not quite as famous but seems to elicit as many laughs from the crowd, he speaks about the difference between South Asians and other Asians, saying ruefully, “I think the god that was making Indian people was having some kind of practical joke with all the other gods. . . . It’s hot and we’re hairy. Men and women [laughs at audience reaction]. Indian girls are getting mad, pulling down their sleeves [mimics their angry reaction] ‘I hate this son of a bitch!’” (Peters, 2006). These quips are often the most effective part of his routine as well as being the most ruthless in their comments on South Asian immigrants. Are these so successful because they have the ring of truth, or because
such humour is more acceptable if it is seen to be self-deprecating? Is Peters exempt from criticism because his use of brown-speak here, as described by Davé (2005), is legitimated by his own colour? Davé, speaking of the Indian character of Apu on The Simpsons, voiced by a non-Indian and written in a way that emphasizes many of the expectations non-Indians have of South Asian immigrants in the United States, critiques the representation found there, which has some similarities to Peters’ routine.

Yet Peters can bring the feel of cultural authenticity—however problematic that phrase may be, with its implication that such a thing exists—to his own brown-speak, which is undeniably a major source of his popularity. He is able to offer a quality with which audiences can identify, possibly because he openly addresses racist assumptions of which his listeners are aware, and/or because he is marked as someone who understands the experience of being different, of serving as the target for racist discourse. At the same time, it is interesting to note that Peters continually mixes both his ancestry and his Canadian identity into his routine. Referring to a trip to China where he lost his deodorant, Peters (2006) recounts comically, “I stunk so bad, I’m walking through the airport in Beijing and Chinese people around me were going, ‘Oh God, you stink! [accusingly] You’re from India.’ [assumes an expression of outrage in response] You go to hell. [waits a beat] I’m from Canada! That’s how Canadians smell.”

In a sense, Peters’ jibes about the shortcomings of his own culture may be seen as the great equalizer, since he then passes judgment on other groups, possibly neutralizing the embarrassment that minorities, especially young people, can feel when their differences are made apparent in school yards and social groups. Those second-generation immigrants who experience difficulty fitting into mainstream society may find it easier to form a positive sense of self and identity when a comic such as Peters reclaims hair, colour, smell, or accents as the source of a shared joke. All the same, Peters is not always referring to his fellow South Asians, despite earlier observations that he may be entitled to mock others because he holds a privileged position as a minority. On the one hand, his willingness to parody any group can be seen as empowering and certainly the inversion of the belief that minorities typically occupy a subordinate subject position in their relations with others: indeed, it may be a manifestation of the carnivalesque. On the other hand, if a comic’s skin colour provides an excuse to pass comment on other racial groups, this offers dangerous licence. More openly problematic than the South Asian caricatures, I would suggest, are the accents that Peters assumes to great comedic effect, but with less personal connection. For example, his Chinese accent, sometimes based on Chinese Canadians as well as Asians throughout the world, is used to confirm ideas about extreme frugality, skill in martial arts, and body type. In a related vein, when Peters complains jokingly that the term “Asian” is always presumed to imply Chinese exclusively, Chinese members of the audience often respond with excited calls of “Wooooo!” In response, Peters (2006) deadpans, “Look at them, calling out their last name. So proud.” Referring to his travels in China, Peters adds that during a visit to a KFC fast food restaurant, he saw a Black woman in line. Waiting for the humour to sink in, he summarizes with a smirk, “The only black woman in China, and she
found the chicken. That’s all I’m saying. I don’t make the stereotypes, I just see them” (Peters, 2006).

Similarly, Peters appears to have carte blanche to mock not only other minorities, but Whites as well, a licence that may be connected to his own positionality. Ray Lillis (2007), commenting on the controversy sparked during the production of his own New Zealand-based series, where Maori characters make derogatory comments about Europeans, describes the atmosphere of political correctness by saying, “[T]he rule seems to be that any comment made by a minority culture about a dominant one will be seen as harmless—merely racial. However, a dominant society’s comments about a minority culture will always be deemed to be unacceptable—racist” (p. 80). Howells (2006) seconds that statement, though he indicates a complicated exception in the person of comedians such as Sacha Baron Cohen, discussed below. The Lillis case is slightly different from Peters’ comedy, of course, but the observation does seem validated by the positive audience reaction when Peters turns his attention from South Asians, Chinese, and Jamaicans and toward White Canadians. After mocking numerous minorities, Peters tells White audience members not to be complacent: they too have strange accents that make them sound, for instance, like donkeys. Likewise, in conducting focus groups on *Rush Hour 2*, starring a Chinese man and an African-American man who routinely offer racially tinged wisecracks, Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) discovered that audiences found the comments acceptable since they were uttered by two minorities and felt that they could laugh without experiencing white guilt.

Skin colour and ethnic background may help defuse audience anger and increase comfort levels, but they cannot be the answer in and of themselves. If this were the case, then Sacha Baron Cohen, the comedic mastermind behind *Borat*, *Ali G*, and *Bruno*, would not be able to, as Howells (2006) marvels, “get away with it” (p. 160), with “it” referring to Ali G’s sweeping and often rude comments about race and diversity. Descended from a Welsh father and Israeli mother, raised in an affluent part of England, Cohen has constructed Ali G as an urban lout who thinks that he is Black and who routinely makes racist and sexist comments. When he is challenged, Ali G—who is not Black but whose ethnic identity could be ambiguous—sometimes responds by inquiring plaintively, “Is it because I is Black?” In response, some of the people he interviews—very few of whom are actors collaborating in the skit—make the obvious response, which is that Ali G cannot be attracting anti-Black sentiment, since he is not Black himself. Howells (2006) opines that “on such combustible matters of race, stereotyping and prejudice, people should be queuing up to take offence at this privileged, middle-class White comedian and his apparent mockery of Black ‘street’ culture” and yet, as he points out, this is rarely the case (p. 160).

Some Black comedians in the United Kingdom did express distaste for Ali G’s tactics, including his impersonation of a Black person, but they were not wholly critical. One, Felix Dexter, suggested that the format of the program provided a safe space for the liberal middle class to laugh at urban Black culture without feeling that they had trespassed the boundaries of political correctness. Others dismissed the character’s importance by saying that the persona was too absurd
to be taken seriously. Indeed, some fans see the humour as stemming from Ali G’s persona as a wannabe gangster, caricaturing those White suburban teenagers who emulate Black people or attempt to do so; other fans note that there is a danger in putting forward such a satire of perceived Black culture, even if it is intended to undermine the ignorant White suburbanite. In Cohen’s case, the colour of the comedian does seem to matter, even if it does not matter equally to everyone in the audience, many of whom dismiss the significance of race by stating that the amusement factor should outweigh everything else (Howells, 2006).

**Promise and profit: Beyond the laughter**

Peters is certainly funny and is probably seen by many as a mere source of meaningless entertainment, compared to Cohen, whose work fluctuates between crudity and political satire. Indeed, Linda Hutcheon’s (1988) comments about a Canadian tradition of postmodern irony may be more applicable to Cohen than to Peters: parody “both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (p. 67). As Matthew Daube suggests, Peters’ techniques do not represent anything very new, especially not in Canada, which has produced a number of successful comedians. If he is a trailblazer, this has more to do with his status as the first very successful comic of South Asian origin in North America, as well as his ability to mine laughs from the experience of growing up in a multicultural country. His invocation of race is important, given that the audience is bound to be thinking about the topic the moment he comes onstage, and for Daube, the acknowledgment Peters provides is simply the continuation of a legacy left by other minority comedians. His use of race creates greater comfort for the audience, it also involves walking a shaky tightrope: “Joking about race and ethnicity is risky, says Mr. Daube, because laughter ‘can be used to keep people in their place and be very aggressive and negative’” (quoted in Lawrence, 2006). Lawrence goes on to argue that South Asian comedians are best positioned to take that risk: “As cultural hybrids, they’re using comedy to bridge a sensitive gap between the disparate worlds they inhabit” (p. W12). Peters himself might not employ the same terminology, but he appears to be cognizant of the strengths, as well as the responsibilities, that accompany his positionality, describing himself as racially Indian but culturally Canadian while living in the United States (von Baeyer, 2007).

Explaining why he thinks that it is acceptable to joke about the cultures of groups to which he does not belong, Peters tells an interviewer, “You can talk about people’s cultures because you can learn about it” (quoted in Lawrence, 2006). That may sound presumptuous, but in its intent to become acquainted with the cultural nuances of other people’s experiences, that statement may express a commitment to the multicultural ideal, as does another interview comment where Peters references his upbringing in a suburb of Toronto that is known for its diverse immigrant population: “Growing up in Brampton, there were a lot of new immigrants. . . . There was a mixed bag of people, so I would learn a lot about everybody” (quoted in Bertucci, 2008, p. 62). Indeed, although he jokingly offers pejorative comments about the difference between Cantonese and Mandarin, he also explains that his travels have taught him which language is spoken in different parts of China and chides those who do not take the trouble to learn the proper names of Asian languages.
If one subscribes to this theory that it is possible to draw upon experiences, old and new, of other cultural groups in order to generate humour, then comedians like Peters, or others named by Lawrence, such as Azhar Usman, a Muslim American, or Dan Nainan, an American of Indian-Japanese descent, are not only within their rights when they make jokes about specific ethnic groups—they are in fact contributing in a useful way to the creation of a pluralist society. Despite his easy use of stereotypes to draw laughs, Peters has drawn boundaries around these stock portrayals.

Aware that many comedians establish themselves through television and film roles, Peters has rarely appeared in these, choosing to forgo opportunities rather than conform to type: “I won’t do the role of ‘Indian guy’ or play a terrorist... What’s the point? I spent this much time building up the respect of my fans, of people who don’t want to be portrayed that way” (quoted in von Baeyer, 2007, p. 57). Describing Peters’ upbringing as a second-generation immigrant in the diverse suburbs of Toronto, one where he mingled with children of different backgrounds at the same time that he learned racial slurs as potential ammunition against playground bullies, Jakob von Baeyer (2007) suggests it is quite logical that Peters is ideally positioned to speak satirically yet meaningfully of the immigrant/Canadian experience:

His act is generous, uncontroversial and irony-free, antithetical to the “mega-bigot” comedy of, say, Borat or Sarah Silverman. Whether his fans know it or not, besides being a very funny guy, Peters just may be the most charismatic ambassador for Canadian multiculturalism since Pierre Elliott Trudeau. (p. 56)

Indeed, von Baeyer’s profile paints a picture of an artist who is not, despite his apparent pioneer status in the industry of comedy, unique in terms of his life experiences. While Peters may have been more savvy—or more amusing—than others in parlaying his stories of childhood into a career, he discovered along the way that those stories were ones that many people could share. Further to his agent’s description of him as a minority who speaks to, and on behalf of, groups who are generally marginalized and neglected, Peters’ own account seems to suggest that he has increasingly found commonalities among the audience members he addresses (von Baeyer, 2007). At the same time, Park, Gabbadon, and Chernin (2006) seem to argue that some of the commonalities provided by race-based humour in comedy may be misleading, offering a superficial gloss of universality. Discussing *Rush Hour 2*, they state that

racial jokes in the film cross color lines, creating an impression that all races are subject to stereotypes. Although there are only a couple of instances in the film that could potentially be interpreted as promoting White stereotypes, the inclusion of these few quips creates the impression that all racial groups are targeted by the film’s racial humor. (p. 164)

In promoting the notion that everyone is in on the joke, and that it is the same joke, such comedies may minimize the importance of actual race relations, assuming that power is held equally by all viewers.
There is also an assumption from such comedies that raced humour is nothing more than the source of profit. Minorities such as Peters can be seen as representative of the next big thing in comedy: once the domain of Whites, comedy in North America has expanded to include prominent Black entertainers and other minorities. von Baeyer (2007) notes the creation of *Ethnic Heroes of Comedy*, a Canadian tour co-produced by Just For Laughs, marketed specifically as a venue for the kind of race-based humour Peters has made so famous. While Peters himself avoids religious humour, preferring not to offend serious followers, observers in the industry have suggested that Muslim comedians will be the next ones to take audiences by storm. If this is true, an arena for public discourse and dialogue may open up that would allow for the discussion of sensitive social issues, helping to promote integration and acceptance of diversity. Alternately, as von Baeyer points out, ethnic comedy may become so commodified that it loses its edge, eking out laughs from perceived racial differences while refusing to speak to the inequalities that really matter.

The ethnic heroes of comedy may seem the same to audiences, but they are not. Minority status in itself does not confer unity, nor does it provide the same wellspring of humour. As Haygood’s (2000) discussion of Black humour reminds his reader, “Negro laughter, then, is hard earned, has been for so very long; and the kings and queens of comedy knew it” (p. 33), a comment echoed in some ways in Hansen’s (2005) account of self-deprecating humour among Indians in South Africa. As with Blacks in the United States or Indians in South Africa, many ethnic groups have a history of experiencing prejudice and may address this through therapeutic laughter, but the details are unlikely to be the same and the historical and geographical context may be different.

Hence, it is possible but not guaranteed that such laughter can result in the formation or strengthening of community. Interestingly, Peters comments on his own surprise when he discovered that sold-out shows in Dubai were attended largely by Arabs, who contacted him to ask plaintively when they, too, would be the subject of his humour: “I kept getting e-mails from Arab kids going, ‘Hey, why did you forget about the Arabs?’ It’s funny because people are complaining to me, asking me why I didn’t pick on them’” (quoted in MacPherson, 2007). As Bertucci (2008) describes, “No culture is safe in his shows. But, that’s exactly why he appeals to so many people. Peters likes to use his observations on the subject of race, class and culture to point out our human shortcomings and find out what’s real about various cultures” (p. 61).

Does comedy then provide a safe public space to voice all the racist thoughts one internalizes? In many ways, it appears that comedy offers a space of considerable potential, but safety is not part of that promise. There may be different reasons to engage in an environment so imbued with risk, and certainly individual motivations will vary. For some, the opportunity to speak racist thoughts out loud may be provided by comic space; for others, however, the space may simply provide one of a few opportunities to speak about race at all. Without routines such as that of Peters, perhaps Richard Howells (2006) is right when he says that “as with sex in Victorian times, race is not nowadays mentioned in polite company. Indeed, it is rarely discussed freely at all” (p. 155). While various media such as
public broadcasters and websites may strive to offer a Habermasian public sphere (Habermas, 1989) for discussion of social issues, these spaces can have limitations that comedy is positioned to address.

Comedy does provide a space where public dialogue is possible, though not guaranteed, as the audience engages together in a common experience of hearing stereotypes voiced out loud and then possibly deflated or debated. Admittedly, once comments about race are voiced, they do not always lose their sting so easily by proceeding cooperatively into the realm of the harmless and absurd. Although he was not referring to comedy, Quentin Tarantino addressed controversy around racial epithets in film, defending his use of words such as “nigger” by insisting that he was helping to defuse the word’s negative power by speaking it out loud (Giroux, 1996). Such a statement is bound to attract ambivalence, similar in some ways to the outraged reaction elicited when comedian Chris Rock (1996), in his breakthrough performance Bring the Pain, uttered a few memorable lines about his fellow African-Americans: “Who’s more racist, black people or white people? Black people. You know why? Because we don’t like black people either . . . There’s like a civil war going on with black people right now, and there’s two sides. There’s black people, and there’s niggers. And niggers have got to go.”

Comedians such as Peters do not move into quite the same murky depths, generally avoiding racial epithets and sticking instead to gentle mockery of characteristics associated with ethnic groups. However, by provoking laughter when he speaks these stereotypes out loud, Peters may accomplish what Tarantino and Rock arguably do not: help extinguish the negativity associated with the stereotypes. Park et al. (2006) quote King’s contention that “comic representations of race (i.e., exaggerated portrayals of racial traits) can be identified as a parody of the stereotype and a strategy of subversion, thereby opening up the possibility of critiquing the racial norm and rejecting prejudice” (pp. 158-159).

Park et al. also point to the other side of the coin, where “[c]ritical views on race in comedy posit that racial stereotyping serves an ideological function, normalizing racially defined characteristics and legitimating the racial hierarchy” (p. 159). Peters could well be doing the same, however unintentionally. For example, some of the comments he directs at specific groups do reinforce stereotypes, even if they are not entirely negative: “Clearly we’ve got some Asians in the house—I saw all the Honda Civics in the parking lot,” or “And the brown bastards—look at you. There’s a lot of closed motels in town right now, I tell you that” (quoted in Lawrence, 2006).

In a sense, this humour, based on ethnic and racial stereotypes, is not new. The movie Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle (Leiner, 2004) makes reference to many of the same assumptions, where the character of Kumar rebels both against his parents’ expectations that he will become, like other dutiful South Asian sons, a medical student, and against the casual racism of the American society he inhabits, where he endures jokes about Indian convenience store owners, for instance. Ultimately Kumar becomes reconciled to his own identity, realizing that he can become a doctor without fitting the exact mould of the overachieving, scholastic second-generation Indian immigrant; perhaps more importantly, both he and Asian-American Harold subvert the expectations of their acquaintances,
eventually standing up to prejudice against South Asians and Asians—although both also learn to walk away at times from the examples of violent racism they witness, realizing that these are part of their existence in America. While Kumar shocks adults with his swearing, rudeness, and marijuana smoking, the anxious and mild-mannered Harold ends the movie by flouting the manipulative colleagues who have been taking advantage of him at work, assuming that he is a docile and hard-working Asian immigrant who is unlikely to protest. The amusement triggered by the unexpected contrast may make more of an impression than a well-meaning minority inserted into a soap opera or drama.

At the same time, one may also ask whether comedy can be a kind of ghetto for ethnic entertainers. Glascock (2003) notes that African-Americans tend to be depicted most predominantly in comedies on American network television. He suggests that this consistency may offer an implication that “blacks are mostly comedic, and needn’t be taken seriously” (p. 97). The minorities who populate comedic films and who are now, evidently, rising to successful heights in the world of stand-up may inadvertently reinforce this impression. Chris Rock (1996) may have been a notable exception at one time: although his background is clearly comedic, his early routines bristle with biting political commentary. His comments about Black people and niggers certainly raise questions about his commitment to racial equality, yet he also expresses rage against the social, political, and economic forces that oppress African-Americans. It would be difficult, I think, to see those early routines as strictly for fun, something to laugh at and then ignore. Although Rock’s routines seem to have now become less politicized, he has used his comedic platform to bring social issues to wider attention.

One other possibility for comedy as a venue for the discussion of race must factor in the pleasures of subversion made possible within such a genre. “Comedy can often confirm stereotypes, but as Annette Kuhn has observed, its pleasure ‘has been seen as its disruption of convention, overturning common-sense categories of behaviour and reversing expectations’” (Waldron, 2007, p. 35). Examining two comedic films made by an Algerian on the subject of migration and race, Waldron concludes by suggesting that he is unsure which technique is most appropriate for accomplishing such subversion. The film that is too compliant, emphasizing integration, tolerance, and happiness, may unfairly neglect societal realities of racial inequality; the film that is too critical may alienate audiences. If this is so, perhaps comedians such as Peters know whereof they speak when they attempt to strike a balance, refusing to let any ethnic group off the hook, but poking fun in a way gentle enough to draw—and keep—a crowd.

Conclusion: The last laugh
Ultimately, there may not be one single, correct answer to the question of whether or not it is appropriate to offer racialized discourse at any time, in any setting. The reaction to a performer like Russell Peters, however, does elucidate one fact: there appears to be some kind of hunger for a place where people can be addressed in the totality of their identities. There is a certain romanticism attached to the description of Peters as someone who speaks to the disenfranchised, giving them voice, but there is also in it a grain of truth. Does Peters offer a sense of subversion, a carnivalesque spirit, then? Not entirely, perhaps not
even mostly. Yet in his best moments, such as his riffs on airport officials who do not understand the difference between Indians and terrorists, in his rejoinders to those who refuse to acknowledge diversity, and in his own wry celebrations of same, Peters does elevate race talk in comedy, as others have done before him, but using his own techniques.

There are dangers inherent in this strategy, of course, and it is not clear that Peters, or others working in the genre of comedy (whether stand-up, film, or television) are all consistently cautious about skirting the perils of racial humour. Such perils may include reinforcement of racist beliefs, insult to minority groups, and the marginalization of talk about race to a comedic ghetto, where no one gives the message its due, or where its significance disappears beneath the weight of other jokes. There is risk in any form of communication, however—as Hall (1980), Morley (1980), and others have pointed out, specific reception of a particular message is not guaranteed. Comedy, in particular, relies on risk: there is never a guarantee that the audience will get the joke. When comedians delve into issues that are controversial or sensitive, the risk is amplified many times.

Comedy, in fact, may be one of the more courageous genres that takes advantage of the ability to embed subversive messages, at least when it so chooses. In the 1970s, televised comedy served as the venue for discussion of politics, war, civil rights, and other issues of the day, and even now, there is some evidence that young people are more likely to absorb their news and politics from satirical programs such as The Daily Show with Jon Stewart than from traditional media formats: “young people appreciate the sarcasm, irony, parody, and satire pervasive in popular culture” (Feldman, 2007, p. 408). In the 21st century, as Howells (2006) comments, it is overwhelmingly difficult to talk about race openly, yet assumptions about race, culture, and religion underpin so many policies and personal relations. Hence it is perhaps no surprise that some of the most cogent commentaries on race and ethnicity do come from parodies and satire, from Russell Peters, from the Harold and Kumar movies, from Malibu’s Most Wanted, or the Israeli-Arab themed comedy Don’t Mess with the Zohan (Dugan, 2008). Perhaps comedy is not the ideal venue—for those who continue to seek a democratic public sphere as proposed by Habermas, comedy may be seen as falling short. The discourse is not always purely rational, and not all of the participants enter with the purpose of facilitating democracy. At the same time, that public sphere ideal is one with certain limits, embedded as it is in White, bourgeois traditions. Given the issues and the audiences under discussion, perhaps comedy offers a more promising space.

When the aforementioned movies, for instance, demonstrate racism’s lack of logic and rationalism using satirical techniques, they do open up space for discourse, for refuting essentialist claims about characteristics of minorities. Unquestionably, there are risks, and certainly anyone who introduces public discussions of race needs to walk an extraordinarily fine line between promoting stereotypes and celebrating communities. Perhaps because the exercise is so fraught with danger, the gauntlet has not been taken up very strongly within another genre or media form. Even if it were, the earnestness that might accompany such an attempt would be unlikely to attract the audiences that flock to these
major comedic events. Comedy is not always subversive, by any means, but it is not as safe a space as observers may assume. When Ray Lillis (2007) announces his aspirations for a world of comedy where “funny brown guys” can simply be funny, without worrying about the implications of their comments, he offers a goal that is laudable in some ways but rather fanciful given the degree of social and racial commentary implicit in his own work. Comedians like Lillis, or like Peters, do have something to offer audiences. Perhaps what they offer is not quite as grand as some observers suggest, but it is a way of educating and enriching others, of opening up spaces for dialogue and for release. In times of racial tension, even the ability to laugh at difference is valuable.

Russell Peters does offer audiences that chance at laughter, as well as a reminder that every race, every ethnicity, may be associated with traits that are amusing. In our differences, and in our willingness to poke fun at them, he seems to say, we can find unity, however superficial. The label affixed to him by von Baeyer, King of Multiculti, goes too far, in my opinion. A close look at some of Peters’ jokes illustrates that his casual use of stereotypes may, in fact, hurt somebody real bad after all. Nonetheless, Peters is tapping into a desire to treat Canada’s diversity—as well as global diversity—with a lighter touch, one whose ability to evoke laughter at embarrassing attributes, sometimes the source of childhood humiliation, may provide real possibilities for acceptance and pluralism. Ambassador of tourism he may be; diplomat of diversity Peters is not. In many ways, though, entertainers who are willing to be brash about taboo topics rush in to fill the gaps that well-intentioned, serious commentators leave behind. By speaking our prejudices out loud, comedians, including Russell Peters, may remove some of their sting and build tenuous bridges that can stand above the troubled waters of race, ethnicity, and diversity in many cities.

References


