“It Was Only a Joke”:
How Racial Humor Fuels Color-blind Ideologies in Mexico and Peru

Abstract

In Mexico and Peru, denigrating racial humor about blacks and indigenous populations is prolific, despite the existence of color-blind national ideologies (which minimize or negate the existence of racism) and social norms which silence various forms of race talk. This article draws on interviews and participant observation from Mexico and Peru to analyze the popular uses and interpretations of racial humor, and their consequences for racial ideology. We illustrate how racial humor serves to reproduce Mexico and Peru’s national ideologies and reinforces the countries’ racialized systems of domination. In this article, we identify three mechanisms involved in the process of ideological reproduction including individuals “going along” with jokes, framing racial humor as benign, and using laughter to “soften” racism. Taken as a whole, our analysis reveals how racial humor works to maintain a color-blind ideology.

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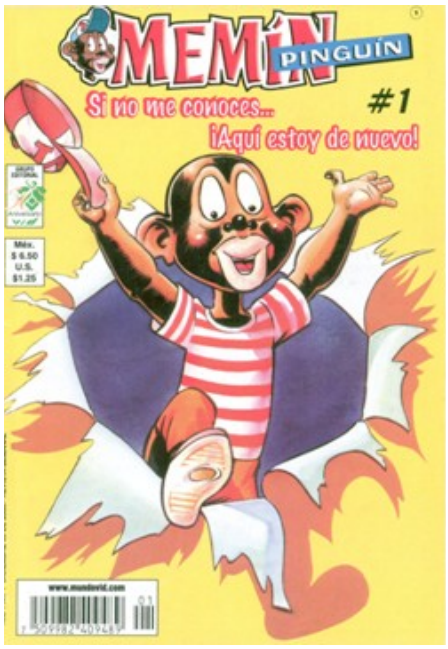
In 2005, the Mexican government released a stamp series based on the popular Mexican comic book character Memín Pinguín.

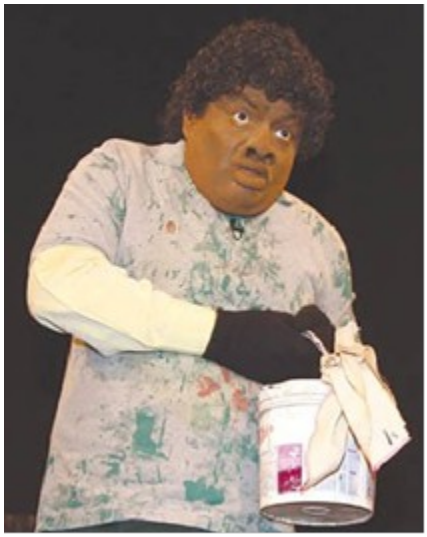


[Figure 1 here: Memín Pinguín]

This move generated protest in the United States with critics arguing that Memín represents an offensive racist stereotype. These accusations of racism challenged the dominant national ideology in Mexico - that racism does not exist in the country - and breached the social silence on the topic of racism. In response, Mexicans, who are avid consumers of the comic, collectively supported and defended the character, arguing that Memín is

intended for comedic purposes. Newspaper headings such as “There is nothing racist about Memín Pinguín!”[1] were plastered across the front pages. Voicing a typical reaction was Bernardo, a 43 year-old professor with dark-brown skin: “I believe that [Memín] is for entertainment, to have a good time, but nothing more.”[2] The discourses surrounding the Memín controversy were illustrative of a broader dynamic operating in Mexico – racial humor largely escapes local charges of racism.

A similar phenomenon exists in Peru. A Peruvian television station features a popular show on prime time called “The Humor Special.” One of the show’s main characters is *Negro Mama* [Black Sucker], who is played by a white man wearing blackface and a prosthetic enlarged nose and lips.



[Figure 2 here: Negro Mama]

Negro Mama is from humble origins; his lack of social and intellectual acumen is highlighted for comedic purpose. Upon viewing a portrayal of *Negro Mama*, African-American scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. responded: “I

can't believe it. That's disgusting. … I have seen some racist things on television . . . I have never seen anything as racist as *Negro Mama*."[3] Many Peruvians, however, do not view *Negro Mama* as racist and simply view him a character used to provoke laughter. Rolando, a 55-year old business owner with light skin, explained to the second author that *Negro Mama* is not racist because the main character always ends up making a fool of others, even though initially it looks as though the joke is on *Negro Mama.*

This article examines how racial humor operates in Mexico and Peru and explores the consequences of the fact that Mexicans and Peruvians frame depictions such as *Memín Penguín* and *Negro Mama* as "only jokes." The study of racial humor[4] provides a window into understanding the relationship between racial discourse and ideology, and offers privileged access to racial discourses in contexts where race-related talk is often censored or silenced. Latin America is a theoretically interesting site to study racial humor because state-sponsored ideologies of color-blindness[5] in the region have created a social silence on the topics of race and racism. Findings from previous studies suggest that racial humor may fuel color-blind ideologies in Latin America (e.g. Telles 2004, Twine 1998, Osuji 2011). However these studies address anti-black humor in Brazil and do not use racial humor as a central point of analysis. The focus on Brazil is not surprising given that the bulk of the research on race in Latin America has been conducted on Afro-Latin American (countries such as Brazil and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, which have a black-white continuum). In

contrast, *mestizo* America (countries where the primary racial divide involves the Indigenous/*mestizo* [mixed-race person] distinction) has received little attention by race scholars (Wade 2010). To our knowledge, there has not been an in-depth study focused on the relationship between racial humor and national ideology in *mestizo* America,[6] much less one that simultaneously addresses anti-black and anti-indigenous humor.

In this article we assess the state of racial humor in Mexico and Peru, two of the largest countries in *mestizo* America. These countries not only have Indigenous and *mestizo* populations but also small populations of African descent. We examine how racial humor operates in these countries both of which have color-blind national ideologies which silence, and either negate the existence of racism (Mexico), or minimize the prevalence of racism (Peru). We also outline the ideological consequences of the discursive uses and interpretations of racial humor in these contexts. In doing so, we make a novel contribution to the study of race and humor by showing how denigrating characterizations and comments related to individuals of African and indigenous descent in Mexico and Peru are frequently framed as "only jokes," and are, therefore, perceived as benign and not racist. We demonstrate how the targets of such jokes often conform to social norms by "going along" with racial joking, even if they find them offensive. Finally, we discuss how individuals use humor when expressing sentiments which could, if delivered in a serious tone, be labeled as racist. Taken as a whole, our analyses reveal how individuals' reactions to, understandings of, and uses of

racial humor work to maintain a color-blind ideology and serve as everyday mechanisms in the maintenance of a racialized social structure.

Racial Humor, Ideology, Discourse, and Silence in Latin America

Despite the potential humor has to inform our knowledge of a host of issues, humor is surprisingly understudied . The analysis of humor as a form of discourse provides insight into the reproduction of dominant ideologies . Dominant ideologies serve an important function for those in power – they are designed by elites to encourage non-elites to embrace a worldview or ideology that justifies the current social order; in this regard dominant ideologies help to maintain the existing power structure (Bourdieu 2001; Gramsci 1971). Although national ideologies often represent the social, economic, or cultural goals of a dominant group (van Dijk 1993), the social force behind ideology lies in the popular realm (Gramsci 1971). Discourse is one way in which ideology is reproduced at the popular level. Therefore, popular discourse (including humor) represents an ideal site for understanding how everyday social dynamics influence ideology and the social structure. Despite this potential, much of the literature on ideology remains elite-centered. We have limited knowledge of how popular discourse influences the process of ideological reproduction (Bailey 2009; Twine 1998).

Consistent with others (e.g. Hanchard 1994; Omi and Winant 1994; Winant 1994), we are interested in the study of *racial* ideology. Along these

lines, scholars have used discourse analysis to understand the everyday processes through which racial ideology and other forms of racism are reproduced . However, as Goldstein (2003) points out, we still lack detailed ethnographic data that illustrate how racial domination occurs. Furthermore, we lack information regarding how specific forms of racial discourse, such as humor, work to maintain racial ideologies on an everyday basis.

Research on racial humor in the United States has treated humor as serving the purpose of reinforcing social boundaries, legitimating the racial hierarchy, naturalizing racial differences and inequalities, and providing joke-tellers with a sense of superiority over the out-group (Hughes 2003; Middleton and Moland 1959; Omi 1989; Park et al 2006; Santa Ana 2009). Michael Omi (1989), for example, argues that racist jokes “serve to reinforce stereotypes and rationalize the existing relations of racial inequality” (p. 121). Not only can racist jokes reinforce the racial hierarchy, but when racial humor is received in a way in which its racist connotations are downplayed or dismissed, it then becomes yet another form of the more general phenomenon of racism denial. Scholars have documented the many ways in which denial of racism occurs through the use of everyday discourse and practice in a variety of settings (e.g. Essed 1991; van Dijk 1992). In this article, we view racial humor, and its interpretation as non-racist, as a powerful mechanism for reproducing racialized systems of power.

Understanding how racial humor influences the process of ideological reproduction requires an analysis of how humor is dealt with and negotiated

on an everyday basis. Reactions to racial jokes are part of a negotiation process that occurs when the taboo on race is violated by use of a joking framework . When a racial joke occurs, the recipient (or broader audience) can reject the joking premise and accuse the joker of exceeding the bounds of propriety, thus sanctioning the joker (ibid) or, alternatively, can accept the joking premise and “go along” with the joke. Often, however, individuals’ reactions are constrained by cultural and social norms surrounding race and humor. In some societies, there is strong pressure for individuals to conform to jokes; individuals who negatively react to humorous insults are told they “can’t take a joke” (Telles 2004). Because negative reactions to jokes represent a “breech in etiquette” (Sheriff 2001), those targeted by racial jokes are socially constrained and encouraged to “go along” with the humor. Sheriff (2001) explains that objecting to racial humor can result in “a kind of self-exposure that produces extreme awkwardness or even overt antagonism” (p. 93). Under these conditions, there is a tendency for all parties to conform to or participate in racial humor; such behavior has important consequences for the reproduction of racial ideologies.

In addition to informing studies of ideology, the analysis of humor has the unique ability to provide insight into sensitive or taboo subjects. Humorous talk has the potential to open up “a discursive space within which it becomes possible to speak about matters that are otherwise naturalized, unquestioned, or silenced” (2003: 10). Joking can become a channel for covert communication on taboo topics in contexts where discussion of the

topic would be unacceptable if conducted in a serious tone Emerson (1969). Others have shown how humor can mask the socially unacceptable or problematic nature of particular subjects. Emerson (1969) elaborates on why this may be the case: “Normally a person is not held responsible for what he does in jest to the same degree that he would be for a serious gesture” (p. 169). Therefore, an analysis of humor can provide coveted information about otherwise difficult-to-access topics. In this article we detail how jokes are negotiated in an ideological context where race talk has traditionally been silenced but where racial humor is permissible. An analysis of racial jokes in Mexico and Peru provides privileged access to topics that are sensitive in these countries. Additionally, the widespread acceptance and diffusion of racial jokes in these countries provides a unique opportunity to examine the reproduction of racial ideologies in everyday discourse.

In Latin America, the topic of race is largely silenced due to national ideologies which have historically sought to eradicate the race concept and negate the existence of racism. In this context, racial humor has become a way to tread upon the highly-sensitive topic of race and touch upon its deep-seated meanings in a seemingly light-hearted way. Much of racial humor is uncensored. Unlike other contexts such as the U.S., there are not attempts to conceal such humor by relegating it to the “backstage,” a safe, private space devoid of expectations for politeness on racial matters (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Picca and Feagin 1997). What occurs in the U.S. backstage – the performance of racist jokes and humorous commentary – frequently occurs

on the frontstage in Latin America and, is thus, visible to all. A few previous studies have tapped into this rich informational source. For example, in her study of a shantytown in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Donna Goldstein documented how poor women use humor in the face of tragedy and everyday hardships. Although Goldstein's main research focus was not on racial humor per se, she did make reference to the topic, arguing that Brazilians are aware of racism but hesitate to express their discontent through conventional means. Therefore, they talk about racism through the language of humor. Other Brazilianists (e.g. Sheriff 2001; Telles 2004; Twine 1998) who deal more centrally with race have only marginally addressed the humor angle. Unlike Goldstein, they interpret jokes as reinforcing (as opposed to contesting) racism.

We expand on these studies by examining the relationship between racial humor and national ideology in Mexico and Peru. In these countries, despite the social taboo on racist talk, racial humor is commonplace. In the Mexican context, racial humor permits Mexicans to talk about race and racial inequality without threatening the national stance contending a lack of racism. In Peru, racial humor allows Peruvians to engage in the perpetuation of negative ideas about blacks and indigenous peoples without being labeled a racist. However, in both cases, discourses surrounding racial humor mask racism and help to maintain color-blind national ideologies.

BACKGROUND AND NATIONAL IDEOLOGIES IN MEXICO AND PERU

Shortly after the Spanish conquest, there was a sharp decline in the indigenous population in Mexico. A consequent need for labor spurred the importation of African slaves who were brought in through Veracruz and Acapulco and later migrated throughout the country . Early in the colonial period, a social hierarchy based on race and socioeconomic status emerged - Spaniards occupied the top rungs and the indigenous – and Africans, the bottom. With increasing race mixture, colonial authorities developed an elaborate caste system ~~was developed~~ to maintain a hierarchy amidst various degrees of mixture . ~~This caste system was dismantled after~~ Mexico's War of Independence (1810-1821) led to the dismantling of the official caste system, but what was left (and still exists today) is a color hierarchy where light-skinned individuals dominate the top social strata and dark-skinned individuals are overrepresented at the bottom (Villarreal 2010). In the early 20th century, Mexican elites popularized a national ideology focused on race mixture and color-blindness – they framed Mexico's mixed-race population as a positive national attribute and asserted that racism did not exist. The idea that Mexico is free of racism is an ideology that remains dominant to this day (Sue 2013).

Similar to Mexico, Peru's population is descended from three groups – indigenous groups that have populated the region for millennia; European colonists and immigrants; and African slaves and freedmen. When Peru gained independence from Spain in 1821, it began the long process of nation-building (Larson 2004). During this time and into the twentieth

century, elite Peruvians developed and consolidated a national discourse ~~was consolidated~~ around the idea that all Peruvians have some black or indigenous ancestry and thus cannot be racist. However, very recently, the Peruvian government has acknowledged the presence of racism in Peru . This new stance can still be characterized as a color-blind ideology insofar as it minimizes racism, treating it as something perpetuated by a few “bad apples” or isolated bigots and not as an ingrained and widespread feature of Peruvian society. Furthermore, although most Peruvians now recognize that racism exists, they do not view themselves or people they know as participating in racism, demonstrating a classic case of “racism without racists” (Bonilla Silva 2003). Although the discourse on racism has changed – from denial to isolated recognition – official and popular discourses on race still operate based on a limited definition of racism, which excludes derogatory comments or images used for comedic purposes.

RESEARCH SITES AND METHODS

Qualitative methodology is well-equipped to capture processes of social reproduction and individuals’ subjective interpretations. Qualitative methods are also ideal for unearthing the various hidden meanings surrounding racial humor, and for capturing how such humor manifests and is interpreted on an everyday basis. For the case of Mexico, we rely on 112 interviews and 12 months of participant observation collected by the first author in 2004 and 2005 in the state of Veracruz where the population has

Spanish, African, and indigenous ancestry. The sample of semi-structured interviews was generated using the snowball technique and includes respondents who vary in terms of gender, age, class, education and color. Findings from Peru are based on ethnographic observations as well as thirty in-depth interviews conducted by the second author in Lima in 2007. The interviewees, selected based on the second author's extensive contacts in Lima, represent individuals varied in social strata, skin color, and region within the city, whose population is of mixed indigenous, African, and European descent.

We selected Mexico and Peru as the sites for this study because of their similarities – both are in *mestizo* America; color-blind ideologies are prevalent in both; and humor forms part of the social fabric in the two countries. The fact that we found similar discourses in both countries strengthens our results. In both Mexico and Peru, joking represents a kind of "free for all" where nothing is off limits. Jokes are made about a host of topics. They manifest on an everyday basis in a variety of social settings including family, school, work, social gatherings, politics, and sports events. Regardless of the content, most Peruvians and Mexicans view jokes ~~are viewed~~ as ~~being~~ relatively benign and not to be taken seriously. In this context, jokes about race are common and ~~are~~ few people view jokes as ~~generally not considered~~ racist. In fact, the idea of "racist humor" is somewhat of an oxymoron; humor is viewed as superficial and light-hearted

whereas racism is defined as overt forms of segregation, bigotry, or violence (Golash-Boza 2010; Sue 2013).

Despite these popular perceptions, racial humor mirrors a racially unequal system that exists in Mexican and Peruvian society. Degrading humor disproportionately focuses on blackness, indigeneity, and darkness, as opposed to Europeanness or lightness. We argue that racial humor not only reflects, but also reproduces, racialized systems of domination. In the following sections we illustrate how this occurs, identifying three mechanisms in this process - individuals "going along" with jokes, framing racial humor as benign, and using laughter to "soften" racism.

FINDINGS: Racial Humor in Everyday Discourse in Mexico and Peru

"Going along" with racial humor. In both Mexico and Peru, it is not socially acceptable to challenge racial humor. Individuals are expected to "go along" with jokes and humorous ~~name calling~~name-calling. Any serious objection to racial humor breaks this norm and the individual objecting is seen as not having a sense of humor and/or being overly sensitive. Bending to social pressure, the targets of racial humor overwhelmingly "go along" with jokes, even when finding the humor offensive or unpleasant. Whereas in the U.S. context, there is an intense social pressure for whites to conform to racist norms (Picca and Feagin 2007), in Mexico and Peru, people of all races and skin tones are subjected to this pressure. To take a case in point, on one occasion, the lead author went to the house of one of her main informants,

Pepe. Upon arriving, she asked Pepe, who has light-brown skin, if she could speak with his handyman, Bonifacio, who was working on the roof. Pepe pointed to Bonifacio, who has dark-brown skin, and loudly exclaimed: “This guy is Memín Pinguín’s uncle!” Pepe then laughed, signaling his humorous intent. Bonifacio’s facial expression revealed his discomfort. Nevertheless, by the time he had climbed down from the roof, he had regained his composure. Displaying his normal good-natured expression, he smiled and said: “Yes, if you take a picture of me, I look like [Memín Pinguín].” Although Bonifacio’s initial reaction revealed he was upset by the joke, he quickly disguised this reaction, replacing it with a false front of acceptance.

Individuals often experience a conflict between the offensive nature of some jokes and the pressure to stay silent. For example, Mary, a 42-year-old Peruvian homemaker with very light skin and dyed blonde hair, shared with the second author that she does not appreciate being the butt of racial jokes in her family but also spoke about the social pressure she feels to not contest the humor. Family members call her *la chola* [the indian] and make jestful references to *vicuñas* (wild animals ~~used~~ associated with~~by~~ indigenous people) in her presence. For example, whenever they are watching television and a *vicuña* or an indigenous person comes onto the screen, her brothers say: “There goes Mary.” Mary admits these jokes are hurtful, but feels unable to contest them openly.

These micro-level interactions have broader consequences - every time racial humor goes unchallenged it gains legitimacy, reinforcing the view that

it is harmless. This circular pattern of reinforcement is strengthened when the subject of the joke does not object to the humor. A case illustrating how jokes' targets oftentimes succumb to the social pressure to conform to jokes, and the circular pattern of reinforcement that ensues, comes from Marlena, a 50-year-old brown-skinned Peruvian homemaker. As a child, her brothers called her *Africana* [African] in jest and made jokes about her using a bone in her hair. Marlena's brothers characterized their references as "only jokes" and said that Marlena did not mind them. However, Marlena confided in the second author that she did not appreciate these jokes; however, she did not challenge them. Although Marlena found the racial humor to be upsetting, because of the expectation to "go along" with such humor, she, like others, remained silent. Her actions enabled her brothers to say she was not bothered by the comments.

Although Mary and Marlena outwardly admitted to being bothered by racial humor, Mexican targets of jokes expressed their ~~discomfort from those targeted by jokes is oftentimes~~ more subtly ~~or indirectly expressed~~. For example, Pilar, a 16-year-old Mexican gas station attendant who has light-brown skin, recalled that her peers would make fun of an acquaintance of hers, calling him *indio patarajada* (a derogatory term for indians). When asked how the individual reacted, Pilar said she was "bothered" but "stayed quiet." Demonstrating a similar reaction was Paula, a 42-year-old Mexican homemaker with dark-brown skin. She explained that she has "jokingly" been compared to the color of coal and told she looks like a monkey.

Although her demeanor and tone of voice strongly suggested displeasure with these comments, she did not directly vocalize her concerns.

After repeatedly being subjected to racial jokes or humorous ~~name-calling~~name-calling, many targeted individuals either develop a tolerance for the humor or perfect their conforming tendencies, convincing others that they are unfazed by such humor. For example, Leonel, a 28-year-old Mexican fisherman with light-brown skin, shared, while laughing, that he used to call his brother *negrito* [blackie]. Leonel said that although this seemed to bother his brother initially, he no longer minds. Making a similar observation was Susana, a 50-year-old Mexican homemaker with very light skin. Her husband, who has brown skin, has long been called *negro* but, according to Susana he has "gotten used to it." In a final example, Maribel, a 45-year old Peruvian homemaker with brown skin, recounted that her brothers called her *negrita*, as she is the darkest in the family. She went on to explain that she no longer minds the label, implying that there was a time when she did care. As a whole, our data suggest that the targets of jokes are socialized to either accept (or perform acceptance) of racial humor.

The fact that individuals outwardly conform to social pressures to "go along" with racial humor belies underlying sentiments that these jokes are hurtful. In other words, failure to challenge racial humor does not necessarily imply that individuals view the humor as inoffensive. Instead, a close reading of our data revealed that targets of racial humor frequently put up a false front, acting undisturbed and remaining silent. In doing so, they save both

personal and national face; they demonstrate their ability to be a "good sport" while smoothing over potential contradictions between racial humor and color-blind national ideologies. As part of the latter strategy, individuals not only "go along" with racial humor but also frame it as benign.

Framing racial humor as benign. Although many instances of racial humor could ~~potentially~~ be read as racist, we were frequently told by the creators, consumers, and even the recipients of racial humor that such humor should not be taken seriously and that jokes are made "in good fun" and not meant to hurt anyone. The strength of the conceptual disconnect between racism and racial humor can be seen in an interaction that the second author witnessed in Peru. While sharing a cab with leaders of an Afro-Peruvian social movement, she overheard them making fun of the accents of *serranos*' (indigenous individuals living in the mountainous regions). The fact that these individuals – vocal advocates of anti-racism – were comfortable engaging in this form of race humor is indicative of the widely-accepted nature of such humor and the view that such jokes are not racist. Afro-Peruvians are the only ones who think it is acceptable to make fun of indigenous' people's accents – the second author also heard a white and *mestizo* Peruvians make similar jokes about indigenous people's purported inability to speak "proper" Spanish.

A common way Mexicans and Peruvians frame racial humor as benign is by suggesting that such humor does not carry racist *intent* and thus does not constitute racism. We can see t~~T~~his ~~strategy is seen~~ in comments made

by Esteban, a 29 year-old Mexican computer technician with very light skin, about his friend who has dark-brown skin: “We only call him *negrito* but we don’t criticize him. In the university, there were jokes like ‘hey *negrito* bring me whatever . . . I am going to put a little bone on your head like an African and you can dance.’ But no, it was never a big offense, or like we really wanted to hurt him.” Esteban draws a distinction between the practice of ~~name-calling~~name-calling and criticism. He also minimizes the racial significance of jokes aimed at his friend, interpreting them through the lens of benign intent.

The boundary of “harmless” joking can extend to violent acts. For example, Alicia, a 25 year-old Mexican navy employee with dark-brown skin, explained that dark-skinned Mexicans tend to stay in their homes to avoid being made fun of. To demonstrate this point, she relayed an incident she had witnessed: “. . . There was this man who was very dark and he went out to the street and, I don’t know if maybe he had problems or whatever, but they threw tomatoes at him. . . I only heard them say ‘go on *negro*, you have to be a slave’ and things like that . . . I took it as a joke but he took it more personally. Here the people are really intense with their games.” Although Alicia saw the man was upset, she framed the incident as “only a joke,” and rather than legitimizing his reaction, she judged him as being overly sensitive.

Not only does racial humor circulate in public venues, it is also prevalent in classroom settings. Bernardo, a 43 year-old Mexican psychology

professor who has dark-brown skin, referenced these dynamics in his own private school classroom:

> Bernardo: . . . If a black student arrives, someone always begins to make jokes about them, but it never goes beyond joking. I mean it is nothing cruel or like hitting them or keying their car . . .
>
> CS: And how would that black student react? Would s/he be laughing and everything?
>
> Bernardo: On some occasions, they are upset because everything depends on the kind of mood they are in when they come to class.
>
> CS: And do you think this is okay?
>
> Bernardo: I think it is not okay when the comment is made cruelly or to attack or belittle someone but when it is done in a joking manner . . . it is not a problem.
>
> CS: And what is an example of something someone would say to make fun?
>
> Bernardo: Simply any kind of phrase that occupies the word *negro* or a phrase that has some kind of association with being black. For example Memín: “You Memín, come here.” Or whatever . . . It is not to hurt others but they do say it to that person as a joke. So it is something to have fun with.

Bernardo uses a number of strategies to frame these typical classroom dynamics as “only jokes” and non-racist. First, he suggests that discursive racial play is benign, contrasting it with “cruel” physical acts such as hitting.

Additionally, although Bernardo recognizes that students are sometimes upset by such jokes, he frames this reaction in terms of their mood, implying that if they take offense, it is their problem for not taking the joke well. The focus on students' moods deflects criticism from the joke itself. Finally, Bernardo highlights the jokers' playful and non-malevolent intent, reinforcing the putatively innocent nature of these jokes. It is noteworthy that racial humor is treated as unproblematic in a private university setting and, furthermore, in the presence of a psychology professor. This demonstrates the pervasiveness of the "racial humor is not racist" frame.

Even the targets of jokes sometimes frame racial humor as benign. For example, the second author asked Luis, a brown-skinned retired Peruvian government worker in his sixties, ~~was asked~~ if anyone had ever said something offensive in reference to his skin color. In response, Luis shared that he had a jealous girlfriend when he was younger. His girlfriend witnessed many women visiting Luis at his office. On one occasion, Luis overheard his girlfriend saying to her friends that she should have known Luis would be promiscuous because he is black. Despite the fact that Luis named this example when asked about his experience with offensive comments, when he recounted it, he presented it as humorous, he himself laughing. This interaction was also likely influenced by Luis' desire to reassert his masculinity. Nevertheless, he ultimately framed his girlfriend's comment as benign, a presentation which belied his earlier implications about its offensiveness. Across these examples we see how individuals frame

humor that could potentially be read as racist as unproblematic. This discursive framing has important ideological consequences – it preserves national beliefs which minimize or negate racism.

Before proceeding it is important to note that these interactions may be interpreted and analyzed differently in non-Latin American contexts. In the United States, for example, it is commonly understood that the race of the joke teller vis-à-vis the joke recipient and audience matters (Picca and Feagin 2007). In other words, one's position as a racial insider or outsider shapes the meaning of the joke. Although this may be somewhat true in Mexico and Peru, the dynamic is significantly weaker since there is a general lack of strong racial-group boundaries and racial group-consciousness in these regions. Therefore, the joke dynamics and forms of interpretation that we discuss throughout the article were identified across racial and color categories.

Softening racism. The fact that racial humor escapes charges of racism has another important consequence - it enables the vocalization of racism in a manner which softens it. In other words, humor becomes a vehicle for expressing sentiments that, if delivered in a serious tone, could be read as racist (Picca and Feagin 2007). Mexicans and Peruvians frequently use humor or laughter to sugarcoat discussions of racism. To illustrate this discursive strategy, we provide examples that center around the topics of intermarriage and children's phenotype and involve the expression of the commonly-held preferences for light-skinned partners and light-skinned

children. Vanesa, a 30 year-old Mexican homemaker with medium-brown skin, is a product of an inter-color relationship – her mom is very light and her dad very dark. Vanesa shared that, “Joking, we tell my dad: ‘With mom you refined your race.’” Vanesa and her siblings express what may otherwise be considered a racist message, but in a joking form.

All respondents interviewed in Mexico were asked whether or not they would date or marry a person of another race. Laughter oftentimes directly preceded or followed any expressed objection to interracial marriage. A typical example can be seen with Marisa, a 25-year-old English teacher who has medium-brown skin. When asked if she would marry a person of another race she responded by laughing and then said, “Except a black,” and laughed again. In another case, Julieta, a light-skinned university student in her 20s, said she would not marry an indigenous person “because I don’t like them [laughs]. I mean, I am not that much of a racist but deep inside the truth is that I wouldn’t marry an indian.” In this case, Julieta recognizes the potential for her stance to be interpreted as racist and therefore works to minimize that impression. However, by expressing her reservations about intermarriage in a humorous tone she is able to soften the message.

Similar dynamics occur in Peru. In one case, Luna, a 45-year-old artisan, spoke about her parent’s views on interracial marriage. When asked what her parents would say if she decided to marry a black man, Luna’s first response was to laugh. She followed this up with: “It would be . . . well, ugh, no.” When subsequently asked “Your parents wouldn’t be happy?,” she said

“No, they would definitely not be happy.” Here, Luna’s laughter does not soften her own expression of racism but, instead, sugarcoats her parent’s anticipated objection to the idea of her marrying a black individual.

Mexicans and Peruvians also use humor and laughter as a way to express their desire to have children with light skin and blue or green eyes. For example, Marco, a 51-year-old Mexican painter with dark-brown skin, shared his thoughts when his daughter was born: “… I wanted to see her little eyes, to see if they were blue or green . . . [laughter].” Through laughter, Marco softens his message which privileges European ancestry. In another case, Mary, the Peruvian homemaker with very light skin, used laughter when communicating that she decided not to have another baby because of her husband’s racial background. In her conversation, she articulated her concerns: “. . . I was scared of having another baby [fearing] it would come out black. That is why I did not have another child [laughs] because, I said, [it could] come out like its grandfather because my father-in-law is very, very black.” Also joking on the topic of intermarriage and offspring, Silva, a 54-year-old Mexican day care worker with dark-brown skin, commented that, since she can no longer bear children, she is open to marrying any race. “Even an Asian man!” she exclaimed while laughing. By delivering this statement coupled with laughter, Silvia was able to deflect potential accusations of racism. These cases illustrate the broader pattern of using humor to sugarcoat sentiments which could be read as racist if not articulated within the guise of humor. In other words, racial humor becomes

a vehicle for the expression of racist sentiment in an ideological context where racism is not supposed to exist or where it is relegated to a few “bad apples.” Thus, such humor serves a particular purpose – by cloaking racism with humor, individuals can minimize potential conflicts with color-blind ideologies.

CONCLUSION

Despite the façade that racial humor represents a benign form of talk, such humor is intricately linked to power-laden ideologies and structures related to race. We have used qualitative analysis of racial humor in Mexico and Peru to illuminate broader processes associated with domination and inequality by highlighting the role of racial humor in this process. As we have argued throughout the article, racial humor does not merely reflect, but also influences, dominant race-based ideologies and social structures. We view our major contribution as demonstrating *how* this occurs in daily interactions. More specifically, we have shown how the discursive uses and interpretations surrounding racial humor serve as critical mechanisms in the process of ideological reproduction. We detailed how Mexicans and Peruvians conform to social norms by “going along” with racial jokes even if they find them offensive. Additionally, we showed how individuals frame racial humor as benign and thus not racist, and use humor as a vehicle to express racist sentiments in a socially-acceptable manner. These discourses and practices ultimately fuel color-blind ideologies. Finally, our analysis of racial humor

contributes much-needed data on racial discourses in Mexico and Peru, ideological contexts which censor other forms of race talk.

Humor is a fundamental aspect of Peruvian and Mexican society. Therefore, the ability to engage in banter and other forms of humor play is critical to individuals' entrée and acceptance in many social settings. Laughter enables Peruvians and Mexicans to see their way through difficult times and to ease the many social pressures and tensions they confront on a daily basis. Given the important social function that humor plays in Mexico and Peru, why do we take such a critical view of racial humor? Although we recognize that humor has the potential to make light of grave situations without reinforcing social inequalities, in the case of racial humor in Mexico and Peru, this is simply not the case. Our analysis reveals that racial humor plays a pernicious role in reinforcing systems of domination and inequality. Mexicans of all shades laugh at Memín Penguín, exposing and reaffirming the widespread popular acceptance of stereotypical and denigrating images of blacks. However, as our data show, Mexicans do not appreciate it when stereotypes cloaked in humor are launched in their direction. In Peru, the grotesque image of actors in blackface on primetime television provokes laughter in all segments of society and reinforces the idea that it is acceptable to poke fun at blacks. However, as we saw, when Peruvians become the individualized targets of these jokes, they often take offense. For both Mexicans and Peruvians, despite their discomfort with racial humor, the targets of jokes generally conform to social pressure and feign acceptance.

This behavior, coupled with the simultaneous and nearly universal framing of racial humor as benign by joke creators and consumers, works to buttress racist ideologies. The persistent denigration of blacks and indigenous peopless in Mexico and Peru is no joking matter.

Although people's interpretation of and reaction to racial humor could potentially disrupt color-blind ideologies and challenge racialized hierarchies, as we have demonstrated in this article, Mexicans and Peruvians overwhelmingly allow such humor to stand. Moreover, through their silence, discursive framings, and behaviors, they ultimately reinforce the perception that racial humor is unproblematic. As we have seen, the relationship between discourse, ideology, and social norms is a circular one. Reactions are contextualized by a social context in which any objection to humor is viewed negatively. The cultural expectation that individuals "go along" with jokes generates a normative response of silence, inaction, or engagement with the joke. These responses then signal or imply an acceptance of the humor, conveying a message that it is unproblematic, which then encourages and legitimates the continued use of such humor. Therefore, these popular level-discourses serve to not only maintain but also reinvigorate color-blind ideologies. Also playing into this dynamic is individuals' deployment of humor to express racist views while \escaping charges of racism. By situating and framing racist discourse under the discursive banner of humor, individuals protect color-blind ideologies and thus participate in the maintenance of a racially-unequal system. And from

there, the circular process continues. Exposing the popular-level mechanisms involved in this process of ideological reinforcement is one of the main contributions of our research.

That being said, this article only begins to harness the analytic potential of the study of racial humor with respect to informing understandings of race relations, racial ideology, and race-based power structures. We therefore encourage future research in this area. For example, we believe that a systematic comparison between black-related and indigenous-related humor in Latin America (something beyond the limits of our datasets) could provide a ~~much needed~~much-needed bridge between studies of these two populations. Black populations are usually treated under the banner of race studies and indigenous populations under the banner of ethnic studies. However, our findings suggest that anti-black and anti-indigenous humor may operate in similar ways. Therefore, a study of this kind could provide an opportunity to bring together the broader literatures on race and ethnicity. Finally, although we examined the Latin American context, we are in no way suggesting that the dynamics we witnessed are unique to these particular cases. Stereotypical portrayals similar to *Memín Pinguín* and *Negro Mama* can be found across the globe (e.g. *Black Peter* in the Netherlands and Belgium and *Conguito* in Spain) and dominate the media, despite the rhetorical consensus against blatant racism (Smitherman-Donaldson and van Dijk 1988). It could very well be that such images are interpreted in a similar manner in these contexts. Only future research will

tell. In the article at hand, we have examined the micro-level and mechanistic dynamics that surround one aspect of the process through which racism is reproduced, in a multiracial and colorblind national ideological context. We hope that through this detailed empirical analysis, we can contribute to theoretical understandings of race at the global level. For example…

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NOTES

[1] *El Planeta*, 7/1/05

[2] The first author was conducting fieldwork in Mexico during the time of the controversy and was thus able to collect systematic data on Veracruzanos' reactions to the accusations that Memín is racist. She also did content analysis of Mexican newspapers during the controversy to further gauge Mexicans' reactions.

[3] Gates, Henry. 2011. "Mexico & Peru: The Black Grandma in the Closet" Black in Latin America PBS video Series. Quote begins around 47:00 Online at: http://www.pbs.org/wnet/black-in-latin-america/featured/full-episode-mexico-peru/227/ Retrieved October 9, 2011.

[4] We do not use quotation marks around "humor" or "joke" except to signal a direct quote. The lack of quotation marks does not mean that we uncritically accept the characterization of comments/images/incidents as humor but, instead, signifies our referencing of others' framing of them as humorous.

[5] Racial ideologies which negate or minimize the prevalence of racism (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

[6]