The Souls of White Jokes: How Racist Humor Fuels White Supremacy presents a sophisticated and timely theoretical framework for understanding the connection between humor and white supremacy. The book thus demonstrates how a joke is never ‘just a joke’ but can be something much more sinister. Author Raúl Pérez introduces us to his original theory on racist humor before applying it on three sets of cases – far right media, racist insults and banter in the police, and finally mainstream US political discourse.

The main contribution of Pérez’ well written work is a new concept: amused racial contempt. By developing this concept, which chapter two of the book is dedicated to, Pérez does an exceptionally good job in linking theories of humor, affect, racism, and white supremacy, demonstrating how comedy and jokes can fuel, maintain and even enforce racial hierarchies. Amused racial contempt is a way to divide between “us” and “them” through an affective mechanism characterized by pleasure, carried out by racist jokes. I especially appreciate how Pérez manages to take the special nature of humor – how it is associated with pleasure and joy – into account when developing this concept.

Another key point in this discussion, which I see as a major theoretical contribution not only to humor studies but also to racial studies, is how amused racial contempt plays a central role in the reproduction of white supremacy. The reason for this is twofold: First, racist jokes can “pass” in a post-civil rights society, where more blatant forms of racism are strongly condemned. Second, this kind of joking maintains and creates racial solidarity through a sort of dialectical move between alienation and alignment: A central part of reproducing whiteness is creating solidarity by laughing at the Other. Amused racial contempt thus has real potential to explain how humor, uncannily enough by virtue of being funny, is far from innocent, but a main driver of the reproduction of racist cultures and societies.

In the next three chapters of the book, Pérez seeks to demonstrate how amused racial contempt is put to work in different US contexts: The far-right alternative media, the police, and mainstream politics, more specifically during Obama’s campaign and presidency. These case-groups are of course not randomly selected but...
chosen to theorize how humor works outside the spheres of comedy and entertainment, particularly in institutional settings of high power and influence – a praiseworthy project and indeed, as Pérez argues, an understudied field in humor studies (and in the social sciences in general).

Chapter 3, dedicated to the racist humor of the far right, opens by discussing the frightening modern internet culture of racism (and anti-Semitism, sexism, and homophobia) cloaked in words like “edginess” and “lulz,” setting the stage for an account of how pure racial hate is expressed through humorous genres, and how this kind of humor is shared in communities with a track record of racial violence. The most interesting part of the chapter is the discussion of Tom Metzger’s publication White Aryan Resistance, a racist journal with its heyday in the 1980s. In the discussion of the quite blatant hate-cartoons from this publication, Pérez manages to convince the reader of how this kind of humor not only is a direct precursor to contemporary online Chan-culture, but also deeply intertwined with white supremacists’ reactions to post-civil rights movement US. A key point in the chapter is that amused racial contempt gained a new form of importance as a way to fuel feelings of lost power and privilege among whites, when overt racism became publicly condemned. This was done by means of racist comedy tropes well-established in American mainstream culture. I am less convinced when Pérez argues that this kind of humor served as a sort of ‘gateway drug’ to the white supremacist movement, or that there is a direct relationship between this kind of humor and physical violence, which I will return to in the end of this review.

In chapter 4, we are presented with numerous cases of racist joking in U.S. law enforcement. It is argued that joking and humor is deeply embedded in, and important in the reproduction of, the culture of systemic racism in American police. Humor is an “everyday ritual of racist bonding” (pp. 116), creating solidarity amongst White police officers while alienating them from, and dehumanizing, Black civilians. The chapter also discusses how racist jokes frequently have been excused by public investigations, both those internal to the police force and by judges in court, and points out the correlation between frequent use of racist joking and insults and police violence towards Black, for example in the Ferguson police force. The seriousness of humor is thus illustrated by showing, according to the book’s author, what racist joking does in the context of law enforcement.

Chapter 5, which in my opinion is empirically the strongest chapter in the book, outlines the shocking travel of racist jokes and imagery targeting President Obama, from when he launched his candidacy in the Democratic primaries to well into his second presidency. Here, Pérez shows how minstrel imagery and very direct violence jokes was a key part of the ecosystem between right-wing media and conservative Republicans like the Tea Party, and how its use and circulation was defended by arguments like “just a joke” and characterized as a countermeasure to
“political correctness.” The chapter thus becomes stunning evidence of how amused racial contempt indeed is ingrained in the forging of whiteness, but also how its use adapts to changing cultural and political landscapes and hence can be constantly re-weaponized.

I think it is evident that I see this book as an important and impressive bit of scholarship. It does, however, also have some clear shortcomings. Humor scholars would probably react to the characterization of the research field of ethnic humor, where Christie Davies takes the role of a villain insisting that humor in general, and ethnic humor in particular, has no social consequences and should not be seen as an expression of racism. While I join in on the criticism of Davies’ view on humor as innocent, I think that seeing him as a typical representative of the research field of ethnic humor, even of those I like to call humor optimists, is a strawman. Although Davies is widely cited and was important for the scholarly community that this journal grows out from, I do not see his theory as representative for the study of ethnic humor. To stay in a US context, there are plenty of works claiming not that ethnic and racial humor plays no social role whatsoever, but rather taking the optimistic stance that ethnic humor can challenge ethnic hierarchies and even the very idea of ethnicity itself. Authors who (to various degree) advance this view, like Gilota (2013), Sollors (1986), Mintz (1996), and Musser (1991), are absent from the discussion in this book – which is a pity, as a critical investigation of these would add great nuance and more force to Pérez’ argument.

There are also some strange omissions of literature supporting the book’s critical stance towards humor. Most conspicuous is Billig’s (2005) great article on the hateful jokes of the Ku Klux Klan, which I think is a natural predecessor for Pérez’ argument, and the numerous empirical studies conducted by (among others) Ford et al. (2015), studies that could have strengthened the book’s claim of how racist humor eventually leads to racist violence.

The latter would have served the book well, because its second shortcoming, as I see it, is how empirical cases tend to be used as proof of humor’s effect. I have already mentioned that the relationship between racist humor and physical violence is frequently mentioned, but this remains nothing but a correlation. Causality is luckily never mentioned in the book, but I would say it is strongly hinted to that racist jokes lead to violence. An even stronger theoretical backing, which could have been based on the authors mentioned above, would have been beneficial here. The book would also come across as stronger if it consisted of more original empirical research. Most of the cases Pérez discusses are based on media reports or other open sources, especially in the chapter about the police. This is very useful in demonstrating the pervasiveness of amused racial contempt in the various contexts, but I do miss the great analytical sensibility I know from Pérez’ earlier micro-sociological work – I think that indeed would strengthen the books’
main argument on how amused racial contempt plays a key role in contemporary (and historical) racism and white supremacy.

These points should, however, be read as nothing but a call for more research, applying Pérez’ very original and well-developed theory in more empirical contexts, using historical and sociological methods. *The Souls of White Jokes: How Racist Humor Fuels White Supremacy* delivers a real theoretical contribution and is an indispensable book for anyone interested in racial humor, in whiteness, and in the dark side of humor.

**References**


